

Chapter Seventeen

“It’s related to Ignis.”

He looked at her. “Ignis?”

“The fire-flu. The virus was named ‘Ignis’, which is nothing more fancy than the Latin word for ‘fire’. This new virus is different, though.”

“Different, how?”

She chewed her lip as she consulted a database. “Well, it is part of the same family of viruses. The RNA has a very similar structure to the 1918 strain, but the DNA seems to have been...modified.”

He shook his head. “Tops, you lost me. What 1918 strain?”

“Sorry.” She looked over at him, the dread in her eye replaced by something else. Perhaps sympathy. “The 1918 flu was recreated in the early part of this century, as there was a growing concern about Avian flu. The scientists at the time discovered that the prevailing form of Avian Flu, the H5N1 virus, was surprisingly related to the 1918 pandemic virus. Almost identical RNA structure, similar DNA.”

“But you say this one is different.”

“Yeah. Ignis was such a nasty bug because not only was it spread by aerosol, but it also had a very short incubation period, just a couple of days. Then, as you know, the disease itself was very swift, and victims died within hours of onset. Like it was all time-compressed, hyper-virulent. This is one of the reasons that people thought then, and still debate now, whether it was a weaponized version of Avian flu. There was a lot of work in that field at the time, but no one was thought to be crazy enough to actually design such a weapon, let alone use it.” She flashed up an image for him to see. “Now, this beastie is somewhat like Ignis, in that the incubation period looks to be fairly short. And it is spread by aerosol, so every time someone infected coughs or sneezes, tiny droplets of the virus become airborne. But the course of the disease is longer. I project that most victims will take three to four days to die after onset.”

“Can you come up with an antiviral?”

“Well, that’s the trick.” She was absently shaking her head, almost as though she were talking to herself. Then she realized this, spoke again directly to him. “This thing is very pleomorphic, even more so than the other variants of the Avian flu. That means it keeps changing its form at a very basic level, making it difficult to create a targeted antiviral. The generic treatments may offer some help, but it’ll be nominal.”

“How about immunity? Don’t most people have some residual antibodies or something against the fire-flu?”

She chewed her lip again. “That was one of the first things I checked. The short answer is no, or not very much. It seems that whoever made this thing wanted to be sure that it was different enough to slip past any defenses we might already have.”

He wasn’t sure that he heard her correctly. “Made?”

With a sigh, she nodded. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure that it was engineered, given how

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neatly it slips past all of our safeguards.”

“But if it was engineered, why did they change the swiftness of the disease?”

“You mean how long someone takes to die?” She shook her head, not waiting for an answer. “That could be a side effect of something they tweaked so that it was different enough to slip past existing antivirals, or our immunity.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“No. It could also be just to make people take longer to die. Prolong the agony, make sure others have to watch it and see what’s coming. A terror weapon.”

There was a very long pause, as the full implications of this sank in. “That’s just evil.”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “Which is why I’m going to name it ‘Diabolus’.”

“How long?”

“Sorry?”

“How long until the first victims come down with it?”

She shook her head. “Not sure. I’ve already started them on wide-spectrum antivirals, and done what I can to boost their immune systems. That’ll help some. But since I don’t know exactly when they came in contact with the virus, I can’t say for sure. Maybe a couple more days.”

“Did you tell them what it was?”

She shook her head. “No. I should, but I didn’t. I needed to confirm it. But based on my suspicions, I started them on the therapy I mentioned. As soon as I confirmed what it was, I contacted you.”

“OK, let’s wait a little until we tell them.” Jon closed his eyes, rubbed his temples. In spite of the few hours sleep he’d had, he felt worn out.

“You OK?”

He nodded, opened his eyes. “Yeah. Just tired. There’s been a lot happening.”

“Nonetheless,” said Tops, “let me get a blood sample. I’ll need to get samples from everyone I can, so I can develop a model of how far the disease is spreading.”

Jon held out his arm for her. “So, what can we do? About the virus, I mean.”

“That depends on how much you want to tell people.”

“Well, pretty much anything will cause a panic.”

“Yeah.” She bit her lip. “We should tell Jakobs and Salim, get them . . .”

“No.”

Tops looked shocked. “Why not?”

“Well, Susan I can probably trust. But definitely not Salim. He’d send word back to Earth instantly. I’m sure it’s in his primary mandates.”

She almost looked indignant. “Well, we’re going to have to tell them sooner or later. If nothing else, I need all the medical help I can get from back home.”

Jon’s eyes sharpened, and he stepped across the office, took Tops by the shoulders. He looked her straight in the eye for a moment, and then said quietly and carefully, “Listen to me. If you tell them, any of them, they’ll destroy this station immediately.”

She looked at him as if he were nuts. “That’s absurd.”

“Trust me, I know what I’m talking about. I helped to draft the directives.” His jaw set, hard. “We are expendable. They will take no risk - none - of allowing this virus to get to Earth. If they catch wind that it is here, they won’t wait for anything. As soon as their suspicions were confirmed Salim would be told to vent the atmosphere into space just to kill us all off, and they’d probably follow up with multiple fusion missiles, to ‘sterilize’ the facility and any of the prospectors down on Titan they could find.”

She was no longer indignant. She was horrified. “My god.”

“Yeah. So, we need to figure out a way to at least control, or better yet beat, this virus before news of it gets out. Because once it does, well, you won’t have to worry about how long it’ll take people to die from the flu.” He let go her shoulders, his hand dropping to his sides. “Sorry, Tops, but we’re on our own with this one.”

She leaned back against a wall, then slid into a nearby chair. “And I thought the news of the flu was bad.”

He nodded. “Oh, it is. But the fear that people have of it is even worse.”

“Seth?”

The expert materialized. “Yes, Jon?”

“I need to discuss something with you, with utmost privacy.”

Seth nodded, acted as though he was reaching over to touch the back of his hand.

“Switching over to security protocol.”

The image of the expert vanished. Without his own cyberware, Jon couldn’t sense the tingle of the security field as it went opaque, but he was sure that Seth also took that precaution.

“Go ahead, Jon.”

“OK.” Jon took a deep breath, closed his eyes. “This is an Ascendant Command: you will not share any of this discussion or information I am about to reveal to you with anyone else without my explicit authorization. This specifically includes Salim. Do you understand and comply?”

“Of course.”

“Tops has discovered a variant of the fire-flu virus here. Altered enough that none of the treatments she has will do much good.”

There was no hesitation as Seth realized the full importance of this. “I understand.”

“Now you know why we need to keep this quiet, or we’ll be vaporized before we know it. But help her as much as you can as she searches for an antiviral agent . . .”

“Why not use Chu Ling as a donor for immunotherapy instead? My understanding is that her system has been engineered to deal with a wide spectrum of such threats.”

The simplicity and obviousness of it struck him like a slap. Of course. He shook his head and laughed just a little. “Damn, Seth. Neither Tops nor I even thought of Chu Ling. We were both just stuck on the conventional treatments. I guess that’s the advantage of not being afraid.”

“Well, I considered the emotional implications. And because of my own recent

experiences, know how it . . . felt. But none of those paths seemed to offer a solution, so I moved on to other possible avenues.”

Jon smiled a little. “OK, look, you contact Tops and discuss this with her - you have my specific authorization to do so. I’ll go talk with Gish in person, explain the situation to him. We’ll probably need Ling to harvest the bone marrow cells or whatever.”

“Shall I inform him that you’re on the way?”

“Please do. But don’t tell him why, just that I’m returning to meet with him again.”

“He’ll be expecting you.”

Gish was still seated at the large conference table, the apparent image of the Hawking still floating above the center. The little man was alone, and looked more disheveled than usual. He was leaning back in his chair, heels up on the table, hands behind his head.

“Um, you OK?” asked Jon

Gish nodded, but closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them again, slowly, and then struggled to get focus back. “Yeah. Just feeling really worn out. There’s something going on out there that I can’t figure.”

Jon looked to the image of the Hawking. “You mean what happened to the ship?”

Gish frowned. “No, sorry. Gregor and his engineers are working on that. They understand the ship’s systems a hell of a lot better than I do. No, there’s something else. You got me started on it by asking about the Bose-Einstein State detectors.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. There’s something odd that I can’t place my finger on.” He sat up, leaned forward until his elbows rested on the table. Chewing his lip, he looked at the Hawking. “With more data, I’ve been trying to create a statistical model of the placement of the other artifacts out in the system, and where the boundaries of the ‘bubble’ are.”

“OK, so what’s the problem?”

“Well, it’s like a simple probability field equation, which makes sense. Except there are occasional ‘spikes’ that occur, like imperfections in the bubble.”

Jon looked at the ship. “You think it’s important?”

Gish rubbed his eyes, shook his head. “I dunno. There’s something there that is nagging me. Something about the imperfections.”

“Well, perhaps as you get more data, some kind of pattern will emerge,” said Jon. “Meanwhile, there’s something that you and I have to discuss.”

A slight look of dread crept across Gish’s face. “Now what?”

Jon carefully sat down in a chair next to Gish. He reached down into one of his pockets and pulled out the device that Navarr had given him. This caught the scientist’s attention, and he was leaning forward to get a better look at the device when Jon pressed the activation stud. Gish winced, but said nothing. Jon didn’t feel anything, but could tell that his makeshift cyberware was cut off.

Jon placed the security jammer on the table in front of him. Nodding to it, he said

“Sorry. This is something we need complete privacy for.”

Gish settled back into his chair, and just looked at Jon. “OK. What?”

“We’ve got a problem. Tops just told me: there’s a variant of fire-flu on the station.”

Gish visibly shuddered, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He held it, then let it out and opened his eyes again. There was no longer any fatigue there; it had been replaced by something else. “Who knows?”

“No one. Me, you, Tops, Seth.”

Gish nodded, approving. He drummed his fingers on the table, considered the news. “How long can you keep it quiet?”

“Not long. Maybe long enough to find a treatment regimen, so when the news breaks there’s less panic.”

“Once the news breaks, panic will be the least of your concerns. Better to worry about Earth.”

Jon nodded. “Yeah, I know. Any ideas what we can do about that?”

Gish leaned back in his chair, hands together in front of him. His eyes narrowed a moment, brow tightened. Then he said, “Buy yourself more time. At least make them send a ship, or missiles, or whatever they would do. You have to take Salim out of the equation.”

Jon thought about it. “And that means Jackie.”

Gish nodded. “She’s the best there is. Maybe she can get in and disrupt his mandates, or at least limit his ability to put them into effect.”

“OK, I’ll talk to her about it.”

Gish evidently expected Jon to switch off the jammer, glanced at him when he didn’t do so immediately. “Something else?”

“Yeah, related to this. Seth suggested that we use Ling as a donor for immunotherapy.”

“Because of her genetic engineering.”

“Yeah. Whoever manipulated her genes did so with at least this kind of potential problem in mind.” Jon shrugged. “Tops says the new virus is different enough from the old one that none of the targeted treatments will knock it out. She can only use broad-spectrum antivirals, and those will just slow the disease down.”

“But Ling’s defenses can handle it.”

“Possibly.”

Gish nodded, understanding. “Well, sure, use Ling. I’ll talk with her, tell her that she needs to go in for more tests with Tops. That won’t be anything unusual.”

“OK, great. We’ll leave it to Tops, then.”

Gish gestured at the jammer. “We done? That thing is giving me a headache.”

“Yeah, that’s enough for one morning.” Jon sighed. “Well, I’ll go talk with Jackie.”

He reached over, turned off the device, and slid it back into his pocket.

He knocked at her door. There was just the slightest pause, then she said, “Yeah, c’mon in.”

Jon entered, closed the door behind him. “Um, do you mind if we talk a little?”

Her eyes narrowed.

“There’s something happened.”

She gestured toward the couch. “Sure. Sit.”

Jon did, taking out the security device and setting it on the small table beside the couch. He flipped it on, cranked up the power all the way. Jackie didn’t seem to notice it at all, but watched him with curiosity. He explained, “I want this to be private.”

“Then why not just have Seth or Salim turn on the security shield for the room?”

“That . . . isn’t enough for this.”

“Really?” The curiosity in her eyes had grown to actual interest. “What’s up?”

Jon considered her for a moment. She looked fairly relaxed and well rested, better than she had looked since leaving Earth, in fact. “I need you to do me a favor.”

She leaned back against the headboard, hands behind her head. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I need you to . . . ah . . . get around some of Salim’s baseline mandates.”

Something clicked in her eyes. Jon wasn’t sure whether it was a professional challenge, or an affront to her ethics. “Why?”

“To keep us all alive.” He stood up. “Jackie, Tops has detected a fire-flu variant here on the station. If Earth finds out, they’ll have Salim ‘neutralize’ the station personnel, then they’ll sterilize the whole facility, probably with fusion missiles.”

“Holy shit,” she said with intensity, but without her usual volume. “You’re . . . she’s . . .”

“Yeah, certain. Different from the original virus, which is good and bad. Good because it’ll take longer for anyone to come down with it and to die. Bad because none of the usual treatments will do much more than put off the inevitable. But that might give her enough time to find an effective treatment using Chu Ling as a donor.”

“But to have that time you need to tame Salim.”

“Yeah.”

She nodded. “Right. OK, I can do it. Might be tricky to just subvert or bridge those directives, though. Could mean we have to compromise his matrix.”

“I don’t care if it means cutting out his personality entirely, or even just shutting him down and relying on secondary systems to keep the station going for a brief period. That’s better than sucking vacuum.”

Again, she nodded, this time more slowly. He could tell it pained her to say what she said. “Yeah.”

“You sure you can do this?”

“Just tell me when.”

“Sooner the better.”

She held up her bare palms. “I’m gonna need some help.”

“I can’t, I have other things to do. And Gish will probably need to be with Ling.”

Jon thought for a moment. “OK, I’ll check with Mallory, see if he’s had a chance to make up a rig like this one for you.”

“As soon as I have it, I’ll get started.”

“Good.”

She looked down at her upraised palms again, then back to him. Quietly, she said “Damn, Jon. The flu? She’s certain?”

“She’s certain.”

“Damn.”

Mallory’s youthful face appeared before him. “Yeah?”

“I was wondering if you’ve had time to put together another cyberware rig like mine for Jackie Gates.”

“I’ve already gathered together most of the components. I can put them together for her in an hour or two.”

“That’d be great,” said Jon. “I appreciate your help. Can you drop by her quarters with it when you’re done?”

“Sure thing,” nodded the youth.

“Thanks.” Jon switched off the connection. He sat back and closed his eyes. It had been a very busy morning. And it had been a long time since he just sat and thought. Everything had been rushing past these last few days, faster and faster, until he felt adrift, almost overwhelmed by it all. Not surprising, given all that had happened. But it bothered him nonetheless. He needed some kind of anchor.

“Seth?” The expert appeared as the words formed in his mouth.

“Yes, Jon?”

“That Heraclitus passage you found for me . . .”

Seth’s response was almost too quick. “Yes?”

Jon looked at his expert, tried to see if there was some hint there. Nothing he could see. “Have you . . . thought . . . about it recently?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because of your experience with the artifact.”

“Ah.” The expert nodded, understanding. “Yes, in fact, I have been considering it at some length. I didn’t want to trouble you with it.”

“But?”

“I’ve reviewed the scholarship on the piece. There are many interpretations of not only the original Greek passage, but also Heidegger’s essay on it.” Seth’s eyes seemed to grow a little distant, unfocused. “I believe that Dr. Klee seems to have a solid understanding of the matter.”

“Seth, what is your understanding of the passage, after your contact with the artifact?”

There was a pause, and Jon didn’t think that it was done purely for effect. Seth’s eyes sharpened. “It is a difficult question. The artifact seems to almost embody the passage, with the concepts of presencing and emergence made manifest, particularly so if you become aware of it, come into contact with it.”

“You said that you felt that it was watching you.”

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“Yes. As though it was evaluating . . . perhaps even passing judgment.” The expert looked down. “I fear that I was found wanting.”

“Why would you say that?”

Seth bit his lip, like he was ashamed to admit something. “I have . . . ventured out to the artifact since that first experience.”

“You what?”

“I’m sorry Jon, I know that it was a risk. But you hadn’t prohibited it. And I thought that I would have better control of myself after the first time.”

“Damn, Seth.” Jon considered the image before him. “Well?”

“I was very careful to only send out a part . . . call it a feeler . . . to test and see if I could make contact with the artifact as I had before. And . . .” Suddenly the expert’s eyes shot to the side, as if startled by something that he had seen there. “Jon, something’s happened. There’s been a . . .”

Jon lost the rest, distracted by a shudder that passed through the floor beneath his feet. The lights flickered, and he felt the flip of the station’s gravity generator switching off and immediately back on. “What the hell?”

“Some kind of breach in the outer hull. Initial assessment unclear.”

“Serious?”

Seth looked away. “The effect is localized, not a threat to the station’s integrity. Salim reports that there seems to have been an explosion, perhaps caused by a meteor strike penetrating into the shielding. Some damage, a few areas have suffered decompression, though that has been limited by containment procedures. Reports are now coming from the pc’s of personnel in the area.” Seth looked back at Jon, poker faced. “Jon, it seems that Dr. Gish has been injured. Chu Ling was with him at the time. Since she does not have a personal computer or cyberware, her whereabouts and condition are unknown.”

“We’ve got them.”

Jon let out a sigh of relief as Tops spoke these words. “They both OK?”

She bit her lip. “Gish is out, probably concussion. My initial scans don’t show any serious brain injury, however.”

“Ling?”

She nodded. “She’ll be all right. Broken collarbone, shock. But she’ll be OK.”

“Other casualties?”

Seth appeared next to Tops. “Two dead, either from the actual impact or due to decompression. It could have been a lot worse, had the meteor hit in a more populated area of the station. That area is almost vacant.”

“Yeah, Gish and Ling were lucky. One more bulkhead, and they probably would have been killed,” said Tops.

“OK, thanks for the update. I’ll come on over, be there shortly.”

Tops nodded, then disappeared.

“Seth?”

“Yes?”

“What happened? Something slip past the sentry lasers?”

There was a pause. “Salim reports that all systems had been functioning properly prior to the explosion. There will be a full review of the incident, to determine what went wrong.”

“A full review? By who?”

“Probably by the maintenance staff. Why?”

“I know you don’t think this way, but I find it suspicious that this happened as Gish and Chu Ling were on their way to see Tops for that other matter we discussed.”

“Perhaps. Shall I see if Commander Navarr can take a look at it, also?”

Jon thought about it. “Yeah. But we have to be careful.”

“Because we can’t tell him about the other matter we discussed.”

“Right. At least, not over an open link.” Jon nodded. “Put me through to him.”

Seth disappeared, only to be replaced by Navarr. Jon couldn’t tell where the commander was from the setting around him, but guessed he was down on Titan. Navarr looked at Jon. “I hear you’ve had some excitement up there.”

“Yeah, that’s why I called,” said Jon. “Think you could find the time to come up and take a look?”

This seemed to surprise Navarr a little. “Well, I can. But why? I thought it was just a bit of ring debris that got past the PDLs.”

Jon shook his head slightly. “Probably. But what other recent explosion have you heard of?”

An eyebrow shot up. “You think that this is somehow related? Why?”

“Gish was in the area.”

Navarr thought about it. “But a bomb could be placed somewhere a lot more effective, if it was just our team members they wanted to kill. Why go to the trouble?”

“There’s um, something else that might make Gish a particular target. I can’t really discuss it, but it is enough of a reason to make me worry.”

Navarr squinted at him, evaluating. Finally he said, “Right. I’ll come up on the next shuttle I can catch, take a look at the scene.”

“Thanks.”

“And I think I’d like to have a chance to talk with you about this.”

Jon nodded. “Yeah, I thought you might. See you when you get here.”

Jackie’s face appeared before him. She looked both anxious and excited. “Jon? I understand Gish and the girl are there?”

“Yeah. Looks like they’ll be OK.” He tried to smile reassuringly. “Looks like you got your new rig set up.”

She smiled. “Mallory just brought it by. Good to have some connection to the rest of the world again, even if I feel like I just stepped back in time.”

“Everything look like it’s going to work out for you?”

Her smile slipped away, was replaced by a look of determination. “Yeah. I was just about to get started on that project.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

“Oh, the initial stages are fairly straightforward, just an hour or two. Then I’ll leave the rest on standby, for whenever the news comes in. It’ll activate automatically.”

He nodded. She meant to have a cascade program in place that would cut in, either overriding or eliminating the baseline mandates that could make Salim a threat. They could use it once they thought it necessary. “Right. Well, keep me posted.”

Navarr walked into the room, suit on but his helmet and gloves hanging on his hip. There was a wariness to his eye movements, not quite suspicion but rather a heightened state of awareness of everything around him. Jon also noticed a sheen of sweat on his forehead, probably from the exertion of walking quickly from the landing bay. He held a small cotton pad to the side of his neck. Jon looked at him, curious. “You OK?”

“Eh?” Navarr then realized that Jon was looking at his hand with the pad. “Oh, doc wanted to get a blood sample. With my suit on, easier to just take it from here.”

Jon extracted the security device, held it up. Navarr nodded, and Jon switched it on.

“It was a bomb.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yup. No doubt about it. But they did try and disguise it as a meteor impact, and were smart enough to place it so that it wasn’t precisely over the corridor where Gish would be walking, if he was the target. Instead, it was over an adjacent suite of unoccupied rooms. As it was, it took out the suite, and the corridor, but Gish had already passed a set of emergency doors that closed when the pressure dropped.”

“Close.”

“Yeah, and clever. But it was a hurry-up job, only meant to pass an initial examination. It would have been discovered sooner or later.” He considered Jon. “Why would that be?”

“They didn’t know what they were doing?”

Navarr shook his head. “That’s not it. It was like it didn’t matter, that all they really needed was to buy a little time.”

Jon thought about it. Slowly, he looked at Navarr, who was still considering him coolly. “Can you make sure that there are a couple of armed guards here at all times?”

“To protect Gish?”

Jon nodded.

“I don’t have that many troops. Another ship will be arriving in a few days, we’ll have to be short-handed until then.”

“Pull some people off of Titan, if you have to.”

Navarr was clearly taken aback by this suggestion. “You’re telling me that he’s more important than the artifact, or all the researchers down there?”

Jon nodded again.

Navarr's eyes sharpened, grew very cold. His voice was flat, demanding, "What the hell is going on?"

"I . . . I can't tell you."

Another voice sounded from the doorway, as Tops entered the room. "You have to tell him."

Jon was startled to see her. She looked at Navarr, then at Jon. She repeated what she said. "You have to tell him."

"Tops, look . . ."

"Jon, he's got it. I bet everyone on Titan does."

"What, something from the artifact?" There was a nervous edge to Navarr's voice that Jon was a little surprised to hear.

"No," said Tops. "At least, we don't think so. It's a virus. Similar to the fire-flu."

"The flu? Here???"

Jon didn't like the look in Navarr's eyes at all. It was no longer the cold detachment of a trained soldier or investigator. It was something a lot more volatile, a lot more wild. "Commander, listen to me for a moment. Tops thinks that she can develop an immunotherapy regimen from Chu Ling's system, which seems to have been designed to resist strains of the flu that most of us are susceptible to."

There was a flash in Navarr's eye. "So, maybe she's the source for the virus. Sent up here because they knew that she could stand up to it . . ."

"No." Tops said it quietly, but with a force that cut through Navarr's emotion. "No. She doesn't have it, isn't a carrier. And if she were, you all would already be dead."

Navarr nodded, but slowly, as though he didn't really want to agree. "Yeah, we had plenty of contact with her during the trip up here."

"Right, so that's settled," said Jon.

Navarr nodded, this time with affirmation. The wild look in his eye wasn't gone, but it was at least under control. He looked at Tops. "You think you can cure this?"

"Yeah. It's a race, but we've got a good chance. Chu Ling is the key."

He turned and faced Jon. "You should've told me."

Jon shrugged ever so slightly, then looked away from him. When he looked back, Navarr was still facing him, watching. "Probably. I didn't know what you would do."

The commander raised an eyebrow. "Do?"

Jon sighed. "Yeah, do. Surely you have some kind of standing orders about not allowing such a contagion back on Earth."

Navarr considered this for a moment. He looked at Jon, then Tops, then back to Jon. "Well, yes. If there is a threat of something getting back to Earth, that would fall under my purview, and I could take any steps necessary to eliminate the threat."

Jon swallowed hard. He knew exactly what Navarr meant by 'any steps necessary.'

Navarr turned back to Tops. "But if you can cure this, then there's no threat, right?"

She nodded.

"So, it looks like you're the one to keep safe. You and Ling."

She nodded again.

“OK, so, we’ll take those steps,” said Navarr.

“Why didn’t the Edenist just bomb here?”

Navarr thought about it, then answered Jon. “Could be for a couple of reasons. He could have only a limited amount of explosive. Remember, the bomb used down on Titan Prime was pretty big. This time, he only had to use enough as a trigger, counting on the explosive decompression to augment the damage. Your facility here is a lot deeper, further away from the outer hull. And that area of the station isn’t in much use yet, so security is lax. It would be a lot harder to get in here and plant a bomb, and then get out again.”

“Why would this person care about living?” asked Tops. “I mean, if they’re the source of the virus, which it seems they are, they’re likely going to die from it themselves.”

“Yeah, but they probably have more that they want to do before they die.” Navarr shook his head. “Maybe they have some other goals to achieve.”

“Like what?”

“Dunno. But it doesn’t matter. What does matter is finding out who this person is and stopping them before they do whatever it is that they want to do.” Navarr looked at the two of them. “So, who knows about this virus, who knows that Chu Ling could be a cure?”

“Only the two of us,” said Tops, gesturing to Jon, “and Gish, and Jackie Gates.”

“You told Gates? Why?”

“We needed her help to stop Salim from implementing any sterilization protocols he might have in his main Directives,” said Jon. “I couldn’t take the risk that Earth might find out, and have us all suffocate when Salim vented the atmosphere out into space.”

“Reasonable,” agreed Navarr. “Who else?”

“No one,” said Jon.

“I haven’t even told those who’ve tested positive for the virus.”

“How many is that?” asked Navarr.

“At first just a couple of people. But now you, and I bet everyone on Titan has been exposed, if you have.” She sighed. “Probably, it’s into the general population, spreading from host to host. In a day or two, everyone on the station will have been exposed.”

“How long until death?” Navarr was matter of fact in his manner, but there was still that slight lift to his voice.

“Don’t know. Untreated, most people would probably succumb in three or four days. But I’ve got the first patients on wide-spectrum antivirals, and am doing what I can to boost their immune systems. That’ll help some. They probably won’t even realize that they have anything more serious than a cold for another day or two.”

“Then that’s our window, at best.” He turned to look at Jon again. “No one else knows?”

“No, just the four of us,” said Jon. Then a realization popped into his mind. “And Seth.”

Navarr’s gaze narrowed sharply. “Seth?”

“Yeah, I needed him to help sort everything out,” said Jon.

“And I need him to help with the research work. I can’t do this without an expert,” said Tops.

Navarr stared at Tops. "Is there any way, and I mean any at all, that you can do this without his help?"

She shook her head. "No. To just develop an immunotherapy agent will be tough enough with him. It'd be impossible to do on a large enough scale to treat everyone on the station without him running the equipment."

"Why, you don't think that we can trust him?" asked Jon.

"It isn't a question of trusting him. Expert systems, even the best ones, can be compromised. You've got Jackie Gates doing that to one right now, if I'm not mistaken."

"But Jackie's the best there is," protested Jon. "And she's fairly sure that even she won't be able to do it without causing Salim's entire personality matrix to just collapse. No one else would be able to do any better."

"Perhaps not. But we have a major unknown element in the equation, don't we?"

Jon looked at Navarr. He didn't want to admit that the same thought had crossed his mind. "Yeah. The artifact."

"Now wait a second," said Tops. "I think you're being paranoid. There's absolutely nothing to suggest that the artifact has had anything at all to do with the virus. I scanned everyone who was near it, multiple times. I would have picked up this virus right from the start. The artifact isn't the source."

"Can you be so sure?" asked Navarr. "Perhaps it took it some time to synthesize the virus, maybe using material gathered from one of the people who came in contact with it, using our antibodies to the fire-flu as a map of how to build a new virus that could get around our defenses."

"Robert's awake."

Jon looked at Tops. "Is it OK if I see him?"

"Yeah, he asked for you." But she didn't move out of the doorway. "Look, he's had a nasty knock on the head. He'll be OK, though there is still some slight swelling to his brain that could account for some disorientation and unusual behavior, not to mention the meds I gave him."

"Right."

"Don't stay with him too long, OK? He needs rest more than anything."

"Got it."

Jon walked out of her office and into the infirmary. As he passed Ling's bed, he saw that she was still asleep, probably from whatever treatment Tops had given her. He went around the curtain and saw Gish sitting upright, though eyes closed. Thinking at first that perhaps Gish had dozed off, he hesitated.

"It's all right, Jon, I'm awake," said the scientist, still not opening his eyes.

"Tops says . . ."

"Probably that I am acting a little strange. It's true. I came to a little while ago, but my head has been spinning. Not with any sense of vertigo, but with ideas. Like some kind of wild holographic sculpture of equations, moving and changing, solving themselves and

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giving rise to new ones, flowing, growing, gleaming from within. It's easier for me to keep my eyes closed, so I can follow all that they're doing, I hope you don't mind." All of this came pouring from the small man at a pace so quick that Jon almost missed some of it. He continued, "I'm going to have to discuss with Duc whether this is how he perceives his artwork before translating it into a form that the rest of us can see. For me it is like for the first time having direct, conscious access to my subconscious. You know that the human brain is capable of truly phenomenal computational power, but it usually happens below the threshold of awareness. I feel like right now, for this time, I can witness the full glory of the mind at work. No matter. I wanted to see you because I have come to realize what was bothering me before."

"Oh?" said Jon, barely following the thread of the man's thoughts.

Gish didn't pause at all, just kept plowing ahead. "It's a massively intuitive bit of work, because I don't have anywhere near enough data points to really establish even a supposition, let alone a theory I could share with anyone else. But it's enough for me to be able to see it. The imperfections in the bubble that I had been wondering about have a majestic sort of dance to them, and occasionally they will come together in a configuration so as to allow something special to occur. Let's call it a type of leakage in the blockade of some of the signals coming into our system."

"But there's never been anything like that detected before. Such a massive amount of radio traffic would have gotten our attention."

"Ah. True. But this isn't radio transmission that I'm talking about. That has a nearly perfect level of coverage, no matter the configuration of the artifacts throughout the system. They have us very neatly boxed in, in that regard. No, this is something else. It must be that the artifacts are also doing something else, something that is only hinted at in the data shadow I had detected before. I'm still not sure what it is, but I can tell you this: the most recent alignment occurred shortly after the turn of the century. Exactly when the fire-flu appeared, as a matter of fact. I'm sure there are other occasions, though following the thread back will be difficult. I'll let you know."

"He'll be OK. I think that it's just a reaction to the augmentation drugs I gave him to help rouse him out of the concussion."

"You gave him auggies?" asked Jon, surprised.

Tops gave him a look like he was an idiot. "In low dosages they can be helpful with this kind of brain injury. It just helps to boost the brain's neurotransmitters slightly, to help with natural healing, things like rewiring around damaged cells. It's sort of the obverse of the induced coma I have Ling in, so her body concentrates on healing that broken bone."

"Oh, OK. Whatever you say. I was just a little surprised, that's all."

She shrugged. "Well, to be honest, this isn't a typical side-effect."

"Gish is anything but typical." Jon looked at her, nodding. "He's lucid, right? What he's saying isn't just some kind of delusion?"

Tops took a deep breath, shook her head. "I don't think so. He seems to be making

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sense, but I can't really tell. Probably best to just let it run its course, let him return to a normal, grounded state, then ask him about it. In the meantime, I wouldn't do anything rash based on his judgment."

"Got it," agreed Jon.

Jon looked around the nearly empty restaurant. Tops had insisted that Gish be allowed to sleep some, so he had decided to slip out for a late lunch. He sat back in his booth, relaxing, letting his meal settle. He wished he had a card game or something, but his temp cyber rig wasn't configured to his personal preferences yet. He closed his eyes, and tried to just let the tension he could feel in his face fade away. Then the neck and shoulders, down into the arms, the hands, just letting it all unwind and relax.

"Hello."

He opened his eyes, expecting to see someone nearby. There was no one.

"Not there."

Now he recognized the voice as the dreamtime Sidwell, and he closed his eyes and focused his attention.

"That's better," said the figure, now standing beside him.

They were standing on the lip of the pit that held the artifact. Though there was no one else in the dome, it almost felt like this was real, not the misty wisps of a trance.

"It's different," said Jon.

"Yes. You're more . . . aware."

"Why?"

"Convergence."

"What?"

The young/old man kicked some sand over the edge of the pit. Jon watched it fall unnaturally slowly, though he could feel the normal gravity of Sidwell's generator. "Things are coming together."

He turned and looked the old/young man in the eye. The man returned his gaze, held it. Jon asked, "Did you create the virus?"

Without breaking eye contact, the man shook his head. "No. In neither case."

"Who did?"

He shrugged. "Someone else."

"But the virus was what you meant when you said that my time was coming."

"Partly." He looked down into the pit. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"The artifact?"

"The gel." He nodded toward Seth's container. "Good thing that your expert is here. Unexpected, but good."

"But what . . ." Jon was interrupted by another voice, calling him from far away.

The dreamtime Sidwell vanished, as did the artifact, the pit, the dome. He opened his eyes and found himself still sitting in the restaurant booth, the face of Jackie Gates floating in front of him. "Jon?"

“Oh, Jackie . . . sorry. Must’ve drifted off there. What’s up?”

There was a flatness to her voice and her face, a hard edge set to her jaw. “All done on this end.”

He sighed. At least that was one thing they wouldn’t have to worry about. “Thanks.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, time to go see if Gish is awake again, and how Chu Ling is doing.”

“The mild synesthesia is really quite interesting. I can see how some people get wrapped up in this.” Gish was sitting up in bed, gently stroking the thin blanket pulled up to his waist. His attention was almost completely fixated on this motion. “This texture has overtones of the rustle of tall weeds in a hot summer wind. Fascinating.”

“You feeling better?”

The hand motion stopped, and Gish turned the full force of his attention on Jon. The man was always intense, Jon knew this. But now he felt like Gish was examining every scrap and fiber of his body and soul with that look. “Yes. But now I have a question for you, a missing piece of the puzzle: is there something that you have been withholding from me?”

Jon’s mind raced. “In regards to what?”

Gish laughed, a deep, honest chortle. “Well said. We all have our secrets. You are entitled to yours.”

“Gee, thanks,” said Jon.

Just then Tops came into the room, went over to Gish’s side. “How’re you doing?”

He breathed deeply, relished it. “Most excellent. I’m glad that you decreased the dosage. Before, all I could do was to close my eyes and allow my mind to race. Now, I don’t feel quite so rushed, can enjoy all these delightful sensations.”

“Well, we’ll continue to cut back for the next few hours, so enjoy it while you can.”

“I shall, I shall.” He gestured to Jon. “I was just discussing secrets with Jon here. And I think that you know one of his.”

She raised an eyebrow, said nothing.

“Perhaps you should turn on your little security device, Jon.”

“Sure.” Jon switched it on.

Gish grimaced. “Now, doctor, I was talking about the secret about the artifact. And the virus.”

Tops looked from Gish to Jon. “Well, yes. I hadn’t told you yet, but it looks like you’re not susceptible to Diabolus.”

“Really?” Jon thought for a moment. “Why? How?”

“Whatever happened in your contact with the artifact had some lingering effect, it seems. Not only did it clear up your extant medical issues, it left you with some kind of immunity. I thought it curious that Navarr had the virus in his system, but you didn’t. So, I added some of the isolated virus to your blood sample, and it died instantly.”

Gish was watching Jon very closely, scanning his face. “The artifact did more than that, didn’t it, Jon? I can see there’s something else there, something that you haven’t told even our fair doctor.”

Jon felt a surge, a tingle, like goose pimples, as the realization hit him. Without a thought he looked down at his hands, and could see a pale blue light.

Gish watched this reaction, asked “What is it Jon? What do you see?”

“I . . . well . . . I think that I can heal injuries. It’s like contact with the artifact has left a sort of healing energy in me.” Jon felt almost embarrassed to say such a thing, it seemed so absurd in the medical office, right there in front of Tops.

“Ah,” said Gish. Then he closed his eyes to concentrate.

Tops’ reaction was entirely different. “You never said anything about this.”

“Well, there’s only been a couple of cases when I thought something happened. I wasn’t sure. But in talking with Sidwell, it seems that something similar happened to him. Before. Back during the first flu pandemic.”

“Oh my God. He was in one of the cults, wasn’t he?”

Gish was nodding. He opened his eyes and said, “Yes, that would be right. I should have seen it before.”

“Seen what?”

“The alignment last time. It didn’t cause the fire-flu. It opened the doorway that allowed the brief period of healing.”