

## Chapter Seven

Saturn filled the image feed, the broad bands of brilliant color broken only by the shadow of the rings. The rings themselves weren't really noticeable, since the ship was so close to Titan, and therefore almost part of the ring system. But there was the shadow, arcing across the southern hemisphere of the planet, giving evidence of what the eye could not see.

Titan itself was a substantial piece of the feed, but was dwarfed by the yellow-orange face of Saturn. Jon touched the back of his hand, and the image tightened on the ruddy moon. Titan zoomed forward, its dusky rouge face broken here and there by lighter patches of red. Floating above the moon, on the far side from Saturn (always on the far side from Saturn), was the dull silver dot of Titan Prime.

Jon upped the amplification again, centered on Titan Prime. The dot shifted to being a disc, then to being a small sphere. There wasn't much to see, to be truthful, but the sight always impressed him, because of what it meant. It was just that blob of silver-grey, the reflected light of a thick layer of ring material and ice collected to provide the station with protection. In Earth orbit, you had to worry about the occasional micro-meteor impact. Here, this close to the rings of Saturn, there was a steady rain of small to medium-sized junk crashing into the station. Until they had the protective shield in place, it was a constant struggle to vaporize the junk with point-defense lasers. Now the lasers were mostly just needed to protect the docking bay and the ships coming and going.

The dock was visible, and its size gave a clue as to the size of the station. Well over a kilometer in diameter, the station was huge. Jon knew that the station was still almost half empty, with plenty of room for growth and supplies. There were whole vast caverns waiting to be converted into storage space, living space, or mechanical plant and equipment. Plenty of room for him and his team, the other team on the Planck, and all their equipment, a dozen times over.

As he watched, a second, smaller disc emerged from behind the station. The Advanced Survey Array. Like Titan Prime, the ASA was protected by a thick layer of dirt and ice about three-quarters the way around the sphere that contained it. The unprotected side was where all the scientific equipment of the array gathered data on the universe.

As soon as they descended through the shell of the station, and crossed the threshold of the AG field, Jon noted the automatic uploading of station reference files by his pc. More importantly, Susan Jacobs was standing there, waiting to meet them.

She was a tall woman, solidly built. Her short, blonde hair neatly framed her face, her smile comfortable and honest. She was in her mid thirties, and had been in charge of station operation for almost three years. Next to her was the smokey image of her expert, a tall, thin man with a lean, hard face. He was the oldest-appearing expert that Jon knew. His hair was the kind of white that you can only get when someone has had jet-black hair in his

youth. It stood up, not wildly, but full of a life of its own.

His name was Salim, and he addressed the group, “Be careful as you get out of your seats: we’re under full gravity here, and your body is used to less than half of that from being aboard ship. It will take some time to make the adjustment.”

Jon pulled himself standing. Yeah, he felt heavy, but it was a familiar, comforting sensation. Susan Jacobs came over to him, extended a hand. “Good to see you, Jon.”

“Likewise.” He nodded to her expert, “Hello, Salim.”

The expert smiled a thin smile. “Greetings, Mr. Thompson. Welcome back.”

Jacobs turned to face the others. “My expert will escort each of you to your quarters. Please feel free to ask him for any assistance you need while you’re here. Your things will be delivered to your room as soon as they can be unloaded.”

Jon looked around to everyone. They were all there, except Commander Navarr, who would disembark with his troops. “Before we break up, let’s schedule a meeting for tomorrow morning, say nine o’clock. I’m going to shuttle down to the surface this afternoon to meet with Sidwell and to examine the scene, but I should be back this evening, if you need me.”

“You want any of us to come down with you?” asked Arthur Bailey.

“No, thanks. I told Sidwell I’d come down by myself. It’ll be easier if we have his full cooperation and assistance, and I want to make sure he’s happy with the arrangements.”

Bailey nodded, but looked a little disappointed. He and the rest of the team found their way out of the room, each following their own Salim. Ling held tightly to Gish’s hand, eyes wide as she took in the new surroundings. She gave Jon a small smile as she left the room.

When the others had all left, Jon went with Susan and Salim to Susan’s office. It was plain, functional, and had a lived-in quality. Jon settled into a comfortable chair facing a couch. Both Susan and Salim sat on the couch. Salim glanced at the door for a moment, and Jon felt the security screen around the office intensify.

“So, how’re things here?”

Susan leaned a little forward. “So far, so good. There are rumors going around about what’s been found down on Titan, but I think we’ve managed to finesse that . . . people think it’s some sort of mother lode of gel.”

“That works,” said Jon.

“We can play upon this; the arrival of your two teams are additional research into this discovery.”

“Close enough to the truth to keep it simple.”

“And with a little judicious leaking, we can keep people thinking that we don’t want them to know about Sidwell’s good fortune.”

“OK, what else?”

“Well, like I indicated in a post earlier, Sidwell has stopped talking to me. I take it you’ve heard from him?”

“Yeah. He sent me a message saying that I should meet with him as soon as I got here.” Jon paused, remembered a dream he had a couple of days previously. “So, I’ll drop

down and see what he has to say.”

“There’s a shuttle with a change of monitors going down in a few hours.” She paused, looked to the serene figure of Salim sitting on the other end of the couch. “Jon’s things to his quarters yet?”

The expert appeared to check a computer file the way any normal person would, even going so far as to touch the back of one hand with another. “Yes, and Seth has been delivered to his temporary home, beside me. Preliminary indications are that he appears to have come through the transit just fine. We should have him set up and operational in a couple of hours.”

“Great. Well, then I think I’ll go get unpacked.” He stood, as did Susan and Salim. “I’ll check in with you before I head down to Titan.”

“I’ll make sure that the rest of your equipment and supplies get to where they need to be.” She reached out a hand to Jon. “It is good to see you again.”

Jon shook her hand. “Likewise.”

Salim, hands held together at his waist, asked, “Shall I show you to your quarters?”

“Sounds good.”

The room was large, comfortable, and could easily have been in a hotel just about anywhere, except for the notable lack of windows. En suite bathroom facilities. A writing desk, a couple of comfortable chairs, a large bed.

“Anything you need?” asked Salim.

“No, I don’t think so. Give me an hour or so to unpack and relax some. Then come back and we’ll go find Commander Navarr.”

“As you wish.” The expert disappeared.

Jon left his bags sitting on the floor beside the bed. He stepped past them, and flopped onto the bed. The normal gravity of the station had made him feel tired, his arms and legs heavy. He knew it’d pass in a few days, but for now it was a nuisance. Just as he started to drift off to sleep, there came a knock at the door, loud and powerful. A moment later, he heard a voice that matched.

“Well, hello my friend Jon, welcome to Titan Prime!” It was, of course, Gregor Soukup.

Jon sat up on the bed, not really sorry to have his nap delayed. He got off the bed, went over to the door and opened it for the engineer and held out his hand.

“Hello, Gregor.”

Gregor shook Jon’s hand vigorously. “Welcome! You had a good trip?”

“Yeah.” Jon gestured to the chairs. “Have a seat.”

They sat. “So, how is the Hawking?”

Soukup nodded. “Very good. She is two days out from here, under her own drive.”

“No problems?”

“Nothing but minor things. Hardly worth my trouble, trying to keep in touch.” He grinned. “The captain, she thinks I am a pest. Like an old man, worried about nothing.”

“How far is she going this time?”

“Out to some promising comets in the Kuiper belt, well past Pluto. We thought it a good test.”

“Well, good luck.” Jon looked at the engineer, who was glowing with pride. “I’m almost sorry I asked you to stay behind.”

“Not to worry.” He glanced around with a conspiratorial grin, then touched the back of one hand. Jon felt the security shield of the room darken, become opaque. “I went down and looked at your alien friend. Interesting!”

“No kidding. Interesting enough that it’s got us not sure what to do next.”

“But you have more equipment coming, more scientists. We will find out what it is.”

Jon laughed. “I wish I had your certainty.”

Soukup returned the laugh with one of his own. “I learned long ago to be certain. At least when around others. It gives them confidence in you. This is a machine. An alien machine, yes, but still, a machine. So it is an engineering problem. We will solve it.”

“I see what you mean about being certain. You could almost make me believe that.”

“Trust Gregor. Always trust Gregor.” Soukup laughed again, loud and long. “Now, you were trying to take a nap before I came in. I leave you to go back to it.”

“Thanks for coming by. Join me and my team for a meeting tomorrow, eh? Nine o’clock.”

“I will be there.”

Navarr was standing several paces inside a large hangar adjacent to the docking facilities for the station, seeing to the unloading and preparation of the military equipment which was aboard the da Vinci.

“Big place, huh?”

“More than I expected.” Navarr looked around. “At least I know where we’ll have room for a game of football.”

Salim smiled. “I believe you’ll find the nets over in that corner, Commander.”

Navarr grinned. “So, what brings you by?”

“Haven’t had a chance to chat with you about your plans yet, now that we’re here.”

“Excuse me, Salim,” said Navarr, as he touched the control of a device sticking out the top of one of his thigh pockets. Jon felt a harsh buzz feed through his cyberware as the expert vanished. Jon shook his head as though to clear it, and Navarr said, “Sorry, here let me turn this down a little.”

The buzz dropped off significantly, but was still there. Navarr looked at Jon, said “You’ll get used to it in a moment.”

“Man, that’s intense,” said Jon. Navarr was right, it was fading into the background, but that left him better able to identify another sensation: being cut off. Not that the datastream was just absent. It was actively suppressed. Even his pc wasn’t working.

“Field procedures for security,” said Navarr as he shrugged. “This hangar isn’t

equipped with a security field, so that it can be constantly monitored. We want to talk about the mission here, I have to use this. It won't let anything through."

Jon glanced at the pocket holding the device. "Can we use that anywhere, even in an environment suit? I mean, it won't disrupt a suit's internal processing, will it?"

"Not a military suit, anyway. They're fiber. What did you have . . ." Then the realization hit Navarr. "Got it. If this can block out all our EM radiation, maybe it'll do the same with the artifact. Give us a shield from being manipulated by the thing."

"If that's what it's doing."

"Worth trying," nodded Navarr. "So, you wanted to know what my plans were, right? I'm going to send an eight-man team down to Sidwell's compound, to establish a temporary base there. My lieutenant will see to that, and will stay there until we establish that there are no threats to being in contact with the artifact."

"OK, but wait until I have a chance to clear the way with Sidwell."

"As you wish. My people won't be excited about having to leave the comforts of the station and live in a field shelter, anyway. If I put that off a day or two, they won't mind at all."

"They'll have a fusion weapon with them?"

"Check. It'll be kept secure in the shelter. The shelter will be close enough to the artifact that it won't matter, if the device is needed."

"OK, good." Jon pushed the low buzzing from his mind, thought. "Anything else we need to talk about?"

Navarr shook his head, reached down and shut off the suppressor. "Nope."

Jon felt the buzz disappear instantly, and had a moment of vertigo as his cyberware sought connections, his pc came back online. Salim was again standing with them, completely unperturbed. The expert looked to Jon. "Ready to continue on to your quarters, sir?"

Jon glanced at Navarr. "Where are you going to be staying?"

"There's barracks near here. We'll be there."

"You can put your shirt back on," she said.

Jon grabbed the garment from the back of a nearby chair, looking at the woman. She was new to the Titan Prime staff, and this was the first time he had met her. Dr. Klavdiya Taupiczak, called "Tops" by everyone on the station. Eastern European heritage, dark skinned with intensely black hair, cropped close. Trim, athletic figure beneath her lab smock. Age about 30 - 35, he guessed. Her movements as she worked with her scanners were precise, comfortable from long familiarity. She looked up at him, and there was a friendly, professional smile on her face.

"Well, I don't see any major problems. The data from your pc and my equipment coincides perfectly. You're healthy. Don't worry about the dreams."

"But I've never experienced anything like this before."

She looked at him, dark eyes searching. "It's no big deal. It just happens sometimes

out here. You know that's why I'm here, to investigate how serious a problem such phantoms are."

Jon nodded. It was indeed why she was on Titan Prime. He himself had approved the study that brought her to the station. There had been occasional reports of crew and staff experiencing strange dreams, unusual and unexplained sights, sounds and sometimes even smells. There'd be a few such phenomena reported, then it'd be months before anything happened again. Mostly it came from people during transit, though there were always rumors of the prospectors on Titan having such hallucinations more often than they'd admit. The USSA decided that it warranted some serious research, so arranged for a qualified medical doctor and psychiatrist to be added to the Titan Prime staff. If there was something about the confinement of working in space that triggered such responses in susceptible people, they needed to know.

"Still, this is the first time that it's happened to me. And with the discovery of the artifact, I wanted to make sure that there wasn't something I needed to be worried about."

"I don't think so. I have had some increase in the number of incidents reported, but that might be just a fluke. So, don't let it concern you."

He nodded. "You have any thoughts on our discovery down below?"

"Not really." She considered him for a moment. "How well do you know Sidwell?"

"Fairly. Met him a couple of times. Quite a character."

"Well," she said, hesitating. "He's acting a little different."

"Different, how?"

She chewed her lip a little. "Understand, I've been his doctor, and have to respect his privacy."

"Yes, but . . . well, let's just say that I have reasons to be concerned about anyone who has been in contact with the artifact. If there's something different about Sidwell that you've noticed, it might be significant."

"It's not like that, exactly. Every test I could run on him, both physical and psychological, came up completely within his normal range. And I had done a comprehensive battery of tests just four months ago, when I first got here, so I had good data to work with."

"What, then?"

"He just seems . . . older," she said. "Oh, no sign of senility or anything like that. But the look in his eyes is different."

Jon considered. "Is it like anything that you've seen with anyone else who has been in contact with the artifact?"

"No."

"Ok. But do me a favor, and go back over all the test data. And not just for him, but for the others. I'll have my expert help you, once he's secured and operational again."

"It'd help if I knew what I was looking for."

After a moment Jon nodded, and said, "You're right. Because of other things that we've noticed regarding the artifact, and the reports that we have had about it from those who have seen it, we're worried that it has some ability to mask itself, to alter the memory

of those who come in contact with it. And that might mean that it has more subtle influence than you've been looking for."

She shook her head. "I doubt it. My psychological testing has covered cognitive and memory functions, along with everything else. My medical scans are comprehensive, down to the cellular level. I have a pretty solid model of each of the sentries who has been in contact with the thing, and I've been thorough in my analysis, knowing full well that this is a situation unlike any we've encountered before. But I'll go over the records again, and add in a couple of additional tests to my routine. That satisfy you?"

"Sure, that'll be fine." Jon smiled. "If you think it would be useful, you're welcome to sit in on any of the discussions that I have with the team I brought with me."

"Thanks, but I doubt that will be necessary, unless there is something that I find worth bringing to them. Besides, I need to do a complete work-up on each member who will be in contact with the artifact, so we have a baseline profile to refer to. Then I'll need to do follow-ups whenever you return from Titan. I'll see plenty of each of you, will have a chance to discuss developments then."

"That's fine. But if you change your mind, the offer stands. OK?"

She smiled just slightly. "OK."

Jon hesitated. "Magurshak contacted you yet about the girl we have with us?"

She looked at him, curious. "Only that she was Gish's ward, sent the baseline physiological stuff in her file. Why?"

"She's . . . an enigma. Send him a message, tell him that I think you need to have the full file. It could be important."

Tops tilted her head slightly, her eyes narrowed. "All right, I will."

"We can discuss it when I get back this evening, once you have had a chance to digest it. I want to see if you come to some of the same conclusions that he has."

Very slowly, she nodded. "Let me know when you're back on the station, and we can get together."

"Hello, Jon."

Jon turned toward the door of his room, found the image of his expert standing there. "Well, hello Seth! How long have you been active?"

"Just a few minutes. Long enough to make sure that everything is working properly, and to download the accumulated data that Salim has been holding for me."

"Everything OK?"

"Fine, thanks. Because Salim was here to handle the reactivation of my matrix, things went much faster than they could have." Seth stretched out his arms, did a partial turn and bow. "Like the new clothes?"

Jon laughed. "Decided to dress for traveling, eh?"

Seth had indeed changed his appearance. Gone was the usual sedate business attire. Now he was wearing brightly colored, though not gaudy, clothes. Seth liked to change his appearance this way for special occasions. Jon looked the expert up and down, said, "Well

remember, we're here on business, not vacation."

Seth smiled broadly. "Not a problem, boss."

"So, feel that you're up to date on everything? Need me to fill in any of the details?"

"I took the liberty of looking through all your posts, and the journal entries you've logged since you left Earth. I believe that things are pretty clear, though I've had to read between the lines in a few places."

"And what do you think?"

There was a prolonged pause, during which time Seth seemed to look down at his hand, opening and closing it a few times, just enjoying the motion. "I would say that you're still operating from a lack of any real data."

Jon nodded agreement. "I told Tops that I'd have you assist her with analysis of her medical data. There might be something there."

"I saw the notes you made about that discussion with your team."

"Did we miss something?"

Seth paused. "No, but there may be further complications. All the rest of the equipment being brought to study the artifact will also be subject to data manipulation, if the artifact is indeed doing that. Correct?"

"Well, yes. But that's why we thought we'd try this trick of using old fashioned photographic film. That should be immune."

Seth nodded. "I agree. But that doesn't change the fundamental problem. The equipment will still be unreliable."

"So we won't know anything more than we do already."

"Essentially. Not unless you do something to counter the effect of the artifact."

"Yeah, I had an idea along those lines earlier. Navarr has a suppression field device that the military uses for security. I thought that we could use it as a shield."

"I'm familiar with that technology. It should work just fine to insulate a human from any such manipulation, but you won't be able to use it with any of the scientific equipment. The suppression field will shut the equipment down."

"Back to square one."

"Not necessarily. There may be another solution."

"Yes?"

"Take me down there."

Jon frowned. "What good would that do?"

"I may be fast enough to counter the manipulation. While we don't know how the artifact is able to manipulate data storage, it has to be doing so using some variety of electromagnetic radiation, setting up a feedback loop so that it can monitor and change the data being stored. But there are real physical limits to how quickly that can be done, given that the artifact is always going to be some distance from the thing it is manipulating. It simply takes time for the EM wave to cross that distance and return. Therefore, it is a sort of cat-and-mouse game: if the artifact is fast enough, it can monitor the data our equipment receives and change it before the equipment realizes it. But if I'm far enough away, I will be faster than the feedback loop, no matter how fast the artifact itself is."

“I think I get what you’re saying . . .”

“Check with Doctor Gish. He’ll confirm it. In fact, I’m surprised he didn’t think of it himself.”

“. . . but I’m still not going to allow it. It’s too risky.”

Seth suppressed a smile. “You’re thinking like a human, Jon. Why should it be risky? If it doesn’t work, even if the artifact can somehow damage me, I can just be shut down and reinitialized here.”

“There’s damage that can be done to you that we wouldn’t be able to repair.”

“True. But it’s still a risk worth taking. It’s a risk you’re going to take, yourself, getting in close proximity to the artifact. And I already have a back-up on Earth, and secure storage media for my accumulated experiences. Even if my matrix were completely destroyed, I could be largely resurrected in a new matrix.”

“But what good would it do us to have you there?”

“Well, if the artifact is manipulating data that way, and we find that I can counteract that manipulation for myself, then I should be able to counteract it for other equipment, so long as I am in close enough proximity to not be subject to the same feedback limitations that we hope to impose on the artifact.”

Jon’s head was swirling. “All right, let me think about this. And I am going to discuss the feasibility of it with Gish. But having just gotten you back online, I don’t want to pack you up and drag you down to the surface of Titan right away. We still need to determine that the artifact is indeed manipulating data, anyway. That’s just supposition for the time being.”

“Correct, though it is a logical theory.”

“So, in the meantime, go help Tops with her medical records.”

“I am already. And I expect to soon have at least a preliminary analysis done of the dream data you had my thin-film duplicate collect.”

“OK, we can discuss it when I’ve finished meeting with Sidwell.”