

Chapter Thirteen

“What?”

“I said I did it.”

Jon looked at the old man in disbelief. He looked at Navarr. He looked back at Sidwell. “I don’t believe this. How . . .”

“ . . . isn’t important right now. Get into your suits, let’s get going.” Navarr grabbed the two suits off the rack nearby. He handed one to Jon, who took it reflexively. The other he took over to Sidwell, held it out to the prospector.

The old man tamped at his pipe and lit it again, drawing heavily. “Look, son, ain’ no reason for me t’ go up t’ th’ station. I did tell th’ nets ‘bout th’ artifact, ‘n for a dam’ good reason: so’s th’ Edenists’d be on th’ defensive. Wit’ ever’body thinkin’ that they was th’ ones t’ leak th’ information, they’ll be more cautious.”

“But still, I have my orders.”

Darnell blew a small stream of smoke out of the corner of his mouth, looked with disdain at the environment suit Navarr was still holding in front of him. “Huh. Ya struck me as smarter’n that. Think ‘bout it. I’ve known ‘bout th’ artifact from th’ start. I coulda told anyone anytime, but didn’t. Doncha think tha’ means you can trust me?”

Jon looked at Navarr. “What exactly were your orders?”

“To secure Sidwell prior to transport back to Earth. Message came in just as we were docking with the two casualties, so I had the pilot bring me right back down.”

“How about house arrest? Wouldn’t that qualify? Seems safer than bringing him up to Titan Prime where he might make more mischief,” said Jon.

Navarr looked at Jon, then at Sidwell, considering. “Perhaps that would be the best course of action.”

The prospector nodded, sucked on his pipe again. “So, how’d you find out?”

“Since we couldn’t find any communication that carried an encrypted message of any sort, they started looking for patterns in the communication traffic. You were the only one who sent a personal message every day - every day except yesterday, that is.”

“Yup. Insurance. If somethin’ happened t’ me, ‘n I didn’ send my message, then th’ news’d go out. Set it up before I even told Jacobs.” Darnell nodded with evident satisfaction. “So, all I had t’ do was not send a message t’ my friend, ‘n th’ word got out.”

“That’s what they figured back home,” said Navarr.

Jon thought for a moment. “But how did the Edenists hear about it, if not from you?”

“That,” said Sidwell, pausing to take a pull on his pipe, “is a very good question.”

Jon left the shuttle dock and made his way to the infirmary. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped inside, felt himself cross the security threshold.

“I wondered how long it would take you to get here.” Tops was standing beside a piece of equipment, manipulating a control projection that Jon couldn’t see. She looked from him into an adjacent room, where he could see beds partially hidden by privacy screens. “They’re in there.”

Jon nodded. “Thanks. No objection if I go in and talk with them?”

“Just keep it brief. They’re both OK, but are badly in need of rest. Whatever happened to them seems to have depleted all of their energy reserves. And the shock of having their cyberware fried has left them more than a little disoriented. Particularly Ng.”

“Right.” He tried to smile a little, as much for his own benefit as for hers. Then he walked into the room. The first bed was on the left, and as he entered he could see Jackie, awake, sitting up and reading something printed.

Jackie looked up to see him come in. “Hey.”

He went over to her beside, sat in a chair there. “Hiya.”

She looked like she’d been awake for days, working hard. There were dark bags under her eyes, and her skin had the pallor of complete exhaustion. “How’re you doing?”

She let the sheaf of papers she was holding fall into her lap. “I’m beat. Feel like I’ve gone fifteen rounds with a prizefighter. Sore everywhere.”

Jon nodded. “Tops says you’ll be fine, though.”

Jackie nodded, though that seemed to be an effort. “Yeah. And I have this feeling that she’s right, though it’s like every ounce of energy has been squeezed right out of me.”

Jon waited. “Remember anything?”

“About what happened? No. Tops even brought me a display and showed me what the security cams recorded. But I don’t remember a bit of that.”

“Anything else, then?”

“Weird dreams.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. But I don’t remember details. Just that they were weird. Hyper vivid, with colors that were almost garish. I remember that. Not much more.”

“OK. Give it time, maybe something else will come back.”

“Right.”

“I’ll let you rest. I’ll check back in later, OK?”

“Yeah.” She sounded so tired, and she closed her eyes. Jon thought that she was asleep, but she spoke again as he got up to leave. “Thanks. For coming by.”

“You’re welcome. Now, rest.”

She said nothing else as he ducked around the screen. In the other corner of the room was Ng’s bed. Jon stuck his head around the edge of the screen there, could see that Duc looked to be awake, but just staring up at the ceiling.

“Imagining what you’d paint there?”

Duc turned his head a little, eyes trying to focus on Jon. Slowly he said, “Come. In.”

Jon sat next to the bed. “Tops says that you’re going to be OK.”

The dark eyes fluttered, and he nodded ever so slightly.

“Do you remember anything about what happened?”

“No.” He paused. “Nothing.”

“Jackie said she had some very intense dreams while she was unconscious. Did you?”

Duc squinted at him, and Jon could tell he was trying to remember, though with a lot of difficulty. Finally he said, “No.”

Jon nodded. “You seem to be more burned out than what you expected. Or is it just the exhaustion that Tops told me about?”

Duc turned away from Jon, looked back up at the ceiling. At first Jon thought that he was either asleep or ignoring him, but then the man spoke again, concentrating. “Burned out. But not from drugs. Like all my gear - fried.”

“Yeah, Tops said that your cyberware was ruined. But she’ll get some new stuff in as soon as you’ve recovered a bit.”

“Not it. Feel . . . different. Blind.” Duc closed his eyes. “Not same. Used to . . . enhancements.”

“But you’ll get some new ‘ware. What they have here may not be the same level of sophistication as what you had, but it’ll get you by until you’re back Earthside.”

“Don’t understand.” Duc sighed, paused for a long time. “Different now. I can tell.”

The last words were said so lightly that Jon could barely hear them. Clearly, Duc was drifting off into a deep sleep. Jon got up and went back out into the anteroom, where Tops was waiting for him, still working.

“So?”

“You’re right, they’re both just completely exhausted. Any idea why?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’m . . . I’m not sure. But I have a suspicion.”

“Shoot.”

“This is still tentative, you understand.”

“Got it. And?”

“And, well, I’ve come up with something else that I hadn’t caught on the first examination. Might be a clue.” She glanced down at the invisible display, fingers working a virtual control panel only she could see. “Both of them have anomalies in their health status, differences from the complete physicals I did when they first arrived on the station.”

“OK, what kind of differences? Some kind of problem?”

“Beyond being completely wrenched dry of all energy reserves, they’re just too healthy.”

“Say what?”

“They’re in better shape now than when they arrived. Granted, both of them were in pretty good shape when they got here. They’re both young, and have gotten good medical care. But even the most minor medical problems have completely disappeared.”

“Like what?”

“Like no slight rashes, scrapes or bruises. A minor deformed toenail causing some inflammation of the cuticle, now resolved. A little tinnitus, disappeared. That sort of

thing.”

“How?”

She shook her head. “No idea.”

“But you think it was because of the artifact.”

She shrugged. “Nothing else has happened that would explain it.”

Jon glanced back into the room. “Huh.”

“You got that right,” said Tops. She shook her head, “I don’t see how it’s possible.”

“But obviously, it happened.”

“Looks like it.”

Jon considered her for a moment. “Look, document everything as well as you can. We want to be sure about this.”

“No kidding.”

“Sorry.” He glanced back at the room. “Do they realize it yet?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“OK. Don’t volunteer the information. After you document everything, secure your records. And tell no one. We don’t want word of this getting out.”

She looked at him sharply. “You sure you want to do that?”

He nodded. “Just for a day or two, until we can figure out what it is and what to do about it. Word gets out that the artifact can heal, or is the Fountain of Youth, or whatever it is, and we’ll have everyone on the station wanting to go down there and touch the thing. Not to mention what would happen back home.”

Realization of just what might happen sunk in. “Yeah. I see what you mean. There’d be demands that we bring it to Earth immediately.”

“Right, regardless of risk or consequences. And that would be the least of it.” Jon sighed. Gesturing toward the other room, he asked, “How long until we can get them back down to Titan?”

“Why?”

“I need to have them back in the dome with the thing, to see if that jogs their memories loose. Or if they are more sensitive to the artifact. Or who knows what. But I need to get them back down there as soon as possible.”

Tops thought about it. “Jackie will probably be ready later tonight. But Duc won’t be up for it until tomorrow midmorning, at the earliest.”

“You sure? Can’t we push it faster than that?”

“No. He’s badly scrambled. I can help replenish his neurotransmitters, but there’s more than that going on. He has to adjust to being without his enhancements. I think he needs at least that much rest, even with everything I can do.”

“OK, then, we’ll say 10 o’clock tomorrow.”

“And I’ll want to come down with them, just in case.”

“Done.” He checked the time. “Look, I’m going to get some work done before dinner. I think I want to get a few people together this evening and discuss the ramifications of what happened today. Not what you just told me about, but everything else. You want to come?”

“No, I’d rather go over my results here, see if there’s anything more I can detect that has changed for them.”

“OK. I’ll just summarize your ‘official’ report on their health status. And I’ll let you know if we come up with any interesting insights.”

“Good. And I’ll let you know if I come up with any other discoveries here.”

Jon nodded, stepped to the door. Pausing, he looked back at Tops. “By the way, thanks. You did a good job today, kept your head. It’s good to know you’re here if we need you.”

“Thanks.”

“ . . . so, the rest of the material from Earth is fairly routine. I’ve downloaded a complete analysis into your system, and you can see if there are any other questions that you have.”

Jon didn’t look up from his pad. “Thanks, Seth. I think the only other thing is to post the information to everyone on the full team about the joint meeting tomorrow, and to my team about the discussion tonight. Be sure to let Bradsen know about that one, and he can decide if there’s anyone else he wants to inform.”

“Done.” Seth paused. “Jon?”

There was something about the tone of voice Seth chose that grabbed Jon’s attention. It wasn’t harsh, or demanding, but somehow a little . . . hurt. He let the pad drop into his lap, turned his full attention to the expert. “Yes, what is it?”

“What’s going on?”

Jon was always a little surprised when Seth looked at him that way. His eyes were intense, even being transparent as they were. “Sorry, I should have told you when I first got back from the infirmary this afternoon. I should have known that you’d realize that something was up.”

“Are Ms. Gates and Mr. Ng all right?”

“Well, that’s the thing, Seth. They’re all right. In fact, they’re better than all right. Besides a slight case of exhaustion and some disorientation, they’re in better physical condition than they should be. It’s like their contact with the artifact erased any and all medical problems or conditions that they had, no matter how minor.”

Seth nodded, “I see your predicament.”

“Any suggestions?”

“Stay with the mission objectives to gather hard data on the artifact. If it is indeed the cause of this transformation, then it is all the more important that you have as much scientific evidence as you possibly can.”

“And that evidence has to be untainted by any of the researchers knowing what it is that they’re looking at or for.”

“Correct. But not only that; you can’t be sure that the changes experienced in these two cases will hold true for anyone else who comes in contact with the artifact. It depends on what the artifact was designed for. If it is just gathering data on humans, then it makes

sense that the first time it comes into direct contact with a member of each sex might turn out this way, as it explores their complete range of physical potentials.”

“But the next person could just as likely be injured or killed, so that it can evaluate the organism’s response to injury or threat. Got it.” Jon shook his head. “But we really won’t know until we understand more of what the thing is and what it was designed to do. It could also turn out to be that the healing effect is unrelated to the primary function of the artifact.”

“Or that the effect is only temporary.”

Jon nodded. “Hadn’t thought of that.”

“Human literature is filled with examples of such temporary or illusive benefits, as part of the pattern of a false deity.”

A shudder ran down Jon’s spine. “You know, Seth, there are times I’d rather not have information like that.”

The expert looked at him quizzically, head tilted slightly to one side. “Why?”

“Because of the implications.”

“I didn’t think that you were a person of faith.”

“I’m not, but that’s beside the point. You’re right, human literature and lore is filled with such examples . . . meaning that they’re part of our cultural context. Many people will be even more uneasy about the artifact because of that. And some will be downright hostile.”

“But won’t people be just as likely to respond to the news as a sign of a true deity?”

“Yeah, some will. And that was what I was thinking of at first, people believing that this is another Lourdes or some such miraculous event. People are always eager to label anything they don’t understand as either a divine manifestation . . . or a trick by some evil, demonic force. Either way, it tends to polarize the situation and increase the potential danger for all of us.”

Seth slowly nodded. “So, what are you going to do?”

“For now, nothing. Not at least as far as anyone else is concerned. Keep going with the research, as we discussed. Tops is doing a thorough review of the condition of Jackie and Duc, to see if she can find anything more about what happened to them. Allow the situation to ripen, I suppose.”

“Be careful, Jon. If I can detect that something is up, so may others.”

“Good advice, Seth. As usual.” Jon sighed. “I need to eat, then get ready for my meeting.”

Arthur Bailey stretched, hands reaching far above and behind his head. He stifled a yawn, then rubbed at his somewhat red eyes. “Man, I can’t get that image of them collapsing out of my head.”

“Don’t worry about it. Tops says they’re going to make a full and complete recovery.” Jon considered the man. He looked not only tired, but worn out. “What’s got you so beat?”

“Talking with people. First, I started with my research, trying to understand how everyone out here fits into the pattern of development and expansion. But the last day or so, since the news broke, all they want to talk about is the artifact.” He stifled another yawn. “Rumors are flying thick and fast. It’s a fascinating glimpse into the culture here.”

“They’re just frightened. It’s only natural,” said Gish, almost distractedly. Jon noticed he was looking not at Bailey when he spoke, but at Chu Ling. The girl was sitting on the floor in the corner of the room, preoccupied with some kind of complex 3-d version of checkers. Periodically, the miniature version of Seth would appear, grab a piece and move it, eliciting giggles from the youngster. Johan Klee sat near her, occasionally asking her why she made the moves she did, offering some alternative advice.

“Oh, yeah. But it is also a classic way of understanding the dynamics of a closed culture. Add unexpected stress to the system, and watch what happens. Who talks with who. Who passes on rumors, who just listens intently. I spent almost all night and most of this afternoon in the bar, just observing. It’s incredible!”

“Say, don’t get too wrapped up in this. We still have to figure out what the artifact is.”

The anthropologist nodded back to Jon. “Yeah, I know. But the opportunity to see how people reacted to the sudden revelation of the artifact was too good to pass up.”

Jon thought to himself that Bailey would have plenty of such opportunity, once the news of the curing effect of the artifact got out. “Nonetheless, we have our priorities.”

“Got it.”

Jon glanced up at the door as he heard it start to open. Don Bradsen stepped through, followed closely by Commander Navarr. Bradsen nodded to Jon, took a seat. Navarr stood for a moment, assessing the room, then came over to Jon and leaned down, spoke quietly, so that only Jon could hear him, “I’m not sure that the girl should be here.”

Jon pursed his lips, thought. Turning to look Navarr in the eye, he said. “Noted.”

Navarr’s eyes narrowed. “I’m serious. She shouldn’t be in any meetings where sensitive matters are discussed.”

“I understand your concern. But at this point, I don’t see what difference it makes. The whole world knows about the artifact. And it’s not like she’s going to report anything she hears to someone back on Earth. Gish wants to have her along, fine with me.”

Navarr held his gaze for a moment, then nodded slightly. “Your call.”

“Thanks.”

The door to the small conference room opened again and slowly Jackie Gates walked in. She moved stiffly, with some obvious pain, took a seat near the door and melted into it. Everyone in the room, except Chu Ling, watched her with surprise.

“Jackie . . . didn’t expect to see you,” said Jon.

Gates sighed. “Man, I didn’t know it was such a long walk down here from the infirmary.”

“You all right?” asked Arthur.

She gave him a slight smile. “Yeah, thanks. Though I feel like I’ve run a marathon or something. I’m sore in muscles I didn’t even know I had.”

“Electrical shock will sometimes do that to you, the way it can cause the muscles to all contract suddenly,” said Don. “I’ve had occasions when a mild jolt left me aching for days.”

She gave him a dirty look. “Gee, thanks for that cheery bit of news.”

Bradsen started to say something else, but was interrupted by the sudden commotion of the door opening with a bang, and Gregor Soukup lumbering into the room. “Well, it is Jackie! It is good that you are up and about!”

As large as he was, he moved quickly, and had bent over to give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek before she or anyone else could react. Somewhat stunned, she awkwardly hugged him back. “Uh, thanks, Gregor.”

He chuckled as he sat down at the end of the conference table. “Sorry that Gregor is late. Have been chatting with Hawking.”

Jon asked, “How’s the ship doing?”

“Ah, very good! All minor engineering problems worked out. Drive is running at full power. Now out in Kuiper belt, will be soon starting the return. Been very good test!” His enthusiasm and satisfaction with the news was obvious. Then his face hardened, the smile almost disappeared from beneath his heavy beard. He leaned forward in his chair and pointed at Jon. “Gregor told you it was dangerous to go down to Titan and be around artifact.”

Jon nodded. “Yeah. Which is why I wanted to get together with everyone this evening. We still don’t have much in the way of hard research data from Don’s team, but we have today’s events to help provide us some information about the artifact. So, I wanted to chat about what your thoughts might be at this juncture.”

Gish looked at Bradsen. “Have you gotten any solid data yet?”

“Nothing positive. Which is to say, so far none of the equipment has been able to identify that the artifact is even there.”

“Which is interesting, because that’s what led Ng down into the pit, and probably why he stumbled into the thing,” said Jon.

Jackie nodded in agreement. “Yeah, that’s what he was talking about as he reached out and touched it. I remember that now.”

Jon said, “and you touched it, too. Do you remember that?”

She shook her head. “No . . . sorry. I just remember seeing him collapse, then bending down to see if he was OK. Then . . . nothing.”

“Tops reports that other than the loss of all their cyberware, and this mild amnesia, neither Jackie nor Ng seem to have suffered any lasting harm from their contact with the artifact.” Jon said, choosing his words carefully. He looked at the faces around the room. “I think that’s significant. We at least know the thing isn’t automatically hostile.”

Jackie raised an eyebrow. “I dunno. The way I feel, I wouldn’t call the thing harmless.”

“Nor can we assume that anyone else who might come into contact with it will not be harmed,” said Gish.

“Exactly. Until we know what it’s purpose is, we have no idea what happened to

Jackie and Ng, or what that means for the future.”

“But I find this collapsing to be interesting,” said Klee. He stroked his white beard. “Others, yourself included, Jon, have experienced a variety of effects. It might be that this is part of that pattern, perhaps a way that the artifact is attempting to communicate with us.”

Jackie snorted. “Yeah, I can tell from my muscle ache that it’s trying to beat the information into us.”

Johan smiled. “Ah, perhaps you are more correct than you know. Your cyberware was burned out, yes? Perhaps the information it tried to send to you was too much, and overloaded your system. It might just be trying to tell us too much, all at once.”

“We need a handshake!” exclaimed Bailey.

“What?” asked Jon.

“A handshake . . . um, when facsimile machines were first used, and then later when computers started using simple modems to connect into primitive networks, there was a problem in information transmission rates. You always had to make sure that the systems were compatible, so that they worked at the same speed.” Bailey nodded vigorously.

“Yeah, they developed a system where the two machines would send out a tone, telling one another what their capabilities were, so they could coordinate, using the best speed mutually possible.”

“Ah, yes. We need some way to communicate with it. To tell it our capabilities,” agreed Johan.

“Interesting theory. I’ll have Theo Crane, my communications engineer, go over the specs on our cyberware systems, see what the threshold for data absorption is.” He looked at Klee. “Any idea how we can communicate the information to the artifact? What do we tell it?”

Before Klee could answer, Gish spoke. “Start with giving it number theory. Keep this mathematical.”

“Perhaps that is a good way to start. But we will need to do more than just that. We will have to establish some kind of symbolic language . . .”

Jon interrupted, “Wait a second. Let’s not start broadcasting anything at it just yet. That could still be interpreted as some kind of attack.”

Don nodded in agreement. “I’ll have Theo start considering the parameters of the engineering problem. That’ll take a while, and in the meantime maybe something else will come out of our research.”

“OK, good,” said Jon. “And speaking of something else coming out of the research . . . Jackie, I’d like to get you and Ng back down to the surface tomorrow, late morning.”

Jackie studied him for a moment. Finally, she said, “Why?”

“Because I want to use you as a guinea pig.”

“Well, that’s blunt enough.”

“Sorry, but if you’re up for it, I think that it’s an important step.”

“What do you want to do with us down there?”

Jon smiled. “Don’t worry, I don’t want you to touch the thing again. But I do want to see if you notice anything different about it now that you have touched it. Same with Ng.”

Slowly, she nodded. "OK. I'm game."

"Thanks, I figured you would be." He looked around the table. "OK, folks, let's leave it at that. If you come up with anything else, drop me a note. Otherwise, I'd like to have everyone at the dome with the artifact tomorrow about ten. If Duc isn't up for that, we may postpone it until later. I'll let you know in the morning."

There was general chatter as the meeting started to break up. Navarr was the first to start out the door, when Jackie stopped him. "Commander . . . I don't remember it, but I've seen the recording. And I want to thank you and your people for pulling us out of the pit."

Navarr smiled slightly. "It's what we're trained to do."

"I know. But still, your trooper didn't know what had caused either of us to collapse. There was no way to know whether the artifact would hurt or kill anyone else who came down there. I can't imagine that willingness to take such a risk."

He looked at her for a moment. "Jackie, I wasn't in the dome when it happened. But I too have seen the record. And you leapt forward to help Ng the moment you saw him go down."

"That was instinct. I didn't have time to think about it."

"Yeah, but you did it anyway." He smiled. "I'll pass along your gratitude to the rest of my people."

Looking down, she said, "Thanks."

Then as she started to get up out of her chair, Gish and Chu Ling came around the table and moved toward the door. The girl was still holding her portable projector, watching where she was going. Jackie stood, leaning on the table for support and taking the hand offered by Navarr, groaned slightly at the effort. Chu Ling heard this, stopped, looked at Jackie for the first time since she had come into the room, and got a very perplexed look on her face. Gish, who was walking behind the girl, hand on her shoulder, stopped also.

Jackie noticed the girl, looked down at her. "What is it?"

Chu Ling stood very still, her eyes wide. She said nothing, just held her projector close.

Gish looked from Jackie, down to Ling. "What is it? What's wrong?"

The girl glanced up at Gish, then back to Jackie. Slowly her hand came out and pointed, timidly. "This lady. She glows."

"Well, I don't know what it is she sees," said Tops, speaking with Jon and Robert Gish. Chu Ling was asleep on one of the nearby beds in the infirmary, her holo projector held close. "I can't detect anything with any of the equipment I have here."

"But she's adamant that both Jackie and Duc 'glow'," said Jon.

Gish nodded. "Yes. She describes it as being like the moon, when there is just a sliver. I think she means that they have some kind of halo effect."

"We'll want to use the equipment down on Titan to see if it can pick up any kind of energy signature coming off either Jackie or Duc," said Jon. "And we'll also want to see if she detects any kind of similar halo or glow with the artifact itself."

Gish looked at Jon a very long time before saying anything. It was a studied gaze, and Jon felt as though it pierced him. “Do you think there’s a threat? To her, I mean.”

Jon and Tops exchanged a quick glance. “Tell him,” she said.

“Tell me what?”

Jon nodded. “Robert, Tops found something else with Jackie and Duc that I didn’t tell the others earlier, and that isn’t in the official report . . . yet.”

Gish said nothing, just looked from one to the other.

“They seem to have undergone some kind of healing transformation. Any minor medical problems they had before have vanished, for at least the time being,” explained Tops.

His eyes narrowed, and he looked back at the girl. “So, why can she see it?”

“Good question. Maybe it has something to do with the genetic manipulation that’s been done to her. But I can’t explain why . . . there’s nothing that odd or unusual about any of her visual abilities.” Tops shrugged.

“All we know is that without prompting, she was able to detect something different about Jackie, and then Duc when she was brought up here. That’s significant. And potentially useful,” said Jon. “Where it will lead, who knows. But I can’t see that there’s any kind of threat to her.”

“OK,” Gish nodded. “I’ll bring her with me tomorrow morning, before the meeting. And we’ll see if she picks up anything when she sees the artifact.”

“Hello again.”

Jon looked around the walls of the cave, to see if anything had changed. It was the same as the last time he was there: a pale blue light, only his shadow, the soft calling of the artifact’s song. He turned his attention to the center, where the tholin burl glowed ever so slightly. Except instead of hanging below the artifact, the burl was being held in the hands of a man. In the hands of a youthful Darnell Sidwell.

Darnell was facing him, a thin, quiet smile on his face. He seemed to be waiting patiently for something.

“It was you.” Jon stepped toward him. He held up an accusing finger. “You did that to Jackie and Duc.”

“Me? I did them no harm.”

“Then who did?”

The figure looked Jon in the eye, and shrugged. Then he turned his attention to the large burl in his hands. Gently, caressing more than manipulating it, he started it spinning. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

And Jon realized that the song of the artifact had changed. It had grown softer, more like the whisper of a lover held close, breath-sound moist and warm, comforting. “Yes. Yes, it is.”

For a long time neither of them said anything, just watched the slow spinning of the burl, heard the murmur of its song. Finally Darnell looked back up at Jon, stared into his

face for a moment. One hand came up and gestured invitingly to the tholin. “Here, you should take this.”

“I . . . I don’t want to touch it.” Images of Jackie and Duc on the floor of the dome flashed into his mind, and he almost lost the thread of the moment, almost slipped out of the flow state. But the calling of the tholin held him steady, anchored in that place for that time.

“Yes, you should take it. It is, after all, your heritage.”

“My heritage?”

“Heidegger was right, as far as he could understand. Though Heraclitus got closer to the truth.” Again, the gesture. “Come, embrace it.”

Jon felt his hands reaching out toward the light, could hear the song grow louder but no less soft and inviting. An eternity passed, but then his hands reached the burl, touched it lightly, felt its warmth spinning below the tips of his fingers. And as he watched, the light slowly flowed from the burl and into his hands, warmth seeping into his palms, filling them. Amazed, he pulled his left hand back, and it stayed alight, solid yet somehow glowing from within.

“What’s happened?”

“Nothing, except that you’re just starting to wake up.”

Jon could feel it, looked from his hand to Darnell. And the lines of the youthful face had gone, replaced with the crevasses of the old prospector. All that was left of the youth were the eyes, bright and alive.

They were the last thing Jon saw before he slipped away into a deep and dreamless sleep.

“Morning. How’re you feeling?” Jon looked at Duc Ng, sitting up on the exam bed, Tops checking him with some kind of sensor. He looked pale, worn out.

“Like I owed money to the wrong people.” He managed a wry smile. “But not bad, for the most part. It’s weird, not having my ‘ware. I feel like I need glasses, or something.”

Tops checked some result, looked up at Jon. “But he’s fine. Even less exhausted than I expected. And most of the burnout seems to be gone, too.”

Duc smiled. “Quick healer. Always have been.”

“Good, because there are a few things I’d like to discuss with you, see if you feel up to doing.”

Stiffly, Duc got off the bed, reached over and picked up his shirt. “Shoot.”

Jon glanced to Tops. “Like maybe returning to the surface with me later this morning?”

Pulling his shirt on, flipping his ponytail out from under it, Duc paused and considered Jon. “OK. Why?”

“To see if you can sense anything different about the artifact. Before you touched it, you said that it wasn’t there. I wonder if you’ll see it now, or not.”

Ng nodded. “Yeah, I remember that part, and going down into the pit. Then it becomes kind of vague. Like a dream.”

“Remember anything at all?”

“Nah, just random impressions of color, mostly. Kind of weird.” He looked at Tops. “Can I go?”

“Sure. But take those hangover meds, just in case. And let me know if anything else happens. You do OK for a day or two, and we’ll install some new cyberware for you.”

“Right. Thanks, doc.” He turned to Jon. “What else?”

“How about I walk you down to your quarters. I’d like to see if there is anything on that extra film you shot before taking the auggies. We brought it up from the dome last night.”

“Yeah, cool.” They left the infirmary, nodding to Tops on the way out.

As they walked down the corridor, Jon asked, “You said something else when you first started to experience the effects of the drugs. Something about people leaving visual trails when they moved. What was that all about?”

Duc bit his lip. “Yeah, I remember that. Kind of hard to recall what it really looked like now, but there was this odd effect . . . sort of like a smear left behind any movement people made.”

“Ever see anything like that before?”

“No.”

“Hmm.” Jon thought about it. “Maybe something to do with the artifact, or the environment?”

Duc said nothing for a few moments, just continued walking, slowly and with some stiffness. “Could it have been the AG generator Sidwell has there? Never been around one of those while taking the drugs before.”

“Seems like a reasonable theory.”

“Let me check on it, see if there’s anyone else who has used the drugs in an AG field.” Duc stopped, slapped a fist into his palm. “Damn. I don’t have any cyberware. How am I going to do any kind of research?”

“Tell you what, I’ll ask Seth to look into it for you. Chances are, he’ll need to contact Earth for the relevant database. That’ll take a couple of hours transmission time. When it comes in, we’ll get you to a rec room here on the station or on the da Vinci, and you can chat with Seth about it.”

Duc frowned. But then started walking again. “It’ll have to do, I guess. Make sure he gets the discussion archives as well as all the official data. This might not have been something that has been published.”

“Right.”

They came to Duc’s quarters, and went inside. Jon could smell the sharp odor of chemicals coming from the bathroom. Duc sat down on his bed, sighed. “Give me a few moments to catch my breath, OK?”

“You all right?”

“Yeah, just still a little weak, I guess. Feel the way you feel after fighting off a nasty fever, know what I mean?”

Jon nodded. He started to sit in a nearby chair when Seth materialized. “Hello,

there. Duc, Seth's here."

"Give him my regards. And ask about that research project."

Jon looked to the expert. "What can I help you with?"

"Word's in from Magurshak. Things are heating up back home." Seth looked down at his hands, clasped in front of him. Then back at Jon. "There's been a number of infrastructure attacks around the country."

Ng was watching Jon closely. Jon asked Seth, "How bad?"

"Not as bad as it could have been. A few power outages, some damage to the mag-lev system. Safety precautions minimized the damage. But it's an indication that things are getting ugly. NSA experts are predicting an increase in violence over the next few days."

Jon looked at Ng, who was still anxiously watching him. "There's been some attacks back home on the mag-lev system. Nothing serious, but they're expecting more."

"Damn. Edenists?"

"Probably." Jon looked back to Seth. "What else?"

"There's also been an attack on the USSA headquarters; there were several casualties. That's being kept off the nets for now."

Jon watched Seth, waited. "Go on."

"While they were in the USSA, the attackers managed to damage my thin-film dupe. No data has been lost, as far as we can tell, but there is reason for concern."

"Oh?"

"Well, the dupe is nonfunctional. Routine administration has had to devolve to other experts, with my guidance from this location. More importantly, it seems like the attack was designed specifically to penetrate to that part of the facility."

"Meaning that they knew exactly what they were doing."

"Correct."

"I don't like the implications of that." Jon glanced at Duc, said "it's not as bad as it sounds, but there is reason to believe that the Edenists know even more than we feared."

"Oh, boy."

"Yeah, really. It's not as bad as it might have been, but still." Jon studied the artist. "I need to go take care of some things, am going to head down to the surface right away. You be OK alone?"

Duc took a deep breath. "Yeah. But have someone come by and tell me if anything big happens, OK? I hate being out of touch like this."

"I promise. Go ahead and see about the film plates, get ready to go down to Titan. I'll have someone by to pick you up. OK?"

Duc nodded, face set. "Sure."

"See you down there."

"So, wha' is it?" Sidwell looked up from his reading, a vague cloud of smoke surrounding him.

"Just wanted to stop in before my meeting over in the other dome. Let you know

some news that hasn't made the nets: the Edenists have been staging attacks back home, evidently trying to disrupt power and information infrastructure."

"Bad?"

"Not really. In fact, the NSA thinks that it was mostly just cover for the real attack: to get into the USSA and damage my expert's back-up system. Which is an indication that they know way too much about our mission."

The old man digested this news for a moment, playing with his pipe. Then he looked at Jon long and hard. "These Edenists, they're a bad bunch. Gonna take some serious work t' get rid of them. But do it early, an' do it right, or you'll have 'nother full-blown war on your hands."

Jon nodded. He was too young to remember the obliteration of Jerusalem. But he knew what the potential costs were. "Yeah, I think you're right. But for right now, that's not my concern. The artifact is. And, speaking of which, just before Navarr came in here last time and wanted to haul you to jail, we were talking about what you weren't telling me. What is it that you know about the artifact that you've been keeping to yourself?"

"Now, doncha go gettin' in too much a rush." He relit the pipe, pulled strong at it, letting the smoke waft slowly out of his mouth when he was done with it. "Bein' in a rush is wha' got people 'n trouble 'n th' first place."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, with th' distractions 'n all. Bein' busy means ya don' have t' notice what you're missin'."

Jon thought back. What was it the old man had said earlier? Something about distracting himself . . . then it came to him. "What is it that you were trying to forget, that the artifact has made you think about again?"

Now the old man grinned behind another cloud of smoke. "About bein' really alive. About havin' your finger on th' pulse of th' universe."

"Sorry, I don't follow. Why would you want to forget that?"

"Because of th' responsibility that goes wit' it." He looked at Jon, still grinning, but now with a little bit of challenge to his eyes. "Think it's easy t' be 'n charge of yer own fate? I mean completely 'n control?"

Jon had always considered that he was pretty much in control of his own life. "Well, it's not easy, but as adults . . ."

"Oh, hell, son, I ain't talkin' 'bout that kind of responsibility." Sidwell shook his head, and there was a look of disappointment in his eyes. "Sorry, thought you was ready."

"Ready for what?"

Darnell paused, sighed. The moment was gone, and Jon knew it. The old man looked at him and said with a touch of sadness, "Wakin' up."

Jon was still considering the old man's words as he waited for the frozen tholin/ethane sludge to wash off in the airlock. The similarity of what the actual Sidwell said, and what the one in his dreams said, was a little unnerving. But the tricks of the mind

are many, and Jon wasn't surprised that his subconscious would be focused on the old man the way it was, playing with the things he said.

The door slid open and he stepped into the dome. The moment he popped open his helmet, he could sense the artifact. But there was something different. The song was back, like it had been before Duc and Jackie had touched the thing the day before. But now the sound seemed somehow fuller, more complete. Like more instruments had been added to the orchestra, more voices to the choir.

Peeling out of his suit, he surveyed the dome. Most of Bradsen's team was still at their equipment, working. Some of them looked like they hadn't slept since they had gotten to the surface. A pair of marines were on the far side of the dome, silently taking in the scene. Navarr was talking with Bradsen near the other, larger airlock. It looked like the two of them had also just come in from outside. As usual, the commander kept his suit on, helmet clipped to his belt and hanging free, ready for use.

Jon's own team members were standing around the near edge of the pit, looking down at the artifact. On one side of the group was Jackie, her arms folded in front of her, hands holding herself tight. There was no sign of Ng. Jon noted that neither Gish nor Chu Ling were in the dome yet, either.

As he hung up his suit, Gregor Soukup came over to him. For such a physically large and powerful man, he seemed to Jon to be very small that morning. "Hi Gregor."

Soukup nodded. "Is good to see you. I think Jackie will be happy to have you here, to get done with this meeting."

Jon smiled slightly. "Well, let's hope that Ng and Gish get here soon."

The two men walked over to the small group standing at the edge of the pit. "Morning, everybody."

Amid the replies, Jackie stood silent, just looking down into the pit. Jon went over to her, spoke in a voice only for her, "You OK?"

She shuddered slightly, took a deep breath, steeled herself. Glancing up from the artifact for a moment she said, "It's different."

"How?"

"The sound . . . now it feels like it is calling me. I . . . I'm worried."

He reached out and put an arm around her. "You'll be OK. It didn't hurt you yesterday, beyond that mild shock."

"It's not like that." She looked him in the eyes. "I'm not afraid of it. But I feel somehow connected to it. I want to go touch it again."

Jon looked down into the pit at the artifact. He knew what she meant, and absently looked at the palm of his hand, half expecting to see the light that was there in his dream.

He heard the airlock cycle open again, and in came Ng with one of Navarr's troopers. Movement off to the side caught his eye, and he could see Navarr quickly walking toward the two figures. "Excuse me Jackie, Ng's here."

She nodded, looked back down at the artifact.

Jon went over to where Navarr was now speaking with Ng and the marine. Navarr nodded as Jon came up, then unclipped his helm and popped it on. Through the open visor

he said as he stepped into the airlock, the marine close on his heels, “Keep everyone inside. One of my marines has gone missing.”

The door to the airlock closed behind them.

Jon glanced at the other two marines. They were now sealed up in their suits, ready for anything. Jon turned to Duc, “What’s going on?”

The artist looked shaken, eyes wide. “I’m not really sure, since I wasn’t able to listen in on what they were saying. The two troopers met me at the landing pad. I was moving kind of slow, so they were helping me along, making sure I didn’t get lost in the tholin sleet coming down out there. Then as we came up to the dome, one of them evidently saw something off to the side . . .”

He was interrupted by Navarr’s voice in Jon’s ears. The commander’s voice was solid, but urgent. “Jon, get everyone back into their suits, as soon as you can. But stay inside the dome.”

Jon touched the phone wafer. “Got it.”

He turned to face the people in the dome. “Everyone, I need you to get to your suits and get them on. There’s some kind of emergency.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, then people started to scramble for their suits. Jon touched the phone wafer again as he reached over to where his own suit was hanging next to the airlock. “Navarr . . . what’s going on?”

There was a pause. A long pause. As Jon waited for a reply, he climbed into his suit. Finally Navarr responded. “Stay there. We’ve found what looks like a bomb, attached to the side of the dome. It was so covered over with the tholin sludge that it was hidden, just a bump where there shouldn’t have been one.”

“Good lord.”

“Yeah. Get everyone over to the large airlock, and as many as possible inside it. All but a few of you should be able to fit, though it’s going to be crowded. When everyone has their suits on and are ready, let me know and we’ll see about disarming this thing, or at least about getting it away from the dome. There’s no evident timer, so I don’t know how long you have.”

“Got it.” He looked around at the chaos of a score of people struggling into environment suits. “OK, people, quickly, but let’s take enough care to make sure that you get your suits on right. Check over the person next to you to make sure their seals are secure, everything in place. Then let’s gather over here by the equipment airlock and discuss what’s going to happen next.”

“Jon?”

Jon glanced over at the sound of the familiar voice. “Oh, Seth. Good to see you.”

“I have been following the situation, and decided to check physical telemetry. Shall I help to calm down those showing signs of anxiety?”

“Yeah, do that. Thanks.”

The expert nodded. “You’ll need to see to Mr. Ng and Ms. Gates, since I have no telemetry from them. And I have informed Professor Gish that this is not a good time to disembark from his shuttle, which has just landed.”

“Thanks.” Jon turned to see Ng already over by the big airlock. Since he hadn’t yet taken his suit off, he was the first sealed up and ready. The small man was leaning against the wall next to the door, trying to stay out of the way of the others getting into their suits. He searched the dome for Jackie, didn’t see her. For a fleeting moment he was afraid that she had indeed gone down into the pit to be with the artifact again, then he saw her emerge from the crowd by the other airlock, suit in hand.

He went over to her. By the time he got there she was sitting on the ground, quickly pulling herself into the environment suit. “Doing OK?”

“Oh, yeah, just grand.” She looked up at him sharply, then frowned. “Sorry. What’s up?”

He gave her a hand standing, helped guide her arms into the close-fitting suit. “Navarr’s worried that the safety of the dome could be compromised. We’ll get all the details in a few moments.”

As she sealed the front of the suit and then bent over to pick up her helmet, she swayed a little. He steadied her, retrieved the helmet. “Here.”

“Damn. Been feeling a little dizzy all day. Equilibrium out of whack.”

Jon started to say something when he heard Navarr’s voice again. “Everyone ready in there?”

Jon looked around. “Not yet, but soon. Another couple of minutes.”

“OK. Let me know. I’m going to have Sidwell shut off his gravity generator so we can fling this thing as far from the dome as possible. It’s a pretty small package, and I’m sure the yield isn’t too great. Warn everyone.”

Jon squeezed Jackie’s shoulder where he had been helping to steady her. Then, in a loud, and what he hoped was a stable voice, said, “Everybody, let me have your attention. We’re going to get as many people as will fit inside the airlock in there. Commander Navarr has found a small explosive device . . .”

“There’s a BOMB?” gasped someone in the crowd.

“ . . .outside the dome on the far wall from us. It doesn’t look to be too powerful, but we wanted to have everyone in their suits and ready before they attempted to remove it.” He looked around, saw that most of them were shaken, but fully in control. “So, finish checking your seals, put on your helmets. I want to make sure that we fit as many people as possible into the airlock for additional protection.”

“Will not all fit,” said Soukup, his powerful voice drowning out the other murmurs. “Those left inside should get into pit, nearest bomb. Best protection inside dome.”

Jon saw that one of the marines nodded vigorously. “All right. Everyone get into the airlock. Jackie, you and Ng get in there, stay close. Anyone who won’t fit into the airlock should join me in the pit. And be ready for the apparent gravity to go off. This will allow Navarr’s people to remove the device from the proximity of the dome quickly. Don’t be startled when we revert to Titan’s normal gravity. And wait for the all-clear before opening the airlock.”

He looked around again. “OK, let’s go. Into the airlock. Try and be orderly about it.”

He was pleased that there was order to it, no panic. All but four of them fit in there, not including the two marines. Giving them a brave smile, he closed the door to the airlock. He turned and faced Soukup, Bailey, and Feldman, along with the two guards. "Let's get down into the pit. Try and avoid all the equipment, but be sure to get snug up to the wall, low to the floor."

They moved. As he was descending the ladder into the pit, he keyed his phone. "Navarr? We're ready when you are."

"Right. Soon as the gravity goes off, we'll try detaching the bomb."

Jon took his place with the others, braced himself, and waited. He looked around the floor of the pit, could easily see the artifact through the banks of equipment nearby. Just as he was turning back to see how his companions were doing, he felt the gravity cut off. Suddenly he was lighter, and his stomach flipped, threatened to make him sick. He closed his eyes and concentrated for a moment when he heard Bailey exclaim, "Oh my god!"

Instinctively, he shielded his face, expecting an explosion. In the second it took for it to register that none was coming, he dropped his arms and saw what caused Bailey's outburst: the artifact had disappeared.