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Ghost: Twilight Lamb

**by
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In 12,496 ATA (Ancient Terran Accounting), the Twilight Lamb, a family trading vessel detected a derelict Imperial courier ship, the Athelstan Cying along its flight path. The ship was over 2000 years old. Its status was due to a misjump, and its crew had long ago turned to dust. What the Twilight Lamb's crew did not know was the ship once held escapees from an ancient Rep prison camp. They were all psyonic masters, bred for telepathic skills, and all members of the House Imperial.

On board the Athelstan Cying, the spirit and intellect of one of the crew was incredibly still alive. He was bodiless, but conscious and aware. When the Twilight Lamb approached the Athelstan Cying, the spirit prevented its destruction by disabling weapons secreted on the ship. When the salvage crew came on board, he tried to protect them.

Den Protania, apprenticed in shuttles, was one of the members of the salvage team. Den was angry and disillusioned about his life among the families aboard the Twilight Lamb. He was the captain's only son. And he was already a self-made failure in astronavigation and command. Den's father, Mikal Protania had apprenticed him in command as soon as he finished his primary

The family trading vessel Twilight Lamb hung heavy and brilliant like an irregular planetoid in a matched orbit with the massive dry dock in high orbit around the planet Neuterra. At over ten kilometers in length and 100 million metric tons, she was large for a family trading ship. In the surface, pocked by the thousands of kilometers of wiring, ductwork, and structure, everything unnecessary to place within the pressure vessel, could be seen a reflection of Neuterra's day and night. The Twilight Lamb had plied space for over 300 years and was one of the most successful of the family trading cartel in Human Space. The ship was home to over a 500 people.

The business of managing command and astrogation repairs for the Twilight Lamb in dry dock orbit around Neuterra took most of Den and Natana Protania's time for the next couple of weeks. Even so, Den watched expectantly for Natana and his rotation for surface leave on the ship's schedule. He saw their planetside leave time come up again then unexpectedly, their slots were removed from the schedule.

Den burst into the cabin he shared with Natana, "Nata!"

"Den. I'm right here." Natana Protania was beautiful in her own way—slight and small. Her skin was dark like most spacers but translucent. Her hair short and lightly brown—it framed her delicate features and constantly threatened to fall into her face. She habitually pushed her

hair back behind her ears. She was young, but looked younger than her 18 terra normal years—both an asset and a liability to the youngest Master Astrogator in a Family Trading Ship.

“Sorry. Do you know why they took us off the planet roster?” Den Protania eased into a seat he pulled out of the wall. He was broad shouldered and tall for a spacer. His face appeared young—as young as his 21 terra normal years, but his eyes seemed older, ancient. His grey-eyed gaze promoted trust and leadership. On the breast of his ship’s suit, the multiple badges of Master Command, Master Astrogator, and Journeyman Shuttle announced his proven skills.

“No idea, but I can guess. But do you really want to go back down there?”

“Yes, we have to return to Neukoln.”

“Why?”

“The information we recovered from Dr. Fleisher’s records is incomplete. He obviously kept his personal records separate from those in his lab. If we hope to ascertain what his organization is up to, we need his personal records. We also need to determine where he found the advanced psy equipment.”

Nata took him in her arms, “I have no intention of losing you now that I have you safe with me.”

Den pushed the hair away from her face, “They can’t surprise us now. We know what to look for. We were unprepared before.”

“I won’t let you go alone,” Natana shook her head.

“I don’t want you to be away from me. We’re a team, Nata, and I may need the extra capability your psy and the chip give. We need to know if the chip inside your brain causes side-effects. The ancients who developed that microchip will likely have experimented with it for a

long time. They had many symbiotic chips that were well tested and safe. This may be one that was fully tested then later modified by the doctor or someone else.”

“How do we find out which kind of symbiotic chip this is?”

“The version number is available through a physical and a thought sequence. The physical sequence is a simple set of actions that are not common during normal human interaction. The thought sequence can be anything close to the actual programmed command. The chips use an intelligent matrix to resolve ambiguities. The physical sequence is enough to activate the chip information recall. In most of these chips, for the physical sequence, you focus your left eye on your right pinky finger and then think the command sequence.”

Natana gazed intently at her right pinky with her left eye and said, “Chip version number.” She gasped, “Amazing, it says EX1704-6514t003, I’ve got it.”

“Try this,” said Den, “Same physical input and ask for the command list.”

Natana gasped again, “This is fantastic. The chip is running through a full list of its capabilities. There is just too much here to grasp all at once.” Her voice raised in volume a little, “How do I stop it?”

“Physical sequence, then think stop.”

“Whew, that did it. How do you know so much about these devices?”

“I had one. Most people in my time had at least one biological symbiot. I had a basic calculator and a time chip. Nothing as complex as the microchip you have. You can test the chip functions with the physical sequence followed by test.”

Natana started the chip test. After a couple of minutes, she asked “How long will it run?”

“Depends on the chip. Mine finished after about a minute. Depending on the complexity, this one could take hours. Order it to run in background and report when finished.”

“Okay.”

Den sat back at the computer terminal. He tapped his fingers on the thin desk, “Now, how are we going to get back on the planet leave roster?” Den answered his own question, “I guess the first step is to ask.” He tapped his teeth, “The council may disagree on principal—why don’t we make use of an ancient custom? In my time and on most planets, after they are married, couples take a trip called a honeymoon. Do you think the council will buy that?”

“They might—the ship’s families have a similar custom, but usually there’s no planet to honeymoon on. My mother definitely won’t like it. She’s fuming now.”

“Then we’re lucky your mother’s not on the council.” Den typed out a computer note to the council making the request.

Natana put her hands on his shoulders, “So assuming the council will let us back down on the planet, how will we get the information you want, and what do you plan?”

“That’s something we must plan together. How much of what we need, can we get from the ship down to the planet?”

“What will we need?”

“Weapons, night vision equipment, distorters, combat environment suits, lock cipher tools, some other basic infiltration equipment—fake id cards and such.”

“We can’t take weapons down to the planet. The rest of the equipment is available or it may be available onboard. We can check the stores,” Natana pushed him out of the seat, “Here I’ll put the list in the computer...”

“Den,” Captain Protania pulled Den aside as they exchanged the watch in the command section. Captain Protania was aged beyond his years. His hair, once dark had long ago turned

snow white. Den was once the main reason for his concerns, but lately the Captain's perpetual frown had turned to a languid smile. He watched his son with a new found pride. He gave his daughter-in-law, Natana, a protective glance. Peace seemed to fill his life—a peace he thought was once impossible.

“Yes, Captain.”

“I received your request on the council network. You realize the council doesn't want to risk you and Natana on Neuterra again. You can understand why.”

“Father, we're forewarned now, and the planetary police promised to keep an eye on us.”

“Den, at one time the council would have gladly left you planet bound and not have shed a tear. Things are different now. You and Natana are treasures to this Family. Frankly, we can't afford to lose you. I can't afford to use you.”

“Father, we need to get away from the concerns of the ship. A short trip of a week or two isn't a great risk. Can't we come to some agreement?”

“What do you propose?”

“We could travel to a safe area—a secluded place where you could monitor us electronically.”

“I'll relay your request to the council. Could you put the stipulations down officially?”

“Sure, I'll send you a note.”

The Captain smiled, “I'll try, but you know I'm not happy with the idea either.”

“I could get a medical prescription from Natana—you know for my condition.”

The Captain looked sideways at Den and laughed at his smile, “Worth a try. Her mother might give you a prescription for separate vacations—that is, if we agreed to leave you on Neuterra.”

Neuterra was a moon that circled the gas giant Asa-Thor. For the next week, Asa-Thor rose late in the day—for the next few turns of the lunar cycle, the days would be very pleasant and the early evenings would be nearly twilight, the skies augmented the light of the planetary primary until Asa-Thor set.

Asa-Thor was an aborted star, an active gas giant. And because of the additional heat it provided its large moon, Neuterra, the combination made the planet's winters and summers delightful. The system's sun alone was not nearly close enough to give Neuterra a properly comfortable climate, but with both of sources of light and heat, Neuterra was a veritable paradise.

The only disadvantage to this combination was Neuterra's diurnal cycle—the human metabolism could barely adapt to it. When the sun and Asa-Thor shared the sky, the days and nights were in proper order, however, when the sun and planetary primary were on opposite sides of Neuterra, the separation between night and day was nearly indefinable. Normally, the cycle divided into four weeks: a week of proper light and dark; a week of successively lighter nights and slightly darker days; a week of nearly similar dimly lit days and nights; and a week of lightening days and darkening nights. The cycle, except for eclipses and odd angular lineups was incredibly regular, but not regular enough for human tastes.

Human beings could not properly align their bioclocks to the phenomenon, and other physiological difficulties presented themselves. One problem was the tides—a difference of thirty meters was not unusual. Landmass on Neuterra was at a premium already, and the high water didn't help. Neuterra, an old and established moon, didn't suffer often from the quakes that

would have plagued a younger planetoid, but minor vibrations were common when the star and Asa-Thor came into juxtaposition.

Den and Natana stepped into the lobby of the Pleasant Tours Rustic Hotel deep in the Neuterra Northern Forest Preserve. The hotel was situated on a high ridge overlooking the large wilderness area. The Neuterran wilderness stretched a few thousand kilometers across the main continent. It was entirely encompassed by urban areas. At some points, the major cities backed right to the edge of the wilderness.

The Pleasant Tours Rustic Hotel displayed “too perfect” backcountry decorations. Over the reception desk hung a great stuffed beast’s head—a representation of some enormous carnivore of the original Neuterran fauna. Other animal heads and stuffed animals lined the walls or prowled the stairwells. Paintings of hunting scenes and the wild lands filled the spaces between. The floors were covered with animal skins and heavily patterned rugs. The floors themselves were stone and time polished wood. A sign hung conspicuously in each room announcing that no actual animals were harmed in the production of the décor—they were all simulations.

Den and Natana carried their few bags themselves. Den approached the desk. A clerk noted them immediately. They were two of the few guests during the off-season at the inn. In an affected rustic Neuterran accent he greeted them, “Good afternoon noble lady and gentleman, you are?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Protania. We have reservations.”

“Yes, I have you here. Our spacer friends. You reserved a private cottage. We have your suite prepared.” He motioned for Den and Natana to step to the side of the desk, and they palm coded for the accommodations and the lock to their room. The clerk handed them a large key with a number attached to it. “The key will work in the door, if you choose to use it, but the lock

will not open without one of your palm prints.” He said under his hand, “The key is for local color. We appreciate your participation in our little attempts at atmosphere.”

“Thank you,” said Den, “We’re here on our honeymoon. May we take our meals in our room?”

The clerk checked the room roster. He frowned involuntarily, “Certainly, sir, if you so choose. As you selected, your cottage is provided with all automatic facilities, but I suggest you try our more rustic delights. You can step back into an ancient world here, away from the concerns of modern urban life.” The clerk rattled off directions to their room and sent them off with a flourish.

Den and Natana waved off the bellhop that came forward for their bags and hurried to their room.

They entered the cottage. The room was furnished in rustic grandeur. The bed was large and covered with a large artificial animal skin. A huge fireplace covered one side of the room with a large skin with head still attached to it.

Natana rushed into the room and threw her bags on the floor. She landed on the bed, and turned around to look at Den as he closed the door, “This is great. I hope your plans include some time at the Pleasant Tours Rustic Hotel.”

Den smiled, “Some time? We’re here for business.”

“How are we going to get rid of these?” she pointed to the tracking bracelet on her wrist.

“I hoped you could tell me how to overcome this one small difficulty.”

“If I can’t, does that mean I’ll have your full attention for the next two weeks.”

“You’ll have my full attention no matter what.”

Natana laughed. Den opened his bag, pulled out an electronic tool, and began to search the room.

“What are you looking for?”

“Bugs. These hotels have sensors to detect us in the room, that’s to be expected. There may also be some unexpected devices. We need to get into the hotel system to account for them all. Why don’t you log in and see what you can find.”

Natana didn’t seem overly enthusiastic, “Okay.”

When Den finished his sweep of the room, Natana lay naked on the bed with her portable computer propped in front of her. He shook his head. She had obviously, successfully hacked inside the hotel computer system. He ignored her obvious pleasant seducements and sat beside her, “How many do you count?”

She rolled over and put her arms around him. “Five,” she said nuzzling his neck.

“I count the same.”

“We’re safe for now,” she drew him down on the bed.

Natana lay on the large rug in front of the fireplace. Her nude body reflected the fire blazing on the hearth. Den’s breath caught in his throat with renewed desire.

“Are you almost finished with that?” she said staring into the flames.

“Finished—now. We have new identities and new documents. Your ability to infiltrate networks is incredible. I never heard of such a thing, even in my day.”

“You can’t credit me, I just tell the chip the problem I want to solve and I see the answer in my head. How long can we stay?”

“I wanted to leave tonight.”

“You’ll be too tired tonight.” She turned her body half around, “I intend to keep you here at least until tomorrow. Ha, I see you agree.”

“I can’t resist you.”

Den and Natana ate in the room. Den had reprogrammed the circuits in the hotel surveillance system, while Natana cracked the code on their security bracelets. Afterward, she programmed the system to indicate they were still in the room and created recurring events to order food and show their movement around the room. They waited a while after they removed the bracelets to ensure the ship or the local police hadn’t discovered their deception. They knew a policeman was assigned to the hotel to watch for them, but they already located and tracked him using the hotel’s surveillance. He wouldn’t be a problem. Den reserved a vehicle from the hotel’s automatic rental service under their assumed names. They donned the Neuterran clothing they bought at the spaceport when they first arrived on the planet. Under these they wore environment suits they borrowed from the Twilight Lamb’s stores. These were suits the ship’s services used while working in the Twilight Lamb’s recreational wilderness. They were military surplus suits that provided full body ballistic, chemical, biological, and radiological protection, limited space protection, and could give near invisibility against infrared and visual sensors. The headgear was fully integrated into the suits and provided night, infrared, and ultraviolet detection and computer interfaces. The headgear also included communications, but they would use psy as much as possible and only the comms when necessary. Many of the suit features were degraded or had been disconnected. With little effort Den returned them to full capability. They disguised their faces using a simple psy blanking technique they could keep up for hours. Their features

would appear absolutely average—whatever the viewer believed was an average face. Not even their friends should be able to recognize them.

Around midnight, Den and Natana opened the door to their room through the hotel's computer system—that way it wouldn't register their departure. As they closed the door, Natana set her programming in motion and checked its action. "We are in bed, moving quite fervently—for a long time," said Natana with a wistful expression. She turned back to the door, "The 'do not disturb' sign is up, and the door is locked. All set."

She and Den walked to the front desk and checked out as their new personas. They had falsified the hotel records and checked their new identities in a week ago. No one should detect the deception for at least 15 days—when the system resolved billing ambiguities. The sleepy desk clerk was only too happy to see them off. Their rental vehicle automatically showed up right on time at the front of the hotel. Den and Natana piled in with their single bags, and Den set the autopilot for the city of Neukoln. The small gravvehicle rose from the ground and headed off to the east at a high rate of speed. Asa-Thor stood high in the heavens and doused the landscape with a peculiar blue-white twilight. Few stars were visible in the nearly day lit sky, but some large structures in orbit were black against the background of Asa-Thor light.

"How long a flight do we have?" asked Natana.

"A couple of hours. The first stop is the university. I'd get some sleep if I were you."

"If I wanted to sleep, I wouldn't have come on a honeymoon," said Natana, but she curled up against Den and closed her eyes, "Love you anyway."

Den didn't take the time to sleep—he ran through the possible computer searches and checked off their planned activities in Neukoln. Then, he recorded the searches on his personal computer. He saw no traffic on the way in, but that changed when they exited the Northern

Forest Preserve. Den set the university as their destination. He chose the main library and the small vehicle headed toward the southern extreme of the city.

Den shook Natana awake when the gravvehicle started its landing sequence. She woke with a start and frowned, “And I thought it all was a dream.”

The air-car parked itself in the basement lot of the Neukoln University. Den and Natana cautiously stepped out and headed for the elevators. Inside, they found a computer terminal close to an exit and away from the main desk. They noticed a few late or early patrons, but not many people were around.

Psyonically, Natana asked, ‘Should we chance one of our computers or use theirs?’

‘Theirs for now. I have the searches planned—we can transfer them.’

“First, to log in,” Natana laced her fingers and pressed her palms outward, “Here goes nothing.” She cut into the computer boot system, and after about an hour successfully hacked into the terminal.

“Any alarms,” Den looked around.

“None yet. I logged in as a master record. I couldn’t get higher. First query?”

“I’m passing it from my computer. Do you have it?”

“Got it and it’s processing. Here you go.”

“Download the data the same way. We can review the details later. I want to scan it for now.”

“I’m scanning the whole thing in detail now. You forget my microchip lets me assimilate and parse it almost as quickly as the system can deliver it.”

“Anything yet?”

“Nothing we didn’t already find in the doctor’s records. A few extraneous records. It’s all basic university class stuff and some generic research. That’s done. What next?”

“Nothing on the archeological dig?”

“Nothing.”

“Next level. We need to search for Dr. Fleisher’s personal records.”

“That shouldn’t be so difficult.”

“Watch for alarms.”

“I’ll be careful. The name search is alarmed; the rest of his records are not.”

“Let’s run the last search recorded in his records.”

“Lots of new stuff. The archeological information is coming across. Underground facility on Arienth. All the data is there and the location. It looks like they didn’t get far in this one.”

“That’s the prison I escaped from. Neuterra was the source of the doctor’s equipment—Arienth psy equipment was inorganic. He had to get that chip here.”

“Another archeological dig—no two. Here on Neuterra. One is in the wilderness preserve. The government allowed some excavation, but cut them off after a month. It looks like the good doctor went back later with his friends a couple of times. The other is under the ancient Ducal Palace. It’s near the spaceport and the city center.”

“Any idea how much is left.”

“The records don’t say. It only says what they took out and where it is.”

“Take all of the data!”

“Got it—and transferred.”

“One last search. Go for the doctor’s records! Can you bypass the alarms?”

“I can try. Okay, here we go. The records are coming across. Damn, tripped the alarm. Got it—and transferred.”

“Logout! Let’s go!”

They grabbed their stuff and made directly for the gravvehicle. When they plopped in the air-car, Nata started to giggle and couldn’t stop. Den started the vehicle and sent it toward the spaceport. “Let me in on the joke. What’s so funny?” he said.

“Well, they’ll know someone was looking in the doctor’s records, and they may trace it back to the terminal we were using, but they will get a big surprise when they check who logged into the computer.”

“Why?”

“I signed in as Dr. Fleisher,” she started giggling again.

Den sent the gravvehicle to a cheap convenience inn near the city center. Asa-Thor had set long ago, and the sky was totally dark. The gravvehicle parked automatically, and they carried their bags into the Sunburst Automatic Inn. The robot desk scanned their IDs and gave them a room assignment. The elevator delivered them directly to the room. Like all convenience inns, it was tiny with a single pullout bed barely large enough for two, a pullout table and two chairs, and a bath stall on one side. The bed couldn’t be opened while the table and chairs were out.

Den stepped in and started a scan for surveillance devices.

“Room clear?” demanded Nata.

“Room clear.”

Nata peeled off her combat environment suit. “That feels better.” She inspected the glove marks along her fingers, then sighed and ran her hands along her naked body, “Just look at the marks that damn thing left on me. It’s almost as bad as a pressure suit.”

“It looks better on you than on anyone else I’ve ever seen.” He reached out to take her in his arms.

Nata stepped back with her arms out-stretched, “Don’t touch me while you’re wearing—that thing. And what did you mean: the suit or the marks.”

He laughed and stripped out of his suit. Nata was already in the shower. He joined her there.

They woke in the late afternoon while the Neuterran sun was at its peak but Asa-Thor was still below the horizon. At the table, between their personnel computers, they drank the inn’s second rate coffee and ate a meal from its automatic dispensers. Den and Nata poured over the data they took the night before.

“All right,” Den tapped his fingers on the table, “Everything points to something more than a criminal conspiracy. According to the records, Dr. Fleisher was well financed by an organization he called the Athenian Charter. The university records are full of this group when it comes to psy studies and Rep archeology.”

“They are at least creative—didn’t Athena leap fully armed from the mind of Zeus?”

“Well done, I remember that myth too.”

“Sorry, didn’t remember it. Searched the chip.”

Den shook his head. Then he said, “So the Athenian Charter is collecting old Rep and late Empire psy equipment and knowledge. We know they are using some of it.”

“They are using it to break into banks,” Natana leaned back in the small chair, “Many of the Neuterran computers are based on organic computer chips. Without the psy equipment, they are largely impervious to hacking and infiltration.”

“Except from you, my dear.”

“Thank you,” Nata gushed and pointed at her head, “It’s largely because I have one in my head.” She continued in her normal tone of voice, “But the chips can be hacked via psy. That’s the way they are programmed—the way you reprogrammed the chip in my head.”

Den ran his fingers through his hair, “The Neuterrans gave up on natural talents and used psy-based machines instead of human talent. The Athenian Charter use psy blankers to prevent their activities and identities from registering on the police psy equipment.”

“Why don’t we show up?”

“The devices are keyed to normal non-talents. They might pick us up as a normal person, but we could detect them and block them if necessary. Don’t you remember the psy probe at the port when we arrived?”

“Oh, that’s what it was. It was so weak, I ignored it.”

“The blankers the Athenian Charter members are using were meant to blank talents, they easily overcome the police scanners. They use the psy-detectors to pinpoint the police scanners. They have an enormous amount of power in their hands, and I doubt if they realize a tenth of it.”

“What do you think they are trying to do with psy—just crime?”

“Don’t know. That’s something I’d like to determine.”

“What’s next?”

“We move the notch up a level. I want to look at both of the archeological sites they discovered on Neuterra and find out if anything is left there.”

“And if there is?”

“We take it or destroy it.”

“When?”

“Tonight.”

“Good, we have time to um—sleep,” Nata rose from the chair and stretched sinuously. She ran her hand down her body, “I can glory in freedom from that torture suit for a few more hours anyway.”

Den and Natana squeezed into their combat environment suits. Nata complained the whole time, but when Den checked her suit, he found each item set precisely. They covered the suits with Neuterran clothing and repacked their equipment. Den checked them out of the convenience inn.

Asa-Thor sat high in the sky, but the sun was well down. They headed for the ancient grounds of the Ducal Palace.

As they neared the grounds a restricted area warning alarm went off in the air-car, Den said, “Put up your combat environment suit hood and turn on the infrared and ultraviolet filters. What do you see?”

“Crisscrossing lines of energy.”

“That’s a detection grid.”

“Does it cover the whole place? Do we have to walk kilometers across the grounds to get to the palace?”

Den pulled on his hood, “Where’s the archeological site?”

Nata stared straight ahead for a moment, “Near the palace. We are on the correct side, but it’s still clicks away.”

The area around them was park-like, empty of buildings and streets. Den put the controls of the gravvehicle on manual and brought it down close to the ground. At ground-level, a low stone wall stretched as far as he could see. Signs warned no one to cross the wall and announced the demarcation of the old estate. It was now a museum owned by the planetary government.

The wall was entirely covered with detection devices. They were obvious in the CES display. The upper detection beams didn’t reach as low as the top of the wall. A good ten-foot opening in the beams showed between the top of the wall and the sky beams. They waited beside the wall until Asa-Thor began to set.

When the darkness was complete, Den moved the gravvehicle ahead slowly between the detectors. On the other side of the wall, he lowered the air-car almost to the ground and pushed the speed up. The trees rushed by on either side.

“More to the left,” said Nata, “Keep going. You should see a pavilion to the left. There it is.”

The gravvehicle groaned as Den pulled up over a line of trees and pushed back over to the ground.

“Not far now,” Nata touched his arm.

Den stopped the air-car and turned it around. He backed it into a thicket of brush and trees. Before they left the gravvehicle, they pulled off their outer clothing.

‘Activate the camo on your CES!’ Den spoke directly to Nata’s mind. With a touch of a button, they disappeared into the terrain.

Nata took the lead and started off through the cool darkness.

‘No heroics,’ sent Den, ‘We’re unarmed.’

They crossed a large meadow. In the trees, they spotted small animals and birds. The animals stood out as bright blots on the dark sky. Den didn’t observe anything larger. They pushed through a line of trees and skirted a large thicket. Nata knelt at the edge of the brush and pointed, ‘It’s right there.’

Den glanced around the thicket and scanned the area. He saw nothing to alarm him. A low mound rose in the clearing. A cracked permacrete path led to the obvious entrance. Barricades and signs warned off the inquisitive. Den didn’t note any detection beams or surveillance devices.

‘Okay,’ he led Nata forward to the door. Den scanned the door electronically and searched around the frame, ‘I don’t see any alarms.’ A small computer access panel was mounted on the right side of the frame. Den popped it off to reveal the door controls and a computer connection.

Nata plugged in to the system and ran a check, ‘No alarms. It reports access to the main house computers.’

‘Can you open it without sending a signal?’

The door opened with a grinding rush. Nata looked smug, ‘Done.’

Den checked over the interior then he stepped inside and drew Nata behind him. She unplugged and followed right at his side. A set of stairs led deep into the ground. They cautiously walked down them. Den saw no beams or detection equipment until they arrived at the bottom of the stairs. A plasteel door blocked their way. An old psy coder unit sat at the base of the door. It was obvious in Den’s enhanced night vision sight. The box wasn’t operating—battery likely ran out. It looked like a simple Neuterran police unit.

This door sported an access panel like the one upstairs. Nata plugged in, but this door was protected with just a simple cipher lock. It didn't record its own operation. Giving a grinding whine, the door slid open and stopped halfway. Den gave the door a solid push and it slipped the rest of the way into the wall.

Inside was an almost bare room.

'I disconnected the lights,' sent Nata. Her psy signal disturbed a strange echo in the room.

Den froze. He heard a sparking and smelled a blast of ozone. Den dove out of the opening and dragged Natana with him to the floor. A blast of heat washed over them.

"No psy!" he called over the CES laser radar comm system. "Connect back into the computer system and see if you can find the trap. It's psy activated."

Nata tapped on her computer, "This is a very complex system. It's isolated from the other computer systems. Nothing else in or out."

"Can you bring up a diagram?"

"I'm in the control system. I don't want to risk breaking the psy security network. The doors are simple. This room is the first in the complex." She pressed a couple of keys and a hidden door in the back of the room opened.

"Do you think it's safe?" Den moved forward a step.

"You're asking me?"

"Well, can you see any more traps in the room?"

"I don't see anything—I told you."

"Okay, let's slow it down. We have all the time we want. I want you to try to break into the security system."

Nata pursed her lips, “I won’t be responsible for whatever happens.” She tapped fervently on the computer. “That didn’t work.” She tried another approach, “That didn’t work either. Look, without psy, I don’t think I can break into the system.”

“It’s likely blanked too.”

“We could just go.”

“But if we don’t know where the traps are...”

“The suits will give some protection.”

“Let me think—can you shut down all the power?”

“That might work. I already opened all the doors. I could shut everything down, but the emergency systems...”

“Try it!”

After a few minutes, Nata said softly, “Eureka.”

“No emergency lights,” said Den.

“I may have cut them off too, or this facility may not have them.”

“I’ll try some psy.” Den sent a search—nothing. He didn’t sense a warning like before. The weapon across the room didn’t fire. “That seems to have worked. Do you want to try to break the network security?”

“Love to.” Nata concentrated on the system through her computer. She tracked the security system through the network and tried to break into the system. She looked up at Den and curled her lip, “I don’t need to break it. I’ve got it all now.”

“What do you mean?”

“With the power down, there is nothing guarding the chips anymore. I just went in and took the coded data from the system memory.” Nata sketched the structure on her computer. “The

door in this room leads down into two lower levels. They are both large rooms with storage and offices around them. There is also another entrance on the lowest level. The system data doesn't say where it goes, but it heads toward the ducal estate."

"Let's check this place out," Den headed toward the open stairway. As he crossed the room, he said, "It looks like they took everything out of here. Was there an inventory in the data?"

"Yes. The Athenian Charter took most of the blankers from here. They also took psy detectors and some of Dr. Fleisher's test equipment. None of the chips or chip making equipment came from this room. But, there is a lot of that kind of equipment listed on the levels below."

The subterranean stairs glowed starkly in their night vision glasses as they slowly made their way to the next level.

"I don't think they found these stairs. Just look at the dust—no footprints."

At the bottom of the stairs, they came on a very thick door opened wide. The laboratory was a shambles, but no one had been inside the place—not for a thousand years or more. Just as Nata predicted, doors along each wall led to windowed offices and storage. At the other end of the room stood a door just like this one and in one corner a cell like the one they occupied for three weeks in Dr. Fleisher's care. This cell was still occupied—two skeletons lay on the bunk in the cell. As Nata and Den made their way through the lab, they saw other fleshless bodies on the floor or draped across chairs and counters.

"What happened?" sent Nata.

"Don't know. Gas...biological agent...or the poor souls in the cell may have unleashed their talents in one last effort. There is so much equipment here. In the wrong hands..."

"What are we going to do with it?"

“Destroy what we can’t take. Seal it away forever.”

Den made his way to the cell. The door was half open. “Looks like the mechanism gave out before it opened all the way.” He pressed into the cell and made a quick search. He picked up one of the skulls and shook it. A small chip much like the one inside Nata’s head fell onto the floor. Den gingerly picked it up with his gloved hand. He concentrated on the chip and tried to read some of its last saved data. “This chip’s dead, but we might be able to coax some information out of it when we get back to the ship.” He placed it in a ceriplast vial and tucked it in a pocket. He repeated the same steps with the other skull and found a couple of dead chips.

Nata said, “I can tell you exactly when the facility was attacked—it’s all in the data system.”

“Can you get back in and wipe the whole network?”

“Sure,” Nata was already hooking her computer into an open node, “Any parts you want to keep?”

“Don’t wipe security. When we leave, we’ll turn it all back on and, this time, protect the power system. Put in your own codes.”

“Sure.”

Den took every data cartridge, chips, and back up storage disk he could find. He stuffed blankers and portable psy detection equipment in his bag. Then he began destroying everything he could. He went into the offices and storage rooms running through them the same way. Nata joined him after she finished with the computers.

At the last side room he sent to her, ‘Are you ready for the next level?’

“Let’s go.”

Den led cautiously down the next set of stairs. The smell of dank and rot wafted up the stairwell to them. At the bottom, the thick doorway there opened into a processing area. The

floor was covered about 10 centimeters with black sludge, and the walls showed that water at one time covered as deep as a meter.

The rooms on this level were all cells. They didn't find any remains in them. The equipment was damaged, but could be used again. "This is where they manufactured the biochips," Den motioned, "We must make sure no one uses this again."

"What's wrong with the biochips? Surely the one in my brain is safe and a fantastic human innovation."

"In your hands, I would trust anything, but the group that wants this technology could use it to control men and women. Except for the accident of war and the dark times, the Repts would have used these things to control and enslave millions. You stored all the data in your computer didn't you?"

Nata nodded

"Then we haven't lost the capability, but we can keep it out of the wrong hands."

She shrugged and together they systematically demolished the manufacturing equipment. They took all the chip blanks they could find. At the end of the chamber, they found the open door and corridor that led in a straight line toward the ducal palace.

"What now?"

"I would like to follow this, but the day will dawn soon and I want to be back under cover before then."

They retraced their steps to the entryway, and Nata turned the power back on. She closed and sealed the doors again and set the security system back on. This time it wouldn't react to psy, but to anyone attempting to enter the structure.

Den led them back to the surface entrance. A thin trace of Neuterra's sun just cut the horizon. As the sky lightened, they took the gravvehicle back across the low wall and reentered Neukoln. In an hour they were in a different convenience inn sleeping dreamlessly.