

Chapter Eight

“Whoa. Is it always that rough?”

The young female pilot nodded, her black face bobbing inside the helmet of her environment suit. “Well, the old man likes his comforts. He’s the only prospector out here who has a gravity generator. It takes some getting used to, coming down through the threshold of it.”

Jon looked up through the windshield of the cockpit. Some fifty meters above them, there was a dance of static lightning at the limit of the field. Tholin, the brownish dust created by the interaction of UV radiation with the moon’s nitrogen-hydrocarbon atmosphere, constantly precipitated out. Where this particulate matter hit the AG field, it caused friction, and static flashes. “Well, thanks for getting us here in one piece.”

“No problem.” She nodded to the other two passengers, the monitoring team, in the seats behind her and Jon. “See you guys in four.”

Jon watched over his shoulder as the two went through a small door, into the airlock. The pilot looked at him. “They’ll just take a moment to cycle through. Now, be careful moving out there. This atmosphere is thick.”

“I’ve been here before.”

“Yeah, but not inside the Sidwell’s AG field. Oh, the rest of Titan’s atmosphere is almost 60 percent thicker than Earth normal. But that’s at one-seventh normal gravity. With his generator, it’s considerably thicker than that. Not as bad as walking in water, but you’ll definitely notice it.”

Jon nodded. A light flashed above the airlock door. Jon slipped between the seats, through the door of the airlock. Locking it, he started the cycle. He felt a crinkling of his environment suit as it compensated for the increasing pressure, then the indicator light turned green and the hatch opened. He looked out into a thick, dull red fog. In the distance a strobe flashed. Sidwell’s compound.

Jon went out the hatch, down a couple of steps to the ground. The two monitors were standing there, waiting for him. “Doing OK there, sir?”

The voice hit him twice: nice and clear inside the suit, on his phone; muffled and shifted to the bass from outside. For anyone used to wearing a suit in the silence of vacuum, it was an odd thing to hear sounds conducted by the thick atmosphere.

“Yeah, fine.” As he cleared the small craft, his pc connected to Sidwell’s datastream broadcast. An overlay appeared before his eyes, pale lines of light outlining buildings in the distance. Nodding to the two monitors, he followed them toward the compound.

“He has his micros keep the path between the landing pad and his buildings free of tholin. But if you decide to go exploring, you’ll need snowshoes.”

“Got it.”

“See the small dome to the left? That’s where the artifact is. The big dome over on the right is his place. The other beyond it is just an equipment shed.”

They walked toward the buildings, the two men in front of Jon looking back

occasionally to check on him. The air was noticeably denser than he was used to on the surface of Titan. And with the almost full gravity, he was breathing hard by the time they approached the first, smaller dome.

Jon touched a control on his suit, linked to Sidwell's expert. "Sidwell? Thompson. I'm here. Where should I meet you?"

There was a brief moment of delay, then Jon heard the crackle of Sidwell's voice. "I'm at my place. C'mon over."

They stopped in front of the smaller dome. It was a standard collapsible structure, meant to give effective temporary protection. Brownish tholin dust hid the original orange, and piled up on the sides of the dome, where it met the ground. Since this was during the moon's brief 'dry' season, the tholin just accumulated. Come the 'wet' season, ethane rain would probably wash the tholin away. The cycle repeated every 16 days, the time it took Titan to orbit Saturn.

"I'm going on over to Sidwell's." Jon said to the two men, who just nodded as they stepped into the airlock. Jon made his way toward the larger dome some sixty meters away. The way was clear, the ground beneath his feet solid and smooth. Even so, he was again breathing hard by the time he made it to the dome. He cursed himself, vowed to remember to exercise more on the trip home.

Darnell Sidwell's 'home' was a large, rigid geodesic. While significantly less mobile than the smaller models, the old man insisted on using it. Jon made his way around to the small airlock, opened the hatch and climbed inside. With a touch to the control panel, he started the cycle. First Titan's atmosphere was sucked out, then a spray of water started from all sides, washing away the tholin, the trace hydrocarbons, and warming the outside of Jon's environment suit. Then breathable air was pumped in. The light turned green, and the inner door clicked open. Jon stepped through onto a metal grating, the last of the water dripping off him. He popped his helmet, took a deep breath of the warm, moist air, and looked around.

It was a large space, with work and living areas intermingled. About halfway around the dome were a couple of benches, near the large equipment airlock. Here there were bench lights on, pieces of equipment in the process of being repaired or cannibalized. Closer, on the left, was a galley, a simple table and a couple of chairs, dishes pushed off to the side to accommodate a pile of papers and books. Real books, and real paper, not notepads or readers. To the right of where he stood was a small cubicle, the bathroom, the only enclosed space in the dome. In the center of the dome were a large unmade bed, a couch and several chairs, one of which held the ghostly image of a large Cheshire cat, another which held Darnell Sidwell.

"Toss yer suit on one o' the hooks there, an' come on in."

Jon sat on a handy bench, and started to extract himself from his suit. "It's good to see you."

"Yeah, yeah." Darnell turned to the image of the cat beside him. "How 'bout you run an' get us some coffee, Pal?"

She just looked at him, jumped down from the chair and disappeared. He laughed,

“Pal don’t like me makin’ fun o’ her. So, you want somethin’ t’ drink? Coffee? I started a pot when yer shuttle came down.”

Jon paused to sniff the air, could separate out the aroma of the coffee from some of the other rich smells: the usual sharp whiff of methane, a pungent hint of mildew, and the almost sweet odor of old man. “Yeah, some coffee would be good. Thanks.”

Darnell went over to the table, where there were already a couple of mugs and a thermos waiting. As Sidwell poured the coffee, Jon finished getting out of his suit and went over to the table.

Darnell sat, pointed at another chair. He passed over a sugar bowl. “You like your sugar, if’n I recall.”

Jon nodded. “Thanks.”

“You know Pal?” Without looking, Sidwell gestured to the cat who appeared to be sitting on the side of the table.

“I don’t believe so.” Jon looked at the cat. He knew that some people preferred to have a nonhuman appearance for their experts, but this was the first time he had encountered such. The cat just stared back at him, then proceeded to start grooming herself.

“Ah, don’t mind her, she’s quiet, that one. The way I want her t’ be. I don’t like havin’ machines ‘round that are smarter’n I am.” He paused from his mug, looked over at her critically. “But a cat keeps me honest. Name’s ‘Palmira’, but I call her Pal. She keeps the place runnin’, though isn’t good wit’ the heavy liftin’.”

“So, you wanted me to come down before the rest of the team arrived.”

“Yup.”

Jon waited. Darnell said nothing, just sipped at his coffee and watched his guest. Jon asked, “Why?”

The old man squinted at him slightly, pushed back in his chair a bit, set the mug down on the edge of the table in front of him. “You’re the one come t’ wrestle wit’ my angel.”

Jon’s brow furrowed. “Sorry, I don’t follow.”

Sidwell smiled. “Just a figger of speech. Don’t worry ‘bout it.”

“OK. Then why did you want me to come down before everyone else?”

“So we could talk ‘bout what you’re gonna do here.”

“Well, we want to thoroughly investigate the artifact.” Jon looked at the prospector. “I thought you had things worked out with Susan Jacobs. We’ll bring in our team, set up our equipment, spend whatever time it takes to find out as much as we can about the artifact.”

“You don’t have th’ slightest idea what that thing is out there, do you?”

“Not yet. But we will.”

Sidwell’s eyes narrowed, and for a moment Jon got a glimpse of a bright and powerful intellect lurking behind the leathern face. Sidwell tapped the side of his mug. Jon could tell that the prospector was considering something. When at last he spoke again, there was a solidness, a seriousness, to his voice that hadn’t been there before. “Here’s th’ deal. I’ll go ahead an’ pressurize that dome, make th’ inside safe. Workin’ without environment

suits will make everyone a lot happier. You do what you want in there. You can set up a hab dome if'n you want. Otherwise, stay outta my way. You don't try an' take th' thing, I come an' go as I please."

Jon nodded. "Sounds good. But you should know a couple of things."

Sidwell said nothing, just looked at him, sipped his coffee.

"We think that the artifact may be manipulating the memory of anyone who comes in close proximity to it. Fits in with our being unable to get any readings on it."

This elicited a slight, wry smile from Sidwell. "That so? Wha' else?"

"Well, there's also a need to take some precautions."

Sidwell tilted his head, eyes sharp. "I can imagine. Military?"

"Well, yes. There'll be a small contingent here at the base."

Sidwell chuckled. "A small contingent wit' a big-ass bomb, right?"

Jon felt himself flush slightly. "Well, yeah."

"I'm not s'prised. Yer shoes, I'd do th' same thing."

"Thought you should know. In case you want to leave."

"Heh. You think I'm worried 'bout that? One, I'm old . . . older'n anyone has any right t' be these days. I ain't worried 'bout gettin' blowed t' bits by some bomb. That'd at least be a quick death, hell of a lot faster'n a thousand other ways I could die out here." He held up two fingers, "Two, I ain't leavin' 'til you figure out wha' that thing is. I'm curious."

"We're all curious."

"I meant I'm curious t' see how long it takes you," smiled Sidwell. "C'mon, let's go take a look at it."

Ng's mockups did nothing to prepare Jon for the reality of seeing the artifact in person.

The two of them stood there, on the edge of the excavation pit, looking down at it. Focused beams of light from the dome's ceiling flooded the pit, but seemed to not really touch the misty grey surface of the artifact. There was no reflection, no glint, and no shadow. There was that roughly hexagonal shape to each of the several facets of it, but it had more of an overall tear-drop shape than he expected. Flat top, rounded bottom. And the large burl of gel directly below the suspended artifact, quicksilver with a little electric blue thrown in.

"Mind if I go down and take a good look?"

"Help yerself."

Jon made his way around to the stairs carved into the side of the pit, next to where the sentries stood, eyeing the artifact. Cameras ringed the pit, just in case they could capture an image of the artifact, and around the inside of the dome other cameras kept a constant surveillance documenting everything that happened. He started to descend. Sidwell followed.

The pit itself was about six meters deep, maybe eight or ten across. As he dropped below the deck of the dome, he heard the sound: a low and steady whisper, almost like the

hiss of falling snow.

He reached the bottom of the pit, and slowly got closer to the artifact. Its appearance didn't change at all, but he was drawn closer by that elusive surface of grey. He walked around the thing, not more than a meter away from it, and had to resist the temptation to reach out and touch it, to see if that deep grey surface would ripple. He found himself stopped, leaning forward, trying to get a better look.

"Go on, touch it."

Darnell's voice snapped him upright, and he took a step back. He realized he had been holding his breath. Exhaling, he looked back over his shoulder, saw the old man sitting in his chair just a couple of paces away, eyes glittering. "Go on, I said, touch it. Didn't kill me. Prob'ly won't you."

Jon smiled in spite of himself. "Thanks. Maybe later."

He got down on his knees, to look at the underside of the artifact. It was hovering almost a meter off the basalt floor of the pit, the large burl of gel suspended between it and the ground. "Did any of your micros come in contact with it or the gel?"

"Nope. No reason t'. It was in a pocket, a sorta little cave o' tholin, sittin' on top of this ledge o' rock. Just like you see it there."

"Ever see a cave like that before?"

"Nope." Darnell touched the back of one gloved hand, and a dormant micro came to life nearby. "Watch."

The micro went over toward the artifact, but stopped before it got directly below the thing.

"I take it you didn't stop it," said Jon.

"Told it t' go right through there t' the other side. They always do that, stop just before they get under it. Take a good look at the ground there."

Crawling forward until he could easily see the area Darnell meant, Jon looked closely at the ground. It was darker than the surrounding rock, without the rusty stain of tholin.

"You can reach under there, scan. But the micros won't go there. So I just had 'em dig the pit down to that level, clearin' off the tholin. But don' worry, I've got a full record o' the site 'n the way I found it."

Jon got up off his knees, turned to face the sitting man. "You do? Why?"

"Oh, I always have a rough sorta survey of an area I'm considerin'. There are usually terrain features what suggest a gel deposit. So I work off o' topo scans, have 'em for reference." He nodded to himself. "Proves handy now an' then. An' when I realized that there was somethin' weird about what my micros found, I did an in-depth survey. Trick I learn' from an Israeli archeologist, back 'fore Jerusalem got smeared. That way you never miss anythin'."

Jon looked back at the ground under the artifact. "So, what'd you find?"

"Hard t' say. Been like that a long time. Weathered, like."

"Anything unusual about the tholin around the artifact?"

"Nope. Same as anywhere, far as I could tell."

Jon stared at the artifact, the gel, the ground. “Any sign of gel in the tholin? Doesn’t it usually appear in veins, not just a lone burl like that?”

“Bingo.” The old man smiled at him. “Funny thing ‘bout that, no trace of gel for a ways around here. Just that big ball of it, hangin’ there.”

“Isn’t that . . . strange?”

“You betcha. An’ take a good look at that ball of gel. Ever seen anything like it?”

“Well,” Jon paused, looked at the burl. “It’s bigger than it should be, by about a factor of three.”

“Yep. Anything else?”

Jon got down on his knees again, took a good look. For a moment he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. “I’ll be damned. It’s moving.”

Gel did not move. At least not on any sort of human time scale. But this gel seemed to be swirling just under the surface.

“You ever see it do that?” he asked the old man.

“No place else. Certainly not at 170 below.”

Jon checked his suit’s sensors. It was slightly warmer than that in the dome, the effect of the lights and equipment. But gel remained a gel even at normal room temperatures. It held that property no matter what the temperature was, as far as anyone could tell. If you heated it up far enough, it would just start to burn, never becoming a liquid or a gas. So, gel did not move.

“Weird.”

“You said it.” Darnell got up from his chair. “Seen enough?”

Jon got back to his feet, glanced again at the placid grey surface of the artifact. “For now.”

He started to follow Sidwell toward the stairs. He was almost there when a vague memory surfaced, and he turned to look at the artifact again. That grey color, soft like a deep fog at twilight. Like stone, turning spongy under his feet as he stepped along a bridge. And there, below it, was a pale blue, more electric than he remembered it from the dream, but otherwise . . .

“What is it?”

Jon heard the old man’s voice as though coming from far away, even though it was just as loud and clear as it had been previously. But somehow, there was a distance there. He couldn’t take his eyes off the artifact now, and felt himself slowly walking back toward it, though it didn’t seem to be getting any closer. But likewise, the lights from the ceiling of the dome seemed further away, growing dim. Another step, and he felt his foot sink into the ground as he tumbled forward.

“You’re getting closer.”

It was a voice that was familiar to him. Old. Maybe wise. Darnell Sidwell’s voice.

He opened his eyes, saw nothing. He couldn’t tell anything about where he was, or what was around him. He was blind, could feel nothing. No sense of gravity, no motion.

Neither cold nor hot. He could touch himself, feel the thickness of his own flesh, but there was no sensation of texture or temperature. He was just clay. Dull, inert, floating in nothingness.

He found he had a voice. “Closer to what?”

There was a long pause.

“The point of definition.” He heard the old man sigh, a deep exhalation that seemed to last for ages, a sigh that had been waiting to be released almost forever. “Think. There can be no silence without sound. Nor shadow without . . .”

“Light.”

Brilliance erupted around him. He tried to close his eyes to it, but the light still filled his brain, so intense that there wasn't even a hint of color in it, no filter of blood in his useless lids. Just a white that surpassed anything he had ever experienced.

“Round one t' the angel, I'd say.”

“Wha . . . what happened?” Jon was groggy, disoriented. He sat up on one elbow, looked around. He was back in Sidwell's home.

“Take it easy. You passed out.”

Jon shook his head, tried to remember. They had been in the dome with the artifact, he had been examining it, then he had a flashback to a dream. Yeah, a dream. The one about the bridge. Then there was that weird interlude, and Sidwell . . .

“What were you talking about, that stuff about light and shadow?”

Darnell looked concerned. “You were out cold. We didn' talk 'bout nothin'.”

“But . . .” Jon paused, tried to remember. It was slipping away now, breaking up into nothingness. He shook his head, tried to get his thoughts to clear. “How long was I out?”

“Quite a bit. Mebbe 20 minutes.” Sidwell looked at him, brought his ancient, craggy face down close to Jon's. A hand peeled back an eyelid. “But, I reckon you'll be OK. Yer stats are all good, an' I don't see anythin' I'd be worried 'bout.”

Jon touched the back of a hand, checked that his medical monitors agreed with what Darnell said.

Darnell stood up, went over to the galley, came back with a steaming cup. “Here, have some coffee.”

Jon slowly sat up a little more, taking his time to see if there was any sense of dizziness or disorientation. Nothing but a lingering fuzziness, like he'd been in a deep sleep. He took the cup, sipped it.

“So, why'd you pass out?”

“Dunno. I'm tired, and not used to the gravity. Maybe that was it.”

Sidwell sat down, and just watched him as he sipped at the coffee, saying nothing for a long time.

At last Jon's mind started to really clear, the coffee beginning to work. “Anyone else collapsed around the artifact like that?”

“Nope.”

He shook his head. “Well, I think I’m all right. Probably just tired.”

“Be a good idea to see that doc they’ve got up there, though.”

“Yeah. How’d you get me here?”

“Had them two sentries carry you. Didn’t think I did it, did you?” He smiled.

“No, that’s . . . wait, you mean the two sentries left the dome? Was there anyone in there with the artifact?”

“Nah. But don’t worry about it. Nothin’ happened. It’s still there.”

“But who knows . . .”

“Look, I know. Nothin’ happened.”

“But...”

Darnell sighed. “I had that thing all t’ myself for most two weeks, an’ nothin’ happened t’ it or me durin’ that time. Just relax.”

Jon nodded, finished the coffee. “Still, I’ll feel better once the other team arrives and we can start seriously examining it.”

“Right. Oh, that reminds me . . . Pal? Where the hell you at?”

The cat materialized on the other end of the couch, sitting. She looked at Jon, then at Darnell.

“Good. I want you t’ have th’ micros start sealin’ th’ upper deck ‘n th’ dome.” He glanced from the cat to Jon. “Do it a section at a time, so th sentries can stay ‘n there throughout.”

The cat just nodded.

Darnell looked back at Jon. “When that’s done, we’ll warm the place, an’ pump ‘n air. When you say yer other team is due?”

“Late tomorrow night. But I doubt we’ll be down until sometime the next day.”

“OK. It’ll be ready.”

Jon nodded. “Thanks.”

“Feelin’ better now?”

“Yeah. Still, let me arrange a meeting with the doctor.” He looked to the image of the cat sitting by his feet. “Can you connect me with my expert, Seth?”

The cat blinked, and the image of Seth appeared in the room. He was standing beside the couch, and nodded to Darnell. “Mr. Sidwell. Greetings.”

The prospector frowned, but nodded back.

Seth gave Pal a quick glance, looked confused for a moment, then turned his attention to Jon. “You asked for me?”

“Yeah. Tell Tops I need to see her when I get back. Upload my med stats, and she’ll see why.” He felt his system connect, the information transfer.

“Done. Are you well?”

“I think so. But I want to double check.”

Seth’s image nodded. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“Not right now, unless you have something for me.”

Seth glanced at Sidwell. “We can wait and discuss it when you return, if you prefer.”

Jon raised an eyebrow. "That research project?"

"No, I just received a message from Director Magurshak. I scanned it, was just about to contact you. I think you'll want to see it."

Jon considered. Somewhat less than an hour before the shuttle would be back to pick him up, but then there would be transit time. He looked to Darnell. "Do you mind? This should only take a moment."

Sidwell took the empty coffee cup, started for the galley. "Nah, go ahead."

Jon nodded once to Seth. The file downloaded. He asked the expert, "Anything else?"

"No."

"OK. I'll let you know if I need you again."

Seth vanished. Jon played the message. Ted Magurshak appeared before his eyes.

"Jon? Thought I should let you know. There's indication that someone else has known about the artifact almost as long as we have. We're still tracking down the possible transmission route, and don't know how far the news has spread. But at least one cell of the Edenists seems to have been informed. There may be other groups involved. I'll get any real news to you as soon as I can. Magurshak out."

Jon's focus came back to the room, and he saw Darnell standing nearby, holding out another cup of coffee. He took it. "Thanks."

"That wasn't good, from th' look on yer face."

Jon sipped. "No."

"Concern me?"

Jon nodded slightly. "Yeah, maybe. There might have been a leak."

Sidwell considered this. "Well, no s'prise. Not with a thing like this."

"I suppose not. But we hoped to avoid it."

"So now what?"

"It seems that the news, if it got out, is still being kept quiet. Whoever might know probably has their own reasons for not spreading it further."

"Prob'ly." The old man looked down into his coffee mug. "So whatcha goin' to do now?"

"Don't know. Have to think about it."

Darnell nodded, said nothing.

Jon sipped his coffee. "They think it's the Edenists who know about the artifact."

Again, there was that flash in the old man's eyes, a glimpse of a powerful intellect kept well banked, ready to blaze if needed. "You don' say."

"They're an ugly mix of radicals."

Darnell looked at him carefully. "Anytime religion gets 'n th' way of lookin' for God, it's ugly."