

## Chapter Nine

“Well, there’s nothing that I can find.”

Jon nodded at the news from Tops. “So, thoughts?”

She sat on a stool in the exam room, leaned against the side of a cabinet. “There’s a lot of conditions which could account for fainting, but I can’t find anything that would support a medical cause for what you experienced. And dreams are very unusual during normal fainting episodes.”

“OK, but how about non-medical causes?”

She chewed her lower lip for a moment. “Well, no one else has reported any sort of fainting, seizure, or visions. And the first couple of people who went down to investigate got pretty close to the artifact. Hell, Sidwell says he touched the damned thing, albeit through a suit.”

“He didn’t faint.”

“Not so far as he said, anyway.” She grinned. “But I wouldn’t put it past him to ‘forget’ such a small detail.”

“Then either I’m susceptible to the artifact in some unique way, or something else is going on that is unrelated to the artifact altogether. And that latter conclusion I don’t buy, because it was pretty clearly connected in some way.”

“Agreed.” She chewed her lip again. “You know, there are a lot of altered states of awareness. States that don’t leave much of a trace afterwards, though they can usually be identified while the subject is in them.”

“Sure. Except I wasn’t meditating, practicing yoga, praying, or falling asleep.”

“Well, maybe you weren’t intending to do any of those things. But maybe the artifact can prompt the mind to achieve such a state, at least in your case. A good hypnotist can put a subject under in seconds, frequently without the subject really realizing it.”

Jon thought about it. Had he felt anything like that? No. But could he rule it out? No. “OK, that’s a possibility. What do we do, wire me and give it a test, see if it happens again?”

“Why not? I can easily program your existing vital stats monitor to do it, no further hardware needed. Won’t take but a few minutes.”

Jon nodded. “Do it.”

Seth appeared. “Forgive the interruption, but I thought that this may be a good time to discuss that research you wanted, Jon.”

Jon looked at Tops, met her almond eyes. “Can you listen and work at the same time?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

Jon looked to Seth, nodded.

The expert brought his hands together in front of him, folded his fingers in a very human gesture. “After his experiencing several instances of unusual dream activity, Jon asked my thin-film counterpart back on Earth to collect data on the subject.”

James T. Downey

“You mean, like dream research?”

“No, rather, reports in discussion groups, news sources, and public postings on any significant change in the frequency of dreams or their content. My dup went back through the last year’s datafiles to establish a baseline for the study, then I compared that to activity for the last few weeks. There is a significant deviation from the norm.”

“More?”

“Not really. It’s more a qualitative difference. The level of discussion and reportage hasn’t changed. About the same number of public postings now as for any point over the last year. But as I sifted through the data, I came to realize that how people were talking about their dreams has changed.”

“Oh?”

“At any time, there is usually a general buzz about dreams being insights into one’s personality, or wish fulfillment, even of forecasting some future event or relationship. It seems to be a way that humans process the general concerns of life, a trait you share with other primates, according to background research. In any event, something has changed, according to the discussions in the public forums, though I’m not sure that anyone is yet aware of it.”

Jon glanced at Tops, back at Seth. “And what is the change?”

“There seems to be a lot of dreaming about doorways, portals, passages, arches, bridges, boxes, baskets, presents, . . . in short, any sort of metaphor for discovery and mental journey.”

“That sounds pretty vague,” said Tops.

“It isn’t. These are all instances where the dreamer made the connection; it wasn’t just a haphazard bridge or gift that happened to appear in the dream. The dreamer realized that there was some significance to the object, and had drawn the conclusion that it meant some kind of impending revelation.”

“How many people are you talking about?” asked Jon.

“Thousands.”

“And given that only a small percentage of people usually remember their dreams, and probably only a fraction of that number would get into a discussion of them that Seth would come across . . .”

Jon felt a slight tingling at the back of his neck. “Seth, when did this change take place?”

“In my survey of the previous year, there’s always this component to dreams for some small percentage of people.” The expert paused. “However, there is a significant increase in the records starting March 30th of this year.”

“Two days before Sidwell found the artifact.” The tingling spread, and the hair of his arms started to stand on end.

He wandered, pondering the evident connection between the artifact and the change in dream content. Was this how it meant to communicate with us? He was too tired, tired

from the gravity, tired from the experiences of the day. He wandered down to the commons, that part of Titan Prime similar to the atrium of Wright Station. But here, instead of a wedge of open space rising dozens of stories, there was a central arboretum and associated gardens that included a small brook originating from a nice waterfall. Around the perimeter of the commons were restaurants, pubs, shops . . . gathering places and communal spaces that offered a reprieve for the scientific and operational staff. The roof, several stories above, was glass fabric, and looked out on the open stars. At the western edge of this vista was the dull silver moonlet of the Advanced Survey Array.

“Not exactly the romantic image of Luna you’re used to, is it?” asked Duc Ng.

“No, not really.” Jon looked at the thin artist, hands in his pockets, slouch hat pushed back to afford him a better view of the sky.

“You know, I could design a program that would enhance the image. Everyone who looked up at that would see our Moon, instead. Wouldn’t take much. I could even paint it red.”

“Paint it red? You mean the Moon?”

Duc grinned. “Yeah, old joke. There was this artist by the name of Downey back at the turn of the century who had this project called ‘Paint the Moon’. He wanted to get everyone in the Western Hemisphere to focus these popular little hand-held laser pointers on the Moon all at once, with the idea that enough of the laser light would cause a red cast. Had it all figured: what phase of the Moon was best to do it, how people could aim their lasers, the whole bit.”

“Crazy,” said Jon. Then, after a pause, “It didn’t work, did it?”

Ng laughed. “Nah. But that wasn’t the point. He always described the project as a ‘shared lyrical fantasy’, using the embryonic Internet to bring people together for a single moment, all doing the same thing. The first attempt got quite a lot of attention world-wide from the media. Millions heard about it, and maybe tens of thousands participated. It is still considered a seminal art event - we studied it in school.”

“But . . . what’s the point?”

“Oh, I just always liked that grandiose sense of whimsy. Not something that could exist in this day and age. There were a number of crazy things like that back then, before everything went to hell. Do you know someone else even got all the schoolkids in Britain to jump up and down all at once, to see if they could cause an earthquake? No shit - really happened.” He grinned at Jon. “So, what did you find down on Titan?”

“Well, I’ll have a secure report to everyone tomorrow before the meeting, but suffice it to say that I had a different experience than I expected.”

Duc raised an eyebrow. “Really? I look forward to hearing about it.”

“I’m glad you had your little presentation for us on the da Vinci, though. Made it less of a surprise to visit with Sidwell.”

The grin on Ng’s face broadened with the compliment. “I am very much looking forward to seeing for myself.”

“No doubt.”

“I think we all are. I talked with Bailey earlier, and he’s about ready to burst with

excitement. Like one of those schoolkids.”

“Well, this whole trip is something that he’s wanted to do for months. I’m glad that it’s working out for him.”

“For me, too. I’ve never been out in space before, and this is going to provide me with material to work with for years.”

Jon nodded absently. “Maybe even more than you think.”

“That’s the way it is. There are some things that you can think about too much. You just have to let the experience soak in, then bubble up again when it’s ready to be understood, or expressed.”

Jon turned his full attention to the young man, who looked him straight in the eye. “Thanks.”

“I can recognize creative tumult when I see it. Give yourself some time to digest what you’ve seen.” He grinned again. “And speaking of digestion, I’m hungry. Want to join me?”

Jon realized that he hadn’t eaten anything since before going down to the surface of Titan. “You know, you’re just full of good ideas.”

“That’s why you brought me along.” Ng playfully slapped him on the shoulder. “There was an interesting looking little Thai place back over this way . . .”

After an enjoyable and relaxing dinner with the voluble Ng, Jon returned to his quarters. Bone-weary, he propped himself in a sitting position on the bed and started to work on his report for the other members of the team. It would be necessary to give them a good overview of what had happened to him on Titan. He didn’t tell them much about his interaction with Sidwell, but concentrated on his fainting spell, along with the subsequent medical analysis. As an addendum, he outlined a summary of Seth’s report on the change in dream content, and the timing of that change. He related this to the vision he had during the faint, and the previous dream with the same symbolism. Just as he was about to summon Seth in order to go over the report, the expert appeared.

“Good evening. Dr. Taupiczak asked me to tell you she’s on her way over. She should be here shortly.”

“Tops? Why?”

“She said that she had finally received the medfile on Chu Ling, and wished to discuss it with you.”

“OK. Thanks.” Jon nodded. “I’ve composed a report that I want you to review. You may wish to expand the last section, about the analysis you did on dream content.”

Seth paused a moment. “Done. Do you wish to see the final version before I send it out?”

“No, that’s fine. Go ahead and distribute it.”

“To the usual recipients?”

“Yeah, but from now on, also include Soukup and Tops. Tops may not participate directly, but I want her included in the datastream.”

“Should I provide them with all the previous material?”

“Hmm. Summarize it, and give them access to the full reports if they want to review it all.”

“Understood. I’ll preface it with an explanatory note.”

“Thanks. They can check with me if they need information you can’t provide.”

Seth glanced to the door. “Dr. Taupiczak is here.”

There was a knock at the door. Jon went to it, opened it. “C’mon in.”

She came into the room, sat in one of the reading chairs, saying nothing. The look on her face was hard, eyes narrowed, jaw set.

Jon shut the door, took the other chair. He noticed that Seth had disappeared.

“Drink?”

“No,” she said flatly. She looked at him again, her face softened a little. “Sorry, I don’t drink.”

“Seth said you got the full medfile for Chu Ling . . .”

“Finally! And with what’s in it, I’m not surprised they didn’t want to show it to me.”

Jon said nothing, waited.

Tops fidgeted with her hands a bit, at last seemed to compose herself. “I don’t like it.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Cloning is a superbly bad idea. Mucking around with the genetic sequence in order to enhance a human being is a worse one. Combining the two is just plain insane.”

“Agreed. But now we’re stuck with her.”

“And just what crazy notion got into your head to bring her along on this trip, anyway? I gather it was your idea.”

He paused a moment to consider that she hadn’t yet seen all the relevant files. “Seth is going to provide you with all the background information on our mission, and there’s a complete explanation in there. But let me tell you briefly how it happened: Gish asked me to, said that he had an instinct that she would be somehow important to us. And I trusted that instinct. This was before we knew who and what she was, but I’m not sure that would have mattered to me. So, I told him that she could come.”

“It’s nuts. You’re nuts. “

He shrugged. “You’re right. But, now that you know, is there anything you can do to help shed some light on the situation?”

She paused before answering. “I can start doing some additional testing of her abilities, see if I can figure out what changes they made to her.”

“Isn’t that fairly straight forward?”

“Yes and no. Oh, I can sequence her DNA, see where it varies. In fact, they already have, back on Earth. But genes aren’t simple blueprints. How they work together, even the shape of a given gene at a particular moment, changes how the body develops, grows, functions.

“But I can do a lot more testing of the results of the manipulation. That was one of

the arguments that Magurshak used to convince the NSA people to release the full file to me.”

“Oh? I didn’t know there was a problem.”

“Evidently. I understand that there has been a leak somewhere about the artifact. This seems to have spooked the security people. That’s why I didn’t get the file until about an hour ago.”

Jon nodded. “If there’s any other information you need, let me know and I’ll help you get it.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” She gave him a professional look. “You feeling OK?”

“Just tired.”

“Then I’ll leave you to rest. But let me know if anything else comes up.”

“That which emerges.”

It was said in a clear voice and perfect pronunciation. But Jon saw Darnell Sidwell standing before him. Standing beside the mouth of a cave, hand outstretched toward the entrance. He repeated, “That which emerges.”

Jon looked into the cave, saw nothing coming forth. “What emerges?”

The old prospector said nothing, just gestured toward the darkness of the cave.

Jon looked around. They were standing beside a small stream, on a gravel bar protected by an overhang of rock. Young trees and bushes nearby were in the first budding of spring. The air was crisp, and there was still a hint of early morning frost.

He stepped toward the cave.

“You’re almost there,” said Sidwell. It was definitely the image of the old man, but somehow he was younger. The flash of intellect that Jon had only glimpsed before was now there, out in the open, unwilling to be hidden by either years or caution.

“Almost where?”

“How many times do you have to be told? Almost to the point of definition.”

Jon shook his head, tried to remember. “Definition of what?”

“That which emerges.”

“You’re talking in circles.”

A smile, kind, but a little superior. “That which emerges from darkness gives the definition of light.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. It’s a very old idea. It’s part of you, buried deep inside your memories.” He again gestured toward the entrance. “Go on.”

Jon felt himself almost compelled by the words. He stepped gingerly into the darkness.

Jon woke, checked the time. A little after three, yet he was completely awake. The

memory of the dream was clear.

“Seth?”

The expert appeared. “Yes, Jon?”

“I just had a dream that fit with the pattern we discussed earlier. Also tied in with the imagery I remember from when I fainted down on Titan.”

“Do you wish me to contact Dr. Taupiczak?”

“Eh? No. But do me a favor and check with Sidwell’s expert about whether Darnell was asleep, with the artifact, or whatever, OK?”

“Certainly. Anything else?”

Jon hesitated. He had a vague idea about another research project, but couldn’t get it to come into focus. “No, not right now. Maybe later.”

“As you wish.” He paused. “Palmira reports that Mr. Sidwell was sound asleep, and all is quiet down on Titan.”

Jon nodded. “OK, thanks. I’m going to try and get back to sleep. I’ll talk with you in the morning.”

“As you wish.” Seth vanished.

Jon lay awake for a while, mulling over the dream. Beyond the obvious symbolism, he felt that there was something else there, something that was nagging at his memory. Something that wanted to come to the fore. He drifted back to sleep, and remembered no other dreams that night.

“So, when do we get to go down and see this thing?” asked Jackie Gates.

“I’m surprised you’re so eager,” said Jon.

“Why? The sooner we get down there and figure out what it is, the sooner I get back to my life.”

Jon looked around. “Well, after you’ve been profiled by Tops, you can go. No reason why you have to wait for anyone else. But particularly given my experience, I’d recommend not being in too much of a rush.”

“You weren’t hurt by it, were you?”

“No, but . . .”

“We should wait for equipment and other team,” interrupted Soukup. He sat, his size dwarfing the small table in front of him. “Find out what causes Jon’s fainting. Then we go down.”

“It could take weeks to figure it out, even if we solve the data-manipulation problem,” said Jackie. “I don’t see the sense in that.”

“Neither do I,” said Gish. “I want to see it. I’ve waited most of my adult life for this, and I don’t see any good reason for waiting longer than we have to. Jon is the only person who has had this fainting problem, and even for him it was more insightful than unsettling.”

“I still do not like it,” said Gregor. “Puzzles are good. Traps are not. We do not know if this is puzzle, or trap.”

“I tend to agree with Gish, though,” said Jon. “This seems to have been more a clue than anything. Look at the information that Seth has gathered about the change in dream patterns.”

“Yes, I was intrigued by this notion of using dreams to communicate,” said Johan Klee. “Our dreams are very basic to us, something which we share with most mammals. It would be a logical, if unexpected, way to attempt contact with a variety of species.”

“Any thoughts on the mechanics of how that works?” asked Bailey. “I mean, it’s almost like telepathy on a mass scale, isn’t it? At least for those who remember their dreams.”

Gish nodded. “And it may be that those who are susceptible to the communication are more susceptible in relation to proximity. That might be why you fainted.”

Jackie looked at Jon. “Describe the burl of gel again.”

“Well, like I said in my report, it was larger than I expected, with a flash of blue to it. Most significantly, it was moving.”

“Moving how, exactly?”

“Ever seen a ball of water floating in zero gravity? Kind of like that. But there was motion inside the ball, like currents flowing from one place to another.”

Gates nodded. “We know that gel is uniquely resonant, it’s how we’re able to manipulate it using a projected energy matrix. But that’s on a quantum level. It sounds like the artifact is doing something to cause it to become almost liquid. I’d guess that is related to the mechanism of communication.”

There was a pause. “Something that wasn’t in my report, because it happened last night: I had a dream which seemed to be related to the others.”

“Oh? And how is that?” asked Johan.

“The details aren’t important. But it had the symbolism of discovery, investigation, exploration to it, along the lines of the others.” Jon thought, continued. “I don’t know if it constitutes a message or even an attempt at communication, but I feel strongly that it is connected to the artifact in some way more than just my subconscious anxiety about what the thing is.”

“So, there’s no reason to wait,” said Gish.

“No, just get checked out by Tops. In the meantime, let’s go over where we’re at and how we’re going to proceed with the actual investigation, not just sightseeing trips.

“The other team is due to arrive this evening at about twenty-two hundred. Like us, they will be stationed here, and then shuttle down to the surface of the moon as they are ready to work. I suggest that you review the personnel files, so you’re at least familiar with everyone.”

“How much interaction will there be between the two teams?” asked Arthur Bailey. “I’d like to do some background research with them, if that’s possible.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” answered Jon. “I expect that while each team has its focus, there will be a lot of informal collaboration. They’re all good, competent researchers, not automatons. So, we’ll be working in close proximity to one another.”

“Will we have to shuttle back and forth constantly? Can’t we just get some housing

set up down there?”

“Susan Jacobs has her people working to get portable shelters established. The first should be up in two or three days, say by Thursday. Then they’ll have several more by the weekend. But these shelters are very basic, with only the most rudimentary facilities. You’ll probably want to come back here every few days, just to get a decent shower and sleep in a real bed. The Planck is bringing another shuttle with it, so that will help with travel logistics.”

“We’ve also got a military shuttle, and you’re welcome to a ride whenever we have room,” added Navarr.

“Thanks. Susan has also had a thorough sweep done of the area. They have found nothing else out of the ordinary. No other artifacts, no anomalous readings on their sensor probes, nothing. Now, if you haven’t been on Titan before, I’d caution you to download the relevant safety seminar. The moon itself is a hazardous place, even with an established base there.” Jon looked around. “I’m serious about that. So, keep your wits about you, and practice the buddy system.”

“Your report said that Sidwell is going to pressurize the dome with the artifact. When will it be safe for shirt-sleeve operation?” asked Duc.

“Tomorrow, probably.”

“Good. Because we won’t be able to use the camera I’m adapting until there’s a normal atmosphere.”

“How’s that going?”

“Pretty well. They have just about everything I wanted here, and I’ve been able to make substitutes for a few things that weren’t. I’m going to make several test sheets of film today, experiment with them to see what works best. But chemistry wasn’t my best subject in school . . .”

“I can help, Duc,” said Gish. “It was my idea, after all.”

“Thanks.”

Jon glanced to see if there were any other immediate questions. Then he looked to Navarr, said, “Why don’t you brief them on your operation, commander?”

Navarr nodded, stood as though he were going to give a formal briefing to his troops. “We’ll be sending a team down today to establish a security base. This will be off limits except in the event of an emergency, and I ask you to just leave my people alone to do their jobs. They shouldn’t get in anyone’s way, but if they ask for your cooperation, please provide it. Their mission is your protection. Keep that in mind.”

Gates bristled at this. “Protect us? From what? I’m more worried about whatever sort of weapons you’re bringing down to Titan than the artifact.”

“The artifact isn’t the only potential threat,” replied Navarr. He turned to Jon.

Jon nodded. “The commander means that we’ve received news of a possible security breach. Seems that somehow word of the artifact leaked out very early. The reports we have indicate that at least one cell of Edenists have known almost as long as we have.”

“SHIT!” Jackie said the word loud enough for it to echo in the small conference

room they were in.

“Easy there, there’s no reason to panic,” said Jon.

“Like hell there isn’t.” Anger flashed in her eyes. “What the hell happened? I thought you guys were being oh-so-secretive about everything?”

“Please,” asked Johan Klee, “who are these Edenists? I do not believe that we have them in Europe.”

“Probably not . . .” started Jon, only to be interrupted.

“Homegrown American kooks,” said Gates. “Take your worst nightmare right-wing Christian fundies, breed ‘em with ecological extremists, let the mix simmer in isolation for about twenty years, and you wind up with the Edenists: eco-terrorists who think that it’s God’s Will that mankind return to a primitive, pre-industrial state.”

Johan looked confused, and more than a little frightened. Jon thought he should clarify. “Jackie’s got the gist of it, but let me try and explain a little more completely. No one is really sure exactly when or how it happened, but sometime during the chaos of the post-flu, when the US almost completely disintegrated, there were two marginal groups that got together. One was the heir of something called The Order, a reactionary offshoot of the old Aryan Nation.”

“Ah, neo-Nazis. Yes, we had much difficulty with them, ourselves.”

“So I recall. Anyway, the other group was a splinter of the radical environmental organization Earthfirst!, sort of like the far-left fringe of the Greens. They managed to create a hybrid belief system: that true adherence to God’s natural law would bring man back to a state of grace, suitable to be readmitted to the Garden of Eden. To promote this belief, or to make it possible, they want to see a complete restoration of the Earth’s biosphere to a natural state, with humans having almost no environmental impact.”

“They are dangerous?”

“Amen, brother,” said Jackie, bitterly.

“Their core belief is that all technology is to be shunned, and population levels pushed lower than even what they are,” said Jon. “The most radical members are willing to destroy technological civilization whenever and wherever they can. The Settlement Authority has had a number of encounters with them.”

“And that’s not the worst of it,” said Bailey. “They believe that only the fertile are the Chosen of God, that infertility is a sign of condemnation. Such people can be killed with impunity, and thereby stopped from further damaging the ecosystem.”

“They’re not likely to take news of an extraterrestrial artifact being found out here very well,” said Jon.

“So I would guess,” said the German. “But we should be safe, yes? If they do not like technology, they are not likely to show up here.”

“Maybe,” responded Navarr. “They’re sometimes willing to use technology as a means to their end. We will need to remain vigilant.”

“But leave that to Navarr and his people,” said Jon. “We need to concentrate on why we’re here, do our jobs. So, if you want to go take a look at the artifact today, feel free. Once the dome is pressurized and the equipment unloaded and checked out, then we can

start studying this thing in earnest.”

“What about the data manipulation problem?” asked Jackie.

“Ng has his film about ready, we’ll give that a try and see what the results are. I also have something else I want to try as a test, will probably do that this afternoon.” Jon looked around. “Any other questions? If not, then let’s break up. Plan on meeting here tomorrow at nine for a full meeting with the other team.”