

The Pitcher Plant

By Brett McKean

Rakee's fingers adeptly slid back and forth across the screen, searching through command menus. The color coded decision trees zoomed in and out as options were culled and proffered. The reflected colors from the screen swam on her dark skin. A soft glow from the white dwarf twenty million kilometers away lit Rakee's face when the computer sifted through the data and darkened the screen. The small ship was silent except for the hum of the generators converting sunlight and hydrogen into energy. Rakee looked out the window at the barren planet's surface, the leading edge of the solar array sucked up all the light and reflected nothing, it was a black cutout. She let out a long deep breath, swept her straight black hair behind her ears and focused again on the display.

Every type of particle, wave and field that was known to sentience was felt by the instruments and scanners on the Zarathustra. They focused on a cave a few hundred meters from the ship. Zara told her the cave was a naturally occurring feature on a planet that was nothing more than a sphere of rock. Rakee knew the cave was not a natural occurrence, at least not completely. She shook her head in frustration at the limitations of the software. She spun her chair around and quickly walked to the front of the Zarathustra. The windshield was dirty, but using binoculars Rakee could clearly make out the symbols that marked the top of the cave. The symbols were designed to exploit a weakness in the pattern recognition software. Walking back to the console she pulled out bolt from her pocket and drew the symbols on the screen. The screen went dark as the computer thought. "The Treasure awaits," was Zara's translation. A dead dialect of the Kalciderian scribes, thick and full of slurs, played over the soundsystem as Zara repeated

the sentence in its original tongue.

The beauty of the universe constantly amazed Rakee; stormy gas giants, volcanic moons, red and orange columns of ejecting gas from dying suns. But this planet was worthless and plain, she thought. She doubted if anyone had ever landed on it. The powers that produced the limitless diversity and surprise in the universe forgot this planet. The white dwarf, of which this planet was its lone satellite, had never produced life on any of its five satellites. Planet FJE-154-B's only reaction to its star was to have one half baked and the other frozen at regular intervals. Rakee understood why they put it here.

She found her self leaning on the control panel to look at the cave, she pushed off, crossed her arms and paced the corridors of the Zarathustra. She asked for music from Zara, dance music she usually liked, she but immediately had Zara turn it off. This is a great place for an ambush, she thought. There's no one within light years of this place. But what are they waiting for? she wondered. She looked at her watch; thirty minutes had elapsed since she landed on this no name rock.

Only twice in her life had Rakee faced physical danger. Three years ago she was coming back late from a nightclub on Secor II, a rare night off. She slapped the door panel with her hand on the Zarathustra and the door slid open. At the console across the room there was a man to which Rakee had just made a delivery that afternoon. He dropped the cutting tool he was using to open the control panel and fumbled for his pistol. He was shaking when he drew. Rakee had three drinks in her from the club; she did not shake. She blew a hole in his chest the size of a grapefruit; he shot off a grape sized piece of her shoulder. Everyone in a while Rakee would find a spot of blood she missed cleaning up. While she was offloading the cargo the client bugged the ship and captured the access codes. Now she scanned

the entire ship after anyone came on board. Traders like her were robbed, cheated and killed daily. Humans were the worst. Most often her problem was deciding whether the cargo she was being hired to haul was stolen or contraband. She would lose her ship if caught with either, and rarely was anyone willing to pay enough to cover that risk.

Forty-eight hours ago she was cruising around the Perry Nebula on her way to Hades Minor, She passed many ships traveling the old route from Westerly Post. The port engine was out of tune and Rakee was wedged between the fuel exchanger and the reactor, testing for the source of the dissonance.

"Rakee, we're receiving a transmission, would you like me to read it?" Rakee's father set the Zarathustra's computer to speak in playful, slightly flirty female voice, or least Rakee thought it was flirty. When Rakee inherited the ship, she changed the voice to a polite, dry male voice. But she still called it Zara.

"Go ahead," Rakee said.

"A treasure awaits, do not miss the opportunity of a lifetime, exclamation point. The Veratians invite you to test your cleverness and skill. If you succeed..."

"Ooohh, how can I possibly lose? Let's go!" she chirped.

"Sarcasm, correct?"

"Correct." she grimaced as she loosened a stuck valve.

"If you succeed, a treasure beyond your imagination awaits. If you fail, nothing is lost. Bring only yourself and the contents of your ship to the following coordinates. We will direct you from there. You have eighteen hours to reach the following coordinates, SSGC one five nine six six..."

"O.K., is that it?"

"Yes, except for the coordinates."

"That's enough then, delete please."

"I've taken it upon myself to scan the area

around the coordinates. Nothing is there, at least nothing that's not in the charts."

Rakee stopped her investigation of the engine. There's something odd about the message, something earnest and playful about it, she thought. She was an collector of scams and forwarded the best ones to her friends for a good laugh. But the scams were usually offers of easy money, rather than outright offers of a treasure as the reward for cleverness. This was a new strain of scam, and like a new mutation of a disease interests the scientist, she was intrigued.

"Actually don't delete it if you haven't already," she told Zara.

"O.K."

Rakee started on the engine again, but she kept coming back to it, running it over in her head. She pulled herself out of the engine and paced the grated metal catwalk between the two massive engines. With the conduits and pipes snaking around them, the engines seemed like quivering spiders at the centers of their webs.

"Can I deliver this shipment and still make it to the coordinates in time?" she asked.

The galaxy still relied heavily on small trading vessels. Only the largest population centers used the large cargo ships. The small traders were fast, almost as efficient ton for ton, but they had little to no overhead. Rakee was CEO, CFO, mechanic, security, and the head office made the trip with her. Also, low level government beaurcrats found it useful to have a list of small traders that were known and trusted. For in times of civil unrest, war, or natural disaster, for a price, Rakee would take on passengers and save the day for a small few.

"Yes, just barely."

Why are you being stupid and even considering investigating this? she thought. Because you want to post it as a warning, or because you want it to be true? This is a trap, or at least a waste of time, nothing more.

People don't give money or treasure away answering a riddle or something, she thought. She thought of what her father said after negotiations with a potential customer broke down. It was a lot of money, and she asked why they weren't taking the job. He thought for a moment and spoke slowly.

"Don't trust. Know. You have to constrain your client's alternates so that you know, you *know* what they'll do, because you've arranged the pick-up, payment and exit so they have no opportunity to take from you. Don't leave it to trust. I couldn't plan that deal, I would've had to trust them, and that I can't do, not with the sort of people we deal with." She knew the story of the Treasure of the Veratains, everyone did. Like the Lost Fleet of the Selarid Faction or Dr. Joris' Gravity Cannon or the Fountain of Youth those with good judgment ignored the rumors. Those whose wishes got the best of their beliefs followed the stories that led into harm, or evaporated in the vacuum. Some thought the Treasure of the Veratains was a catch of platinum bars hidden in an abandoned freighter floating in a nebula. Others thought it was a stockpile of information and evidence detailing the crimes of a million governments for either blackmailing or exposing. Kaal Firth, Rakee's mechanic, told her the Treasure was a million gold coins the Veratains minted from the donations of the converted wealthy. A matter accelerator on the Zarathustra had fried, only Kaal's feet were visible from under the accelerator. They would twitch as he talked and worked.

"Don't tell another soul, but I know where it is," he whispered.

"Oh yea?" Rakee did her best impression of interestedness; she had a good relationship with Kaal, just flirty enough to keep him hoping and hence not overcharging.

"I got this friend and we're renting an Invren H5. I was working on his old Argo class twin a few weeks ago, a real nice machine. It had a

custom fusion reactor to match these big 018 pyron injectors he fixed up. His coolant system is still slowin' him down though. Anyway, he was surveying a moon near the Hadrin belt. Of course I can't tell you exactly where it is, yet. He found a large chamber, a tunneled chamber. There's no record of it in the mining database and its right on the old Veratain trading routes. We're getting a drill and explosives and cutters so we can get in there. Do you want in on the deal? Split it three ways. We could use your ship to get it out, I know you can work a cutter."

He pulled himself out from under the Accelerator, all grease and sweat. He was totally serious, and totally mistaken, Rakee thought. You're letting your desires get in the way of the facts my friend, she thought. People's capacity for self-deception was infinite. She knew the area well. It was heavily traveled and it was cashed. Every rock bigger than her ship had been stripped and scanned a dozen times over. It was probably a collapsed mine that nobody had bothered to reopen.

"No thanks, but good luck to you Kaal." she replied politely. He looked at her blankly and went back to work. That was two years ago. Last week she brought in the Zara and he was still fixing ships and overcharging everyone but her.

The Veratains were the old priests of Gua-Han, she reminded herself. Rakee knew that the religion was thousands of years old. She tried to remember what they taught; peace and love or something. She couldn't really remember, but she didn't feel like a lecture from Zara. The Veratains didn't exist anymore; at least the priests didn't call themselves that anymore. Like all things Gua-Han went through alternating periods of grow and decay, but it never died completely. Through the Great plague, censorship, upheaval, war, purges, the religion never died. It was always somewhere, and often it popped up it disparate

places at once, with no visible connection between the two. To its followers this indicated the timeless ultimate truth it contained. To its detractors, its tenaciousness simply reflected the problem of ascribing intelligence to all intelligent life.

Rakee remembered when her father caught her reading a Gua-Han dablet when she was thirteen. After unloading the day's cargo to a large man who was anxious to leave, they secured the Zarathustra and walked to the market place. Sweat from the heat and the exertion of unloading the cargo dripped from her forehead onto the dusty red ground. Darrin bought Rakee a drink from the old women blending purple and pink starfish shaped fruit. Animals squawked and the crowded marketplace crawled with food, politics and deal making. Rakee stared at each of the countless booths and tables that sold slipshot drives, fuel tanks, intricate statues and pipes, dazzling bowls and glassware, drugs, computers, guns. Her father stopped to look at a table with various scanning equipment, mainly spectrometers and microgravitometers. He began asking the proprietor questions and Rakee wandered away.

Darrin rarely took Rakee to places like this. The contained chaos scared and excited her. The colors, smells and bright colors of everyone's clothing, the occasional whiff of manure and chattering groups of men in the center arguing and shaking their fists made her breath heavy. Chanting peaked through cacophony of the market. A group of monks were chanting on the other side of the street. They wore black denim jumpsuits, too big for their lean bodies. From what Rakee could see their body hair was shaven, including eyebrows. Some leaned against the wall while a few sat cross-legged, rocking back and forth slowly. Rakee walked past them twice, trying to look as if she had somewhere else to go. On the third pass she stopped off to the side and

watched. One of the monks leaned forward and handed her a dablet. As he leaned she could see his ribs and gaunt body. He smiled and bowed slightly, saying nothing. She quickly slipped it into her satchel. Her back to Darrin, she slowly looked around to see him still haggling with the proprietor who shook his head and crossed his arms in finality. Darrin reached out to her and pulled her close as they walked on through the market. A few days later he caught her reading it. She tried to hide it as he passed by her room, she had not yet made a habit of closing it. He grabbed it from her and threw it in the fusion shoot.

"These people are fools," he said loudly. "They don't know what they're talking about. It's all nonsense, don't believe that shit. Otherwise you'll end up begging for money and ranting on the streets like them." She looked down as her lip began to tremble. Sucking in a large breath and letting it out slowly he calmed down and sat down beside her bed. "They're lots of mysteries in the universe. But no one knows the answers to any of them and anyone who says they do are either stupid, or they to cheat you. You don't want to be a fool and have everyone laugh at you do you?" he rubbed his hair and looked down. "Believe what you want to believe Rakee, but be wary; wishing it were true only lets others take advantage of us."

She knew she had no good reason to go to those coordinates, no reason at all. It was easy for her to resist such things, usually she could immediately see the trap behind the stroke of good luck or quick buck. She could see the sales pitch before it came, or the pound of flesh clause in the fine print. Not that she was afraid of a good deal, she lived off good deals. Say you were offered to move medical supplies to some plague infested outpost stinking of death and madness, and they were willing to pay to get it there fast. That's a good deal if you're careful. But the better the deal sounded the

more wary she became. But she remembered that day in the marketplace, the anticipation, the warmth of the blue sun on her face, the excitement and uncertainty. Maybe it's real, she thought. I'll just be careful.

After the cargo was out of her hands and the money in them, she plugged in the coordinates.

"I may be a stupid computer, but this does not compute," complained Zara.

"We're going. Keep an eye out for me, if things get fucked up, I want an escape route planned."

"Aye captain."

As promised, the signal, which she could not pinpoint, gave her a new set of coordinates when they reached the first set.

She paced some more. Slowly, the Zarathustra approached the planet and landed.

"OK, I'm going in. Keep me updated," she ordered. Rakee walked purposefully to the storage locker and began pulling out equipment she needed. Her survival suit was thick and heavy, but it was worn in and comfortable for its weight. Her hands ran over the slightly reflective smooth material and over the occasional nicks and scuffs from years of abuse. It had a dull reflectivity to it, and it was nicked and scarred from years of abuse. She untied her boots and slipped them and her army surplus pants and vest. She looked in the mirror hard as she took off her favorite shirt, stealing a glance in the mirror in just her t-shirt and underwear.

Not bad. I'd do me, she thought. She looked into the mirror closely, a lock of black hair fell in front of her dark skin and she pulled it all back into a pony tail. She began breathing heavily and she pulled away from the mirror. After zipping it up her body warming up from the suit's insulation. The temperature control kicked and instantly her skin cooled.

She slung the air tank over her back and pulled the straps and the metal hooks clinked as she locked them in place. Her gauss pistol

reflected the light from the white dwarf and she tucked it into the black holster strapped around her left thigh. Three clips of ammunition, heavy and cool to the touch she strapped around her right thigh. She clipped two black globular smoke grenades onto the air tank shoulder straps. The helmet was a compressed sphere. Three large windows one directly in front and one on each side with ten centimeter brace separating them. Behind her head was windowless and held the electronics. From the engine room she retrieved her integrated scanning unit: a sheet metal box, briefcase sized, on one end were sensors and detectors, which beamed information to the computer in her helmet. On the bottom was a small gold colored plaque that read, "This hardware/software has been certified as non-sentient by the Sentience Directorate, under the authority of the Sentience Commandments."

The air whistled out of the airlock as the door opened, she held onto a handle bolted into the wall as the air pressure pushed her. Her breathing grew deafening as external sound lost any route to her ears. The effect of the grav-compensator lost its effect as she stepped carefully down the ladder. She was carrying a lot of weight, which was somewhat mitigated by the lesser gravity of the planet. It was twig light now and shadows hid portions of the terrain, the white sun, low on the horizon, hit the sharp angles of the rock, and the scene became a heavily contrasted black and white photograph. The ground was three centimeters or so of fine powdery dust, covering an uneven granite surface. The cave lay 100 meters or so ahead, carved in the semi-circle cliff wall that was about forty meters tall in the center, diminishing towards either end. Huge boulders and rock formations forced to her wind a path to the cave. Looking back towards the Zarathustra, the fading light made the metallic curves of the ship in pop out in relief to the sharp angles of the boulders in front of

the cliff face.

Turning away from the ship she headed into the cave. The first hundred meters or so looked like a natural cave. Then, abruptly a pattern of dimples about two centimeters in diameter covered the cave wall. The shape of the cave circular became perfectly circular. It curved right and descended at a shallow angle, corkscrewing down.

She had been walking steadily for ten minutes when contact with the Zarathustra was cut. Her stomach dropped and her hand went to her pistol. She dropped on one knee and swiveled her head back and forth. I'm totally exposed here, this was a mistake, she thought. The suit's defogger kicked in when her heavy breathing began to obscure her vision. She pressed a few times on the touch sensitive screen on her right forearm. As she suspected, a full spectrum white noise field had overwhelmed her communications signal to and from Zara. She drew her pistol and ran back to the surface. Exhausted and panting she ran out of the cave, looking around as she made her way back to the ship.

"Zara!" she yelled, but only static echoed back.

As her fingers met the control pattern panel on the ship, tiny filaments from her suit extended into the control panel and connected with Zara.

"All systems nominal, no ships or contacts in the area," said Zara, anticipating her.

"Great, I'm coming in."

Once inside, her hands shook as she paced.

"Quite a scare, losing contact like that," she said.

"Yes, disconcerting."

"Is there any way we could get around it'?"

"It's very strong and fills the useable spectrum, given that we're so near the source I don't think so.

"I'm assuming we can't transmit as well."

"That's correct, do you want to take off and send a message asking for assistance."

"No, not yet, I think given what we've seen, we have to assume that they can make good on their threat to erase our memories. But it's an option," said Rakee

"Let's string a wire," she continued. "From what I've seen it would be easy to string a wire behind."

"But shouldn't we assume that there's either somebody down there, or at least an active security system, it could be very dangerous, and that wire could be cut easily."

"I know, I know. But I just have to see what's down there."

"Curiosity..."

"Quiet Zara, remind me who's the sentient one around here?"

"You're the sentient one. I know, I don't have any feelings or goals."

"Good, keep that in mind."

"I'm just looking out for your best interest."

"You are the voice of reason. But I gotta do this."

"O.K." Zara said with resignation.

"I'll get the wire, you keep an eye on those sensors."

As she walked through the tunnel again, she trailed the wire, keeping her in contact with the ship. Every five minutes or so she would anchor the line with a climbing screw she would drill into the rock. The pedometer read four point three kilometers. She felt fine, but thought about the distance she was willing to go before she turned back.

At eight kilometers the tunnel leveled out and made a ninety degree turn. She pulled up flush against the near corner of the turn and without exposing her body swung the ISU around the corner. Most of the channels were scrambled, but a photo turned out fine. The cave opened up into a straight square hallway, about 5 meters on each side and 300 meters long. Lights slowly came on, a soft yellow glow. Rakee froze and took another picture. She waited a minute taking readings. As she

turned the corner and as she crossed the plane into the hallway she felt resistance against her body. Her HUD indicated there was a breathable atmosphere instead of vacuum. I must have passed through a soft wall, that's expensive, she thought. She didn't take off her helmet, though her ISU told her she could breathe the atmosphere. The light seeped through simple fixtures attached to the walls. As she approached the end of the hall she felt heard and felt a rumble. The wall in far wall began to rise. She stepped back and went for her pistol. Her face changed from fear to awe. In the room beyond the wall that opened was a treasure that would set her free.

In the center of the room, Yordur's lost statue of Minvidas stood ten meters high. Minvidas was holding a rifle with one hand and the other pointed up towards the new frontier. Gold bars lay at his feet and a spear made of solid Amazon mahogany and tipped with an obsidian point leaned against the base of the priceless statue. It was all real, the gold and jewels were real, and the artifacts were original, or at least old enough and made from the right materials. On a statue of Princess Ja'may, there was a necklace of Sidorian platinum with sapphires and emeralds. The platinum shimmered and changed colors as she moved her head. A gown made from the web of the Devorian Spider hung on the arm of an ancient robot from the court of Ferryhan The Just, its octagon ruby eyes glowed from the atomic reactor still burning inside. A skull of the extinct Kilner Dragon, seven meters high, its bone hard as steel, hung from the ceiling. Its mouth of daggers was open. Intricate scenes of battle and conquest of a lost empire etched in acid on the skull over a hundred generations. Off to the left a suit of armor made of tempered polyanium, the strongest known material, leaned against a rusty cargo container. Hundreds of interlocking plates left no gaps in the armor, like a crustacean's shell. The suit,

with its black hue, looked like a discarded shell from a molted monster. Chests of steel and oak lay strewn about the room, filled with gold, diamonds and other jewels, as if afterthoughts placed as filler amongst the other priceless treasures.

She started towards the treasure but then saw her reflection and stopped. A wall separated her from the treasure. She put her hand on the wall and it felt almost pliable, like she could bend it. She pushed harder and it did give a few centimeters but no more. She pounded on it with her fist and there was no give, it felt like pounding a boulder. It was like sand, the more kinetic energy you feed into it, the more resistant it became.

A light went on to the left of her, she spun. The stone moved revealing a screen. It printed these words in simple large type,

"Thank you for responding to our message. There is a treasure before you and it is real. There is a riddle to be solved. There is only one way to gain entrance. Our temple scans your body and brain for a certain pattern of awareness and peace, and once obtained, you will have our Treasure. You may choose to leave but your memory and records of this place will be wiped and will never be called again."

She looked back into the vault holding the treasure, her memory of the villa on New Cyprus appeared. Her client paid extra for door to door delivery. The town's marina consisted of a run down ticket station and a large dirt field marked off in squares. She loaded everything onto the pallet jack. After thinking about it for a second, she decided to pull it herself. It wasn't far and the pallet jack was powered, so she only had to walk along and guide it. She walked through the ancient town's winding roads filled with stone and brick buildings, all with red ceramic tiled roofs. She was a sight to the townsfolk, they stopped each other and pointed, laughed and

whispered. She wound her way through the ancient town and up the curvy road to the villa sat on a hill overlooking the town. When she arrived at the front gate which was covered in red vines, it opened and a female's voice told her to continue up to the house.

She delivered the goods to an older woman, short and lively, dressed in a black and red dress, who could see that Rakee was in awe of the place and she gave Rakee a tour of the marble and stone villa. In the back of the villa and down the other side of the hill was a lake about half a kilometer from the villa. They stood and watched the sun set and the sailboats scurry back home. I could buy that place, she thought pressed against the vault wall. I could offer them a thousand times what its worth. Thoughts of what would be raced through her head, the men that would seek her hand, family and children, the ships she would own, the fame of being the one to discover the Treasure of the Veratians.

Her saw started smoking just before it touched the wall with the blade. She threw it down on the ground and walked away. She didn't have to open it, she knew it was fried like the others. And just like the others it had been shielded the best way she knew how. How did they do that? she wondered. Her attempts to hack the computer system, were foiled by a quantum randomizer that she could not find. She took out her pistol and fired off a few rounds into the translucent wall. Just as before, the wall absorbed the projectile, she could see it stuck there. It would dissolve in a few hours and the wall would be look pristine again. She walked outside and took aim the boulders and outcroppings of rock surrounding the cave. Boulders would shatter like glass from her pistol. Out of rounds and exhausted, she walked slowly back the Zarathustra and fell into a disturbed sleep. When she woke she began planning again, rummaging through her equipment, bouncing ideas off Zara, then it was

back into the cave to try another plan. Tunnel through the rock? But with what? She did not have the weapons or equipment to tunnel around the room. And the walls of the room were three feet thick of Achillinum, she could not enter through brute force. Cut the power? But where was it? Probably safely stored inside the room.

A cycle of frustration, inspiration and failure marked her days and nights. Trips between the cave and the Zarathustra wore shallow path in the ashen surface. Each plan she implemented revealed a new layer of security of the vault. Every piece of information she could squeeze from her equipment was either disheartening or inconclusive. She did conclude that they could wipe her memory as well as Zara's. Finally, it fried her ISU, she screamed and threw it against the wall, where it made no mark. She yelled again and ran up to the wall.

"Let me in! Goddamn you fucking freaks! Let me in!" She pounded her fists against it, eliciting only dull thuds. After a time her screams turned to sobs. "Please let me in." She once again contemplated the life that she could have: riches that were teasing her, all the men that would seek her hand, the necklaces made out of black diamonds, the dresses made of satin, the villa. She also thought of the things that she would never have to do again, scrub the energy capacitors, align the communications array, sleep in a room with no windows. Thoughts of her life transformed and her inability to find a solution to the riddle brought a wave of selfhatred and pity.

She sank against the wall and leaned against it on her side. Turning towards the room that held the treasure, she did not see what was beyond, but only her reflection. It was like she had never seen her own face, the strangeness of it held her attention. The scar near her left jaw

was visible in the reflection. A few months after her meeting with the Gua-Huan monk, on a planet racked by civil war, an explosion from a bomb had sent a sliver of metal into her. Surprised by her own blood running down her arm she did not notice her father yelling her name and holding his hand over her throat to stop the bleeding. If she wished, the scar could be made to disappear in a few hours, but Rakee kept it, at first as an act of rebellion against her father insistence that she have it healed. But now she was unsure. Her eyes met themselves and she stared hard into them, daring the others, staring herself down. Another wave of self hatred suddenly reached her, she saw her face turn into rage and she pounded the reflection. Turning away, the hatred soon turned to self-pity. I'll never have it, she thought. I've come this close and then to have a bunch of self-righteous freaks take it away. She clawed weakly at her face and body. Her head drooped and she went limp.

She heard a sliding sound and a rectangle of light appeared on her right, on the opposite wall where the monitor appeared before. It was a doorway. She stood looking at it for a long while, forgetting to ask how the room had been hidden from her. She stepped cautiously into the glowing doorway.

The room beyond the doorway which was about ten meters square. Ample light was coming from the ceiling itself. There lay a simple tan carpet on the floor along with two large pillows and a chair. On the chair there was what she recognized to be a dablet, but it did not look like any other dablet she had ever seen. About 30 cm square, it was larger than usual, and the worn, smooth wooden frame gave it some heft. She picked it up and switched it on. Information regarding its contents appeared and she guessed there was enough information inside to fill a small library. She looked around the room, and another plan entered her head for bypassing

the security. She remembered she had an old ISU that was dead in storage. Maybe she could get it working again. And there had to be a way to shield it so that they couldn't get at it. She switched off the dablet, tossed it on the chair and left the room. The door stayed open.

Rakee opened her eyes, got up from a sitting position and set the dablet carefully on the floor. The dablet displayed the last page of Rayneff's Journey from New Paris. During the last two months she read *The Seven Ways of Peace* by Tryanine, *Methods of Understanding*, by Eoppinor, and the *Trance Practices of the Order of Veratians* and all the rest. Standing up, she looked around the room and carefully set the dablet on the pillow. After walking out of the room Rakee stopped and looked past her reflection to the vault wall. The vault wall slowly rose leaving nothing between her and the treasure. Rakee smiled slightly, turned and walked out of the cave. She never returned. The lucid wall protecting a treasure slid shut again, as did the door to the room holding the Treasure of the Veratians.