

## Chapter Three

‘What was it?’ he wondered as the car wound through the streets, stopping before the USSA building. He got out, standing there in the plaza, looking up at the golden plasteel supports and the draping glass fabric. He heard the car pull away, to return home, turned to watch it drive down the street.

‘What was it?’ The question nagged. There was something half-remembered that had been haunting him all morning. Something he felt. Something he could almost taste. As he turned back to the building, there was a blurring at the edge of his vision, and he almost knew what it was that lurked there.

Almost. Golden light, somewhere above him. A metallic tang in his mouth. Movement at the edges of consciousness. Then it slipped away, thin veins of frost vanishing in the morning sun.

Jon went inside the building, his pc connecting to the stream, refreshing all the files he would need. Glancing through the postings of the other team members as he walked to his office, there was still that tugging sensation, that itch. Something that Judith said in her sleep came back to him, something about a blue flower. It could have just been the meandering of her subconscious in that doorway between sleep and wakefulness. He couldn’t quite remember . . .

“Morning, Jon.”

He snapped back into the present. “Morning, Seth. Look, I’m feeling a little distracted this morning. Run through a summary of pertinent status reports for me, eh?”

“Of course. Last night’s message from Susan Jakobs on Titan Prime indicates no changes detected in the artifact. Owen Roberts reports that the da Vinci is ready for boarding and departure. Commander Navarr has all of his materiel stowed, and his troops standing by. Bradsen’s team is gathering the last of their equipment, seeing to its transference to the Planck.

“Jackie Gates returned from Seattle early this morning, will meet you at the airport. Bailey and Ng are still at their accommodations, haven’t checked in yet. Chu Ling and Gish have joined Klee for breakfast, and are in the cafeteria. I have the medical reports on Ling, which you may wish to review later, though she seems to be doing well.”

“All right. Go on.”

“There are some matters which require your attention concerning the Europa colony. And Karen Trudeau has left a report you’ll wish to respond to. She’s arrived on Mars, wants to know what is going on. Seems the Japanese are getting a little curious, have asked her about some changes they’ve noticed in routine traffic and communication with Titan Prime.

“Sappho has been coordinating with me to prepare a thin-film machine for my temporary duplication. Once that is complete, I will transfer all routine functions to my dup, and prepare the primary for transportation. You shouldn’t notice much discontinuity until you leave Earth orbit. Then the communication lag will become increasingly problematic.”

Because any expert was so much a creature of the net, disruptions or delays in communications tended to be very difficult for them. Jon fully expected that he would have to leave the Seth dup free to handle the routine functions of the office, just checking in periodically. And it meant that Seth would not be able to function as his personal secretary for the duration of the flight. That would be annoying at some levels, but would also impose a break in his routine for the duration, giving him a rest he very much needed.

Jon made his way to the cafeteria. He had already had breakfast at home with most of the family, but he thought a chance to see how Ling, Gish and Klee were getting along would be a good idea. As he entered the large, open space, he saw the three of them sitting at a table near the entrance, well away from the open vista of the city. Coming up to the table, he greeted them in Mandarin.

The girl looked at him intently, but just barely nodded. Klee noticed this, but seemed unconcerned. “Good morning, Jonathon. Join us?”

Gish grabbed a parcel off the remaining chair, making room for Jon. The odd little scientist smiled. “Yes, please, sit.”

Jon did. “I understand that our little prodigy is doing well?”

Ling watched him, like a little bird ready to fly at the first sign of danger, but still fascinated by something new. Klee nodded, “Yes, yes, she had her physical, and now has a phone.”

Gish pulled something out of the parcel he had moved. It was a portable holo projector. “And Seth was able to find this little gem for us.”

He set it down on the table, and as he did so, Ling brightened, almost standing to get a better look at the device. The size of a large, old-fashioned book, it was made of an opaque, glass-like material. Dual control, it could be operated either by a palmkey or manually. The girl would have no difficulty with it, and her mentors could easily load the information they wanted her to have into the machine. Gish touched a stud on the side of the object, and an image projected above the surface of the glass.

It was Seth, but dressed in the formal robes of a classical-era Chinese instructor. The small figure bowed to Ling, said, “Greetings, young pupil.”

The girl returned the bow with a nod of her head, then looked around at the adults. Gish pushed the projector across the table to her. She reached out and tried to touch the figure, giggled when her hand passed through the holo. Putting her face down near the figure, she said quietly in Mandarin, “Show me the game.”

The image of Seth disappeared, to be replaced by what seemed to be a miniature landscape of hills, a road, a small river, and a bridge. On one of the hills appeared a small person, looking around as though trying to find something. Ling commenced to play with the controls on the side of the projector. Jon didn’t recognize the game, looked to Klee.

The German smiled. In English he said, “No, it’s probably not a game you’ve ever played. It’s a little something Seth and I came up with to help her learn the fundamentals of game theory. In this first level, she has to learn how to communicate with the figure, and agree on a meeting place. The obvious choice is dictated by the terrain features: where the road crosses the river, there is a bridge. That is a unique point in the landscape, and hence a

good starting point to establish a reference. The game goes on to introduce other concepts, using a variety of terrain features, multiple players, tacit and explicit communication, cooperation, and competition. She's quite good at it, and no matter which variables the machine uses, Ling sees the essential key to each scenario quickly. Soon she'll have mastered the principles of a zero-sum game, and we'll move on to other lessons."

Seth materialized at the end of the table. "Herr Klee thought that since the girl had already been introduced to me as a non-corporeal figure yesterday, she would accept a smaller version of my image in the machine."

"And the Imperial tutor persona was my idea," said Gish, smiling.

"Seth, just how much of you is in that projector?" asked Jon.

"The projector doesn't have capacity for AI. The persona is just a prop in this case. Though I can link to the machine and use it to manifest myself, if there is ever a need for that."

Jon nodded, said to Gish and Klee, "Looks good. Well, I just wanted to stop by and see how she is doing. Let me know if there is anything else you need. Otherwise, I'll see you at the airport this afternoon."

As he turned to leave, Klee touched his arm. "Have you had a chance to look over the medical report on Ling yet?"

Jon stopped. Klee looked a little concerned. Gish turned his attention to the girl, avoided Jon's eyes. "No, though Seth would have told me if there was anything serious in it. Why?"

Klee glanced at the girl and Gish, who was now participating in the game as an additional player. "There are some...anomalies there. It seems that in spite of her size and physical development, she is older than we thought."

Jon pulled up the file, glanced through it. "Hmm. Yeah, says here that physiologically, she's about six or seven. But according to her cumulative DNA degradation, she should be about fourteen."

"The medics didn't have an explanation for it. But they took skin and blood samples, and were going to investigate possible causes." Klee looked to Gish. "He thinks that it might be due to environmental factors."

Without looking up from the game, Gish said "Central China is not exactly the healthiest place to live."

Jon went through the report on her health in a little more depth. Yeah, there were toxicity problems, and not surprisingly even some radiation exposure. But further testing was needed before all the damage to her DNA could be accounted for. "Well, they should have the rest of the workup done in a few days. There's nothing here that indicates she's in any kind of danger. She's fit for space travel."

Gish looked up from the game for a moment. "I know, but it concerns me."

Jon smiled. "Don't worry. She'll be fine. There's a good automated medical system on the da Vinci, and the medic on Titan Prime is first-rate."

Gish said nothing, returned his attention to the game. It was clear that he was having difficulty keeping up with the girl. Jon watched the two of them for a moment, then said as

he left the cafeteria, “See you at the airport.”

Karen Trudeau was the head of the USSA Liaison Office. She was the person who made sure that lines of communication were kept open and smooth with the Japanese, the Israelis, and the European Alliance on all matters in space. It was vital that the space faring nations shared information, technology, and even occasionally resources, in order to minimize the dangers presented by the exploitation and colonization of the planets.

And now she wanted to know what was going on out on Titan. Jon had reviewed her message, could see that she was aware that something was up, but didn't have any idea what it was.

Key people in the other nations would have to be told eventually. But Jon wanted to postpone that at least long enough to reach some preliminary conclusions about what the artifact was. Jon checked with Magurshak and Jen Grant, the NSA Chief. They all agreed that it was better to not tell Trudeau about the artifact just yet, giving her the necessary room to deny in the future that she had withheld information from her counterparts.

Jon manipulated the back of his hand, started the recording equipment. “Hi Karen. Thanks for checking in after your arrival on Mars. I hope that your visit there goes well. Give my regards to Ushugi, tell him that I hope to see him and the progress they're making soon.

“About your query; we've discovered an anomalous gel pocket on Titan. Like nothing anyone has seen, or theorized. So the research boys want to get a good look at it, and I'm going along to see if it presents any difficulties for future mining operations. Plus, it'll give me a little face time with the Titan Prime staff. It's been more than two years since I've been out there.

“Don't spread the news of this too far, since we're not yet sure what it is we're dealing with, and we don't want to cause any unnecessary alarm about the availability of gel. I don't see how it will present any major difficulties, but we want to play it safe. If anyone asks, you can tell them that we'll pass along all the information we have as soon as possible.

“Let me know if you have other questions. Take care, and I'll talk with you soon.”

Jon shut off the recorder, played back the message. It said enough, and was close enough to the actual truth that his conscience could live with it. Once Karen did know what the situation really was, she'd understand the need to be discreet.

He turned his attention to other matters, both routine communications and items related to their departure for Titan. As long as he stayed focused, there was only the work. But his attention was fragile, kept going back to the vague impressions of the night before. Eventually, a phrase emerged in his memory:

“The blue flower that burns.”

It didn't make any sense. But it wouldn't go away. Rather than trying to fight it, to force it out of his mind, he decided to explore it. Shutting off the lights, disconnecting from

the distractions of the data stream, he relaxed and tried to concentrate not on the words, nor their meaning, but just the context of them, hoping to elicit something else from his subconscious. The evening at home with his family had been relaxing and enjoyable. A nice dinner, good conversation, playing with the kids. He retired early, he and Judith snuggling a bit, drowsing in one another's arms.

As he allowed his mind to float back through the evening, he remembered that during some point in the night, she started talking, coherently, like she was narrating one of her lucid dreams for him as she dreamt it. As he woke and came to consciousness she was talking about being in a desert valley, looking for water. There was nothing alive for miles, just a great waste of endless sand and gravel, with occasional bones and husks of trees, bleached white by the glare of a brutal sun. Looking for shade, she walked to where tall hills met the floor of the valley, hoping for a cave or a crevice of rock that would afford some relief. At last she found a sheltering overhang of rock, and coming upon it discovered an almost dried-up mud hole and a very small puddle of water.

Concentrating, he tried to remember exactly what she said next, because it seemed important. At last, he heard the words, clearly this time, just as she had spoken them. There was excitement, almost a sense of revelation in her voice. "There's a plant ... forcing its way out of a crack in the mud ... I can watch it grow. A bud is opening ... the blue flower that burns!"

He asked her what she meant by it, forgetting that she was in the throes of a dream, and only succeeded in waking her. Bleary in that early hour, she remembered almost nothing of the dream, and they both drifted back asleep.

He pondered the memory for a few moments, trying to tie it to the other sensations he had earlier in the morning. That odd sense of being in a golden light. The electric tingle of metal under the tongue. The feeling that there was something moving just at the edge of his peripheral vision. He couldn't place the origin, couldn't relate it to the dream that Judith had. It was probably nothing, just his subconscious acting up. A small rebellion at having to work when he had promised himself a vacation. Just to be sure, he pulled up the file of his vital signs, which were automatically monitored and recorded by his personal computer. It wasn't a comprehensive medical report, but the most critical stats were there. No significant deviation from his baseline blood pressure, heart rate, temperature, or blood chemistry. Nothing to suggest that he was experiencing any kind of illness which might account for the earlier sensation. He decided that he didn't need to see a medic before the trip. It would pass.

Jon didn't like airports. Essentially, they were all 20th-century holdovers no matter how much they had been refurbished and modernized. It just didn't make sense to devote significant resources to creating an alternative, when they still met the same fundamental purpose. Certainly, the world population decline had meant that there was no pressing need for larger facilities. In fact, the existing airports became generalized transportation hubs, some of their space converted to use for the growing mag-lev rail net, and to meeting the

needs of aerospace transport.

The Toronto airport was no different. He went to the aero terminal, found most of the team waiting there. Ng was sitting quietly in a corner, wearing sunglasses, slouch hat pulled down to hide from the small crowd of people. Jackie Gates was looking out the bank of windows, though Jon realized that she was deeply engaged in conversation with some unseen party. Not too far away, Arthur Bailey also looked out the window, but he seemed to be actually looking out the window at the aero. Klee was there, and waved slightly when he saw Jon. Jon went over to him.

“Where’s Gish and the girl?”

“Off exploring the airport. Seems she’s never been in one before. From what he’s been able to learn, she came over from Asia on a surface ship, as a stowaway.”

Jon nodded, unsurprised. “How’re you doing?”

Klee considered the question. “I am somewhat happy to say that I’m excited. I’ve never been up before, let alone on an extended trip. No reason to.”

Jon smiled. “I think you’ll find that it is a little different from what you may think. Being on a spaceship, even a large one such as the da Vinci, for eight days, gets a little tedious.”

Klee laughed. “I’m quite sure that I’ll have much to do, just working with Ling. The child is brilliant, but she has a lot to learn. It seems she has had very little formal education, which makes her survival and immigration all the more remarkable.”

Gish walked up and stood beside Jon, holding the hand of the girl. He had evidently heard the last part of the conversation. “I took the liberty of having Seth prepare some general educational programs for her.”

When she heard the name, Ling looked up and smiled. Letting go of Gish’s hand, she petted the holo projector she held tightly to her side, and said, “Seth.”

The three men chuckled. Gish squatted down beside her. “Let’s leave Seth in his box for a little while. Soon we’ll have to get on the aero. Remember what I told you about the aero?”

The girl nodded, started to say something to Gish, but then glanced up at Jon. Taking the hint, Jon said, “Well, I’ll chat with you later.”

He went over and stood next to Bailey, looking out at the transport. It didn’t look that different from the standard Superjet, though the engines were significantly larger, and tucked closer to the wedge-shaped fuselage. At present the wings were almost straight out from the body, in the take off position.

“So, what does this tell you about our culture?”

The anthropologist smiled. “Quite a lot, if you really want to know.”

“Um, maybe later.” Jon looked at him closely. “So, how are you doing?”

Furrowing his brow a little, Bailey nodded. “Still a little stunned. You really sandbagged me.”

Before Jon could respond, the other man held up a hand. “Oh, that’s ok. Fair’s fair. I get what I want, and this is an amazing opportunity.”

“All right. But let’s not discuss it any further right now. This is a little too public. I

just wanted to make sure how you were doing.”

Bailey smiled. “Fine. Quite an adventure.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” said Jackie Gates, having finished her conversation and come over to join the two men. She held out a hand to Bailey. “Good to meet you in person.”

Bailey took her hand, held it for perhaps a moment longer than she expected. “Likewise. Never thought I’d meet you. For someone like me who studies Industrial Archeology, meeting one of the Gates heirs is a rare opportunity.”

She looked a little amused. “I thought your area of study was the mechanized age.”

“Oh, well, it is, but of course I am familiar with later eras, too.” He stammered a bit. “Sorry, I guess you hear too much about your family.”

“Relax, I’m used to it. I never knew my grandparents. My father tells stories from the pre-flu years, but nothing that isn’t pretty well covered in the histories of the period.” She shrugged. “Sorry, I guess I’ll never be much help to the historians. Not about them, anyway. But if you want to know about the development of the semifluid CPU, I’m the one to talk with.”

“Well, like you say, it’s outside of my area of expertise. But I think it is a fascinating story, and a reflection of the cultural forces at work in our own time.”

“Really? And here I thought we were making the discoveries, and all the time it was cultural forces.” She smiled to show that she was just teasing the anthropologist.

A little unsure, Bailey just sort of smiled. He was saved by the sound of Seth’s voice. The expert manifested beside Jon, said, “Magurshak will be here momentarily. He’d like to meet briefly with the team before you board the aero. I suggested that for privacy’s sake a small meeting room just down the hall might make the most sense.”

“Well, then’s let’s go.” Jon said, turning to check on Klee, Gish and Ling. They were also up and starting to move. Glancing over at Ng, he saw that even the artist had roused himself in response to Seth’s request.

Magurshak was already waiting for them in the meeting room. When everyone was inside, he touched a small device before him on a table, and Jon felt the static of a security screen. He saw Ng cringe. Even without drugs, the artist’s cyberware was much more sensitive than most people’s.

Magurshak looked around at all of them. “I don’t really have anything to tell you that you don’t already know, about the importance of this mission, the possible ramifications that your investigation could have. But I wanted to come and personally wish you the best of luck. I hope you won’t need it, but it doesn’t hurt.”

Gish translated for the young girl huddled beside him.

The security screen went down, and Magurshak shook each person’s hand as they left the room. When he shook Jon’s hand, Jon felt an encoded file transfer through the palmkeys. “Just in case.” Magurshak whispered.

Curious, as he walked back down the corridor to their gate, Jon pulled up the file. But it wouldn’t open. It was time locked, and wouldn’t open until after they were scheduled to reach Titan Prime.

When he got to the gate, the aero was loading. He filed onto the transport with the

others. Inside, the craft was low and wide, windowless. He found his seat, climbed into it, and secured the harness. When he rested his hands on either of the small semi-sphere palmkey feeds at the end of the armrests, he was instantly connected to the aero system. Then, turning his head, he was able to look all around the outside of the craft, as though the walls had gone transparent. The feeds were necessary to connect to the system, since it was dangerous to broadcast data inside the ship while it was moving. The advantage was that for the duration of the 90 minute flight, Jon would be able to tap into the full stream that the pilots had available, and see everything about the status of the flight, if he wanted to.

Lifting his hand from the feed, he disabled the telepresence, and looked over to where Ling was. She was in her child's seat, Klee and Gish on either side of her. The projector was on and active in her lap, and had her full attention.

"Prepare for departure." It was announced over loudspeakers. Jon reconnected to the aero system, just to follow the progress of the flight. In passing, he noticed the emergency-response file download into his pc. If triggered by the crew or the craft's expert, the safety protocols would activate and help guide him to safety. It would be there automatically if needed, and would wipe itself at the end of the journey if not.

The aero taxied from the terminal to one of the runways, and then raced down it, building speed. Once airborne, the thrust of the massive engines didn't slacken, however. Rather, after clearing away from the city below, the thrust increased, pushing him deeper into the protective support of his seat. Speed increased as the wings swung into their hypersonic position, and the aero continued the slow climb out of the Earth's gravity well, spiraling upward.

Wright Station was one of the older stations, and its age showed in its design. The basic large wheel structure, necessary when centrifugal force simulated gravity, was still evident, though it had been substantially altered. Now, additional spokes radiated out from the central hub, though not all in one clean plane. And from these spokes arced new sections, sometimes joining two or more spokes, sometimes attaching to the main wheel. The additions, while no doubt soundly engineered, looked haphazard, almost random. The overall impression one felt when looking at it wasn't so much that it was being 'built,' but rather that it was growing by fits and starts. The station hung there as they approached, motionless. Without any standard by which to measure, the human eye couldn't gauge the size of the thing, though Jon knew that it was more than 500 meters wide across the main axis. The aero slowly coasted toward a large box well outside the sweep of the wheel, connected to the wheel by an extension of one of the major spokes. This was the dock, and it was outside the AG field.

Apparent Gravity was the third major application of the theories set forth in Hawking's Conundrum, the great opus of Stephen Hawking which was not published until after his death in the earlier part of the century. He hadn't released the work because evidently even he couldn't really believe that it made any sense. It upset Einstein's

applecart, knocked quantum mechanics on its ear, and in no way fit neatly with any of the prevailing models that experimental physicists relied upon. It was, essentially, both too simple and too complex. But it did account for all the established data, including much of the stuff that seemed valid but didn't fit inside the previous paradigm. Upon Hawking's death and the subsequent publication, a huge scientific debate ensued. In the end it won out because almost all of the old guard physicists, all the ones committed to the things they learned and tested and hypothesized in the late 20th century, died from the flu. Only the Young Turks survived, and they were willing to embrace the potential of Hawking's work. Using his theories, they learned that the structure of space itself could be manipulated.

The first major application led to practical, safe, and efficient fusion power. Rather than forcing high-energy particles together, the forces keeping them apart were just removed. Or, more accurately, the manifestation of space between them was inverted. It took very little energy, was easy to control, but only worked in a very localized fashion.

The second major application was the projected energy matrix which made things like the semifluid CPU possible. With a lot of work, and a fair amount of energy, it was possible to cause a small piece of space to achieve a harmonic, then control and tune that harmonic. Tholin gel was easy to manipulate in this way, and had a natural resonance which made it ideal for very fine control. The problem was that this sort of spatial control required a relatively stable inertial field. Scientists still weren't entirely sure why this was, but it was demonstrably true. Whenever you tried to move such a matrix, it collapsed. Hence, gel-based computers were useless for spaceflight, with the need for constant accelerations and course changes.

Apparent Gravity was the third and most recent application. This was a more generalized effect than either of the two earlier applications, and refined control of the AG field was still elusive. But if you had sufficient power, it was relatively easy to convince a small part of the universe that a gravity field existed, whether or not there was sufficient matter around to create such a field. Turn on a generator, and it became the center of the gravity field, with everything inside the field falling toward it. Like the second application, this effect required a relatively stable inertial field, and would collapse if the generator were accelerated. But a space station in stable orbit provided a platform that was almost ideal for using an AG generator, the field being switched off for periodic orbital maintenance. Since you didn't want incoming ships to suddenly enter a gravity field, the docking bays were always set up outside the range of the AG generator.

As they pulled up to the docking bay, Jon could see parts of two interplanetary ships extending past the far side of the dock. Presumably one was the da Vinci, but he couldn't tell anything about either ship from his vantage point. The aero came into contact with the external cradle, and was made secure. A transfer umbilical snaked out and attached to the hatch, establishing a pressurized passageway into the docking facility. Jon let go of the palmkey feed, and looked over at where Klee and Gish were with Ling. She looked to be asleep, held in place by the seat harness, her hair floating around her in the weightless environment. As passengers disembarked the aero, the two men got Ling out of her harness. She woke, startled and confused by the lack of gravity. Jon expected her to cry out, but she

didn't make a sound, just tried to push away from the two men with her, to gain some footing so she could run and hide. Gish, familiar with the experience of weightlessness, was easily able to keep hold of her and prevent her from slipping away. He held gently onto her, soothing her with a steady stream of words spoken too low for Jon to make out, a hand lightly brushing her hair. After a moment she calmed down, stopped trying to flee. Klee took the holo projector and their carry-on bags, Gish cradled the girl, and they exited the ship. Jon gathered up his things, and followed.

The passageway got them safely inside the dock, where they had seats just like the ones they left on the ship. Once everyone was strapped in and secure, the floor started moving toward the station. As they crossed the threshold of the AG field, Jon felt his normal weight return. The floor descended a full additional level, lowering them into the station transfer terminal. Jon felt the normal flow of data around him as his system automatically connected and downloaded all the relevant information about the station.

Jon went over to where Gish and Klee were helping Ling get out of her seat. "Everyone OK?"

With the girl holding his hand, hiding slightly behind him, Gish said, "We're fine. She was just a little disoriented when she woke. She'll be OK."

Klee looked a little green. "I'm happy to have gravity again, I must admit. That half hour of weightlessness was more than I really wanted."

"Well, then I'd recommend against eating anything the last hour or so before we're to board the da Vinci. With the time it'll take to get secured in the ship, then have it get clearance to disconnect from the station and depart, you'll have a good couple of hours of weightlessness. And it might be a good idea to stop in at the medic's and get something to settle your system."

"I've already thought of that." His eyes changed focus for a moment, and he said "I see there's a medic station just around the way."

Gish said, "Go ahead. We'll wait. I think Ling would like to look outside for a bit."

She was holding his hand, peering over at the windows along one wall. He let go of her hand, nodded. Tentatively, she took a few steps toward the windows, glanced at him again.

"Go on, it's OK." Gish looked at Jon. "I'd better go with her. She's a bit nervous with all these people, I think."

Jon nodded as the man moved off, joined the girl. Together they went over to the windows, and were looking out, Gish pointing toward the Earth as Jon watched.

"Seth?"

There was a noticeable delay of about a second before the expert appeared. "Yes Jon?"

"Just checking in. Everything going OK with you there?"

"No problems, nothing to report."

"Good. I'm going to explore the station a bit, see what's new since the last time I was here. Contact me if anything comes up."

"Of course." He vanished.

The other members of the team had likewise disappeared. Only Gish and the girl were still in the terminal. No surprise, they had about three and a half hours before they needed to report to the ship, and there were a lot of nooks and crannies to this place worth looking into. With a last look at the rumpled scientist and his ward, Jon went wandering.

Some things had changed since he had last been to this station. A couple new spokes had been added, and arcing corridors branched here and there, adding to the real estate of the place. Additional living quarters for the increasing crew which manned the station, met the needs of the ships coming and going. A new hotel, with a level that went beyond the AG field, to create a micrograv playground for guests. But this wasn't a resort station, and the amenities were fairly limited.

About an hour into his exploration, he came across Jackie Gates. Even with her map program running, she had managed to get turned around. Jon was sympathetic, since the asymmetrical growth of the station had created a maze effect. He'd almost taken a wrong turn more than once.

"I've been here a number of times. What are you looking for?" He asked.

"The Atrium. Thought I'd get some decent food before getting stuck in a tin can for eight days."

"Um, Jackie, you're..."

"Yeah, I know. You know what I mean."

He smiled. "OK, come with me. I had the same idea."

As soon as the elevator opened onto the corridor, they could hear it. Off in the distance, reflected and changed by the long corridor, echoing and layering upon itself, it was nonetheless identifiable: live choral music. Gates was surprised, looked to Jon for an explanation.

"Just wait."

The corridor arced, the floor slowly dropping away, coming to an opening. As they got closer, the sound of the voices cleared, became purer. And when they stepped out onto the balcony, the full effect of the singing washed over them. Bright and powerful, clean and crisp and full, joyousness filling the space before them as they moved toward it.

With a voice of singing declare ye this and let it be heard

Alleluia

declare ye this and let it be heard, alleluia

utter it even unto the ends of the Earth . . .

They were on a balcony, two-thirds of the way to the top of a huge open wedge. It started down at the central core, and expanded all the way up 20 levels. Above, and on the sides, was only the specialized glass fabric used in space. Across the chasm were balconies for rooms, a couple of pubs, restaurants, and small secluded spaces looking out on the

opening. This was the commons, the place where people cooped up for too long in their cramped quarters on board ships and in the station could come and feel less confined.

This wasn't an atrium like one would find in the glitzy offices and hotels of the last great gilded age at the beginning of the century. There was no polished marble, no gold glinting ostentatiously. There were plants, lots of plants, helping to add a natural scent to the recycled air. And here and there streamers and decorations tumbled down from the functional metal railings on the balconies, fluttering in an occasional breeze.

Then there was the music, the sound of human voices cascading over and around everything, tripping down the open corridors, playing off the walls.

Where shall I be when the last trumpet sounds?  
Where shall I be when it sounds so loud?  
When it sounds so loud that it wakes up the dead?  
Where shall I be when it sounds?

Gates looked around, "where?"

Jon pointed down about halfway, at a large balcony on their side. "There."

There was a knot of perhaps 15 people, all facing one another around a bunch of tables shoved together. They finished their song, and clapping was heard throughout the atrium.

Jon smiled at Gates, explained. "Spacers. Crew off those two ships docked outside. Choral music has become something of a tradition the last few years, and each ship usually can field a fairly good ensemble of at least a half-dozen singers."

"Huh. I had no idea. Makes sense, I suppose. They don't have to have instruments that way."

"The expert system on any ship can provide all the instrumental backup that may be needed." Another song started, this time with more voices. "C'mon, let's go on down there."

Taking a nearby open-air elevator, they went down to the level of the balcony. It was part of a restaurant, and with the vocal group as an attraction, the place was crowded. Jon and Jackie found an empty table on the outside of the crowd, but still near the balcony. They downloaded the menu, uploaded their selections, and sat back to enjoy the music.

"Is it always like this?" she asked.

"No, but with two ships in dock, it was a pretty good bet."

Jon looked over at the knot of people singing. Yeah, two crews, and a friendly bit of competition going on. One group would sing a piece, followed by the other. Occasionally, they'd join together to do a standard both groups knew, and even the informal audience around them would chime in.

Gates also looked at the singers. "Shouldn't at least our crew be back getting ready to depart? I mean, we're scheduled to leave in just a couple of hours."

"You haven't done a lot of space travel, have you?"

"Not really. I hate it. Been to the Moon several times, but that's it."

## Communion of Dreams

James T. Downey

Page 47

“Well, standard procedure when a ship docks is to prepare it for the next trip, first thing. Crew doesn’t leave the ship until it is ready to go. That way, if there’s ever any kind of an emergency, the ship can leave immediately.”

She nodded. It made sense.

Sumer is icumen in, lhude sing cuccu,  
Groweth sed and bloweth med, and springth the wde nu.  
Sing cuccu!  
Awe bleteth after lomb, lhouth after calve cu,  
Bulloc sterteth, bucke verteth, murie sing cuccu.  
Cuccu, cuccu,  
Wel singes thu cuccu, ne swik thu naver nu

He and Gates split up after enjoying a long dinner. Or, rather, she left him to go explore a bit more on her own. He left the restaurant, found a secluded bench near the bottom of the atrium, and just sat, enjoying the music and the view. Even after the music stopped, he stayed there for a long while.

“Seth?”

“Yes Jon?” The expert appeared.

“Time to go. Roust everyone out of whatever they’re doing, have them head to the dock.”

“Understood.”

“Oh, and keep close track of Gates. She’s gotten turned around a couple of times already.”

Seth smiled slightly. “I’ll be happy to. Anything else?”

“Not on this end. How about you?”

“I was going to contact you once you were settled on the da Vinci, but we can go over these things now. I’ll upload the latest postings, but there’s nothing there which needs your immediate attention. Also, I’ve established a schedule with the ship’s expert for routine communications.”

“Good.” Jon stood, prepared to leave. But Seth was still there. “Something more?”

“Well, as you know, we won’t be able to communicate in real-time for very long once the ship departs. And I just wanted to wish you well on the mission. Be sure to take care of yourself, and me, out there.”

“Seth, you almost sound . . . anxious.” While experts were prepared to understand and respond to human emotion, the consensus was that they were incapable of emotion themselves.

“Not exactly. But I find this thin-film machine . . . limiting.”

It was Jon’s turn to smile. “I’ll take care of us both, promise.”

The image of Seth lingered a moment, then vanished. Jon looked up into the atrium one last time, and made for the dock.