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I: SCIENTISTS DIE FOR LOVE

In twenty years of exploring strange worlds and seeking out some kind of sign that possibly humanity really wasn't alone, Randi Queson had never found any signs of any alien civilizations, past, present, or future, but she'd found a number of human ones. Perhaps it was because only human beings were both adaptable enough and insane enough to settle even the armpits of the universe that they were surviving at all.

This was a particularly ugly place, all gray and white, with constant winds whipping a fine sand against any exposed parts of the body. In most places where there was this kind of sandblasting there had at least been great natural carvings out of the rock, but the ugly pillars and squat black, twisted forms created here were more reminiscent of a ghastly entryway to Hell than the kind of unique beauty that would have drawn tourists and preservationists back in the old days when spaceships had been plentiful and space travel relatively cheap.

But there was water here; not on the surface, but not far underground, and in great quantities, filtered by the rock and sand base into a mineral rich freshness that would nourish almost anything you wanted to plant. And so humans had come here, in better times, to set up vast enclosed hydroponic farms and draw the rich water

and its minerals and make it explode into life. She could imagine how it had all looked at its peak, even though it was before her time, just by standing there and staring down at the flat plain with the ruins of those great automated farms.

Just so much junk now.

Highly automated surface farming was impossible now; they'd manufactured no spare parts here, nor had they the means and materials to innovate beyond a certain level. When the pumps went and the power supplies finally wore out and the spare parts for the robotic monitors had gone, there had been nobody to bring them more, nobody to trade what they needed for the rich and probably exotic high demand delicacies they'd raised here.

"There are some places even people can't manage after a while, huh, Doc?" a man's voice commented near her.

"Perhaps," she responded. "But I wouldn't put it past some remnants to have made it here, perhaps in caves or underground. They knew what was happening, and they had time to plan. I don't know what shape they'd be in after all these years, but I wouldn't be shocked to find some pockets here and there, growing in sheltered areas and somehow getting by. It wouldn't be much of a life, but back on old Earth and in several worlds out here we've seen people get by with less. In deserts so hot and dry they'd boil your brains, and in areas so cold that you'd swear nothing could find enough food and warmth. Keep that in mind, all of you, when we go down there! We don't want any ugly surprises, and we're not exactly in the business of giving poor stuck farmers a ride."

The man chuckled. "You're all heart, Doc." He turned and looked at the rest of the team, all in environmental suits with helmets on to protect against the elements here, and waved them forward. All of them were armed. "Everybody spread out and be at the ready! I don't think we're gonna find anybody down there in those ruins, but you never know who or what's gonna pop up from where. If they're around, though, they'll already know we're

here.”

“So what do we do if they come out and welcome us as liberators and shit like that?” one of the team asked.

“Keep it friendly and businesslike,” Queson told them. “If there’s anybody around, they know where everything of interest to us is. It’s a lot easier to have it given to you than to take it. Nobody has to know that we’re not leaving with anybody we didn’t bring until the very last moment if nobody is stupid. Understand?”

The tall, thin man in the rust colored e-suit who moved to take the point nodded, still chuckling. “All heart for sure,” he muttered as he checked the charge on his pistol.

The fact that no alien civilizations had been discovered didn’t mean that there wasn’t a lot of alien life, and they all understood that. Any world that was habitable by humans tended to be inhabited by something, and the more water present as a liquid the more likely that was. Much of it that had been discovered wasn’t very smart, but it was astonishingly dangerous. All the more dangerous because until you met it you often didn’t know anything about it at all, and after you met it you hoped you could figure it out before it got you.

They weren’t there to be gotten, but to get.

In the old days, they would identify themselves as being in the salvage business, and salvage was in fact what they did. With few factories capable of the quality of work that used to be available before the Great Silence had cut off the children of humanity from its roots, this was how you did things. Finding one of the lost colonies, hoping against hope that it had failed and that everyone who’d lived there was long dead, and then stripping it of everything of value before anybody else found it and selling it as best you could.

Most of them were pretty tough people. Some of them wouldn't care if the colony they found was dead or alive, desperate or thriving. The bigger, more civilized, more developed worlds needed this stuff, and tended to look the other way as to where it came from. The philosophy professors called it "mutually beneficial amorality;" others retained their immorality by pretending that everything that came in was from ruins of the dead, and they prayed for the souls of the departed as they bought their property.

This group was a varied lot, as all such salvager cooperatives had to be. In the old days, you just had to be brutish and amoral to be a pirate; now you needed high technical skills of varied sorts to do this sort of thing. Only the soul had to be piratical, or dead.

Take Randi Queson, Ph.D. Nobody else on the crew knew why she'd chosen this life, or if she had or had been forced into it. They all knew that she was very smart, very knowledgeable, and totally pragmatic about the job. That was all they needed to know.

Yet, in a sense, beyond ship's crew and maintenance, she was the most important person aboard the Henry Morton Stanley. You could hire a captain and a crew, and much of the work was automated anyway, but only she was knowledgeable enough to know what was valuable and what was junk. She, and the Chief Engineer, Jerry Nagel, who could say if some particular gadget or gizmo could be put back into service or whether its parts were potentially golden or simply fried goo. That was why both had to be down on the surface with the exploration team, and why the rest of the team's main job was protecting the two of them.

Queson was in fact the only one aboard who knew the irony of being a member of a ship's complement named after Henry Stanley. Stanley, a British born American newspaperman who set out to find a famous explorer and missionary and found him, writing a book about it and becoming a legend. What they never said was that he then went with his exploration experience, his maps and charts, to European powers, most notably

the King of Belgium, and created one of the nastiest and most immoral colonies since the days of slavery, the Belgian Congo. Stanley'd gotten famous for Livingston, but he'd gotten rich by exploitation.

Livingston, a godly man with a love of Africa died, nearly a saint, bringing medicine and Christianity to the natives he loved and who loved him while sending back the maps that the Stanleys of that time would use to rape the continent.

The ship was not named for David Livingston.

Nagel signalled to the rest of the team and they approached the first of the vast series of structures that had once been some sort of great farm supporting a town that was clearly intended to become a city. The cold wind continued to swirl and howl all around them, like some sort of ghostly presence, or perhaps the pain that dreams feel when they die.

The buildings seemed to go on and on; long, boxy affairs with high pitched roofs facing the maximum sun. A mass of greenhouses, perhaps, although they did not, had never, depended on that sun for very much.

Still, much of the structures had been designed to be, if not transparent, then nearly so. Now, they were nearly impenetrable, sandblasted over decades without any attempt at maintenance to clear them. Here and there there were jagged holes in the surface, like the remains of great rocks thrown through plate glass.

Only this wasn't glass, it was a synthetic material designed to withstand far worse than this miserable planet could normally dish out. Rocks, even huge ones catapulted by who knows what, would have been very noisy and create a lot of vibration, but they wouldn't have penetrated that stuff.

You needed to shoot these holes in those panes. Nothing less would have done.

"What do you think, Doc?" Nagel asked her, standing in front of one of those

holes now. "Civil war? Riot? Revolution? Or maybe early raiders?"

She examined the wound in the building pane. "Hard to say. Not raiders, though, I wouldn't think. Hard to tell with all this dust and sand piled up, but the curvature on the edging here indicates that it was blown out, not in. I'd bet you'll find some missing shards if you dig enough in this pile. Bring up one of the big searchlights. We're going inside."

Two of the crew floated in an obelisk-shaped remote light. About a meter and a half high and slightly thicker at the base, it was none the less not that heavy and very, very useful.

A tap on one symbol at the base brought the entire thing to light, giving a bright but diffuse lighting to a large area. Other settings allowed different kinds of light as required, at different intensities and, if they needed it, any could be brought to bear on any point with the greatest accuracy and illumination that any spotlight ever made could manage. They moved it inside, and the two leaders followed.

Inside wasn't as bad or as beaten up as they'd assumed. In fact, it looked relatively intact, although any remains of plants once grown here appeared to be either missing or turned to dust.

Nagel examined the hydroponic rows one by one. "Pretty worn, showing their age and heavy use, but still more than serviceable," he proclaimed. "With the exception of the broken panes, we could probably dismantle this down to the flooring and do pretty well. It ain't sexy but it sure looks profitable."

Queson took her personal light and took a close look at the holding membranes for the plants. It was a familiar design, pretty standard about two centuries earlier, and still very much in use back in civilization. She went close, opened her kit, and took scrapings from the whole area, including the holes.

"What's the matter, Doc? See something you don't like?"

“Probably nothing,” she responded, continuing to take samples at random points in the complex. “But either this went well before the silence or there should be some remains of something here. We know there’s nothing intrinsically caustic in the atmosphere, so if one of us were to drop dead here and be left in place, we’d find a skeleton, certainly, or at least identifiable parts of one depending on the exposure to the elements, and probably clothing or parts of clothing and personal stuff.”

“Yeah, so? I’d be surprised to find any bodies around here. Whoever wanted out sure seems to have gotten out, and this don’t look like anyplace other folks would be living. Most of the complex is automated—you can see the mag tracks and signs of robotic tending. We’ll probably find the robots themselves, power depleted. I hope so. Those would be the most valuable finds yet.”

“Yes, well, that’s what I mean. In conditions far more primitive than this, and less protected, there’s always the remains of plant matter of some kind. Dried remnants of vines, that sort of thing. I don’t know of anything we grow in this kind of setting that would leave not a single trace behind.”

“Maybe it was raiders,” he suggested. “I mean, they’d strip the food out of here just like we would if it had any. Or, this is one of—what? Seventy, seventy five buildings, each around a kilometer long, just in this valley? And the last one out at that. Maybe it never got put online. Maybe it was down for maintenance. Unless we find some kind of record we’ll never know.”

“You’re right, of course,” she sighed, wondering why she just felt that something was very, very wrong here. She couldn’t shake it, and in this business you lived longer if you trusted those kind of instincts. “Still, I’ll feel better if we find more normal things in the others. I really wish we knew what went on here.”

“If you ask me,” came the deep, gravel voice of Sark, one of the ground detail,

“anybody who’d come and live on a hole like this place in an armpit like this had to be nuts from the start.”

“I’ve seen worse and I’ve seen it work,” Queson told him. “Back in those days they even had means of controlling weather and climate on a planetary basis. They didn’t do that here, but I think that was the ultimate goal. Take a place with all the elements but in the wrong places and forms, prove it and mold it, then eventually create out of an armpit, as you call it, a garden of beauty and plenty. Some of the best worlds we still have were created that way by these kind of people. This one just failed, for some reason.”

Now she badly wanted to know what that reason was, too. Not just because she had to weigh any threats against the salvagers from all this, but also because it was another chapter in the story of humanity. She hadn’t gotten her degrees to go into the salvage business; she’d gone into the salvage business to provide a means to satisfy that curiosity.

“Tag this building and prepare it for dismantling,” Nagel signaled to the salvage team through the intercom. It would take a few hours to fully analyze the site, but then less than two to salvage anything of and in it that might be of value. The robot deconstructors were very efficient once they’d been told what was what.

“Going into the next building,” Queson told them. Even as they progressed, slowly and methodically from building to building and throughout the site, business would be going on behind them. “Achmed, take this sample case back up to the base and have it fully analyzed,” she added, speaking to one of the nearby team. “Then return to us.”

The big man took it and frowned. “Yes, Ma’am, Boss Lady,” he responded with a slightly mocking tone. “Um—you don’t think there’s anything dangerous here, do you? I mean, like germs and stuff?”

“Possibly. I shouldn’t worry about it. If it can get through these suits we’re already infected anyway.”

Achmed took the case and hurried off, never sure when she was kidding.

Nagel chuckled. "I love it when you're so fatalistic."

"He deserved it. His faith says to accept what happens as the will of Allah. It's one of the most fatalistic religions we have. I'm doing him a favor, allowing him to test his obviously wavering faith."

"Maybe he's just worried where he's going if his fears pan out," the engineer noted. "That's why I keep a hard-nosed atheism inside. The alternative is so much worse than obliteration I find a lack of faith one of my dearest comforts."

They went through a connecting tube, seals pretty well come loose from all the wind outside beating against it and the lack of maintenance, but it was serviceable to get where they needed to go. From this point the buildings went in three directions, and they'd have to decide on a route.

The eerie light of their personal torches revealed pretty much a carbon copy of the first building, as they expected. This building, however, still had all its panels in place and so was very much the way it would have been abandoned.

It looked as clean, even sterile, as the first would have been without the hole.

Nagel checked his instruments, and sent three small probes down the wide aisles. He checked his screen and saw nothing he didn't expect. Even as he was recalling the small probes he said, "Nothing at all here. The stuff's almost too new, even with a lack of power and maintenance. You think they built these but never got to actually use them?"

"That's been my thought," she responded. "But, then, what was somebody doing running out through that last one and blowing a hole in it rather than simply exiting via the door? I don't know. I'd almost prefer the crumbling rot of ancient vegetation and a dead body or two to what we're finding. Something here just isn't right."

"I agree," Nagel responded. "Still, we've got a long, hopefully boring examination of all these buildings, and sooner or later we should turn up something."

"I'd almost prefer that howling wind outside to walking blindly through here," Nagel said, sounding uncharacteristically nervous. "I don't like going down dark corridors blind."

"Not blind," Doctor Queson said from in front of him. She put her light on a wall plaque at the far end of the greenhouse, near the connecting tube to the next unit. He walked over to it and stared. The characters meant nothing to him; whatever language it was in was way different than the one he knew. Still, it was very clearly a drawing of the entire complex, and, right near the end, in one of the two units farthest out, there was the drawing of a stick figure inside a circle. The message was universal.

"You are here," he said, nodding. He looked over at the far end, which extended to and actually inside the cliffs beyond. By that point the greenhouses were twenty across and it would be easy to get lost without maps like this.

"It's gonna be a week before we get to the living quarters," he commented.

"Why wait that long?" she responded. "Looks like pretty much a standard layout. We should be able to pinpoint the master control building and get any records that might be there. We might even be able to get some power going again. It would make looking through this jungle of empty greenhouses easier and more tolerable. In fact, if you see the finely etched maintenance keys along each unit, and trace them back, I'd say that the control center was about...here." She pointed to a section almost dead center and embedded in the cliffs.

"Long walk," he noted. "Want to bring in the shuttle?"

"It's a good hike, that's for sure, but we've already seen the problems the shuttle has in flying low under these conditions, and it should be all inside. I'm not in the shape I used to be in, but this is eighty six percent standard gee and I think it would do me good.

Besides, I'm more curious to find out what's going on here than to keep walking through deserted buildings for days on end."

Nagel sighed. "Okay, agreed. Sark, you take over here. Buzz if you find something out of whack, otherwise do a survey and mark 'em. We'll see about turning on the lights."

"'Bout time," Sark grumbled. "Why didn't you do that in the first place?"

There were several possible answers to that one, not the least of which was that there simply wasn't any safe place to put down the shuttle close to the cliffs. Between the density of greenhouses and the tremendous, swirling winds with their sandblasting effects, effects which were magnified when you got in close to the cliffs.

"Stay with me and move fairly quickly," Jerry Nagel cautioned. "We still don't know if anything's inside ahead of us."

"You worry too much," she told him. "Anything here is long dead." But she wasn't foolish enough not to heed his cautions.

Each of the greenhouses was connected by a flexible tube along which metallic flooring had been laid so that humans and robotic units could walk between without having to go outside. The seals had held remarkably well considering the constant buffeting from the outside winds, and the flooring was rock steady.

There had been some initial worry that some of the robotic devices might well still be present, might even view them as invaders or interlopers, but orbital and close in scans showed no sign that the power grid was active anywhere. It was cold and dead, save only well below and inside the cliffs where the fusion reactors were in the process of cooling down. It would take them another few hundred years to get to that state, though, so turning the lights back on shouldn't have been a problem. The real question was, why was everything turned off?

They walked for some time, stopping only to check that there was still a plaque at each entrance/exit tube showing where they were and where they had to go.

It was eerie, particularly after two hours, to still be walking in those great, dark halls beside empty racks that were designed to be the nurturers of abundant life. Here and there they found signs that once these places had in fact bloomed; not residue, but a wall on which hung protective clothing, rebreathers, and the like used when checking chemical mixtures, testing radiation levels, or working maintenance on the automated equipment.

Still, there wasn't the least sign of wear and tear on any of the equipment, rails, robotic arms, you name it. Not even marks and rings where water and nutrient excess would have flowed down into drains to be re-separated and reused. In a sense, the place had the feel of being used but the look of being brand new. It didn't really make sense.

Before they could safely salvage any of it and take it aboard their ship, though, they would have to solve this puzzle.

The maps held up; like everything else they saw, they looked so new it was as if they'd been put up yesterday. Sheltered from the outside violent weather, they hadn't faded or lost any luster. It was a tomb, but it was an eerily new tomb, one so fresh it didn't even seem to have any remains around.

Still, in the protective suits and with no interior lighting, it was one hell of a long walk.

"Nagel? Doc? You okay?" a high, reedy feminine voice asked.

It was An Li, the operations controller when people were on the ground, the First Officer of the Stanley when in flight. She was one of only three people who never left the ship while it was in search or salvage modes. No matter what they might find on the ground, it could not get to the ship, now in geostationary orbit well above them, nor to the ship's controls. An Li could dispatch anything from heavy weapons to food and drink,

assume control of any of the machinery below up to and including the salvage tug and its heavy robotic equipment, and do whatever was necessary to protect the crew on the ground if possible and the ship above in all cases from any dangers.

Queson wasn't the only one who thought that An Li's choice of positions stemmed more from the fact that she was fifty eight centimeters and then only when she wore the thick work boots, and weighed at best thirty six kilos. But at that control panel high above, she was the height of a constellation and the weight of a neutron star. In orbit and on station, she had all the power.

"We're fine, Li," Queson responded. "But if we have to go much farther I'm not so sure." Maybe I'm getting too old and out of shape for this, she thought, feeling the distance in her back and legs. She was never one to work out hard and regularly on the long space hauls.

"We'll pick a real low gravity planet next time," the officer promised with a chuckle.

"You want to rest?" Nagel asked her, suddenly aware that she was breathing hard.

"No, I'm all right. I'll rest when we find some sign in this spook house that something was ever alive in here."

"Like those, maybe?" Nagel responded, shining his light on the floor and stopping to look.

She came over and stared. Clothes. Standard work uniforms like you'd find even now on hundreds of worlds. Synthetic, automatic form fitting, utilitarian, along with synthetic rubber soled work boots. There were several sets on the floor, spaced out in an unnerving fashion, as if each had once had an occupant that had simply, well, dissolved. Ceased to exist. As if they'd been balloons, pumped up with air, and

suddenly punctured.

Randi Queson studied them, and particularly the areas around where the head would have been. One figure clearly had earrings, kind of crudely placed on either side of an imaginary head, as if they'd fallen a small bit to the floor as the head had ceased to exist.

Nagel picked up a work glove and shook it. A ring fell out and clattered as it landed on the smooth floor. He stepped on it, stopping its roll, and then leaned down and picked it up.

It was clearly a wedding ring.

One of the other phantoms also had a ring in a glove, this one a school ring from some far off university or other. The cuneiform around the institutional crest was the same as on the signs in the greenhouses, and so far still unfamiliar to any of them.

He looked at the anthropologist and frowned. "There aren't two explanations for this coming to mind," he noted, sounding a bit nervous.

She nodded. "They were in these clothes, and then they weren't. It happened fast and it was complete. Organic matter, animal and plant, was completely consumed. Nothing else was touched."

"You ever hear of anything that could do that?" he asked her. "I mean, com'on! I've used a particle beam disintegrator and there's always some residue, no matter how slight. Nothing is converted so efficiently that it leaves nothing behind!"

"There may be something there, but, if so, it's so minor it'll take a full lab analysis to find it. Queson to Control."

"Yes, Randi? What did you find?"

"The question is, what didn't we find. Anything back on that sample I sent?"

"Um, yeah. Ground lab says nothing. Brand new. No vegetable matter of any kind, nothing carbon. They don't have full facilities there, but they're pretty good."

"They're good enough," the Doc responded. "Whatever got this station consumes

everything organic, and I mean everything. Run that through the computers and see if you can find anything that efficient and that selective all at the same time in the records. Any luck on the writing yet?"

"Oh, yes. Turns out to be one of the Sanskrit family of languages in its original alphabet. This was either an ethnic or national extension, that's for sure, not just a commercial one. Most of them used one of the widespread alphabets for centuries, but a few kept the old stuff for cultural cohesion. This was a really nationalist group, since the signs have no translations. The computers say it's probably Laotian, possibly Thai-Siamese, but it may be an east Indian regional one. Impossible to get any closer than that unless you find the history records, though. It doesn't quite match anything we have."

"But can you read it?"

"Oh, sure. If you find anything more than directional signs and shit like that, we can make it out. You sure you want to go farther in without some kind of backup, though?"

"I think it's pretty unlikely that anything that got them made it through the years after it did," Queson told her, hoping her logic held. "First, it was probably some sort of thing they either brought with them or that mutated, since anything that efficient with our kind of plants and animals had to know us. It eats, therefore it has starved for generations because of its own efficiency. Any such organism would have turned on its own species to survive. Unless the ultimate survivor learned to eat sand or metal, and it clearly didn't from the looks of this, it would finally croak. Still, this means high level sterilization of any salvage and a Class A containment situation for everybody and everything down here until that's confirmed."

"That's affirmative. You hear that, everybody? Class A Containment. Any

violators get left down there and outside. And as for you, Doc, and you, Nagel, I want your helmet cameras on and audio key permanently open. I'm recording from this point if you're going to go any farther in."

Acknowledged, switching to permanently on," Nagel responded. "This might cut power by a third, though."

"Well, then, keep an eye on it. Remember, the more in you go, the more distance you have to cover back."

Queson gave a low moan. "Don't remind me!"

Jerry Nagel stood up, shined the light around the ghostly greenhouse, and sighed. "God, I hate this part of the job!"

"Well, as you pointed out, our shares of something this big are going to be enormous," Queson said resignedly. "And even with all this, in this day and age, it's a hell of a lot safer than robbing banks. Still, I wish we had an archaeologist on the team. Going blind into ancient graves is what they get off on, and they're never happier than when they're digging up and carting off some old graveyard. Come on, let's see what's what."

Finally, they made the cliff. At this point the complex ceased being a greenhouse or processing area and instead became a small self-contained city built inside the protective rock.

As they expected, the amount of clothing absent owners increased with every step now, and often was so dense you couldn't help but walk on them even though both salvagers felt, somehow, that they were stepping on bodies.

Now they were on instruments, using the "You Are Here" signs only as confirmation, as they followed the dark halls and walkways towards the low level but still present central energy core.

There were, at least, some pictures along the wide hallways and in many of the large

offices and stores that were built, multi-level, around the control center. Both Queson and Nagel had expected to see exotic faces in some kind of ancient looking cultural garb, but, the fact was, the folks looked pretty ordinary. Beaming faces, mostly dark complected but Oriental cheeks and eye structure rather than Indo-European, making it likely that the original guess, something like Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese, or perhaps Malayan were at the root of these people's ancestry. They certainly had a sameness about their racial features that made it clear that they were either picked to a standard or had remained cohesive when having children long before these people had come here.

"Vegetarian, most likely, and not enamored of synthetic foods," Nagel guessed from the three dimensional photos that seemed so real. "That would explain the huge greenhouses. Funny, most of these racial purity type colonial projects were also selectively technophobic; I don't see any signs of that here."

Queson nodded. "A couple of the pictures show they had babies the old-fashioned way, and I don't see much attention to livestock. You're probably right. Some form of Buddhist sect, I would suspect. Affluent, well educated, setting up a colony so they could practice their specific faith, whatever offshoot it was, and keep away from the culture polluters while enjoying the benefits of modern life where it didn't conflict. Makes sense."

"Except they chose this hole. As you say, they clearly had money, so what the hell were they doing picking a cold, rotten desert like this?"

"Oh, I don't know," Queson replied. "They were here for the long haul, and for religious and cultural reasons. They probably took it because nobody else wanted it, and it had enough underground water and a heavy enough atmosphere to sustain them. Their ancestors way back not only lived in dense jungles but in valleys carved

by glaciers from mountains eight or more kilometers high. If they indeed had any Laotian blood in them then their distant ancestors picked up and walked ten thousand or so kilometers from ancient southeast Asia on old Earth up to the frozen Arctic, across frozen ice bridges eighty kilometers across, and down another two continents back when they were hunting prehistoric mammals with spears. These people were technological enough to grow fat and lazy without a challenge. This was it.”

“Yeah, I’ll take fat and happy to dead and consumed,” Nagel commented. “Look at where their faith and high dreams took ‘em. What a waste.”

“Maybe. I’m reading fifty-two percent power, though. If we can’t find the light switch and get going, we’re going to wind up a kilometer short and with no protection.”

Nagel nodded and stepped up his pace. It was getting easier and easier to just ignore the density of empty clothes and just make sure you didn’t slip on them.

They’d had this discussion before, and would again. Nagel believed in nothing but the moment, and attaining by any means available the wealth to indulge every pleasure, except that it was stupid to do anything else. The universe, after all, was going to end someday, going to go out and die, and then everything, everybody, and the sum total of all human achievement would be absolutely meaningless. To him, and many of the others, it was the easy way to justify just about anything they felt like doing.

Even this. Scavengers of dead worlds, a way to accumulate great wealth without having to dig mines or committing more daring robbery against the living. It could be dangerous, as now, but never once in his experience in the salvage business had a dead man ever shot him.

Randi Queson stopped and shined her light at a doorway that was, like almost all of them, wide open. When the power went down, it was standard procedure for all the locks to spring open and all the doors to slide open unless tagged specifically for security. That way,

you could always get out. It was a much larger entrance than most of the others, and had all sorts of signs and pictographic symbols as well.

“Jerry, I think we’ve found the control center.”

He came over and looked. As with many of the important stores and offices in this part of the complex, there were lots of empty suits stacked up around the doors. Clearly there was great panic at the last moments here, but it was also clear that they knew what was coming for them. It seemed clear from the direction of most of the clothes, though, that whatever they were running from had begun right around here.

“Everybody’s running away,” she noted, feeling a tightness in her chest and breathing very heavily.

She could hear his breathing, too, and took some comfort that it was as labored as her own.

They walked cautiously into the Control Center office. It was a large place, clearly the center of administration as well as the central power plant. The inner wall, however, was transparent, a shielded window down to the power plant and reactors far below. She checked her suit monitor. Radiation was well within tolerance, although higher than it should have been.

The window area, and the whole inner office complex, was also notable for its near lack of empty clothing. Whatever had come for them, they were running from it, running from right here.

The control board and manual override stations were still active, as they’d suspected. The screens were dark, but unless they’d shorted out or been damaged somehow they should come on when an operator assumed control. That would not only give them a view of the power plant area at various levels but also access to the

bank of screens on the inside corridor wall that probably would allow them to examine any greenhouse, or perhaps any public area in the whole complex.

"I wonder how long this stuff's been sitting here, running in standby?" Nagel mused. "Maybe a century or more. Control, can you still get us."

"We're all eyes and ears, Jerry," An Li's voice responded. "Give us a scan of the panels and the control system. We'll see if we can access an operator's manual. They almost certainly used a standardized system, and if we can translate the stuff for you then we can show you how to operate it. Both of you, do as much scanning of hardware as you can, will you? And if you see any manufacturer name, symbol, serial or model number, or whatever, focus in."

They did as instructed, and finally An Li called, "That's enough. They're Kalnikoff Systems units, almost certainly fifteen oh fives. That makes the power station almost certainly a colonial model five five six three Kaminichi Power Systems unit. Yes. No problems. And in that condition we might be able to do a ton in salvage. That's fairly recent stuff for colonial kits, no more than a hundred and five years. You just can't get those any more. Expensive to chip it out and move it, but it might well be sold in place. Then it would be the buyer's problem."

"Quit adding up the hypothetical profits and let's see if we can get some of it back on line!" Queson snapped. "The sooner we do, the sooner we can access and upload the records and find out what the hell happened here. And the sooner Jerry and I can get out of here and back to warm food, showers, and a bed!"

"Only one? Hmmm.... Never would have thought it of the two of you."

"Can the comedy," Nagel grumbled. "Something killed a shit load of people here and I'd really like some confirmation that it isn't going to suddenly show up and dissolve me, too."

“All right, all right. Are you sure you want to bring it back on line, though? Somebody deliberately shut this thing down before they panicked, or maybe while everybody was panicking. Sorry, but if something’s shown up and started eating or dissolving folks right and left, do you take the time to lock the door and turn out the lights before you run like hell?”

That brought them both up short. Nagel looked at Queson in the eerie near darkness, illuminated only by their lights, by a few lights showing shutdown status on the command consoles, and by the soft glow from the power plant even in its most dormant stage beyond that protective picture window, and she looked back at him.

“Maybe we ought to take a closer look at the rest of this room,” she suggested, and he didn’t argue.

An examination through various light filters didn’t help. The only one that registered much was infra-red, and that only because of the residual energy coming from the close proximity to the well shielded reactor chamber. The lights, though, showed that at a point where the undershielding extended underneath the fifteen centimeter thick floor there was some buckling.

“Jeez!” Jerry breathed. “That’s impossible! We go to space with shielding pretty much the same as this, and the interior of Stanley is made of this same calrithium compound. What kind of pressure short of a black hole would distort it so much?”

Randi Queson walked over close to the window, and, for the first time, looked down deep into the central power core and shaft.

“Jerry? I don’t think we can salvage this power plant.”

“Huh? What do you mean? I—” He suddenly saw her just staring down and went over to the window and saw what she was looking at.

“Holy Mother of God,” the most faithless of men breathed as he looked down.