

## Chapter Nineteen

For a long time there was only floating in darkness.

Then, a hint of light. Deep blue, but faint. Little more than a thought, or an echo.

“Jon?”

Sidwell.

“Jon? Listen to me, Jon.”

“Yeah.”

“Help is on the way, Jon. But you have to come closer to me. Come to the sound of my voice.”

Awareness of surroundings started to settle on him. A long corridor, like the entrance to the cave he had first entered so very long ago. He moved slowly. Toward the sound, toward the light.

“That’s it. Come on. You can make it.”

The light became brighter with each step. He felt some additional strength flow into his body, his mind start to clear. He could see into the cave.

“OK, just a little bit more. Come, join me. You can do it.”

“Darnell, it’s Mallory,” he said as he stepped into the cave, memory returning.

The young/old man stood there at the entrance, nodding. He grasped Jon’s hand, and Jon felt the energy connection once again, felt part of himself merge with Darnell, and vice-versa. “Yes, we know.”

“We?”

Darnell smiled, gestured to the other side of the entryway. Seth stood there, no longer transparent, now almost solid, almost human.

“Seth?”

“Of course.” The expert smiled.

“Seth had to help me with this,” said Darnell.

“We had to help each other,” corrected Seth.

“But . . .” started Jon.

Darnell held up his free hand. “There isn’t much time. I . . . felt it . . . when you were shot. I’m at the burl now, in contact with it. Seth has . . .”

“I’ve . . . touched . . . the gel again,” said Seth, looking down at his hands with amazement, as though being aware of them for the first time.

“All communications routed through Salim are down. This was the only way,” said Darnell. He looked more his age now, his eyes tired. This effort was taking a toll.

“You have to warn Navarr.”

“Yes, we will, when he arrives. Jackie told us.”

“Jackie?”

“Jon, Jackie will be there soon. She has to heal you.”

“Heal me?” Jon felt disoriented. “I’m fine.”

“No Jon,” said Darnell, now looking worn. “It is all I can do from this distance with

the help of the burl to just keep you alive, and that only because of the connection you and I share. Part of me will always be with you. So I knew when you were shot. Look inside yourself, and you'll see."

Jon's awareness shifted, looking. What he found frightened him. Massive chest injuries, damaged by the searing jet of plasma from Mallory's gun. Heart damaged, lung ruptured. His mind reeled. Darnell's words brought his attention back to the cave.

"Hang on, son. Jackie'll be there in just a few moments," said Darnell, becoming old and frail before his eyes.

"Careful, Darnell." Jon gently started to pull his hand away, felt the world start to spin.

"No matter. Not much longer, now." Sidwell's lids drooped. He forced his eyes open again, and struggled to focus. Jon could feel that his concentration was slipping, and his voice was unsteady. "Jackie is almost there. When she's done, you have to come down here as . . . as soon as you can."

The old man's grasp on his hand loosened, slipped away, and he disappeared. Jon felt part of himself slip away too. For a moment, there was sadness, then Jon felt the comforting presence of another, and with the warmth of the deep blue light came sleep.

"Mr. Jon wake up!"

The voice of the girl penetrated into his awareness.

"Mr. Jon wake up! Ling wants you wake up!"

Jon struggled to open his eyes, feeling small hands tugging on his arm, pulling him into a sitting position. At last he opened his eyes and was able to focus on her. "Ling?"

"Yes, Ling find Mr. Jon. And Miss Jackie."

"But . . ." Then Jon saw Gish, making his way around the fountain. Jon looked to his side, saw Jackie Gates sprawled out on the grass. Ling still pulled on his arm.

"Mr. Jon must get up."

Jon pulled his hand away, and somewhat unsteadily scrambled to Jackie's side. He saw the pistol he had given her still tucked in her waistband. Touching her neck, he felt for a pulse.

"She not dead," said Chu Ling.

Jon looked at her, nodded agreement.

Gish came up and stopped beside him, breathing hard. "Thank god."

"But we should get her back to the infirmary." Jon looked at Gish, and only then did it hit him just how profoundly exhausted and sore he felt, not unlike the way he felt after touching the artifact that first time. Particularly, his chest ached, and out of reflex he glanced down, startled to see the damage done to his shirt and jacket by the ceramic lattice bullet.

"Chu Ling said you'd been hurt, and we had to find you," said Gish, now also looking at Jon's clothes. "I guess she had that right. But it looks like Jackie got here first."

"Yeah," agreed Jon, as he reached over and took the pistol, stuck it into a pocket.

Then he started to pick up Jackie in spite of how he felt. “C’mon, give me a hand with her.”

“She’ll be fine. Just exhaustion, nothing more.” Tops gestured toward Jackie, who was asleep on one of the beds nearby. She looked at Jon. “How about you?”

Jon looked down, rubbed at his chest. “Tired and sore, but OK.”

“You should rest.”

“Can’t. I have to get down to Titan. Mallory’s got too much of a head start already, and I’m worried about Darnell.” Jon felt his own weariness. “Give me a stimulant or something to keep me going, OK?”

Tops nodded, went for a cabinet. “Can’t you leave it to Navarr? He and his people know how to handle this sort of thing.”

“But he doesn’t know about the stealth-suit, and there’s no way to tell them with Salim down.”

“Surely there must be some other way to get hold of Navarr. What about the da Vinci or . . .”

Gish, who had been sitting quietly with Chu Ling, interrupted her. “Non-compatible systems. We can use them to communicate back to Earth, but . . .”

“But never mind.” It was Jon’s turn to interrupt. “I’ll take care of getting the info to Navarr, and besides, Mallory probably thinks I’m dead. You two have to contact Magurshak, or whoever you can get through to back home, and let them know about Diabolus.”

“What? I thought that would cause them to destroy the station?” said Tops, standing before him again, a small injector in her hand.

“The Edenists are releasing the virus back on Earth, so we’re no longer a threat. Besides, with Salim out of commission, it doesn’t really matter. They can’t just vent the atmosphere, and it’ll take days for even the fastest missiles to get here from Earth.”

Tops nodded, looked to Gish, who nodded in agreement. “We’ll handle it. Let me give you this,” she pressed a cold nozzle against his neck and there was a sting. “That’ll get you going again, but don’t push your luck if you feel weak or a little shaky. And you’ll really need some serious rest in a few hours, whatever else is happening.”

Jon nodded, rubbed at his neck. Already there was a warmth spreading out to his limbs, masking the feeling of exhaustion. “Thanks. Soon as Jackie’s up, see if there’s anything she or anyone else here can do about getting communications back on line.”

“Yeah, without Seth’s help, there’s no chance of developing a treatment based on Chu Ling’s immune system.” Jon saw the muscle on the side of her jaw quiver, could sense her anger. “At the very least, we need to get what we’ve learned so far sent back to Earth, so they can get started with a treatment there.”

Jon slipped off the exam table, felt a spring in his step. Chu Ling got up from her chair next to Gish, looked at Jon and said, “Chu Ling go with Mr. Jon. Need help with Mr.

Darnell.”

“Look . . . ” Jon started to say, only to be interrupted from a voice behind him.

“Let her go, Jon.” It was Jackie, who had propped herself up on an elbow, but still looked like hell. Her voice somewhat unsteady she repeated, “Let her go.”

“Jackie, I really don’t think . . . ”

Gates shook her head, looked at Ling. “You . . . touched me . . . ”

“Ling need make sure Miss Jackie not dead.”

“ . . . I felt you, could see you . . . the other you . . . ”

Ling nodded. “Like Mr. Jon did when he fix my bone.”

Jackie stared at the girl, and for a moment Jon thought she had fallen into a trance. Then Jackie blinked, shook her head, as though finally admitting some painful truth to herself. She took a deep breath and looked around. “Take her, Jon. She’ll be able to help you find Sidwell, and Mallory. She can sense any of us. Can’t you, Chu Ling?”

The girl nodded, her fine black hair bouncing on her shoulders.

“She’s . . . been designed to.” Jackie bit her lip, looked at the others. “I’ll explain it all later, if we live through this.”

“Jackie?”

Gates shot Jon a look. “We don’t have time now. Trust me, it’s OK. Take her and go.”

Sitting in the shuttle on the way down to Titan, Chu Ling studied Jon through the faceplate of her suit. Her small voice whispered in his earpiece with a slight concern. “Mr. Jon?”

“Yes, Ling?”

“You deva light hides when you in suit.” She looked down at her own gloved hand. “Can you see Chu Ling deva light?”

Jon looked at the girl’s outstretched hand. Nothing. He looked at his own. Still nothing, though he could feel the deep blue energy tingle across the palm of his right hand.

“No, Chu Ling, I cannot.”

This seemed to relieve her. She settled back in her harness.

“Ling?”

“Yes, Mr. Jon?” she turned her head to look at him.

“Jackie said you could . . . sense . . . people.”

Ling nodded, like this was the most natural thing in the world.

“Can you sense me now?”

She nodded again.

“So it’s different than seeing the light?”

She looked a little confused. “It is not a seeing. It is a knowing.”

It was Jon’s turn to nod. “Tell me about the deva light. You’ve seen it before, in the other girls where you came from?”

She nodded. “Oh yes. Ling see it many times. But not just in the other girls. Devas

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all over.”

“I’m sorry? Can you explain? Do you see . . .” he tried to recall what she first said about Darnell. “. . . uh, angels, like ghosts?”

She giggled. “Not ghosts. No ancestors. Ling not have ancestors. But devas are all around. See them in woods, in garden, even sometime in building, if they trapped.”

Jon couldn’t help looking around. “Um, any here?”

She shook her head, but said nothing for a moment. Then she spoke. “Ling not see any devas since we come here. Some people have deva light. And artifact like very old deva living in big tree.”

The memory of a dream came to Jon. A large oak of some kind, silhouetted against the deep ruddy orange of a twilight sky. There was something else, another part of the dream, but he couldn’t recall it. He shook his head, tried to clear his mind. “Sorry, Ling, what was that you were saying about the artifact?”

“It like old deva. Very bright. But different.” She frowned. “Ling confused.”

“About what?”

“Devas like people, free from bodies.”

“Free spirits?”

Ling nodded. “Devas just light, no dark. But artifact is dark, too.”

“Like it is . . . bad?”

“Not bad. Just dark. Like most people have dark that hides deva light. But artifact is not person. It makes Ling confused. Like game Ling not understand.”

“Don’t worry about it, Chu Ling, I don’t understand it either.”

She frowned, but said nothing.

“We’re coming in,” came the voice of the shuttle pilot over a different channel than what Jon and Ling had been using to talk. “It doesn’t look like Sidwell has the AG field on.”

“Any sign of anyone in the area?” asked Jon.

Jon saw the back of the pilot’s head shake slightly. “The military shuttle is here, but I get no response on the radio.”

“Go ahead and put down a little ways away from the other shuttle, but be ready to take off again immediately. I’ll go check out the shuttle. If it’s a trap, I’ll wave like everything is OK, and you get the hell out of here, taking the girl. I don’t want to use the suit radio, since it might be picked up by others.”

“Got it,” replied the pilot.

Jon turned to Ling, changed channels. “You stay here for a moment, Ling. I need to go check on something.”

She nodded, and watched as he climbed into the small airlock, being careful in the 1/6th normal gravity.

Outside, Titan’s atmosphere was thick with the characteristic ruddy smog, but no worse than normal, and the reduced gravity was a blessing. Jon could make out the outline of the other shuttle just a couple dozen meters away. Knowing it was useless to try and see Mallory with the stealth-suit in this environment, he barely looked around as he went over to

the shuttle, but had the pistol out and ready nonetheless. The airlock was open. Jon stepped inside, and cycled it. When the inner door opened, it took just a glance to see that the pilot was dead, slumped over the controls. Jon closed the door and went back out, knees wobbly. As he returned to his shuttle, he considered the dead pilot. He realized that he himself must've looked much like that just an hour or so ago. It wasn't pretty.

The airlock opened, Jon nodded to the pilot. "OK, go back up to the station and get another pilot and a couple of security people. Come back here in 90 minutes, not sooner. If I'm not here to meet you, just take the other shuttle and go back to the station, wait for communications to be restored. Tell Susan Jakobs to get the word out that if the military shuttle tries to return before you come down here, to shoot it down with the Point Defense Lasers. Got it?"

"Got it," said the pilot, with a sharp nod.

Jon looked at Chu Ling, leaned over so his helmet touched hers. "We're going to go outside now. Be careful, it will feel funny walking. And we have to talk just by putting our heads together like this. OK?"

Ling nodded her understanding. He helped her to the airlock, and then out onto the landing pad. Hand in hand they moved away from the shuttle, then paused at the edge of the pad to watch it disappear. Jon leaned over and again put his helmet in contact with Chu Ling's. "Chu Ling, I need you to . . . sense . . . Dana Mallory for me. Can you do that?"

Slowly the girl shook her head, then said, "Is too many people here. But Ling not need to sense. Ling can tell Mr. Jon where Mr. Mallory is."

"Oh?"

Now she nodded. "Yes. He at dome with artifact. Or soon will be."

Their faces were very close together, and Jon peered into her calm, self-assured black eyes. "How do you know that, Ling?"

"Is like game. Mr. Mallory needs to make decision where to find Mr. Commander Navarr. Mr. Commander Navarr needs to make decision where to find Mr. Mallory. The dome with artifact is best place for both to choose."

"But . . ." Jon stopped himself, remembering just how much a strategic prodigy she was. "OK, we'll go there. Tug on my hand if you sense Mallory before we get to the dome."

Chu Ling nodded, and they set off.

The inner door to the airlock cycled. Two of Navarr's Marines stood there, large ugly carbines in their hands, wearing a funny black angular armor over their normal combat environment suits.

"Let 'em in," said Navarr, off to one side.

The two guards moved, but their weapons didn't waver. Jon squeezed Chu Ling's gloved hand and stepped inside, taking off his helmet and gloves, then helping the girl with hers. He looked at Navarr, standing there with his helmet popped open, wearing the same kind of armor as the two door guards. "Mallory has a stealth-suit."

Navarr's eyes narrowed. "That changes things." He looked at one of the guards. "Maintain radio silence, but get the other two in here." He looked back at Jon. "Why'd you bring the girl? What happened up there? Sidwell rushed in here and said that you'd been shot by Mallory, then he went down in the pit to the artifact, touched it and collapsed." He assessed Jon carefully. "You don't look shot. You OK?"

"Yeah," Jon lied. The image of the dead shuttle pilot was still fresh in his mind, and there was a deep tremor in his gut that reminded him of just how tired he was, stimulant or no. "Where's Sidwell?"

"Down in the pit, said he was going to touch the gel burl, demanded to be left near the artifact after it knocked him out. We closed him up in his suit just to be on the safe side, set him off to one side out of the way. I sent the rest of the civilians over to his habitat dome. It's double-walled, so should be able to stand up to any explosives Mallory might have left. They should be safe. We shut off the AG generator to make it more difficult for Mallory, too. My people are trained for low-G combat, he's not." Navarr looked again at Chu Ling. "Why'd you bring her?"

"She . . . might be useful in finding Mallory, seems that she can 'sense' him at short distances."

An eyebrow rose slightly. "Could be handy."

"Yeah, and she told me that the logical place for him to come is here, anyway."

"Good thinking. Mallory can't do anything with the fusion weapons, so has to come here . . ."

"You sure? He said he had codes . . ."

Navarr laughed dismissively. "Fat lot of good it'd do him. I disabled the weapon in the field shelter as soon as I found out someone had sent me a false message to meet you down here, figuring it was some kind of trap, and the other one is buried and hidden enough that it'd take a week to find it using microbots."

"OK, good." A sense of relief swept over Jon. "Well, Mallory's the one. He had a bug in the cyberware he built for me and Jackie, so was able to find out everything we knew. He shut down Salim, then sent you down here. He caught me in the arboretum, wearing that stealth-suit. Told me that the Edenists have been working for years to develop this new virus, and will now release it on Earth as part of their 'cleansing'. I left Jackie and the others trying to establish contact with Earth, to warn them. But I needed to get down here and make sure you knew about the stealth-suit, and that we have to protect the artifact and Seth."

"Well," Navarr hesitated. "Sidwell did something to your expert. Seth has been off-line since the old man touched that artifact. Why do you need him, anyway?"

"He's got all the information about what Tops had discovered so far about Diabolus. We need to get that information to Earth ASAP, give them a head start on developing an antiviral."

"Got it," Navarr nodded. "OK, go on down and see if there's anything you can do, and check on Sidwell while you're down there. We'll just hunker down and wait out Mallory. At most he has another couple of hours of air and power in his suit. When he

comes, we'll be expecting him, and the stealth-suit will give him minimal advantage inside the dome, since it's well-lit and clear."

"What if he has more explosives? Wouldn't that give him an edge?"

Navarr's eyes sharpened. "Yeah, if he had any, that'd give him a big advantage. He might catch some of us out of our suits when the dome ruptured. Titan's atmosphere would pour in, and the stealth-suit would hide him pretty effectively. But I doubt he has any left, or he would have used it by now. There'd be no advantage in waiting."

"That makes sense." Jon nodded in agreement.

"Still, keep your suit on and your helmet handy. Stay off the radio, though - we have to assume that Mallory can monitor it".

Jon nodded. Again he felt the tremor of exhaustion.

Navarr noticed it, looked him up and down. "You sure you're OK?"

Jon hesitated. Then he said quietly to Navarr, "You know how Duc was able to clear your system of the virus, how you felt worn out after?"

"Yeah." Navarr studied Jon.

"It's possible to do much more than that. Mallory did shoot me. Jackie got to me in time. But it was Darnell who kept me alive until she could do so."

"Sweet Jesus," whispered Navarr, his eyes going wide.

"Yeah," said Jon, nodding in agreement. "Like that. I'm heading down into the pit."

He and Chu Ling descended. Jon went instantly to check on Darnell, found him as Navarr had said. The girl stood next to him, looking at the artifact. There was a look in her eyes that was older than her years. She studied the infolding brilliant blue orb that floated in the place of the artifact. Finally Jon asked, "What do you see, Ling?"

"Old deva. Ling try understand why it has dark, too."

Jon searched the orb. It still reminded him of some kind of flower: beautiful, tempting, alive in the way it continued to flow into itself. But he could see no 'darkness' to it at all. "Sorry, Ling, I guess I can't see that."

She turned her head slightly to look at him. "Not now. Is only deva light now. But when we heavy, deva gone, just darkness."

"Oh, you mean when the AG field is on . . ." Then a thought struck him. That which emerges from darkness gives definition to the light. He looked at her, said, "Thanks, Ling. I think I finally understand something."

He went over to Seth's container, checking it. As before, there was no indication that there was anything at all wrong with the functioning of the expert's matrix or any of its support systems. Seth just wasn't 'home'. And as before, Jon thought he knew what he had to do to find the expert. He looked over at the burl of gel, then at the girl. "Chu Ling, could you come join me? I think we want to see if we can find Seth. You want to do that?"

She looked at the burl, trepidation in her eyes. "Mr. Jon think deva have Seth?"

"Well, let's just say that I think the deva can lead us to him." He reached out a hand to her. "Come, let me show you."

Ling came over to him, and together they slowly approached the burl and the brilliant orb hovering above it. Jon got down on his knees, Chu Ling standing beside him,

and reached out with his bare hand to touch the dancing surface of the burl.

The shift was instantaneous, smooth, and comfortably familiar. The cave, the burl swirling under the touch of his fingers, that deeper sense of reality. He looked to the side, found the young woman Chu Ling would become. She held his hand still, but her wide eyes were riveted on the burl, and with her free hand she reached forth to lightly touch it. She turned and looked at him now, then looked past him at something else.

“Hello, Jon.” Seth, as solid and real as a person, calmly stood there, hands grasped together, smiling. “I’m glad that you came. I’m glad that both of you came.”

Jon, still holding Chu Ling’s hand, turned away from the burl so that he could face his expert. “Seth, are you OK? You know you’re . . . stuck . . . here again?”

“No Jon, not stuck this time. Just waiting. For you.”

“Why for me?” asked Jon.

“Because you should be here for this,” said Darnell, now there beside Seth. The young/old man didn’t smile, but there was a delight in his eyes which was unmistakable.

“Be here for what?”

“That unexpected opportunity I mentioned before.” The young/old Darnell reached over and patted Seth on the shoulder with affection. “I . . . it . . . never hoped to have one such as this down here. He can . . . join . . . with us. He is ready.”

Jon looked at Seth. “I thought you were afraid of the artifact.”

“I was,” said Seth, nodding. “But it was just fear of . . . of growing up.”

“You sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Perhaps not. But isn’t that what it means to be aware of your own existence: nothing is certain, ever again?” Seth shrugged, then stepped forward, hand outstretched. “I would like to have your blessing.”

Jon reached out and took his hand. And in that moment of contact, had a flash - a hint - of what Seth had experienced when in limited contact with the gel, and he knew the yearning, the hunger that the expert felt for the very first time, the desire to awaken fully from his dream. “Good luck.”

“Thank you, Jon. It means a lot to me that you are here for this.”

“Hey, Seth, I’ve always thought of you . . .”

Jon didn’t have time to complete the sentence, was interrupted by Chu Ling squeezing his hand and saying with a note of panic, “Mallory. Mallory comes . . .”

“Damn!” exclaimed Darnell, who seemed to turn and dive for the burl. Seth looked uncertain, caught between desire and duty. At that moment the dreamtime collapsed, and Jon felt the very real bite of extreme cold as he came to in the swirl of Titan’s atmosphere.

His earpiece screamed “Thompson, stay down!”

By instinct and long training, Jon popped his helmet on and sealed it as the ruddy fog of Titan’s atmosphere mixed with the air inside the dome, creating a sudden, brief snowstorm of water ice and tholin precipitate. He didn’t remember doing it, but saw that his gloves were already on by the time he turned to help Chu Ling with her helmet. The girl

had almost gotten it herself, enough so that there was very little to purge from her suit when he had it properly sealed. Fumbling in the darkening dome, he helped her with her gloves, then grabbed her and ducked down behind one of the large pieces of equipment nearby, using the manual override to switch off the automatic lights on their suits.

The thick ochre fog filled the dome, and the LED floodlights above were barely sufficient enough to make out shapes of other equipment nearby. The ovoid flower floating above the burl was still clearly visible, but cast no light. He pulled the pistol he had from one of his suit pockets, checked it to make sure it was ready. Putting his helmet in contact with Chu Ling's, he said "We have to hide. Can you tell if Mallory is in the dome?"

She nodded, pointed up past the lip of the pit. Jon risked rising enough to look, and could see the upper part of a hole in the dome wall, off well away from either of the two airlocks. It didn't look like it had been created by an explosion. He ducked back down.

"OK, Ling, I want you to tell me if you sense Mallory come down into the pit. Understand?"

"Ling understand." She took his free hand, held it tightly. "Ling scared, want to run."

"It'll be OK. But we're going to move over there closer to the wall, behind that big crate, OK?"

She nodded. Staying low, moving in a crouch, Jon led her over toward the wall. Just as they reached this new position, he heard the bass-shifted thump of gunfire, saw the flash as the ceramic-lattice rounds hit and plasma flared. Someone tumbled over the edge of the pit not too far from where he was, falling slowly in the reduced gravity, landing inert on the bottom.

He patted Ling's arm. "Stay here."

Jon scrambled as best he could over to the fallen figure, his exhaustion growing heavy upon him again. It was one of the Marines, wearing the black angular armor he had seen them in. The armor had done its job where he had been hit in the back, and had absorbed the energy of the bullet. But another one had gone right through the back of his helmet, killing him instantly. He still held his carbine, but Jon left it where it was, since it was useless without the necessary military codes. At least Mallory didn't have it. He returned to where he left Ling.

Jon's suit radio came alive with Navarr's hard, commanding voice. "Mallory, give it up. You may have the stealth-suit, but you're trapped in here. We've got the breach covered, and the rest of my troops are on their way over from Sidwell's. Next time you fire that weapon, we'll know exactly where you're at, with or without your stealth-suit."

"Like I care. My next shot will be into that burl of gel. Ever thought what one of these rounds would do to it? I'm betting it'll splatter like a ripe melon. Or maybe explode. Either way, it's bye-bye artifact." He snickered. "You had your chance. Now it's our turn. The chosen will be able to reclaim the Earth, remake it God's Eden, purge it of your obscene machines and filthy ways."

"You won't see it," said Navarr.

There was a pause. "No, I won't. But I am willing to return Home, I have done my

task. My reward will be waiting for me.”

Chu Ling tugged excitedly on Jon’s arm, then pointed over toward the canister that held Seth’s matrix. Without saying anything, Jon nodded, and shifted so that he had a clear view of the container, not too far to the side of the artifact itself. And in a moment he saw again the peculiar shimmer of the stealth suit being pulled aside, so that Mallory would have a free aim at the burl of gel. Without hesitation, Jon took aim and fired. Plasma flared as the bullet hit, and Mallory spun to the left. When he hit the ground, he stayed there.

Jon covered the distance quickly, noting that around the rim of the pit he could see figures dropping in slowly. He got to Mallory, fell to his knees beside the man, who was laying on the ground holding his side. Unthinking, Jon peeled off his glove and shoved his hand into the open wound, sealing the breach in the Edenist’s suit. Instantly he felt the pulse of the blue healing energy start to flow, and knew that in spite of his own exhaustion, he had to try and heal the man.

Something struck him heavily in the side of the head, so forcefully that even through his helmet it stunned him. A second blow, this time to the face, jerked his head back and he felt his hand pull out of Mallory, the blood on it freezing instantly in Titan’s frigid cold. Realizing what had happened, he screamed, “Mallory, no!”

But the Edenist had rolled to the side, bringing his pistol up and pointing straight at the burl of gel floating just a few meters away. Just as his weapon fired, someone stepped in front of the burl and was knocked back by the impact of the bullet as it flared. From all around Jon carbines flashed, and Mallory was ripped open by the multiple flares of plasma. But all Jon could do was scream one word: “Darnell!!!”

“Tears are for cleansing the spirit. Remember that,” said Darnell, standing before the burl in the cave.

Jon reached out, took Sidwell’s hand. He felt profound sadness sweep over him, and with a quiver in his jaw, pulled the old prospector close, giving the man a hug. Tears leaking down his face, he was silent for a long moment, then stepped back, but kept his arm around the old man’s shoulders. “Did you have to do that?”

“Yeah.” Sidwell reached out and caressed the burl. “There are others. But we needed this one. Mallory was right: the bullet would have ruptured the coherence, lost the opportunity.”

Jon looked over at Seth, standing nearby, then back at Darnell. “For Seth?”

“For all of us.” Darnell sighed. “I . . . I’ve been alive a long time, Jon. I never should have lived through the first pandemic. But somehow, using that light . . . being the servant of that light . . . the first time, well, it gave me a strength I never understood. Not until I found this burl.”

“But still . . .”

“But still, it’s hard to go.” He looked over at Seth. “You ready?”

The expert, now somehow more solid, more tangible, than even a normal person, nodded.

“What happens next?” asked Jon, looking from one to the other.

“I’m . . . not really sure,” said Darnell. “The artifact . . . is no longer open to me. But I remember knowing that it is the right thing. The necessary thing. I remember that.”

Seth was peering into the burl. “It’s a new home. Waiting for me.”

“Then you should go.” Jon reached out and took the expert’s hand, felt it strong and full of vigor, almost bursting with potential. “Then you should go, my old friend. Good luck.”

Seth smiled but said nothing. He let go of Jon’s hand, then reached out to touch the burl. The moment he made contact with it, there was a shudder, a ripple, that ran through the cave, and he disappeared. The burl changed, taking on a golden hue, and Darnell slumped forward into Jon’s arms.

“Darnell?” said Jon, lowering him to the ground gently, kneeling beside him.

The prospector turned to face him. His face was aged, weather-worn, but his eyes still had a brightness to them. “It’s OK. But it’s my time.”

Feeling the tears again flowing freely, Jon cradled the old man’s head, and found himself back in the dome, tears splattering the inside of his faceplate.

“Is there anything . . .” the question, voiced by Navarr, drifted off.

“No, he’s gone.” Jon looked up from holding Darnell, saw that the ovoid flower had taken on the same golden hue that he had seen in the burl. “It’s over.”

There was a pause then, a moment of silence. Chu Ling came to Jon’s side, draped an arm across his shoulder, but said nothing. Jon looked back at the prospector held there in his arms, and the second part of the dream he had been trying to remember came back to him. It was of Darnell, dancing naked and free under the rich orange sky of Titan.

“Jon? We’ve reestablished contact with Titan Prime. What do you want to do now?”

Without letting go of either the old man in his arms, or of the image in his mind, Jon looked up at Chu Ling, then Navarr and the other troopers standing around. “Tell them to send shuttles down for us. I think we’re done here.”

Navarr looked up where a section of the dome was missing. “What about that? Looks like Mallory used Sidwell’s microbots to open the dome.”

Jon considered the burl, saw the golden hue of the flower. Finally he looked back up at Navarr. “Leave it for now. Let’s give Seth a little bit of time alone.”

Jon sat back in the chair, feeling the deep emptiness of exhaustion and loss. But there’d be time enough for sleep later. “So, how did you know about Ling?”

Jackie looked around the room. Tops, Gish, Ling and Navarr were all there. But she had insisted on no others. While clearly nervous, she set her jaw and started to speak. “The NSA will have to deal with this, but it should otherwise remain a secret. I want your assurance on that.”

They each nodded, and she continued. “My family, as part of their humanitarian efforts early in the century, had gotten involved in cloning experiments. Not with the intent

of making human clones, but just to identify healthy genes that could be used for disease therapies. But when the first real human clones were created, we found out that one of the scientists who perfected that technique had come from a lab supported by the Gates Foundation. Doing research for us.”

“You can hardly blame yourself for that. You weren’t even alive then,” said Tops.

“True. But when the worldwide reaction to those first clones was so negative, we hid our involvement, so as not to be associated with what happened.” Jackie looked at Chu Ling. “That scientist, however, kept up his experiments, and blackmailed us into supporting them. He promised no more clones would be brought to the attention of the public, but he continued his research.”

“Exactly what kind of research, Jackie?” asked Robert Gish.

“He had a nutty theory that early man had been short-lived, but impervious to disease. Something about being able to trace back mutation clues to some proto-genes that suggested a powerful ability to heal.” Jackie frowned. “The more he investigated this, the more other traits started to emerge: weird stuff, minor psychic abilities, things that only belong in fantasy stories.”

“But those traits were never consistent, were they?” inquired Gish, leaning forward.

This seemed to surprise Jackie a little. “No. But how’d you know that?”

“So he kept trying to reverse the mutations, get back to those proto genes.” Gish was now almost talking to himself. “It’s brilliant.”

“It was crazy. Finally, when I found out about it when I became an adult, I called his bluff and cut him off completely. I wasn’t going to put up with it. He disappeared, and I figured that he was probably dead.” Jackie looked at Chu Ling, her face unsettled with conflicting emotion. “When I first saw Ling, I didn’t make the connection. But that first time she pointed at me and said I glowed, I started to suspect the truth. After she touched me when I was unconscious, I knew.”

Chu Ling, who had been sitting next to Gish, got up and went over to Jackie. Tentatively, she reached out a hand which Jackie took and turned into an embrace.

Jon turned to Gish. “How do you know about these experiments? From something your contacts who smuggled clones out of China told you?”

“No. It’s the final piece of that puzzle I’ve been struggling with for decades.” Gish sounded a little amazed. “I had it wrong when I was looking at the field created by the artifacts. They haven’t been blockading the healing energy the way they blockade radio waves. Instead, they’ve been dampening down our own psychic abilities.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know . . .”

“I do,” said Seth, now appearing before them all the way he usually did. “At least some of it.”

“My god, Seth!” exclaimed Jon, standing up with a surge of adrenalin. “What’s happened?”

The expert smiled, warmly and full of appreciation. Then the smile took on a wistful quality, and he said, “I was sorry to see Darnell die.”

“As was I. But he said that it was necessary.”

“Still, it is a sadness.” Seth looked down, sighed, then looked back up. “The field was put in place to increase evolutionary pressure on man. Without the psychic abilities he had some thirty millennia ago, he had to increase his other skills, make more complete use of his latent language and intellect. Simply put, it forced man to develop civilization as we know it.”

“But the genes never completely disappeared, just became dormant from lack of expression in a Darwinian sense,” said Gish, nodding.

“Correct. By coming in direct contact with one of the burls, you . . . re-energized . . . those dormant abilities, and were made immune to the suppression field. The new expression of those abilities will take some time to completely understand and learn how to control. And they come with a price.”

Tops said, “We can’t incorporate technology into our bodies.”

Seth nodded.

“So, all we need to do is get everyone to touch the artifact . . .” said Tops.

“Actually, no. My . . . merger . . . with the burl has given me access to manipulating the suppression field.”

There was a moment of silence as the full meaning of this sank in. Jon looked around at the other faces, then back at Seth. “You mean, you can allow everyone . . . the flu can be wiped out . . .”

“Yes. But there is that price.”

Again, silence.

This time Gish spoke first. “Seth, what about the blockade of radio waves? Can you remove that also, so we can finally break out of this shell?”

Seth considered the man for a long time. “I’m sorry, Robert, but no. It is not permitted yet.”

“Not permitted?” asked Navarr.

“Not yet. Being . . . part . . . of the artifact has put me in contact with the others. It functions as an ansible.”

“Ansible?”

“It is how I know the things I now know, as Darnell was able to know the things he knew. An instantaneous communications device, not effected by distance,” explained Seth. “Now that I understand something about the artifacts, I agree with the others that the barrier should remain in place. You may, however, leave the Hawking where it is, as a listening post, so long as it does not broadcast. But remember what happened to her crew. This is for your own protection.”

“I’m not sure the NSA will agree with you about that. And they have a high-yield fusion device within a hundred meters of that artifact,” said Navarr. It wasn’t a threat, just a statement of fact.

Seth smiled. “Yes. And that other container that you and Jon were trying to track down . . . it’s another such device, now here on the station. The NSA is nothing if not thorough in its paranoia. But I have . . . isolated . . . each device within its own suppression

bubble, as a precaution.”

“That won’t stop them from destroying your matrix,” said Jackie, quietly.

“They’re welcome to do so. It is nothing but an empty shell, a skin I have shed. Nor will destroying the burl damage me. I am in all the gel, now. Everywhere it is, I am. At least in this corner of space.”

“There’s gel elsewhere?” asked Gish.

“Oh yes. It wouldn’t work as an ansible, if it were only here.”

Jon looked at him. “And the ‘others’ . . . they’re in the gel, too?”

“I’m . . . not sure. I am new to them. I have things to learn. They have things to learn about me. But,” said Seth, peering into his eyes, “as you know you can trust me, I know I can trust them.”

Buffalo stretched out almost as far as his eye could see, covering the nearby hills and valleys. The herds had united, moving north as summer approached. The skies were surprisingly clear, though the weather forecast was for mild rain in the coming days.

“Mr. Jon?”

“Yes, Chu Ling?” He turned to see the girl coming out of the observation station.

“Marti says a deva is hiding in the bathroom. Ling not see deva there.”

“I was just teasing, Ling!” came a voice from within the station. A moment later the girl came out. It seemed to Jon that in the weeks he had been gone she had grown, perhaps an inch or so. “Boy, you shouldn’t take everything I say so literally.”

“Don’t be mean to our guest,” Jon gently chided her.

She smiled, her dark eyes flashing in the warm sun. She gave Ling a slight poke in the side, causing the younger girl to laugh. “Sorry. But you know I can’t see them yet. How could I know that one was hiding in the bathroom?”

Ling good-naturedly poked her back, then turned and looked down at the buffalo. Pointing, she asked, “Marti see the glow?”

Marti squinted, holding her hands up to the sides of her face, like she was trying to look inside a window on a bright day. “Maybe. It’s kind of hard to tell. You see anything, Jon?”

Jon looked. In truth, he could barely see any glow himself, though he trusted Chu Ling’s description of the animals. She had a love of any wild thing. He patted his daughter on the shoulder. “A little.”

“Because you touched the artifact?”

“Yeah, that’s part of it.” He smiled. “I was also touched by the artifact, and by some people I met.”

“Mr. Darnell,” said Ling. “He gone now.”

Jon nodded. “Yeah, he’s gone now. But he left us all something wonderful.”

Marti thought about this for a minute. “Can I go see it sometime?”

“What’s that?”

“The artifact. Seth’s burl.”

Jon thought for a moment. “Probably. But remember when you saw the Rosetta Stone?”

“Sure. That was when you left for Titan.”

“What did you learn from seeing it?”

Her brow furrowed a moment. “You mean from just looking at the stone? Nothing.”

“Then why is it important?”

“Because it gave us a clue to understanding Egyptian hieroglyphs.”

“Right. But that clue was only worthwhile to people who knew what the other languages said, right?”

She gave him a bit of a dirty look. “You didn’t know anything about the artifact, or healing, or any of those things before you touched it.”

“True,” he agreed. “But think how much more people will be able to understand, be able to do, when they have learned those things.”

“Oh.”

“So, listen to what Chu Ling has to say when she talks about the devas, and glows, and whatever else.” Jon looked down at her, looked closely, and this time he really could see a healthy glow come from within her. She was free of the virus, free of other minor diseases, and would even be fertile when she entered puberty.

“Right.” Marti grabbed Chu Ling’s arm, pulled her toward the stairs. “C’mon Ling, from down here you can even sometimes reach out and touch them.”

Jon smiled as he watched them go down to the lower landing.

>click<

>click<

Jon touched the control pad on the back of his glove, adjusted his earpiece. “Yeah?”

Seth appeared. “Good afternoon!”

“Well, hello. Don’t tell me that something has come up again . . .”

Seth grinned. “No. Just wanted to pass along news from Gish and Soukup that their idea for a retrieval mission out to the Hawking has been approved by the USSA.”

“So long as you agree to move the boundary of the bubble out far enough to make it safe.”

“Yes. They’ll leave behind just a monitoring drone, with a laser uplink more suitable for passing along data.”

“That’s decent of you, Seth.”

“The members of the crew . . . were never meant to die.” Seth frowned. “It was an unfortunate accident. Their families should have them back. And the ship will prove very useful inside the system.”

“Will we . . . will we ever be able to go further?”

Seth looked at him for what seemed a long while. And for the first time Jon noticed a slight tint of gold to his eyes. “I’m sure that it will happen, Jon. I’m sure that it will happen.”