

## Chapter Eighteen

“So you’re saying that this alignment of the artifacts . . .” Tops was saying.

“Somehow creates a leakage in the bubble that surrounds us, allowing this healing phenomenon.”

Gish turned and looked intently at Tops, his eyes wide, drinking in her reactions. He looked back at Jon. “But there’s something else going on. Perhaps I was being too hasty in considering this to be just a four-dimensional problem.”

“Sorry? You lost me there,” said Jon.

Gish ignored him, his attention turning in on itself. “Yes. Clearly there’s a proximity effect. Perhaps anyone who touches the artifact becomes somehow connected to the outer surface of the bubble.”

“Wait, you mean that the artifact is some kind of doorway to another dimension?”

Gish looked at Jon as though he were some kind of distracting insect. “What? Doorway? No, just that the surface of the isolation field may not conform to our simple space-time geometry.”

Tops cut in, “More importantly, if this particular alignment does allow for healing, how long will that last? Long enough for us to use it here to cure Diabolus?”

Gish still looked annoyed, but now more at himself. “Don’t know. I thought I understood the field being created, but if it is a higher dimension effect, then I’ve not understood the heart of it.”

“I can care less if you understand it or not, just tell me if we can use it,” said Tops. “The cults lasted for a few weeks during the start of the fire-flu outbreak. If we have that much time, we can beat this virus here on the station.”

“Well, no, I don’t think so. The alignment isn’t the same as it was before; it changes with every configuration. This time it won’t last beyond a few more days. I’ll have to give this some more thought in order to be specific.”

“OK, but tell me this: how long has the current configuration been in place?” asked Tops.

“The alignment fell into place just a couple of days before we left Earth.”

“But wasn’t that about the same time that Sidwell discovered the artifact?”

“No,” said Jon. “He only told Susan about it then. He had known about it for about ten days before ever saying anything. Why?”

Tops chewed her lip. “I dunno. I thought that since he had been involved with one of the healing cults the last time, maybe there was something to his finding the artifact when the alignment fell into place this time.”

“That would make a certain amount of sense,” said Jon. He looked at Gish. “You said that the artifacts are blocking this healing energy, the same way they seem to be filtering out this huge amount of radio traffic. Think that they’re connected?”

“Perhaps.” Gish’s eyes narrowed. “As I said earlier, the blockade of radio waves is so close to perfect as to not matter. But let’s look at root causes: perhaps the blockage of

radio communications and the healing energy are related.”

“Why?”

“To isolate us, hide the larger universe from us. Radio from outside would certainly have tipped us off. So would have this healing energy.”

“So you’re saying we’ve been cast out from the greater community? And our access to the healing energy cut off as some kind of punishment?” asked Tops. “Why?”

“Perhaps so that we just kill ourselves off,” answered Gish, quietly, as his attention turned inward again.

“The appearance of Diabolus is a pretty good example of that,” agreed Jon. He took a deep breath. “Looks like you’d better stay busy with Chu Ling.”

“Yeah.”

“And I need to chat with Jackie and Duc. We may have only a few days, but maybe the three of us can make a difference.”

“So you think that we can . . . we can heal people?” She was incredulous.

“I think that it’s a possibility, that’s all,” reassured Jon. “I had an odd moment with Sidwell, and he claims to have been one of the members of the cults back during the time of the fire-flu.”

She looked at him as though she thought he was clearly nuts. “So, on the word of that ancient geezer, you’re going to try and save us all from the flu.”

“No, I said that it might be a possibility that the three of us who have been in contact with the artifact might be able to do some good. And there may be something to it. After all, the three of us are clean of the virus.”

“Why not just take people down there and have them touch the thing? Why not just skip the middleman?”

Jon took a deep breath. “It may come to that, but you know what it did to you, me and Duc. If we can avoid that, and still do something about the virus, isn’t it worth the effort?”

She looked skeptical. “Well, perhaps.”

“OK, let’s see if you can sense the same thing that I have. It seems to be the starting point.”

“What is?”

“Just look down at my hands here, tell me what you see.”

Jackie, to her credit, really looked. She peered down into Jon’s upturned palms, past the dense weave of the palmkey, at the skin below. After a moment, she shook her head.

“Sorry.”

Jon looked, and could see the pale blue light building, though yet faint. “Try again.”

Again she looked, this time reaching out with one hand to pull back the fabric. She made a slight jerk when she touched Jon’s hand, and she looked up into his eyes. “Well, I just felt something like a jolt. But I still don’t see anything.”

To Jon’s eyes, the light had pooled there in his palms, flooding out the image of the

palmkey, clearer than ever. “Well, perhaps it takes a little time. I guess it did with me.”

She took a deep breath. “But we don’t have much time, do we?”

He sighed, shook his head. “No.”

“Jon, have you actually tried to heal anyone who has the flu yet?”

“No,” he admitted. “I thought I should talk with you and Duc first, see if you guys had any ideas about it. I just feel like we should do everything we can, even if it seems a little crazy.”

She considered him for a moment, looking down again at his hands, now hanging at his sides. Holding up her own palms, she tried to give him a supportive smile. “Then I guess that I should start working on this.”

He nodded in agreement. “Would you be willing to talk with Sidwell about this? He might be able to help.”

“Yeah.”

“OK, thanks.”

The room was slightly darker than normal. “Duc, you here?”

A voice from the corner. “Yeah. Come on in.”

Jon stepped fully into the room, let the door close behind him. His eyes adjusted to the subdued lighting and he could see Duc sitting comfortably in a chair. “Little dark, isn’t it?”

“A little. I’m still adjusting.”

“Oh?”

“Tops says that my senses are all a little haywire, after contact with the artifact. I was used to having my jacked-up rig feed my brain so much more information. Seems that now everything has to find a new equilibrium.”

Jon nodded. “Well, maybe that’ll help.”

Duc watched him, said nothing.

Jon crossed the room, sat on the couch beside Duc’s chair. He leaned over slightly, looked into Duc’s eyes. There was something unusual there. “You sure you’re OK?”

Duc paused before answering, though his eyes didn’t come away from Jon’s. “Do you know you have a . . . shining . . . about you?”

Jon smiled. “Yeah, though I think I see it a little differently than you do. That’s what I’ve come to discuss.”

He reached into his pocket, took out the jamming device. Placing it on the table, he turned it on.

Duc flinched out of habit, then realized that there was no pain, relaxed and smiled a little. “I guess there are some advantages to not having any cyberware, after all.”

Jon held up his hands, concentrated and let the light emerge. “Notice anything with your new vision?”

Duc watched, curious, his head turning slightly side to side. “Yes, like the artifact. There’s a ghost image there. I can see it.”

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Jon looked down again at his hand, saw the light pooled there, almost had the sensation that it was about to overflow and spill onto the floor of the room. Again he concentrated, felt something well up inside of him, and the light took on a deeper hue, became more intense. “Now what do you see?”

Duc’s eyes had started to squint. “There’s something . . . I can’t make it out . . . but it’s getting stronger, more defined. Like water bubbling up, becoming more than smoke . . .”

“Good enough.” Jon let his hand and concentration drop. “Duc, you know you’ve been . . . changed . . . by contact with the artifact.”

The artist nodded, said nothing.

Jon continued. “Well, there’s more to it than just the loss of your cyberware and your senses having to readjust. What you just noticed seems to be some kind of ‘healing energy’.”

Duc chuckled. “Good, without my cyberware, I can’t create art. But maybe I can go into the miracle business.”

A wry smile crossed Jon’s face. “Exactly.”

Duc stopped chuckling. He studied Jon. “You mean that, don’t you?”

Jon sat back on the couch, tried to relax a bit. “Um, yeah. We’ve uh . . . we’ve got a problem. A big one. Something like the fire-flu is on the station.”

Duc’s skin turned pale, and his hands grasped the arms of the chair. “The flu?”

“Worse, something just different enough to get around our defenses, it seems.”

“Good lord. How far has it spread?”

Jon shook his head. “Tops isn’t sure. But the betting is that everyone’s been exposed.”

Duc closed his eyes for a moment, swallowed. But then his eyes opened again, and there was a hardness to the set of his jaw. “How long?”

“People will probably start dying in a matter of days.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah.” Jon looked the man full in the face. “But we’re immune. You, me, and Jackie.”

There was a long pause as this sank in.

“Because of the artifact,” said Duc, understanding. Then his face blanched again as another thought crossed his mind. “My god, we didn’t . . .”

“No. We didn’t have anything to do with the new virus, at least to the best of Top’s determination. Looks like it’s the work of the Edenist who is trying to sabotage the mission.” Jon saw an odd kind of relief sweep across Duc’s entire body. “Nonetheless, we have to do something about it. I think that we might be able to.”

Another pause. “Go on.”

“Well, back during the fire-flu, there was a brief period during which some people claimed to have been able to psychically or spiritually heal people . . .”

“The cults,” said Duc.

“Yeah, the cults,” said Jon. “Darnell was in one. And he says that he recognizes the

same energy now.”

“But what happened last time . . .”

Jon nodded. “It’s a risk.”

“Can’t we just shuttle everyone who is infected down to touch the artifact?”

“Yeah, but that has logistical problems. Not just getting people down there, but you know what it does to you.”

Duc shrugged. “Beats being dead.”

“Agreed. But I’m not sure we have the time to pull that off. Still, it’s an option. But I want to try this other path, first.”

Duc looked down into his own hands, as though seeing them entirely anew. “I always wanted to perform miracles with these, but of a more creative sort.”

Jon smiled. “OK. Let me take care of one more thing, then we’ll meet down at the infirmary and give it a try. I’ll send someone for you.”

“How’d it go?” asked Tops.

“Pretty well. They’re both willing to try, at least.” He glanced at the doorway into the infirmary. “How’re they?”

“I think Gish is sleeping. He’s discovered that the auggies take a toll. But he’s doing pretty well.” She nodded to herself. “Yeah, he’ll be OK. Ling is still in the induced coma. I planned on leaving her in that state until at least tomorrow. It’ll cut in half the time needed to knit her collarbone back together.”

Jon chewed his lip. “Is there . . . anything else wrong with her?”

“No. Why?”

“Well, would it hurt her to come out of the coma now?”

Tops frowned slightly. “Well, I’d rather not wake her if I can avoid it. A collarbone is a painful break, and tough for a kid to keep immobile for the first crucial period of healing. Did you want to talk with her? Can it wait?”

Jon smiled slightly. “Well, I didn’t exactly want to talk with her.”

Tops looked at him, slightly confused. Then understanding came. “Ah. You want to see if your ‘healing energy’ can work on more than just the virus.”

Jon nodded. “It’d be good to have some idea of what’s possible. And if she’s in the coma, it shouldn’t present any problems for her.”

Tops considered him for a while. Then, nodded. “OK, but I’m going to come and keep an eye on it. Maybe we’ll be able to see how it works.”

“If it works,” corrected Jon. “OK, let’s go.”

He led the way into the other room, past the sleeping Gish and over to the partitioned area where Chu Ling was. Jon stopped at the foot of the bed and looked at her. She was peaceful, completely relaxed, seemingly asleep in the web of bandages that held her left arm immobile against her chest. Tops came around to the side of the bed, started adjusting things so her equipment was ready. She nodded to Jon.

He moved around to the right side of the bed, next to the girl’s restrained arm.

Unsure what to do, he closed his eyes, tried to concentrate the way he had before, when showing the light to the others. He took a deep breath, opened his eyes slowly, and looked down with a relaxed, almost unfocused gaze at the palms of his hand. There it was, pooling in the palms, starting the odd sort of flowing motion. He reached over the side rail and put one hand close to the girl's arm. Tentatively, he touched her, and there was a slight rush at the tips of his fingers, but he knew there was something wrong.

He looked again at his hands, and could see the light growing deeper, like it was bubbling up from a deep and potent well. Yet the fabric of the gloves he wore seemed to hold it back, so that it could only find escape around the edges and through his fingers. Instinctively, he peeled off his gloves and let them drop to the floor.

Now the light surged forth. He felt a warm tingle start at the base of his skull and flow down his arms, and saw that the blue light seemed to want to reach out to the girl. He moved his hands out to her shoulder and her torso, feeling like he needed to complete some kind of electrical circuit.

The moment his second hand touched her, he lost sight of the room around him. He was back in the cave, but this time there was no Sidwell and no artifact, just the figure of the girl, hovering before him, still asleep. Here, in this place, he could look through her garments and her flesh, to see the bone under the skin, pale blue with a dark line across it midway. Again he reached out with his hands to touch her, wanting to reach inside and smooth the broken line, make it whole.

But before he could, her eyes opened, and she blinked slowly, trying to look at him, trying to focus. Her mouth tried to move, to form a word.

He paused, unsure what to do. Softly he spoke her name. "Ling?"

Her eyes rolled, found him and came into focus. Her mouth continued to move, but no sound came.

"It's OK, Ling. I just want to help you, to make you feel better." He smiled, and his right hand touched her shoulder. Again there was a shift, but this time the scene in the cave did not change. The girl did.

Now, before him, standing, was a young woman. Jon knew that this is what Ling would grow to become. It was the image of the woman from whom she was cloned. And she seemed familiar to Jon, like a distant relative seen in an aging photograph.

Still with his hands on her torso and shoulder, the woman looked at him. Her own arms now rose, one touching his arm, the other reaching up to the side of his face.

Now the circuit really was complete. Jon felt his own energy surge, felt it move through the woman and echo back to him, as though it had been amplified, made cleaner and somehow older.

"Jon?" He heard a voice call his name. The connection, and the vision, broke.

"Jon?" It was Tops.

He realized that he had been holding his breath too long, and felt a little woozy. The world of the infirmary fell into place around him, and he realized that he was looking at Chu Ling, now sitting up in bed, her hands touching him just as the young woman had.

"Mr. Jon OK?" asked the girl, sitting up in bed beside him.

Jon was on a chair there, feeling better now that he was sitting. He looked at the girl and gave her a smile. "I'm feeling fine. Just a little tired."

She returned his smile. "Is good. Ling knows, feels same."

"Well, from what I can tell, you're both OK," said Tops, fingers dancing in front of her, checking equipment reports. She looked at Jon. "Her collarbone is . . . is fine. Like it had never been broken, from what I can tell. And all trace of the drugs I gave her to induce coma have disappeared." She smiled a little, with some trepidation. "Congrats, it worked."

Jon nodded. He looked at Ling. Now he saw the girl, but he also felt the presence of the young woman. "What do you see now, Ling?"

The girl looked at him quizzically, like it was a foolish question. "Ling see Mr. Jon."

"But before, you saw something else. Remember?"

She smiled. "Oh. You mean the deva light."

"Yes, like you saw with Mr. Darnell. Remember that?"

She nodded. "Oh yes. Mr. Darnell, he had light, too. Was brighter than your light. But now Ling thinks yours is brighter. Do you now have Mr. Darnell light?"

"I don't think so, Ling."

She studied him a long time, hands still touching him. "Ling thinks maybe you do, just not know it."

"It worked." Jon nodded, looked around the room. "Yeah, it worked."

"But what's interesting is that it was only the broken collarbone that was healed," said Tops. "Other than the drugs I gave her being swept from her system, nothing else changed. All of her other injuries sustained in the explosion, all minor, are still there."

"That implies that there is some volition either necessary or possible in the healing effort," said Gish.

"Well, yeah, because that is just what I intended. Once in the trance state, I was able to see the break in her bone, and reach in to meld the ends back whole. I guess her waking up was just part of the process."

"No," said Gish. "What I mean is that there wasn't just a systemic 'healing' which took place, such as when any of you touched the artifact. That is my understanding of what happened to you previously, correct?"

Tops nodded. "According to my equipment, anyway."

"Yeah, and it felt like hell," said Jackie Gates.

Duc considered her a long time. "Perhaps more like purgatory. Our bodies were purified of all previous injury and disease. Cleansed by fire."

Jackie gave him a slightly dirty look. "I didn't know you were religious."

Duc shrugged. "Never was, particularly. But you can't deny that we've been . . . changed."

"My point is that there seems to be some effect of will on the healing energy. Whether it is to focus it, or restrict it, cannot be determined from just this one experiment,"

said Gish. "In either case, it is significant. Chu Ling, how does your shoulder feel?"

The girl, who had been sitting restlessly on the end of Gish's bed, shrugged. "OK. Mr. Jon touched it."

"Any soreness where he touched it, or any hurt?"

She shook her head. "No."

The scientist looked at Jon. There was a hardness to the look, and in a slightly demanding voice he said, "Heal me."

"What?"

"I said heal me. I was injured in the same explosion as the girl."

"But you're already OK, just need a little rest." Jon glanced at Tops. "Right?"

"Probably not completely. But he'll be OK in time," said the doctor.

"So, heal me," repeated Gish. "I want to be healed, now. You did it for her, you can do it for me."

A little embarrassed, and not sure what else to do, Jon stepped over to the side of Gish's bed. He closed his eyes, and once again concentrated in the relaxed way he had previously. Feeling the energy well up in his palms, he reached out his still bare hands to the sides of Gish's head, and went to touch him.

Something did happen on contact, but it was just a flash, just a slight tingle. There was no clean flow of energy, no snap of connection, and no sidestep into the cave. He opened his eyes and looked at Gish, then around to the others. "Um, it doesn't seem to be working. Maybe I've used it all up on Chu Ling."

"It's OK. That tells us a lot," said Gish, his tone much softer. He reached up and lightly patted Jon's arm. "I suspect that either the damage is too minor to trouble with now, or there was something about my demanding attitude."

"It must come freely offered," said Duc, nodding.

"Right. Sorry, Jon, I wanted to put you on the spot," said Gish.

"No, that's OK," said Jon. "I imagine that we'll have to get used to it."

"Let me try," said Duc. He got up and went over to the other side of the bed. Head down for a moment, he rubbed his hands together, as Jon had seen him do prior to manipulating one of his sculptural creations. Then his head came up and his hand reached out, cupping the sides of Gish's head gently. There was a depth, a calmness, to his eyes that Jon had never seen before. He seemed transfixed by something, concentrating very hard. In an almost whisper Duc spoke. "Yes, I can see it. Slight darkness there, like a smudge on a screen. But the area all around it is brighter, healing and rerouting. Soon, you'll never be able to tell it was damaged."

Gish nodded slightly as he reached up and lightly touched the hands holding him. Gently, and sincerely, he said, "Thank you."

Duc shook his head as though to clear it, then looked around the room. "That was odd. For a moment it was like I was back in my studio, working. But I knew the whole time where I was, and who was around me, what I was doing."

"Robert, what did you feel?" asked Tops.

"Just the slightest hint of a tingle where his hands touched me. Almost nothing,"

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said the scientist, with a touch of amazement to his voice.

“He has deva light, too,” said Chu Ling, pointing at Duc. Then she looked at Jackie. “You, too. Like Ling say before, you glow.”

“Ling, you said before that some of the other girls where you came from could heal people. Did they have this deva light? Did they glow?”

Ling frowned as she thought. “Something like. But not so bright.”

“Wait a second . . . you didn’t tell us about this . . .” said Jackie, sounding a little frightened.

“It actually makes some kind of sense,” said Tops. “I mean, it fits with the genetic manipulation for virus resistance, and the structural changes we’ve seen.”

“It explains a great deal.” Gish, eyes narrowed, considered the girl. “For how many centuries have we had the legend of those who could heal with a touch? Of miracles? Above and beyond the rare occasions when the artifacts align just right, these healers are part of our folklore, even part of our cultural beliefs. There must always be a few combinations of our DNA that allow us to access this healing energy, in spite of the embargo caused by the artifacts. Someone has just found the combination, reinforced it, and brought it to the fore in the expression of the genes of these girls.”

“Almost like it was planned,” said Jackie, absently, almost to herself.

“Not necessarily. They may have just been looking for genes that would make the clones resistant to the virus, and stumbled across this. Or they may have been looking for something else entirely.” Gish looked at Tops, who nodded in agreement. “Given that we’ve seen this healing energy manifest on a wide scale before, there must be some latent ability to access it in at least a significant portion of the population.”

“Which would explain us,” said Duc, with a slight hand gesture to Jon and Jackie. “Why we’re able to do this.”

“Perhaps,” said Gish. “Or perhaps there’s something else going on.”

“Either way, it’s something that we can use.” Jon looked around the room.

“You don’t know yet that you can do anything for Diabolus,” said Tops. “Healing a broken bone is one thing, clearing out a systemic viral infection is something else.”

There was a brief silence, then Jon said, “Well, about time we found out.” He looked at her. “You have it?”

She nodded. “Yeah, undoubtedly picked it up from one of the first cases. Of course, I’ve been taking a full course of antivirals to delay onset of any symptoms . . .”

But Jon could now see a slight flush to her face, almost as though he could detect the losing battle going on inside her. There was a touch of sweat on the temples he hadn’t noticed before, and a pallor to her skin. For a second this seemed familiar, but he couldn’t place it. “Yeah, I can see it now that I’m thinking about it.”

She raised an eyebrow, but said only, “So?”

“So, have a seat.” He gestured to a nearby chair.

Tops looked around at the others, took the chair. “Right. I didn’t detect anything when you worked on Ling, but maybe my pc will pick up something this time. Give me a moment to get it ready.”

Jon nodded, let her do what she needed to do as he closed his eyes and prepared himself. Stepping over behind the chair, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly, felt his awareness start to shift, a now-familiar tingling cross his palms. Taking another breath, he closed his eyes and lifted his hands slightly, so they were just about to the level of her shoulders. Now the warm flow started again at the base of his skull, smoothly moving down and through his arms to his hands, ready.

“OK,” said Tops, speaking just above a whisper.

His hands settled gently on her shoulders. There was a deep flash of blue even though his eyes were still closed, and he felt the connection. Now the energy flowed, into her butt then back and down his torso, to his legs and into the floor. There was a sensual, almost sexual, quality to it in the way it wrapped up his entire awareness, made him feel like he was soaring. The deep blue field in his vision now resolved and something came into focus, like he was looking into an old-fashioned microscope. It wasn't a virus he saw, at least not the kind he was familiar with from scanning images. It was more like a misshapen toy or piece of a three dimensional puzzle, an abstract image of the real thing. Concentrating, he could feel his energy move toward it, touch it, turn it around and over, until he found the weak spot, the place where it was ready to break, the flaw in the crystal. And with a touch, it shattered and melted away.

“Now you've found it.”

“Yeah.”

“The first part is done.”

Jon opened his eyes, saw the dreamtime Sidwell sitting on the edge of the pit, looking down at the artifact. “The first part?”

“Yes. You have much yet to do, but the first part is done.”

“What's the second part?”

“As I said before: unexpected opportunity.”

“He's coming around,” said Jackie Gates.

This time Jon opened his eyes and looked around the room, slowly, trying to piece it all together. Jackie pressed a cold cloth to his forehead. “You OK?”

Blinking, he took the cloth, sat up slowly. “Yeah, I think so. What happened?”

He was sitting in one of the other beds in the infirmary, could see Tops still prone in another. Jackie grasped his hand, held it tightly, and again he could feel the blue energy start to bubble but this time pushed it back. He looked at her. “Is Tops all right?”

Jackie smiled reassuringly. “Fine. She's fine.”

Duc, who was standing beside Tops, nodded. “She just seemed to fall into a deep sleep, moments after you touched her. You started to open your eyes and move away from her, then said something and stumbled. I caught you and set you down there.”

“How long?”

“Just a couple of minutes ago,” answered Gish.

He felt a little light-headed, and hungry. But otherwise OK. “You sure she’s all right?”

Duc nodded. “Just seems to be asleep. But her breathing and everything is normal. We turned off your jamming device and had Seth take a look at her. What her pc recorded . . .”

“ . . . Was most interesting,” came Seth’s voice. Jon looked over to see the smokey image of the expert standing there, calmly. “She is, indeed, just asleep. But there is a kind of physical exhaustion that one sees in people after strenuous exercise. And, most importantly, the virus seems to be gone from her system.”

“You’re sure?”

“As sure as her equipment can determine,” affirmed Seth.

Jon stood, moved to Tops’ bedside. He looked closely at her face, felt tinges of the deep blue creep in around the edges of his vision. And while there was a sheen of sweat all across her face, her skin had a healthy glow to it again. He reached out and softly touched the side of her face, and her eyes flickered open. “It’s OK, Tops. You’re fine.”

She struggled to bring the world around her into focus, then looked at him. “I could . . . feel you . . .”

“Yeah.” He smiled, helped her sit up with Duc’s assistance. “How’re you doing now?”

She took a deep breath, blinked again. “Like I could use a good long sleep. How long was I out?”

“Only a few minutes. And I’m afraid that we’ll have to postpone that good long sleep until later. There’s a lot of work to be done, and we need your help.”

“So, Gish thinks that we probably only have a few days.”

Don Bradsen sat in the chair across from Jon in a room of the infirmary. He was still stunned from the news. He hadn’t known of the virus, let alone the healing effect of the artifact. He looked at Jon, “Well, is that long enough?”

Jon took a breath, felt the exhaustion deep in his bones. It had only been a couple of hours since the first attempt to cure someone of the virus, but in that time he had worked on a dozen people. Jackie and Duc had also been working on those selected by Tops, after discovering that they too could effect a cure, experimenting with Gish and Navarr.

“Probably not. There are a couple thousand people on this station, and Tops is sure the virus has spread into the general population by now. It’s just a matter of a few days before everyone starts to develop symptoms. We can’t heal that many in such a short time. But it at least buys us some time with those who were exposed early.”

“The members of our teams?”

“Yeah, and Navarr’s troops.”

“Meaning it came from someone in that group.”

“Probably.” Jon felt beat. It had been a long day, and each healing session left him feeling a little more drained. “Navarr’s trying to piece it all together.”

Bradsen nodded, looking a little frightened. “What then?”

“Tops is going to continue her work on developing a treatment based on Chu Ling’s immune system.”

“Yeah, I have hope.” Tops stuck her head into the room, obviously caught the end of Jon’s statement. “Good news: once someone has been cured, they seem to have an immunity to reinfection.”

Don smiled weakly. “So, once you do this . . . procedure, I should be safe from the virus?”

Tops nodded. “Yup.”

“So we’ll continue to cycle people in and do this as long as we can,” said Jon. “But we have to keep it quiet, which is why I couldn’t tell you why I was bringing people up from the surface a few at a time.”

“Most of them don’t know?”

“No, I’ve sedated them, telling them this is just a routine test. The healing process clears out the sedating drugs, too, but most people just fall into a deep sleep for about a half hour,” Tops said.

“We still can’t afford to let the word out about what’s happened. Not only would there be panic, . . .”

Bradsen nodded. He knew the protocols as well as Jon. With a grim tone he said, “They’d sterilize the facility.”

“Yeah.”

There was a silence as this sank in. Then Tops spoke, “Well, I’ve got a bed ready for you in here, so whenever you want to proceed . . .”

Jon nodded, and she ducked back out of the room. “There are a couple of other things I should get you up to speed on before we do this.”

“Why?”

“This healing is . . . tiring. Each time it goes a little better, and demands a little less of me, but I’m still exhausted. Jackie and Duc are having a rougher time of it for some reason, have only been able to do a few cures before they crashed for the night. After I clear the virus out of your system, I’m going to get a little sleep, but feel like I have to devote as much time and energy to this as I can. I need to have you take over some of the other aspects of the mission.”

“Right.”

“OK.” Jon smiled slightly. “Check in with Soukup and Klee in the morning. I worked with both of them this evening, but they weren’t told everything. Each of them has information about the Hawking that will someday be important.”

“Like what?”

“Well, the two of them have been going over all the data coming down from the Hawking. In addition to the telemetry about the condition of the ship, they’ve had a flood of

data about the communications broadcasts that the ship has been receiving since stopping.”

“Communications? I thought your report summary said that we couldn’t broadcast to the ship, that it was on the other side of some kind of barrier?”

“Correct. But on that other side is ample evidence that the universe is teeming with technological civilizations. Klee hasn’t been able to decipher any of the communications yet, but is certain that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of sources. Seems that we’ve been kept in the dark about all of them by this shell of artifacts that surrounds our system.”

“Good lord . . . ”

“Yeah.”

“What other surprises do you have for me?”

Jon shook his head wearily. “Nothing comes to mind. You ready for this?”

Bradsen nodded a little, and the two men stood, went out into the other room.

“Don’t worry, I feel better than I look,” said Jon.

“Actually, you don’t look that bad,” replied Jackie Gates as she entered the room and sat down, cup of coffee in hand.

“Well, that’s good news.” Jon tried to smile. He was tired, but then he had already been up for a while, after a scant few hours of sleep. “I’m not too sure how long I can keep this up.”

Jackie nodded in response as Duc entered the room. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I feel worn out after each session.”

Duc settled into a chair. “Well, I feel a little buzzed, like I’ve just completed a sculpture or taken a test I know I did well on, but it’s hard to focus for a while after.”

“Still, we’re doing good work,” said Jackie. “Dozens of the worst cases so far. That’s something.”

Jon frowned. “Not enough. Gish says we have a few days while the ‘window’ will be open, but there’s no way I can keep this up for that long.”

Jackie sipped her coffee, looked at him. “Well, what can we do?”

“I dunno, it’s not like . . . ” Jon stopped as a thought stuck him. “Well, actually, there is someone here who’s done this before.”

Duc snapped his head up. “Sidwell.”

“Yeah. He went through the start of the fire-flu like this.” Jon touched the back of the one glove he was wearing on his left hand. Anymore, he only bothered to put that one on, since they both had to come off for the healing sessions. A moment later Seth appeared in front of him.

The expert nodded to Jon, then Jackie. Since Duc had no cyberrig, he didn’t bother to recognize the artist. “What can I help you with?”

“Find me someone to pilot a shuttle, have them ready to go ASAP. And get me Darnell.”

“Certainly.” Seth disappeared.

A few seconds later Sidwell’s crusty face appeared. He looked like he had just woke

up. “Yeah?”

“Darnell, I need to come down and talk with you.”

“OK. ‘Bout what?”

“About healing. I need your advice if we’re going to have a chance to beat this thing.”

The old man nodded. “C’mon down.”

The old man looked up from a book he was reading. “C’mon in an’ sit a spell.”  
Jon sighed, weary. “We . . . we don’t have time. Darnell, the flu’s back.”

Darnell slowly closed the book, set it on the small table beside him. There was a calmness, a deliberation, in his movements that was almost aggravating to Jon. “Yeah, I figgered.”

Without removing his suit, Jon walked over and sat. “How?”

“Your dreams,” said the old man. “I have ‘em, too. Been havin’ ‘em a lot longer than you, I reckon.”

“But you never said . . .”

“Wasn’t sure. Not ‘til the last one, nohow.” Darnell shrugged. “Not ‘til we was sittin’ on the edge of the pit, over there, lookin’ at the gel.”

Jon’s head swirled. “But how?”

“Dunno.” The prospector shook his head. “I thought they was jus’ my dreams. Had ‘em ever since I came here. When I found the artifact, I thought I knew why. Bigges’ damn burl of gel I ever seen. It’s the gel, you know. It’s alive.”

Jon’s head swirled. “You mean, the gel has been giving us both these weird dreams?”

Darnell nodded. “Yup.”

“But you don’t really think . . .”

Again, Darnell shrugged. “Who knows what’s alive an’ what ain’t? The dreams started when I firs’ come down. Jus’ little ones. Then I found it. Somehow, that changed things.”

The room seemed to spin slowly around Jon. He looked at the old man, tried to organize his thoughts. “But you say you’ve been having the same dreams as I have?”

Darnell wagged his head back and forth, slowly. “Can’ say, for sure. Have some without you, but some you been in.”

“So, you’ve been the one giving me all the answers?”

The prospector shook his head. “Not exactly. T’ain’t exactly me talkin’. Like th’ answers are jus’ there. It’s like a way of seein’ th’ world new . . . th’ answers are jus’ there, before me.”

Jon shook his head, tried to clear it. “Look, Darnell, I don’t have time to sort all this out. I need to get back up to the station. People are going to die. I came down to see if you could give me any advice on how to use this healing power. You and the others in the cult saved a lot of people before it disappeared on you. We need that experience if we’re going

to beat this new flu.”

Darnell turned away from him, looked off in the distance and chewed his lip. Finally, he nodded slightly, as though to himself, and said, “Can’ show ya. But I can teach ya.”

“Fine, fine, whatever. But let’s go.”

“No, I can teach you. You’ll hafta teach the others.”

“You sure? Wouldn’t it be better for you to teach them yourself?”

Sidwell shook his head. “I’m needed down here.”

Jon looked around the room. “What for?”

“Th’ artifact. It’ll need me.” The old man nodded his head again, with certainty.

“Yup. Gonna need me here. But I can teach you, you teach the others.”

“OK, whatever works,” said Jon, anxious to get back to the station.

Darnell stood, slowly and a little unsteadily, raising himself to his full height. He held out his hands, palms up, and for the first time Jon realized that the old man didn’t have a palmkey on his right hand. Darnell saw him look at it, smiled. “Nope, never have. Gimme your hands.”

Jon stood, peeled off his own cyberrig gloves, set them aside with his suit gloves and helmet. As he reached out to take Darnell’s hands he first felt, then saw, the blue energy bubbling up, just as though he were going to heal someone. The energy almost leapt out, closing the gap between their hands, pulling Jon slightly forward, into the shared dreamtime.

“Jon?”

The voice, soft yet demanding his attention, came from someplace outside. He felt rather than saw the reaction of Duc and Jackie, their minds shifting from the swirl of the cave to this interruption. The clean, bright blue light shifted, withdrew, and he let his hands drop from those of the other two.

When he opened his eyes he was back in the infirmary, Jackie and Duc standing in front of him. The others were still struggling to focus on the room around them, to settle back into this reality. He reached out and placed a comforting hand on their shoulders, said, “Easy. Give yourself a moment to reintegrate.”

Jackie shook her head, swayed a little. She took Jon’s arm for support, looked him in the eye and said, “Huh.”

“Huh, indeed,” said Duc quietly, also now shaking his head a little. He smiled at Jon as he settled into a nearby chair. “OK, I think I understand.”

Jon helped Jackie sit, then pulled up his own chair. “It makes more sense that way. Not so much healing the other person as leading their own energy on that path, directing them to the weak spots in the virus.”

Jackie nodded. “That’s more . . . efficient.”

“And also makes them partly responsible for their own being. Much better to teach than to do. The ancients understood this.”

“Teach a man to fish . . .” said Jackie.

James T. Downey

“Exactly,” said Jon. Then he turned slightly, saw the source of the interruption that had called them out of their communion. Tops was standing by the door, waiting patiently. “Yeah?”

“Sorry about that,” said the doctor. “But I discovered something that I needed to talk with you about.”

“What’s up?”

“I was going through the tests of the other team members as I was identifying who should be targeted for treatment in what order. And there’s an anomaly: the kid, Mallory. It looks like he doesn’t have the infertility syndrome.”

“Say what?” said Jon.

“He doesn’t have any of the genetic damage associated with the syndrome.”

Duc asked “Has he been in contact with the artifact?”

Tops shook her head. “If he had, he wouldn’t have the flu. Yet the virus is there in his bloodstream. He was one of the first ones I detected it in, as a matter of fact.”

“Ohmigod,” said Jackie. “He’s the one.”

Jon felt a cold chill run down his spine. “Yeah.”

“The one what?” asked Tops, then the answer struck her, and she exclaimed: “He’s the Edenist. All the Edenists are fertile, almost by definition.”

Jackie looked horrified, but there was no note of panic in her voice when she said to Tops, “Quick. I need to use your pc monitor.”

“Uh, sure,” said Tops, leading the way into the other room where all her equipment was.

The others followed. As Jackie and Tops quickly got to the necessary monitor and hooked things up Duc asked, “What’s going on?”

Jackie didn’t respond for a moment, intent on what she was doing. Then her face went absolutely pale. “The cyberrigs Mallory made for us. Each has got a data dump that caches everything for later retrieval.”

“Shit,” said Jon.

Jackie kept working with the monitor. After a moment she looked up. “Mine’s been downloaded more recently than yours.”

“How bad is it?”

Jackie’s face, moments ago as pale as a sheet, now flushed. With a mixture of both anger and fear she said, “He knows the cut-arounds in the programming for Salim. Not only can he shut down the expert, but I bet that he can selectively tap into all communications and system operations routed through his matrix. Which, given that Salim pretty much runs the entire station, is just about everything.”

“How long ago did he download that data?”

Jackie looked up from the virtual monitor. “This morning. I passed him in the hallway on my way from breakfast.”

Jon pulled on his gloves, touched the back of one hand. “Seth?”

The expert materialized instantly. “Yes Jon?”

Trying to keep his voice neutral, Jon said, “Please ask Commander Navarr to meet

me in the arboretum, by the waterfall. I believe that he's still on the station."

"Is it important?"

"Yes."

There was a brief pause, then Seth said, "The Commander says that he'll be there in about ten minutes."

"Thanks, Seth." The expert vanished. Jon looked at Jackie. "C'mon. We need to change those commands you inserted."

"But why the arboretum?" asked Duc.

"Because we can hopefully get lost in the trees, then skip down to the central core where Salim's matrix is, just in case Mallory is watching for us."

The lights in the lift flickered at the same moment that the gravity flipped off and immediately back on. Jon looked to Jackie, worried.

Jackie touched the back of a hand. "Salim?"

Jackie looked at Jon, shook her head. The lift stopped, and the door opened onto the large expanse of the arboretum. They stepped out. Jon touched the back of his hand.

"Salim, are you there?"

"He's already started the cut-around," said Jackie. "Salim is probably off-line, but secondary systems are dropping into place."

"Now what?"

"It'll take a while for Mallory to sort everything out. I'll head directly to the central core, see if I can stop him from seizing full control."

"OK. Take this." Jon held out the small pistol Navarr had given him. "Go on, take it. I'll meet Navarr in the arboretum. Just be careful."

"No shit." Jackie smiled grimly, taking the pistol. She hefted it, and it was clear she knew how to use it. "I'll be in touch, soon as I get things stabilized."

Jon watched the door to the lift close, then turned to go into the arboretum. He approached the waterfall cautiously, from trees on the side. It was a landscaped mound of dirt about two meters high, covered in flowering plants. The water emerged from the top, spilled over the falls into a shallow pool beside a broad flagstone covered walkway. On the far side of the walkway were several rustic benches, empty. No sign of the Commander.

Jon walked to the edge of the pool. He heard a noise behind him, turned slowly to look at it.

From beside a large bush a pile of boulders shifted. The air shimmied, light danced, and a crouching figure emerged, covered in a fabric drape that tried to keep up with the changing surroundings. One hand pulled the drape to the side. Another was holding a very large sidearm. "I wouldn't be expecting Commander Navarr. He's gone down to Titan to meet you at the fusion weapon, thanks to a little subterfuge allowed by Salim's datafiles. Of course, he'll be surprised when I'm there, instead. Well, not surprised, really, since I'll be in this stealth suit and he'll never see me. Just dead, the moment he opens the door and grants me access."

James T. Downey

Jon nodded at the drape. “Was that what was in the crate? The crate you had smuggled aboard the da Vinci?”

Mallory considered him for a moment. He no longer looked quite as young as Jon remembered him. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I brought this suit up in some of the sensing equipment. It served me well once already, will again.”

“Killing Navarr won’t do you any good. You won’t be able to do anything with the weapon.”

Mallory smiled thinly, gestured with the pistol in his hand. “The same way I wasn’t able to do anything with this? Sorry, Thompson, but my cyberware is much more sensitive than even what the auggie junkies use, easily a match for military encryption . . . particularly when you consider I have inside information. We have friends in high places, you might say. Hence, my stealth suit. So yes, I will be able to use the weapon.”

“It still won’t matter.”

“Oh, you mean that I’ll die? Well, of course I know that.” Mallory laughed. “Or are you talking about the fact that once the virus is detected here, the military will destroy the station? Yes, I found that in Salim’s protocols. I was wondering why Gates had gone to the trouble of carefully setting up an override. Well, frankly, I don’t think that they’ll really care . . . because the virus is already being released back home.”

Jon stared at him. “This is insane.”

Mallory smiled coldly. “And before they all die down there, they’ll get to watch you die up here. The few worthy ones will see the warning, and have a chance to repent and save themselves. We’ll be ready to receive the worthy.”

“You have a cure?”

“Of course. We had those who engineered the disease also engineer a cure. And make sure this virus takes days to kill.” His smile grew even more broad. “The Chinese have done an excellent job for us, though their procedures have been somewhat . . . unorthodox . . . over the years.”

“Then this isn’t something that you’ve just come up with since the artifact was found?”

Mallory smiled coldly. “Hardly. We’ve been waiting. The arrival of the artifact was the Sign we’ve expected.”

“Expected?”

“Of course,” said the youth. “Many of us have sensed the Coming for years, particularly those who have stayed pure and unsoiled by your technology.”

“You don’t seem to have any problems with technology,” responded Jon bitterly.

“Well, it was necessary to learn the ways of the world to protect the Faith, and to prepare.” Mallory didn’t seem too bothered by the dichotomy. “It is a sacrifice I make for my brothers and sisters. And it has its own . . . rewards.”

“You mean the sacrifice, or the technology?”

Mallory snickered. “Both, I suppose. But I have found the technology limiting, for all that it allows me to do.”

“Look, Mallory, you can’t just destroy the artifact.”

“Why not?”

“It is the key to . . .”

“It is unholy!” spat Mallory. “I have seen it, and the evil power that it has within.”

“It’s not evil,” said Jon in a calming voice. “It’s just knowledge. Not unlike the Burning Bush that supplied Moses . . .”

“Blasphemer!” shouted Mallory, raising the pistol.

At the same moment Jon slapped his thigh, hitting the activation stud of the jamming device. Mallory screamed, and the pistol went off.