

## Chapter Fourteen

“Finally.”

Jon’s vision swam, refusing to come into focus. He blinked, tried again. At last he was looking into the face of Darnell Sidwell.

Yet it wasn’t. Then he realized it was the Sidwell of the dreamtime, the trance.

“About time you finally got here.”

Jon looked around. It was the cave. But now, instead of the pale blue glow from the tholin, the room was bright . . . with a light that was coming from himself. “What . . . what’s happened?”

“You’ve emerged from the dimness.” The old/young man smiled. “You’re awake.”

Jon looked down at his hands. They were afire with that clean blue-white light, yet every pore, every vein, every swirl of fingerprint was still there, still identifiable. They were his hands. Just . . . glowing. The light even seemed to pour through his clothing.

“But this is just a dream,” he said to himself.

“Yeah. But it tells of a deeper meaning, a deeper truth,” replied the Sidwell.

“What truth is that?”

Darnell looked at him oddly, head tilted to one side, considering something. “You know.”

Jon nodded, slowly, still somewhat agog. He felt the words form, a texture, a color so bright that it almost leaked from his mouth without intent. “We are the light.”

A smile. “Well, at least part of it.”

“Awareness.”

“Bingo.”

Jon looked at him. “Why aren’t you glowing?”

“Because this isn’t about me.”

He thought about it. “Is this what happened to Duc and Jackie?”

Sidwell hesitated. “They touched it. But they did not seek it. You have.”

“So, it has done this to me?”

Another wry smile. “Not exactly. Think of it more as a doorway, an entrance into a fuller understanding. They came, but they were not ready to go through.”

“I am?”

“Evidently.” Darnell looked at him with piercing eyes. “Now, what will you do with the light that is within you?”

“Jon? Jon, can you hear me? Hey, I think he’s coming around already!”

Jon tried to open his eyes, but failed. He was so tired.

“Jon? Jon? Come on out of it. You can do it!”

Who? He tried to think. Jackie. Yeah, Jackie. He concentrated, and his left eye fluttered open briefly.

“C’mon Jon, open your eyes. You can do it. Just open your eyes and keep them open.”

His eyes opened, but the glare from the overhead lights hurt. He was looking straight into them. “W-what?”

“Easy. You’re OK.” Jackie looked down into his eyes, cradling his head. “You’ll be fine. But you’re going to be very, very tired for a while.”

He felt so light. Then he realized that the gravity must still be off. “How . . . how long?”

“You’ve been out for less than an hour, Jon,” said Jackie. “Navarr’s people are keeping the gravity off for the time being, since it cuts down on the tholin sleet outside. They’re doing a thorough search of the grounds for the missing marine. We’re staying in here until the all-clear.”

He tried sitting up. But even in the reduced gravity, his head still felt like it weighed a ton. He slumped back into Jackie’s arms. A memory of curiosity. “What happened?”

Gregor and Jackie exchanged glances. She spoke, “You walked into where the artifact was.”

“Gregor tried to stop you, but you didn’t listen. You were like sleepwalker,” said the big man.

Jon shook his head. “I don’t remember.”

“No surprise,” said Jackie. “What is surprising is that you’re already awake. How do you feel?”

He considered that. Soreness, exhaustion. Then he realized something else, and with a jolt of fear said, “Hey, my cyberware . . .”

Don Bradsen came into view over Jackie’s shoulder. “Yeah, it’s fried. At least from what we can tell. Seth and Tops have been trying to see if they can access your pc at all, but no luck.”

“It’s like you touched the artifact, Jon.”

He remembered. “But it wasn’t there.”

Soukup nodded. “Still is not.”

“At least not that we can tell,” said Jackie.

“But according to our equipment, it never was there,” said Don. “Nonetheless, you seem to have come into contact with it, the same way that Jackie and Duc did. And with much the same result. As soon as things are safe, we’ll get you up to the station, and Tops can do a thorough examination.”

“Seth . . .”

Don looked over to the side, where Jon could see nothing. “Seth’s here.”

“Tell him,” Jon started to speak to Don, then stopped. Jon looked at the empty space, “I mean, Seth, tell Magurshak.” He paused, and not just because he was so bone-tired. Unable to deny the inevitable, he said, “Transfer . . . operational oversight to Don Bradsen . . . until I can resume my duties.”

“How’re you doing?”

Jon tried to focus on the man sitting next to his bed. It was Navarr. “A little groggy.”

Tops, standing close by foot of his bed, said, “That’ll pass. I hit you with some pretty strong drugs, pushed you into an artificial coma for a few hours. After seeing how Jackie and Duc went through the first day of recovery, I learned some things.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Sleep was the best bet.” She smiled. “That, and flushing your system to remove the waste material from such a systemic overload of cellular repair. You’ll probably still be sore in some of the deeper tissues and joints where it takes longer for that material to work its way out, but you should be in better shape than either of the others were.”

Jon looked from her to Navarr. “He knows?”

Tops nodded slightly, hesitated. “We . . . we tried to use the artifact, after . . .”

Navarr broke in. “After we found my marine. Dead.”

Somehow, Jon expected this. A blackness crept around the edges. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, we at least know that the artifact can’t resuscitate someone who is dead,” said Tops.

“What happened?” He tried to sit up in bed, found that he could with minimal difficulty.

Navarr frowned. “Hard to say. It was murder, clearly. But whoever did it used either her weapon or one like it to blast away her pc and any information that it contained.”

Tops nodded. “In the autopsy I found evidence of pre-death blunt trauma that indicated she was probably first attacked by someone from behind.”

“Looking over the scene, my bet is she was knocked down, then shot at close range. Whoever did it knew enough to make sure the pc was incinerated with the first shot, just in case it was transmitting a record of what was happening. And that’s not an easy thing to do, through our suits.” Navarr looked hard at Jon. “Not much in the way of other evidence.”

“What was her name?” asked Jon. He wasn’t sure why, but this felt important to him. A need to connect.

“Lewis. Indra Lewis.” The commander looked away for a moment, closed his eyes. Then he looked back at Jon, and Jon was very glad that he wasn’t responsible for the death. “She was a good soldier.”

Jon nodded, and no one said anything for a few moments. Finally, Jon asked, “What about the bomb?”

“It exploded when we threw it away from the dome. Small, but very powerful. Easily would have opened up a big hole in the wall.”

“So, we have someone with one of your weapons, knowledge of military protocols, at least one bomb, and a desire to kill us all. Great.”

“Yeah, that’s about right. And either it’s one of my troopers, or someone else who has the necessary military encryption to use our weapons.”

“Wonderful. Just wonderful.”

Jon took a deep breath, felt a soreness in his ribs up where his pc should be. He

must've winced as he reached up to touch that area beneath his armpit, because Tops said. "It's out. While I had you under, I removed all your cyber systems."

"Fried?"

Tops nodded, her short brown hair flipping. "Yeah, like Jackie's and Duc's. But interestingly, there seems to have been less damage to the surrounding tissue than they had. Like it was cleaner, more surgical. Or maybe the damage caused by the attack was repaired more in your case than it was in theirs. I'm not sure."

"But the same thing as when they touched the artifact?"

"Yeah."

"Well, at least we know it wasn't just a fluke with them."

"You're talking like you did it intentionally, to find out," said Navarr.

"No. I don't remember doing so, anyway." Jon shrugged. "But I did have another of the dreams or visions or whatever, associated with the thing. And that made it pretty clear that I had come in contact with the artifact."

"Interesting, because the artifact had disappeared."

"Yeah, I remember that. Weird."

"Perhaps," said the commander. "Perhaps not. It reappeared when we finally turned the Apparent Gravity system back on."

This caught Jon by surprise. "Oh?"

Navarr smiled. "Yeah. It's got Bradsen and his people all excited. They tested it several times: each time the AG was shut off, the thing disappeared. Still, none of the equipment can pick it up. But at least we know that something we can do affects it."

Jon thought about this. He looked to Tops. "Can I leave?"

She chewed a lip. "Yeah, if you really want. I'd recommend some more rest. But if you take it easy and are doing well, maybe tomorrow we can install new cyberware. I've already got Duc and Jackie scheduled, but I bet you'll be in shape for it, too. So, yeah, you can go, but limit your activities."

"Well, I don't think I'm going to be doing a whole lot, with no cyberware."

Tops smiled. "As to that . . . you have another visitor."

She left the room for a moment, and came back with Gish and Chu Ling. The scientist looked around the privacy screen tentatively, but the girl just came around the corner and smiled broadly. She said, just as Gish was reaching out to grab her, "Ling is happy to see you! Have brought you gift!"

He was surprised at how happy he was to see the girl. She held out her portable holo projector. Jon took the thick grey slab. The moment he touched it, the image of Seth appeared. "Good evening, Jon. I trust you are well?"

Jon felt a relief that he didn't expect, and his vision got a little blurry. Taking a deep breath, he smiled back at Chu Ling, but said to the miniature expert, "Be with you in a moment, Seth."

He set the projector down on his lap, and reached out to the girl. She hesitated, but when Gish let go of her shoulder, she took Jon's hand. He felt an electric shock go through him, and clearly the girl felt it too, because she almost jumped away. But the connection

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held, and for a moment Jon could swear that he could see a glow around the girl, a pale blue aura.

“Chu Ling wanted you to have the projector, until your new cyberware is installed,” said Gish, evidently unaware that anything unusual had taken place.

Jon looked from the girl to the scientist, then to Tops and Navarr. None of the others seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary. He decided that he should just shake it off, the after effects of the drugs. Then he looked back at Ling, and found the girl staring at him, intent, seeing something.

“What is it Ling? What do you see?”

“The glow. Like that lady. But yours different.”

This got the attention of the other adults. Gish spoke again, now looking at the girl with some interest. “She wanted to see you, once you were back up on the station. No idea how she knew, but she did. We came in while you were asleep. Said she saw the glow then.”

Jon looked at Ling. “Is it the same glow you see now? Can you tell me about it?”

She looked at him with a little confusion. “Same as you see. The blue glow.”

“What do you mean the same as I see? How do you know?!?”

She pulled away, slightly frightened by the intensity of his question.

“Ling, wait. I am sorry if I scared you,” said Jon. He tried a smile. “Can you tell me about the blue glow, and how you know I see it?”

Holding tight to Gish’s hand, she glanced up at the scientist. He nodded. She looked back at Jon. “Just know. Can see it with your eyes.”

“You mean in my eyes?”

She shook her head. “No. Ling sees it with your eyes. Like you see it.”

Gish’s hand came comfortingly to her shoulder. She looked up at him. “Ling, tell me. Do you see like this with other people?”

Her brow furrowed, considered. “No. Just Mr. Jon.”

“Not even Jackie or Duc, who you also said glowed?”

She looked at him as though it was a dumb question. “They don’t glow like this. They just have little glow. And no . . .” she hesitated, trying to think of the word. “. . . vision. Mr. Jon has vision. He sees. So Ling sees.”

“Amazing,” muttered Gish.

Jon looked deeply into her eyes again. “Ling, can you see anything else with my eyes?”

Still holding tight to Gish, she nonetheless returned Jon’s gaze. After a long moment, she said, “Some man. Old man. In a dark place, but he has the glow, too.”

Jon nodded, looked around the room. The other adults were all staring first at the girl, then him, unsure what to make of it. He said to the girl, “Yes, that’s right Ling, a man. Can you tell me who he is?”

She made a face. “Ling tired, looking is hard.”

“Do you know the man, Ling?”

One hand let go of Gish, and rubbed her eye. “Not know. But you do.”

“Yes, Ling, I know who the man is. Maybe you would like to meet him?”

She frowned. “Not now. Tired. Ling wants sleep.”

In truth, she did look tired. And Jon considered that it must be quite late. “Maybe in the morning, then. Will you come to see me, and we can talk more about him? Maybe you can come with me to see him.”

She nodded, but then turned and stuck her face against Gish’s side. Gish looked at Jon. “I know this is very interesting, but perhaps it is best if I get her to bed. She’s normally asleep at this hour.”

“Yeah. That’s fine.” Jon closed his eyes for a moment, and he could see a faint afterimage of blue. “But come by in the morning, and we’ll talk, then take a trip to the surface together. I want her to meet Sidwell.”

He fell asleep with a memory, a memory he hoped would take him back to the cave:  
What will you do with the light that is within you?

“Well, what will you do?” Sidwell’s voice came to him in the darkness. He tried to look around, and somehow knew he was in the cave, but there was no light.

Holding up a hand right in front of his face, he stared intently, and after a moment, could see a faint glimmer of deep blue. Concentrating, he tried to look further into the light, and slowly it grew, started to pulsate, to emerge from the depths of his hand.

“I’m waiting.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m just trying to figure this out.”

Jon could . . . feel . . . that the old man was smiling. “Good. It wouldn’t be useful for you to take this for granted.”

Now the room started to fill with a diffuse light, but it didn’t come from him. He turned to face the source of it, saw the dreamtime Sidwell. As before, the light seemed to seep through his clothes, to permeate the space. It stemmed from him, but didn’t make him any the less human. Jon looked back at his own hand, and concentrated again. More light started to appear on the surface, to gather there like the coming of dawn.

“That’s it. Just look, feel, call the light.”

He relaxed, but kept his concentration focused. The light in his hand shifted down the spectrum slightly, becoming less dark, more visible. It pooled beneath the surface of his hand, puddled in his palm, and started to pour out its radiance, adding to the light coming from Sidwell. “So, there’s some sort of control to this?”

“Of course. You have to learn to walk, don’t you?”

“And learning that control will help me understand what to do with the light?”

Sidwell smiled. “No. No more than learning how to walk will help you understand what paths to take.”

“What paths are there?”

“The same paths you have always found in your life. This doesn’t change that.”

“Then what changes?”

“It’s a way of . . . seeing.” The old man looked thoughtful for a moment. “Like the

girl.”

“You mean Ling?”

“Yes. It takes something special to see the world the way a child does.”

“But Ling is special.”

“Yes. Something . . . older.”

Jon considered. “Older?”

“Like I said, the light is your heritage. She remembers this, though she doesn’t understand it yet.”

“Help me to understand it.”

“I am. But you must be diligent. Habits long learned are difficult to break. Most people can never change. You, I fear, have to.”

“Have to?”

There was a somberness in Sidwell’s voice. “Yes. And there isn’t much time.”

Jon walked into the medical facility, portable projector slung under his right arm. Tops was waiting for him. He looked at her, asked, “What’s up? Your message said come down right away.”

“Come on back.” She turned and went down a hallway, entered a surgical bay.

“Have a seat.”

Jon followed her in, sat on the exam table she pointed to.

She picked something up from a nearby counter, turned to face him. “Let me have your left hand.”

He held out the hand and she took it, turned it over so the palm was facing up. She examined it carefully, through a small scanner she held just a few inches away from it.

“How does your hand feel this morning?”

He looked at it, flexed his fingers. “Fine. Why?”

“No problems with either hand since your incident with the artifact?”

“No. They were sore last night when I came out of your induced coma, but I figured that was due to the shock or whatever it was that burned out my pc.”

She nodded. “You know how the palmkey is installed and works, right?”

“Yeah, sure. It’s a thin film injected just under the skin, forms a fluid web across the palm that is programmed to function as a close-range transceiver. That’s connected to the pc, which in turn is connected to sensors in the scalp that detect and decipher brain waves, so after calibrating the equipment all you have to do is just ‘think’ and the pc translates that into simple commands that can be broadcast through the palmkey. Simple enough.”

“Simple, and a technology that we’ve had and used for ten years. It’s well understood, along with all the potential problems and glitches.” She looked at him. “Except watch this.”

She set down her scanner and picked up a hypo filled with what looked to be a gold-colored mercury. Jon recognized it as the thin-film material used for palmkeys and similar applications. Taking his hand, holding it firmly, she tipped the needle down to the skin and

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slipped it under. There was only a mild sting, just what he remembered from the last time he had a palmkey installed. She depressed the plunger on the hypo, and the fluid was injected under the skin. She waited a moment, removed the needle, let go of his hand.

Jon held it there, palm up, expecting to see the liquid metal flow across the palm as it had previously. But it didn't. It stayed, pooled up at the injection site. He glanced up at Tops. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," she said. "But the same thing happened with Jackie when I tried that an hour ago."

Jon looked back at his palm. Now the liquid seemed to be seeping out through the small hole made by the needle, pooling on the surface of the skin. "What the hell?"

"It shouldn't do that. That material is specially formulated to spread out subcutaneously and form a thin, flexible film, not stay in a liquid state. Certainly not come squirting out of you like that." She looked at him. "It's like you're having an immune response to it."

"I'm sorry?"

"Your body is rejecting the material. Jackie's did the same thing, though more slowly. Same thing with the thin-film controls on the back of her hand."

"Duc?"

"I've sent for him. When he gets here, I'll run the same test on him. But I bet I know what will happen."

Jon nodded. "The artifact?"

"Probably." She shrugged. "But how? I mean, having your cyberware fried because you came into contact with the thing makes a certain amount of sense. And I just figured that the palmkeys were somehow damaged when that happened, so removed the pooled material with a hypo and didn't give it much thought. But this? You're not in contact with the thing now."

"Or are we?" He looked down at the small dollop of liquid metal skittering around on his palm. "Look, I need to go down to Titan, check on something with Gish and Chu Ling. Can you go ahead and use Jackie and Duc for your tests for the time being, try and see what the extent of this is? I promise I'll come back in as soon as I'm back on the station."

She nodded. "But do me a favor, Jon, and stay away from the artifact, at least until we can figure out what is going on here. If it's exercising some kind of physiological influence over you, that might be exacerbated by being in close proximity to it."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. I'll try and keep my distance, but I want to expose the girl to it."

"No touching."

"I promise."

Navarr was waiting for him when he got back to his room. Jon gave him a curious look, but ushered the commander in.

Navarr paused by the door, looked around. He reached down to a thigh pocket and touched the control of a device that Jon recognized: the field suppressor. But this time, Jon felt nothing, since he had no cyberware to be affected by the device.

“What’s up?” asked Jon.

“You’re vulnerable.”

Jon nodded. “Yeah, but I’m also not responsible for anything. Bradsen is.”

“True, but whoever killed my marine and planted that bomb may not care about that.” Navarr looked at him, eyes narrowing. “I, on the other hand, do.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. And him being in charge, that’s only temporary, right?”

“Well, who knows? I just came from Tops, and it looks like there are complications with getting new cyberware installed. I can’t very well run things if I’m not connected.”

Navarr nodded to the holo projector. “What about that?”

“Clumsy, at best.”

“Yeah, but the same principle applies. Don’t be stuck thinking that there’s only one solution to your problem.”

Jon considered it for a moment. “Well, yeah, we can go back to some of the older equipment, I suppose. Pre-cyberware. I’m not sure if there’s anything like that available up here, though.”

“You’ve got a communications tech expert down on Titan, don’t you?”

Jon grinned at the obviousness of it. “Yeah, sure as hell. OK, I get the point.”

Navarr returned the smile. “Good. Now, in the meantime, you need some protection.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the suppressor, handed it over to Jon. “Take this. If you need some privacy, just touch this control. This one controls the power output. Turn it like this to create just a personal space, crank it up like that to secure a room.”

“Yeah, I remember how it felt when you had it turned up.”

“OK, good. Then there’s this,” Navarr reached behind his back and pulled out a small pistol, handed it to Jon.

With just a slight hesitation, Jon took the weapon, examined it.

“It’s not much for range, but packs punch. Uses the same ammo as my service weapon.” He smiled. “And doesn’t require cyberware to use.”

“Where’d you get this?”

“Back-up,” said Navarr. “My dad was a cop, told me that no good cop was ever without a secondary weapon, just in case. It’s non-regulation as all hell, but rank has its privileges. You take it.”

Jon hefted the weapon. It felt comforting, but he was dubious. “Look, my days of fighting are behind me. Well behind me.”

“I don’t care. I can’t afford to have someone play bodyguard to you all the time. You’re without cyberware, can’t call for help easily, can’t be monitored, and are potentially a target. So, you take that. Fewer worries for me.”

Jon nodded, and Navarr handed him a pocket holster and an extra magazine of

ammunition. He hefted the weapon again. It did feel good. “Thanks.”

“Just take care of yourself. And get hooked up somehow as soon as you can.”

“Will do.” He carefully tucked the weapon into the small holster, then put it into his back pocket. The magazine slipped into another pocket. “Gish and Chu Ling should be here any moment, and then we’re going down to the surface. Wanna go?”

“Sure. I’ll arrange for a transport. Meet me at the hanger.”

The tholin sleet wasn’t as bad, since Titan’s atmosphere was adjusting to the ‘seasonal’ change and stabilizing. Nonetheless, visibility was down, and Jon was happy that Navarr was with them as they walked the distance from the landing pad to Sidwell’s dome. Particularly so since he was relying on just his normal vision, with no display overlay to help guide him if he got off the path.

He was following Gish and Ling, the scientist holding the hand of the girl. Navarr followed behind them. Gish kept looking straight ahead, but he could tell by the way that Chu Ling’s helmet moved that she was looking all around, trying to take it all in. Suddenly they stopped, and Navarr touched him on the shoulder. The two in front turned around just as Navarr put his helmet next to Jon and said “Be ready . . . gravity flip.”

Jon started to ask what he meant, when it hit. A quick series of shifts as the AG generator was turned on and off in rapid succession. His stomach didn’t have long enough between shifts to find a new balance each time, and Jon thought that he was going to be sick inside his helmet. Then it was over as quickly as it started. Navarr nodded ahead, and Jon turned to see that Gish and the girl were already walking again.

They got to Sidwell’s habitat dome, entered the airlock. After a few minutes, the accumulated tholin sludge rinsed and breathable air cycled in, they removed their helmets, and prepared to enter the dome. As soon as Jon popped his helmet, he looked at Gish. “That Bradsen testing the artifact?”

“You mean the AG sequence? Yes. I was down here last night when they were doing it. After you go through it a few times, it’s not so disorienting.”

Jon nodded as the inner door slid open. The familiar sweet aroma from the old man’s pipe gave Jon a certain comfort.

Navarr, ever alert, stepped first into the dome, glancing around. The others followed.

Darnell barely looked up from his reading at first, then he saw the girl. His book dropped into his lap, and his full attention was focused on her.

“Well, y’all come on in.” Darnell stood, reached out a hand to Navarr, then to Gish, but he never really took his eyes off of Chu Ling.

For her part, she studied him. Not timid, not hesitating, not at all shy, she looked him full in the face, met his gaze with one of equal intensity. Jon watched, could almost feel a connection, a pathway, being shaped between them. “I thought that it might be good if you two met one another.”

Ling looked up at Jon, then back to Sidwell. Then back again to Jon. But she said

nothing.

“C’mon in. Have a seat.” Sidwell gestured to the table. They sat down around it, Jon setting the holo projector in front of himself. Sidwell looked over at Jon. “Doin’ OK, son?”

Jon nodded. “Yeah, for the most part.”

“Good.” He turned, looked close at the girl, who was still standing beside Gish, holding on to the scientist for security. “Hello Chu Ling. I’m Darnell.”

“Yes. You the man Mr. Jon sees.”

“Tha’ right?” Sidwell glanced at Jon, a glint in his eye. “Did he tell you ‘bout me?”

“No, but I can see. You the one. The one with the glow.”

Sidwell looked, for just a moment, befuddled. “What glow is that?”

“She thinks that she can see some kind of . . . aura . . . around those who have been in contact with the artifact,” said Jon.

“Huh.” He looked back at the girl. “But I haven’ touched it.”

She furrowed her brow, trying to understand. “You glow.”

“Like Mr. Jon?” asked Gish.

She shook her head. “Not like Mr. Jon. Mr. Jon has big glow.”

Sidwell chuckled. “So, my glow isn’ as big, eh? Guess that’s wha’ happens when you get old . . .”

But the girl shook her head vigorously. “No. Mr. Jon has big glow, bigger than others. But you glow . . . brighter. Like . . .”

She stood, stumped, trying to think of a word. Without asking, she reached over and hit the activation control on the holo projector sitting in front of Jon, said something low at it. In a moment the image of Seth appeared, dressed in his tutor’s robes, facing her. They whispered to one another, then Chu Ling turned back to Darnell and said, “Like angel.”

Sidwell laughed heartily. “Child, lemme assure you, I’m no angel.”

Chu Ling looked concerned, consulted with the miniature Seth again. She looked back at Sidwell with intensity. “Like old deva.” She pointed at Seth. “He say ‘angel.’”

Now Sidwell just looked at her for a long time, and then smiled. “Well, I’ve been called worse. But I’d say ol’ Seth there’s more’n a spirit than I am.”

Now a different voice came into the room. “Jon?”

Jon looked at the holo projector, sitting on the table in front of him. Seth had disappeared, replaced with the image of Tops.

“Yeah, doc. What’s up?”

“Got those results for you.”

Jon looked around the table at the others. “Um, excuse me a moment.” He picked up the projector, went to the other side of the room. With his back to the others for a little privacy, he turned down the volume and said, “OK, what’ve you found?”

“First, the tests with Duc confirmed that the three of you all share a similar reaction to new cyberware implants.”

“So I’m stuck like this?”

“Well, until we can figure out what is going on, and how to counter act it.” She bit

her lip. "Sorry."

"Yeah. OK, I'll have to deal with it some other way."

She looked at him, curious. "How?"

"Navarr gave me the idea, going with pre-cyberware tech. I'm going to go talk with Theo Crane, the communications expert who came up with Bradsen's team."

She nodded. "Makes sense. Good luck."

"Thanks." He turned off the image, went back to join the others.

"News?" asked Navarr.

Jon nodded. "Tops is fairly certain that I can't replace my cyberware."

Gish raised an eyebrow at this, but said nothing. Chu Ling remained quiet at his side, just watching Darnell as if she wasn't quite sure what to make of him. Sidwell watched Jon very closely, asked, "Why?"

"She's guessing some kind of interference from the artifact. We don't understand it yet. But it's true with both Jackie and Duc, it seems." He shrugged.

"It should be fairly simple to hook you up with pre-cyberware tech," said Gish. "It'd be a little inconvenient . . ."

Jon nodded toward Navarr. "Yeah, Commander Navarr suggested that earlier. One of the reasons I came down was to discuss it with Theo Crane. He should be able to rig up something for me, though it's going to feel like stepping back a dozen years."

"We should go over and see him about it," said Navarr.

"Yeah."

The Commander looked at Gish. "I'll come back and get you when we're ready to leave. I don't want anyone outside without an escort, if it can be avoided."

"Oh, we'll come along now. I imagine that Chu Ling might be interested in seeing what all the fuss is about."

Jon saw Navarr start to object, said. "It's OK, Commander, let them come with us." Navarr frowned slightly, only nodded.

They went in through the larger of the airlocks, and as they were waiting for it to cycle, Navarr leaned over and said to Jon, "Another flip coming."

Being ready for it did help, but Jon still felt slightly disoriented and a little sick by the sequence. From what he could remember, it was the same pattern as before. The inner hatch of the airlock opened as the gravity stabilized.

Popping his helmet, Jon stepped into the large dome. He stepped to the side, and leaned against the wall near the changing benches, letting the others have those. Eyes closed, he just stood there a minute, calming his stomach and getting stable. A nearby voice spoke.

"You don't look so good. You OK?" It was Don Bradsen.

Jon took a long, slow breath and opened his eyes to look at the man. "That AG dance is just a little rough."

Bradsen seemed surprised. "Huh. No one else has complained of anything. You're

probably just still a little weak from your encounter with the artifact.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Jon looked around, noted that Gish and the girl were going over to the edge of the pit, and that Navarr had gone straight over to where his troopers stood sentry, without bothering to get out of his suit. Then he turned and looked at Bradsen. “What are you trying to do with turning the AG field on and off like that, anyway?”

“What we discussed after Ng and Gates were in contact with the artifact: establish communication with it.”

“I thought we agreed that broadcasting anything at it was too risky, that it might be perceived as an attack.”

Bradsen shrugged. “That was using conventional broadcast spectrum. After we found out that the artifact reacted to the presence or lack of an Apparent Gravity field, and didn’t have a hostile response, I thought it was safe to proceed using that as our communications vehicle. I discussed it at some length with both Klee and Crane, even got Gish’s thoughts on the matter. We agreed that starting with some simple tests, some basic on/off patterning, with breaks between to see if the artifact responded, was the best course of action.”

“Sounds risky.”

“OK, it’s risky. But it was my call to make. Look, we’ve got someone trying to sabotage our operation, a trooper has been killed, there’s a whole bunch of additional marines on their way, and another research team en route. I thought that under the circumstances, we needed to move a little faster to figure out what this thing is and how to communicate with it if that is possible. Before someone does manage to blow this place up.”

Jon looked at the man, nodded. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“No sweat. I’ve heard from Magurshak. He wants you to take operational control back over as soon as you’re able, and that’s fine by me, since I have research to coordinate. But let’s make sure that you’re able.”

“Fair enough. And it’s a moot point before I have communications set up again, anyway.”

“Communications set up? You mean new cyberware?”

“As a matter of fact, no. It seems that those of us who have been in contact with the artifact can’t have new cyberware implanted. I came here so that I could meet with Theo Crane and see about getting him to make up some external communications.”

“A bit out-dated, but should suffice.”

“Yeah, my thought. Would you be kind enough to ask Crane to join us, so I can discuss the matter with him?”

Bradsen manipulated the back of his hand, then touched the phone wafer at the base of his jaw. “Theo, come on up for a moment, would you?”

“Thanks.” Jon nodded slightly.

A heavyset man with a crew cut, hair blonde, came over the edge of the pit and around to the two of them. “Whatcha need, Don?”

“Actually, I needed to chat with you,” said Jon.

“Oh, hey, Jon. You’re looking pretty good, considering the way they took you outta here.”

“Theo, my encounter with the artifact burned out my cyberware, and the doc says that my system will reject any new implant for the time being. Can you help me out?”

He rubbed his hand absently along the top of his head. “Well, yeah. Some stuff I have’ll work just fine with conventional cyberware, if we mount it outside your body somehow.”

“Like what?”

“Well, let’s see . . . we can rig you up a phone, and your contact lenses should be OK, right?” Jon nodded, the man went on. “We’ll need some kind of harness for the pc, but that’s no big deal. Hmm. You want like a thin-film control pad and everything?”

“Well, I’m going to need some kind of interface.”

“Yeah, and probably some kind of palm-key . . .”

“What about like a glove?” offered Bradsen.

“That’d work.” Crane thought for a moment. “I can handle most of it with equipment I have here, though we’ll need to scavenge some things. I’ll get the kid - Mallory - to help me. He’s pretty handy jerry-rigging stuff.”

“OK. Keep me posted.” Jon tapped the projector plate. “This thing is of limited use.”

Crane nodded, started back toward the pit. Just then the holo projector activated, and Seth appeared. Bradsen’s attention was diverted to the side, where he was obviously seeing a larger version of the expert. “I’m glad to find both of you. Let me transfer..”

The image shifted, and Soukup’s large face appeared. He looked very preoccupied with something. “Something has happened. I have just heard. The Hawking - we have lost contact.”

“What do you mean, lost contact? Has something happened to her?” asked Jon.

“Do not know yet. All telemetry normal, multiple data channels. Everything working fine, routine. Then nothing.”

“You’ve tried sending a message?” asked Bradsen.

“Of course. But will be hours before we get response. They very far away, almost to end of journey before coming back.”

“How long ago did this happen?”

“Just few minutes. I was just sending messages to other ships and stations, asking if they had anything, thought you two should know.”

Jon looked to Bradsen. “Don, I can probably cover things up there, even with only this projector.”

“Fine by me. I’ll stay here, keep in touch.”

“OK, Gregor, I’ll come up,” said Jon. A thought occurred to him. “Have you considered using the ASA to see if they can locate the ship, get an image of it? That might tell you something.”

Soukup brightened. “No, did not. Will do. See you when you get here.”

The holo went off. Jon looked at Bradsen, tapped the projector plate. “This thing is

of limited use. Please continue to handle my other duties until Crane can come up with something better. ”

“You got it. I’ll try and keep you posted, though.”

“Thanks.”

Bradsen nodded, started back toward the pit.

Jon looked around, saw where Gish and Chu Ling were, sitting on the edge of the pit, watching all the activity down below. He went over to join them. Sitting down beside Gish, Jon looked down into the pit. For a long moment he looked at the artifact, but it seemed no different than any other time he looked at it, and he could feel no changes within himself being this close to it. He leaned past Gish and looked at the girl. “So, what do you think, Chu Ling?”

She looked up at him. She had been watching someone work on the far side of the pit. “What about?”

“About the artifact there?”

She shrugged, said nothing. Gish was watching her. “She didn’t think anything of it. Looked at it from up here, but has pretty much just ignored it. Like it wasn’t important.”

“Huh.” Jon looked from the girl to the artifact, then back. “Have you ever seen anything like that before, Ling?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Is there anything . . . unusual that you can see about it?”

“It floats. How they make it float?”

Jon shrugged. “We don’t know. That’s one of the things that the people down there are trying to find out.”

A loudspeaker in the dome activated. “Next round of AG tests scheduled to start in one minute.”

Jon glanced at Gish. “How long will this one be?”

Gish touched the back of his hand, read something. “Cycle is 10 seconds on, then 10 off, through the pattern.”

“Might as well stay put and wait until it’s over then, before getting back in our suits and leaving.”

Gish nodded. “I saw you speaking with Don Bradsen earlier. I told him that I thought it was a good idea to proceed with the test. Thought you should know.”

Jon took a deep breath, held it. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that it poses anywhere near the kind of danger to us that we pose to ourselves.”

Jon was about to answer this when he felt the gravity cut off and Ling gasped. He looked at the girl to see what had happened, and she was pointing down into the pit. He turned to see what it was that she was pointing at, and what he saw made his head spin.

The cycle ended, and normal gravity cut in. He looked back at Ling, who was now sitting, jaw hanging open. Not believing his own eyes, he asked her, “What did you see, Ling?”

The girl couldn’t take her eyes away from the spot, and a moment later when the AG

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James T. Downey

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field went off again she spoke with awe in her voice. “It is angel! Like old man Darnell.”

Indeed, Jon looked back at where the artifact should be invisible, but all he could see was a brilliant, bright blue orb, floating above the burl of tholin.