

**D**r. Cyrus Klov was the most successful chemist the North had ever known. During his career he created sixty percent of the North's innovations. Since he never disclosed his past to the press, many believed that he was a child prodigy. In reality Dr. Klov found his inspiration near the end of his academic career. Before then he muddled through school doing just enough to stay in the program. At age twenty-three, Cyrus Klov's only desire was to finish school and acquire a steady job. Then the unexpected happened. The most renowned chemist at the time, Dr. Ricker, sponsored a competition to create a new compound for a medical adhesive. Not expecting much Klov submitted his research and won. Suddenly, with just a month left at the university Klov had a clear future and was the envy of most of his peers. The morning after graduation, Klov left his dormitory with a suitcase that held all of his belongings and began his new life. He was grateful for the opportunity but knew the other assistants would likely be much better at the technical side than him. Klov walked into Dr. Ricker's lab and saw that his thoughts were confirmed as he looked around the lobby. All of the other assistants were in the top three percent of their graduating classes. All of them looked back at him wondering why he was there. At that moment a woman walked over to the group.

"I see that everyone has arrived. Hello, my name is Janelli. I am the head of the support staff," she said as two androids came over to the group. "Please deactivate the 'follow' function on your suitcases so they won't get in the way during the tour. The androids will take them to your apartments."

As soon as they were deactivated the androids picked up the suitcases and took them down the hallway. A second later, Janelli began the tour.

While the actual size of the labs in the North varied depending on their specific applications, the configuration of each lab was the same. In the front of the lab was the area reserved for the support staff, vendors who were hired to take care of the housekeeping and administrative needs of the lab. The desks belonging to the four humans were aligned along the long reception counter. There they monitored the androids' work, ordered the supplies and catered to the needs of the assistants and the owners. Janelli's desk was raised higher than the others and was located at the right end of the counter, near the entrance of the lab. Apartments for the support staff were in an area behind the reception counter. The ten androids spent their downtime in the holding area that stood to the left side of the reception counter. All of the cooking, cleaning, and daily maintenance was done by the androids. On the left side of the lab were the offices of the owner and the junior owner. In the center was the lab core. The left side of the lab core, which sat across from the offices, was the main lab. The main lab could be split into two or three smaller labs. Three auxiliary labs made up the right side of the lab core. All of the labs could be sealed off within five seconds if any biohazards were released. In the main and auxiliary labs all of the equipment that would be needed was housed within the walls and could be retrieved by voice command when it was time to work. Across the hall from the auxiliary labs were a cafeteria and a recreation room. The recreation room used virtual reality to simulate any environment for fitness or relaxation. At the back of the building, the owner, junior owner and each assistant had his own apartment. All of the apartments were configured that same way as well: they had a main room and a bathroom. The main room had a bed and a kitchenette.

Janelli then turned around and looked at the assistants. "If there are any issues, everything should be relayed to the junior owner or to me. Only the androids and I are allowed in the rest of the lab. Also don't enter the back part of our area. If no one is at the counter, please summon me.

Do not remove any of the experiments from the lab core to prevent contamination. Dr. Ricker wants to see all of you in the cafeteria in one hour,” Janelli said.

All of the assistants went to their assigned rooms to unpack while Janelli went back to her desk. An hour later the assistants and Janelli met in the cafeteria for their first staff meeting. None of the assistants knew what to expect as they waited for Dr. Ricker to come. Soon he arrived with a big grin on his face.

“Good Morning, everyone,” Dr. Ricker said.

“Good morning, sir,” everyone replied.

“Welcome to my lab. I see that you don’t have any luggage so you’ve obviously done the tour. The next order of business is to talk about the winner of the junior owner position. Like many of my colleagues, I decided to have a contest to choose my successor. I couldn’t be happier with the result. Klov, please come here.”

Klov looked back at Dr. Ricker in shock. Dr. Ricker didn’t previously disclose that the winner of the contest would become the junior owner. All Klov knew was he would be working for him. Klov then began to look around and saw the shocked faces of his colleagues staring back at him. He reluctantly got up and stood beside Dr. Ricker.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is Cyrus Klov, the new junior owner,” Dr. Ricker announced.

As the words left Dr. Ricker’s mouth, envy welled up in all of the assistants except for one. She continued to stare back at him in shock. Klov then looked over at Janelli who looked back at him just as shocked as the assistants. Janelli smiled back at him apprehensively hoping her team wouldn’t be replaced too soon. Dr. Ricker then assigned the assistants their projects.

Even though Klov was the junior owner it didn’t mean that his work load was lighter. On the contrary, he had to do his share of the experiments and work with Dr. Ricker to learn about how to manage a lab. During the first week, most of the other assistants made life as difficult as they possibly could for him. They would lock him out of the labs, deliberately set things on fire and tamper with his food and his work. Klov soon began to find concentrating arduous. As a result he sometimes didn’t complete his lab work. When it was complete, it didn’t make any sense. The other assistants decided to leave him alone thinking that he would destroy his own career. One night the assistant who didn’t hate him found Klov in the main lab drowning in despair because he couldn’t get a formula to work. He sat on the floor with his head in his hands and his elbows on his knees. The assistant calmly walked over to him and knelt before him.

“It looks like you had a bad day,” she said gently.

Klov looked up at her for a moment, confused that she would speak to him.

“You seem to be dehydrated. Here, take this,” she said handing him her flask.

Klov looked at her suspiciously.

“Go on, there’s nothing wrong with it,” she insisted.

He took her flask and took a few sips. He was pleasantly surprised at the cold contents within.

“You can drink all of it. I’ll just get more,” the assistant said smiling.

Klov smiled back and then drank until the flask was empty. “Thanks, I really needed that,” Klov said giving her back her flask. “I didn’t expect juice to be in it.”

“I like my juice cold,” she said as she smiled. “My name is Agatha Sorensen.”

“I know. You were the valedictorian of your graduating class. Why are you being nice to me?”

“I’m not as near-sighted as the others. They make such a fuss over trivial things.”

“I wouldn’t call the situation trivial,” Klov said as he lean his head against the wall.

“The others are being childish. The owners can choose whoever they want no matter how much we try to get noticed. Dr. Ricker chose you. They others have to accept that. There are other labs.”

Klov looked back at her puzzled. “But Dr. Ricker is the best. Shouldn’t he have chosen the best?”

Sorensen looked back at him puzzled. "You of all people must believe you are the best. If you weren't you wouldn't be the junior owner."

Klov sighed. "I think he made a mistake."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. Now what are you working on?"

"You're going to help me?"

"Yes, we may find out we have similar goals," she said smiling eager to discover his skills.

Klov mimicked her response relieved that he now had a chance of saving his career.

He stood up and helped Sorensen to her feet. They then went over to his station and worked on the experiment until sunrise. While they worked Sorensen became fascinated by Klov's imagination. She began to see why he was chosen and how being creative could benefit her. She decided to make a pact with him agreeing to help him with the formulas if he would help her with the ideas. Klov quickly agreed.

A few months later, Klov and Sorensen came up with two new innovations. The assistants took notice and tried to sabotage their experiments, but it didn't work. Sorensen and Klov got into the habit of checking their work before they submitted it to Dr. Ricker. Ten years and thirty innovations later, Klov and Sorensen received their doctor titles, a title given to a scientist or engineer who had proven their ability. Dr. Klov and Dr. Sorensen created one hundred more innovations over the next ten years. Now they were eligible to own their own labs. Since the leaders of the North prevented more than one lab with the same specialty to be in the same sector, Dr. Klov knew his best friend would have to leave soon. Before she brought up the subject, Dr. Klov went to see her. He found her working late one night in one of the auxiliary labs. He stood there for a few moments trying to figure out what to say.

"Is something bothering you, Cyrus?" Dr. Sorensen asked as she glanced in his direction.

"You need to leave the lab," Dr. Klov said.

Dr. Sorensen sighed and stopped working. She looked down.

"You're a brilliant chemist and can do much more if you leave," he said as he walked over to her. "You're being held back here. I'm holding you back here. You need to leave and start your own lab. I did some research and . . ."

Dr. Sorensen held up her right hand. "Before you continue, I need to inform you of something." She looked into his eyes. "I'm leaving at the end of the week."

Dr. Klov was disappointed but tried his best to smile. "That's great. Where are you going?"

"The sector is called Vega. It's about one hundred miles southwest of here."

"A hundred miles, huh?"

"I'll still be just a call away," she assured him as they both wondered how they would each work alone after being such an effective team.

When the end of the week came, Dr. Ricker allowed everyone to take an extra break. The other assistants chose to continue working as if it were any other day while Dr. Ricker, Dr. Klov and the human members of the support team recalled their favorite stories about Dr. Sorensen over cake and drinks.

"Dr. Sorensen, this lab won't be the same without you. My current success I owe to you and Dr. Klov," Dr. Ricker said as he grinned. "I'm sad to see you go, but I'm eager to see what new innovations you and your new team will come up with."

Everyone clapped as the head of the support staff retrieved a small blue bag from a nearby table.

"This is a little something from all of us," the head of the support staff said.

"Thank you," Dr. Sorensen said as she took the gift. She faced the others. "Thank you, everyone."

The support staff and Dr. Ricker hugged Dr. Sorensen and then returned to work. A moment later Dr. Klov escorted Dr. Sorensen out of the lab with her suitcase following close behind. The

front doors led to a large hallway that opened up into the ground floor. On the left side of the hallway were the entrance and exit tunnels for the elevators for the building. On the right were the entrance and exit tunnels for the moving sidewalks that carried people into the nearby buildings. In front of them was the platform for transports that would take her to the inter-sector trains or the IST. They walked over to the security line that was a few feet in front of the ticketing gate.

"I'll let you know when I get settled in," Dr. Sorensen said looking back at Dr. Klov.

Dr. Klov nodded.

"Cyrus, this is not the end. I'm just a call away."

"I know, but it won't be the same," Dr. Klov said as the transport arrived. Sighing deeply he added, "I guess it's time to go."

"Goodbye, Cyrus," she said as they embraced.

"Goodbye, Agatha," he said sadly as he held on to her a moment longer.

She walked over to the ticketing gate as her luggage followed her. As the gate scanned the implant in her right forearm and checked her identification and travel information, her luggage was scanned by its own gate as it rolled through it. Once they got to the transport Dr. Sorensen climbed into the back seat. The luggage extended its four tentacles as it retracted its wheels. It then climbed into the open trunk of the transport and retracted its tentacles as the trunk closed. A few seconds later the transport rose from the platform, hovered for a few moments and started forward. It soon vanished from sight. Dr. Klov lingered for a few moments and then went back into the lab. Later on he and Dr. Sorensen spent the night talking as he helped her to get settled.

The next morning Dr. Klov wearily came into the lab and began his work. Surprisingly, the others didn't try to torture him that day or ever again. Instead they concentrated on producing what few innovations they could while Dr. Klov continued to produce many. On several occasions, it was Dr. Klov's work that kept everyone employed. Labs that didn't produce enough work were given to other lab owners with their own teams. One by one the assistants decided to leave and work with other doctors or pursue other interests. Most of them believed that they were going to be replaced anyway since Dr. Klov's work now overshadowed Dr. Ricker's. They decided to leave before they were fired. As the number of assistants decreased Dr. Klov and Dr. Sorensen spoke less and less as they concentrated on their work.

Eight months after the last assistant left, Dr. Ricker retired and a party was held for him. The support staff took care of all of the arrangements. Dr. Klov was curious about what Dr. Ricker would do next since the rule of the North still applied: *Everyone had to contribute*. Lab owners had to retire when they couldn't produce any innovations for six consecutive months. Dr. Klov thought that Dr. Ricker would be upset. Instead he was jovial as his many colleagues shared their favorite stories and talked about his achievements. As the celebration continued, Dr. Ricker's colleagues discussed the conferences and consulting jobs that filled their lives making Dr. Klov excited about the future. After the celebration was over, Dr. Ricker left with his colleagues. His luggage extended its wheels and followed his personal android attendant who carried his keepsakes. Dr. Klov watched them leave and then turned around and looked at the lab. Now he was the owner. He looked around for the head of the current support staff, Jessie, and saw that she already went back to her desk. As he walked over to her, she looked up at him.

"What can I do for you, sir?" Jessie asked with smile.

"Tell me, do you like working here?" he asked.

"Of course, sir," Jessie said.

"I want to make a deal with you. I want you and your staff to stay here and work for me until I retire."

She looked back at him shocked.

"I know that it's not normal, but I have no reason to replace you. Your team has been the best

support team we've ever have in this lab. I like to keep people I can count on. Does that sound reasonable?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please alter the contract and I'll sign it."

"Right away, sir," Jessica said as she got to work. "Oh, Dr. Klov, the files of the candidates are on your desk for you to view."

Dr. Klov sighed. "Right, the assistants."

Dr. Klov went to his office, sat down and retrieved the files of the candidates. Three-dimensional projections of the files floated above his desk. He began flipping through them and sighed. He hated going through the process, but he knew it was necessary. He couldn't continue to produce innovations on his own nor did he have the desire. He wanted to pass on his knowledge to someone who loved chemistry as much as he did and could take the North to the next level. Unfortunately finding that person would be nearly impossible. Since the government monitored the labs, the officials did what they could to influence the pool of candidates owners could pick from. Dr. Klov only received the applications of the top one percent of the graduates since he had the highest producing lab in the sector. The candidates were great in their research but had no vision. Most of the teams that Dr. Klov chose were complete disappointments. They were more interested in making a name for themselves than learning to make viable innovations for the North.

Those that were in Dr. Klov's first team left after five years to work for other doctors. They got tired of Dr. Klov telling them the errors of their work and refused his help to fix them. Dr. Klov had to suffer through two more teams who each only lasted five years before he demanded to choose his team his way. Because of his status and his ability to still produce many innovations the government officials reluctantly allowed him to proceed. Dr. Klov found them a week later and produced ten new innovations in the weeks afterwards. Dr. Klov's new team (Marx, Williams, Holleen and Sarasin) were very eager to learn everything they could from him, but they weren't perfect. It took them a year to get used to the rapid succession of Dr. Klov's ideas. At the beginning of the second year they were able to make small adjustments to the experiments through collaboration which pleased Dr. Klov. Halfway through the second year, Sarasin showed more potential than the others. Dr. Klov began giving her private lessons which she was excited to attend.

After the first three months of the third year, Dr. Klov stopped coming up with new work. The first week it was a relief because it gave the assistants time to catch up. After the second week the team became concerned. Two days later before she started her day, Sarasin went to check on Dr. Klov who hadn't made an appearance in the past five days. She went over to his office and knocked on the door. When he didn't answer she carefully opened the door and peaked inside.

"Sir," Sarasin called as she knocked on the door again.

Dr. Klov sat with his back to the door. He stared at an ancient painting of the sector deep in thought. Back then Dolpul was one of the underground sanctuaries of the Far North. It had a series of tunnels that snaked through it. In those tunnels were areas marked for different applications. There were areas where edible roots and subterranean animals were located, areas the people used for sleeping, areas used for meetings and the singular tunnel they used to get to the surface. The map also displayed areas that were blocked off because of hazards. He developed a habit of staring at the painting a year ago when the ideas didn't come so easily. When the ideas refused to flow, Dr. Klov felt that he had to go back to the beginning. The other times it worked after a few days. This time he still had difficulty. He began to worry that he had nothing left.

"Good morning, sir," Sarasin said.

Dr. Klov continued to stare at the painting.

Sarasin came into the room and then cleared her throat. Dr. Klov didn't respond.

"Good morning, sir," Sarasin repeated.

Dr. Klov still didn't hear her.

Sarasin giggled and she walked over to him. "Sir?"

Dr. Klov suddenly noticed her and jumped. "Sarasin, you startled me," he said as he snapped out of his trance.

"Good morning, sir. I've been trying to get your attention for the past few minutes. Everyone is waiting," Sarasin said as she smiled.

"Okay, I'll be there."

"Sir, are you alright?"

"Yes," he said straightening up. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, first, you've been staring at your painting again and second, I can tell you haven't gotten any sleep again."

"Give me a moment to freshen up. I'll be out."

"Okay, sir," Sarasin said. She then left his office and rejoined her colleagues in the main lab. An hour later Dr. Klov walked into the room.

"Sir, do you have a new project for us?" Marx asked.

"Unfortunately, I don't," Dr. Klov said.

The assistants looked back at Dr. Klov disappointed.

"I thought you would have had something by now," Marx said. "We're almost done with our old projects. Are we going to have any new work?"

"Any of you could come up with a project. Do you have any ideas?"

The assistants looked at him apprehensively.

"I can't be the one responsible for the ideas all of the time. You're my assistants. At some point one of you is going to take over."

"That will probably be Sarasin," Marx said.

"It may not be me," Sarasin said blushing, "It could be any of us."

Dr. Klov smiled. "All of you are still in the running. The fact still remains that one of you is going to take my place as the owner of the lab one day. I'm not going to be here forever. So, do any of you have any ideas on what we're going to discover next?"

Sarasin went over to the right corner of one of the empty wall. There the control panel, a thin strip of buttons, sat halfway up the wall. She pressed a button to increase the opacity of the wall and then activated the television. A moment later a large area of the wall began transmitting a channel. She retrieved one of the control gloves that she would sometimes use for gaming and began flipping through channels by turning her right wrist. The others looked at her puzzled.

"What are you doing?" Holleen asked.

"I'm looking for something, anything inspirational," Sarasin said as she continued to flip through channels.

"Why are you looking at what other people have done? We're supposed to be on the cutting edge. We're supposed to think outside the box," Holleen commented.

"Sometimes looking at what people have already done helps you to think about things that haven't been done," Sarasin replied.

"It's hard to come up with something as brilliant as Vocam," Williams commented. "Something really brilliant would be better than Vocam, but who could do that? Everything runs on Vocam."

"Yeah, you know it would be scary if there was some crisis and we couldn't use Vocam anymore," Marx commented.

"Maybe we should do a sustainability analysis on Vocam," Dr. Klov suggested.

The assistants moaned.

"Dr. Klov, why should we bother? Everybody knows that Vocam is sustainable. That's already been proven," Marx said.

“Yeah, it was done, but that was some time ago. A recent one should be done,” Dr. Klov said.

“It’s a waste of our efforts,” Holleen complained.

“Well, no one has any other ideas. This gives us something to do in the meantime. Perhaps through the analysis we can figure out something better,” Dr. Klov said.

The assistants reluctantly agreed.

Dr. Klov submitted the needed report to the government officials to let them know what he and his team were doing. He was very careful to mention that the analysis was just “busy work” and that his team needed a little downtime. He promised that they would be coming up with ten new innovations in the next two weeks to cover for loss of time. Dr. Klov knew that he and his team were finishing seven innovations that the government officials didn’t know about yet, so he reasoned that they should be able to come up with the other three by then. He also assured the government officials that he expects there to be no adverse findings. The government officials were not happy with Dr. Klov’s report. As he expected they told him that it was a waste of time and resources. However, because of his past work they would allow it. They also demanded that Dr. Klov and his team create twenty new innovations in three weeks. Dr. Klov sighed as he looked at the message. He sat back in his chair and sighed again. A moment later he turned around and began staring at his painting.

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A week later Sarasin rushed over to Dr. Klov’s office and knocked on the door. When he didn’t answer she peeked into the office and saw him staring at his painting again. She sighed as she went inside and stood in front of him. Dr. Klov was startled.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we need you to come and look at this,” Sarasin said with fear in her eyes.

Dr. Klov immediately got up and followed Sarasin to the main lab where the data was displayed on one of the walls.

“We did the analysis and found some very alarming results,” Sarasin explained.

“Okay,” Dr. Klov said as he looked back at her.

“Our supply of Vocam is being depleted.”

“Depleted, isn’t it being renewed?” Dr. Klov said as he turned and looked at the data.

“The consumption is far greater than the renewal rate. We are running out of energy.”

Dr. Klov began shaking his head as he continued to review the data. “It can’t be. It’s impossible,” he said under his breath.

“We checked everybody’s work four times and found the same result every time. I also looked at the record. The last time a sustainability analysis was done was when Vocam was created.”

“That long ago?” Dr. Klov asked as he glanced at Sarasin.

“Yes, sir. Since then the population of the North has grown exponentially.”

Dr. Klov continued to look at the data and shake his head in disbelief as his team looked at him nervously.

“Sir,” Sarasin said. “What do we do now?”

“Think of something to research and do the experiment or find something to keep yourselves busy. I need time to go over this,” he said as he looked at everyone. Dr. Klov then touched the wall, gathered the data and slid it to the top of the wall, sending it to his desk. He walked out of the main lab and went back to his office. Once he got there, he went inside and closed the door. “How could they have been so careless,” he said in frustration as he walked over to his desk and sat down. “Computer, contact Dr. Agatha Sorensen. Display image on desk.”

“Yes, Dr. Klov,” the computer responded.

A moment later, a holographic image of Dr. Sorensen’s head and shoulders appeared on his

desk. "Good morning, Cyrus. This is unusual." Dr. Sorensen said as she looked at Dr. Klov. "Are you okay?"

"I'm sending you data that I need you to look over immediately. Please check the results and redo the analysis."

"Has something happened?"

"Just do the analysis and inform me of your findings."

"Okay," Dr. Sorensen agreed and then ended the transmission.

Dr. Klov sat in his office and did the analysis himself repeatedly for several hours. The results were all the same. At that moment a torrent of ideas came to Dr. Klov. He reluctantly entered them into the lab's workflow program and sent them out to his team. He didn't want to continue working without solving the crisis, but he knew he couldn't do anything without help. He hoped that the analysis was somehow wrong and Dr. Sorensen would find the flaw as she had done for him several times before. Dr. Klov paused for a moment and thought about his team. He soon realized that he had to get them focused on work to prevent them from being consumed with a problem they couldn't currently solve. A few minutes later he found them in the cafeteria talking about the analysis and how awful the North would be without Vocam.

"Team, I sent the results of the analysis to a colleague for review. In the meantime we have work. There's plenty to keep us busy for a while. You can start in a few hours."

"Yes, sir," the assistants replied reluctantly. All of them wanted to help solve the crisis, but they knew if Dr. Klov didn't have any ideas about it they shouldn't ask.

A couple of weeks later Dr. Sorensen contacted Dr. Klov. He looked at his right forearm and touched his thumb to his middle and ring fingers to answer. A hologram of Dr. Sorensen's head and shoulders appeared on his desk.

"Cyrus, I went over the data and found the same results. I also enlisted the help of a few of my trusted colleagues and they also found the same results. They in turn sought the help of others and are getting mixed results now. Some people are saying the original results were tainted, some are saying that they were accurate."

"What do you think, Agatha?" Dr. Klov asked. "You did the analysis yourself."

"It seems that some are trying to bury the truth. I hate to admit it, Cyrus, but the crisis is real. What do we do now?"

Dr. Klov sighed. "We have to go to our leaders and tell them what we found. Maybe we can get them to scale back Vocam use or to switch some of the systems to nuclear energy."

"They won't like that at all."

"None of us like it, but we have no choice. We are talking about the lives of billions. It's better to scale back use now, than to completely run out."

"Yes, I agree. We have to tell our leaders. I'll let everyone know about our decision. Hopefully they will listen," Dr. Sorensen said.

"Thanks, Agatha."

Dr. Sorensen nodded and then ended the transmission.

Dr. Klov immediately put in a request to have a meeting in person with the government officials of Dolpul. The request was denied. He then resent the request weekly, each time telling them that the matter was urgent. After four months the government officials accepted Dr. Klov's request, but the meeting would be virtual and for only thirty minutes. The assistants then got to work creating the presentation. Five minutes before the set meeting time, everyone gathered into Dr. Klov's office and waited while he contacted the government officials. Twenty minutes later, they were displayed on one of the walls of Dr. Klov's office. The assistants then presented the information during the next twenty-five minutes using holographic charts and visual aids to make it easy to understand. After they were finished Dr. Klov added a few words to endorse what his team had said. A moment



later, the government officials began giggling.

“Head Chairman, I don’t understand what’s so amusing,” Dr. Klov said angrily.

“Dr. Klov, Vocam will never be depleted. This is a simple fact. When it was created the Desyne made sure that it was sustainable. Plus your own colleagues have done the same analysis you did and found different results. We have plenty of Vocam for now and the future,” the Head Chairman of Dolpul said.

“Head Chairman, with all due respect, those recent results are erroneous. There are others that can confirm my findings. Please don’t ignore the warning that we’re giving you today. The potential consequences are far too great. We need to start making plans to convert back to nuclear energy.”

The government officials began to laugh at Dr. Klov. Anger grew within him as he looked back at them.

“It seems that your large imagination is getting the best of you, Dr. Klov,” the Head Chairman said. “You’ve wasted enough time with this. You need to return to your work.”

Dr. Klov left the room full of anger. His assistants watched him leave and then looked at the government officials who were laughing and telling jokes as the transmission ended. The assistants looked at each other not sure what to do.

“Let me go find him,” Sarasin said. She left the office and searched for Dr. Klov in the main lab, the auxiliary labs and in the cafeteria. She then went to his apartment and was about to knock when she saw that the door wasn’t completely closed. Slowly she pushed the door open and went inside. Dr. Klov was sitting on his bed with his head in his hands and his elbows on his knees as he stared at the floor. A moment later, he looked up and noticed Sarasin. They stared at each other for a moment before Dr. Klov looked back at the floor.

“Come in, Sarasin,” he said barely above a whisper.

Sarasin crept inside and gently closed the door. She stood near it as she looked at him afraid. Never before had she seen him this upset.

“I take it the others are waiting for me,” Dr. Klov said.

“Yes, sir,” Sarasin said.

Dr. Klov sighed and sat up. “Tell me something, Sarasin. If I wanted to have a secret meeting, how would I do it?”

Sarasin looked at Dr. Klov puzzled. “I imagine you would have to leave the labs. But the government monitors everything.”

Dr. Klov sighed. “Yes, I suppose they do. Computer, contact Dr. Agatha Sorensen.”

“Yes, Dr. Klov,” the computer responded.

“Do you wish me to leave, sir?” Sarasin asked.

“No, Sarasin, you can stay. Have a seat,” Dr. Klov said as he gestured towards a chair that he had at the foot of his bed.

Sarasin walked over to the chair slowly and sat down. Dr. Sorensen’s full body hologram appeared in the room in front of Dr. Klov. She looked at Dr. Klov and then noticed Sarasin.

“I didn’t expect you to be in your apartment at this time of the day or with company,” Dr. Sorensen’s hologram said as she looked back at Dr. Klov. “You must have had a rough day too.”

“They humiliated me, Agatha,” Dr. Klov said as he looked at the hologram.

Dr. Sorensen’s hologram sighed and then sat down on the bed beside him. “They did the same to me and the others. Every single government official we warned failed to listen. Not one of them believed what was presented.”

“We need to have a meeting with everyone that wants to help. I just don’t know where to do it.”

Dr. Sorensen’s hologram smiled mischievously. “Leave everything to me,” she said just before ending the transmission.

Dr. Klov and Sarasin looked at each other puzzled. A second later the implants in their right

forearms vibrated indicating that they had received something. When they checked them they found that they had tickets for a tour on the IST. The tours took travelers from any sector in the North to the sectors they wanted to visit. It would then take them back to the starting sector. The longest tours took travelers through all of the sectors of the North and lasted for three months. During the tour, the travelers would be completely immersed in simulations of the vacations of their choice. Their tour was set to start in Dolpul and they would have company. The tickets had a “D” under the group designation category. This meant they would be meeting with at least thirty other people.

Dr. Klov rose to his feet and looked at Sarasin. “Let’s find the others.”

“Yes, sir,” Sarasin replied.

A few minutes later they found the others in the cafeteria discussing the horrible meeting with the government officials. Marx looked up and saw Dr. Klov and Sarasin as they walked into the room. Williams and Holleen then turned and looked at them. They noticed that Dr. Klov was smiling.

“Is everything alright, sir?” Marx asked afraid that Dr. Klov was going crazy.

“I suppose the three of you haven’t checked your implants lately,” Dr. Klov said.

The three of them looked at him puzzled and then checked their implants.

Dr. Klov turned around and began walking away. “We’re going on vacation. You can start packing now. We leave in the morning,” he said as he walked out of the cafeteria.

Marx, Williams and Holleen looked at the itinerary and then looked up wanting to ask Dr. Klov more questions but saw only Sarasin. Sarasin looked back at them nervously as they peered at her.

“You know something, don’t you?” Holleen said.

“See you in the morning,” Sarasin said quickly before hurrying out of the cafeteria.

Dr. Klov went and informed the support staff about the “vacation” in person and sent them a copy of the itinerary. He apologized for the last-minute changes and encouraged them to take a vacation as well. On his way to his office, Sarasin caught up with him.

“Sir, why didn’t you tell them about what happened?” she asked.

“I didn’t wish to go through the whole thing again. I’m too exhausted. Besides they’ll find out soon enough. Try to get some sleep. We leave in the morning.”

Dr. Klov went to his office and sent an email to the government officials informing them of the trip. Lab owners had the right to take vacations at any time as long as they continued to produce innovations and met their deadlines. Dr. Klov never took any vacations during his career. Still the government officials were not pleased that he and his team were leaving.

In the morning, Dr. Klov and his team said goodbye to the support staff and headed out of the lab. They went straight towards the transports for the IST, scanned their implants and waited a few moments for the transport to arrive. Once it came, everyone climbed in as their luggage climbed into the open trunk of the transport one by one. The trunk closed once all of them were inside. A few moments later the transport hovered and then left the building. Through the windows the team could see the hundreds of transports taking their passengers to their destinations. Even though majority of the North’s residents never left their workplaces there were still many who travelled. Dr. Klov began to worry about the future for the North. He looked around and noticed Sarasin was looking at him. He could tell that she was concerned. He smiled at her to make her feel at ease. She smiled back and then looked away. A few moments later, the transport reached the IST.

The sectors of the North were built bordering each other. When the first buildings were constructed each sector was housed in its own building. During the days of the Age of Invention the sector walls were replaced by gates to allow people to travel more freely between the sectors. Soon the skies and the narrow streets became crowded with thousands of transports due to the population increase and the citizens' desire to travel. A group of enterprising inventors from various sectors and their friends, who later became known as the Travelers, came up with a solution, the IST. They developed new materials for the tracks and the trains and then went to the region's leaders to get approval. The leaders weren't convinced that the system was needed but liked all new inventions. They smiled and nodded during the presentation until the Travelers requested to do their own monitoring. The Travelers reasoned that since the IST wasn't in any of the sectors no sector should be in charge of them. Instead they would report directly to the leaders. The Travelers added that they would report all customer complaints and the actions being taken to resolve those complaints. The leaders discussed what they heard amongst themselves for a few days and then agreed. They warned that they would replace the IST monitors with their own people if the complaints became too excessive. The Travelers did whatever they could to keep their clients happy.

Once Dr. Klov and his team reached the station for the IST, they climbed out of the transport as the trunk opened up. Their luggage then climbed out of it and followed them. They walked over to the moving sidewalks that would take them to their train and soon reached the platform. There Dr. Klov met four other chemists and their teams: Dr. Keller, Dr. Avila, Dr. Baker and Dr. Forenza (who had a reputation for being overly ambitious). Since all of these men were excellent chemists, Dr. Klov was grateful to see them. The five teams walked over to their designated car and embarked the train. Many of them felt they stepped into another world as they stared at the car's decadence. The car was fifty feet wide and three hundred feet long. Every inch of it was covered with white marble decorated with precious stones. The compartment had two common areas furnished with a plush sectional and an entertainment console in each of them. Sarasin and a few of the other assistants had their eyes on the consoles. There were two full kitchens complete with three service androids for each one. Twelve more service androids stood in the standby closets to do the cleaning. There were twenty-four bedrooms and twelve bathrooms. Every bathroom had a Jacuzzi. Everyone went into their rooms and settled in. The assistants then gathered in the second common area while the doctors stayed in the first.

Two hours later the other three chemists Dr. Kim, Dr. Shue and Dr. Sorensen came with their teams. Dr. Klov breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Dr. Sorensen. After greeting everyone else she finally gave him a hug.

"For a moment, I thought you weren't coming," Dr. Klov whispered to her.

"I would never abandon you, old friend," she whispered back. She turned and looked at everyone. "Okay, what have you gentlemen done so far?" she asked as the assistants went to the second common area.

"Nothing," Dr. Avila said, "I guess we're still trying to wrap our heads around it."

"It doesn't matter if we believe it or not. The North's running out of Vocam. What can we do to reverse it?" Dr. Sorensen asked.

"There's no way to *reverse* it, Dr. Sorensen. The people are not going to stop using Vocam," Dr. Forenza said. "There's no way to manufacture Colezen, Fidorud and Derasen. It's been tried with disastrous results. Since our governments refused to go back to nuclear power we have to find a new energy source."

Dr. Shue smirked, “You say it as if it’s easy. Do you know how many have tried to find a new energy source and have been successful? Everyone that has tried has failed. There’s no substance or combination of substances in the North that can replace Vocam.”

“What if we search elsewhere?” Dr. Klov asked.

Everyone stared at Dr. Klov.

“Dr. Shue just said that there was no substance or combination of substances *in the North*. If we remember our history, we know that the North stripped Rendal of its resources to become what it is today. What if the answer was there but it was lost?”

“What are you suggesting?” Dr. Sorensen asked.

“We leave the North and search the Belt Sectors and perhaps even the Southern Sectors for the new energy source.”

Everyone sat in silence for a few moments not sure of what to say.

“You want us to leave?” Dr. Forenza asked. “Suppose the Belt Sectors and the Southern Sectors don’t have what we seek. What happens then?”

Dr. Klov thought about Dr. Forenza’s question for a moment. “I don’t know. The North will have to return to nuclear power. I think by then we should find something.”

“What if we die out there?” Dr. Baker asked.

“If the officials don’t heed our warnings there will be nothing but death for any of us here. Look, I understand it’s a long shot but it’s a chance to help the North and discover something amazing.”

“Cyrus,” Dr. Sorenson said.

Dr. Klov looked at her.

“Suppose we find this substance or substances. What if the natives don’t let us have it? What then?”

“With all of these minds here, I’m sure we’ll find a way to get the substance or substances *when* we find them. Everyone has the option to stay and try to do something here, to go or to do nothing. I think we and the assistants should decide by the end of this trip,” Dr. Klov suggested.

Everyone agreed.

For the rest of the night the doctors tried to come up with another solution but to no avail. They knew that they did all they could to convince the leaders of the North of the truth, but they didn’t want to face reality. Although Dr. Klov’s idea sounded crazy at first and there were obstacles to overcome, the group began to see his argument. If something existed that was just as good as Colezen, Fiborud and Derasen and was renewable but was used up by the North in its early days it would still exist elsewhere on the planet. The more they talked the more the group hoped that the officials wouldn’t allow Vocam to simply run out.

The next day the assistants were informed about the decision to leave the North. Many of them didn’t like it but understood the gravity of the situation. Each doctor sat down and talked with his team about the advantages and disadvantages of choosing to stay or to leave. This helped the assistants to make the most informed decision possible. The doctors told them that any of the assistants could transfer to work under another doctor. However, there was the possibility of the North being completely changed. Because of this all of the assistants agreed to leave.

Dr. Klov then went before the group. “We need to inform our support staffs and give them some kind of cover story.”

“Why make up anything?” Dr. Forenza said. “We should just tell them and the officials were going to find a new energy source. They can’t say ‘no’. We can do whenever we want as owners.”

“We could give them a choice to stay or seek employment elsewhere,” Dr. Sorenson said.

“No, we should just terminate all contracts,” Dr. Kim said. “We don’t know how long we’ll be away.”

After a few more minutes of discussion, everyone agreed.

Dr. Klov reluctantly called his support staff by holographic message and told them the bad news. He allowed them to stay for two more weeks before stopping their service. The support staff didn't like it but thanked him for his leadership. Given the events that happened recently they were not surprised. Dr. Klov then changed the tour's itinerary to end at the southern border of the North. He and the other doctors sent their messages to their respective government officials, who were not pleased.

For the rest of the trip the group did their best to relax. They continued to discuss possible destinations but couldn't decide on a specific location because of their lack of knowledge of the world outside of the North. They knew that the Belt Sectors had some technology and that they lived by trading with each other, but not much beyond that.

"I'm sure we'll figure things out once we get there," Dr. Klov said. "By the way, we need a name. Any suggestions?" Dr. Klov asked.

"What about the Klovis Group. After all it was you and your team who discovered the problem," Dr. Sorenson said.

Everyone agreed.

A few hours later the Klovis Group reached their final destination. They disembarked the train with their items and walked onto the platform. The Klovis Group then went over to one of the vending machines and purchased normal bags to replace their luggage. No member of the group was happy about it, but knew that their old luggage may become a problem since it ran on Vocam like everything else in the North. The group then noticed how empty the platform quickly became. Everyone else was going in one direction, towards the rest of the sector. In the other direction was the opaque red wall of the Great Barrier. In the middle of it was a series of giant gates. There was a hallway that connected the gates and extended beyond them.

"I guess this is the end of the line," Dr. Klov said as he looked back at the group. "Is everyone ready?"

Everyone nodded. Dr. Klov took a deep breath and stepped through the first gate.

"This is the end of the region of the North. You are about to enter the region known as the Belt Sectors. Once you pass these gates you will need authorization to reenter. Do you understand?" The gate asked.

"Where do we get this authorization to reenter?" Dr. Klov asked.

"This is the end of the region of the North. You are about to enter the region known as the Belt Sectors. Once you pass these gates you would need authorization to reenter. Do you understand?" The gate repeated.

"Yeah we understand. The question was how do we get the authorization?" Cohen, one of Dr. Forenza's assistants, sneered.

The gate started to repeat the warning a third time. Dr. Klov then stepped back making the gate stop.

"I guess the point is once we leave we can't come back in unless we talk to one of the leaders," Dr. Klov said. "There's a possibility that we may not be able to come back in."

"The gate should have informed us further. I'm not sure leaving is wise. Perhaps we should go and asked one of the officials what type of authorization we need before we exit. The whole point is a find what were looking for and then to return isn't it?" Dr. Sorensen reasoned.

"That is the point," Dr. Klov said. "But we don't know how long the bureaucracy is going to take. They may never give us authorization to find the energy source."

"I say we should just go and they worry about getting back in later," Dr. Baker said.

Dr. Klov looked at the others. "What do you guys think?"

"If they let anyone in, they'll let us in. We are the most gifted scientists of the North," Dr.

Forenza said.

They all decided to leave. As they continued through the gates, each one repeated the same warning while it scanned them. After they passed the last gate there were no other obstacles between them and the Belt Sectors. They all then took a deep breath and went outside. Suddenly everyone in the group began coughing. After several moments their lungs accepted their new surroundings. There was a slight breeze but it did little to ease the scorching sun. The group looked before them and saw a dusty wasteland with little vegetation and mountains in distance.

“Well, everyone, welcome to the Belt Sectors,” Dr. Klov said sarcastically.

“I didn’t think that the Belt Sectors would be so hot,” Sarasin whined. “So what do we do now? I thought there would be transports out here.”

Dr. Klov sighed. “I thought so too. I guess we walk until we find someone.”

The Klovis Group walked for a few hours before they were completely exhausted and dehydrated. They stopped and tried to figure out the best place to go to get help. A few minutes later some of the members saw a group of six thin guards walking towards them. They were dressed in khaki pants, loose-fitting khaki shirts and tan work boots. Each of them had a belt fastened around his waist that had compartments and a stick hanging from it. All of them were armed with guns and carried small brown backpacks. They wore sunglasses and their heads were covered with broad tan hats that had white cloth draped from the back of them covering the guards’ necks. The Klovis Group was relieved to see other people, but didn’t know if the men would assist them. The group stood there and watched the men as they got closer and closer. At that point some of the members fainted. Moments later the armed men reach them.

“Who are you?” one of the guards asked in Zomcas in an authoritative tone.

“Please, we mean you no harm,” Dr. Klov said with his hands raised. “My name is Dr. Klov and we are the Klovis Group.”

“What brings you into the desert?”

“An expedition.”

The guard studied Dr. Klov and then examined the rest of the group. He and the others then notice those who had fainted. Four of the guards quickly went over to them and lowered their backpacks. As they took care of them the other one distributed water to the group. Each person drank several gulps and then passed the bottle on to the next person as the first guard then walked up to Dr. Klov.

“An expedition, huh?” he asked as his tone softened. He handed Dr. Klov a bottle of water.

Dr. Klov took the bottle and drank several gulps. He then handed the bottle to Marx who did the same.

“Where are we?” Dr. Klov asked.

“You’re in a sector called Kepca.”

“The Belt Sectors specialize in something, correct?”

The man nodded as the last person who fainted was revived.

“What does Kepca specialize in?” Dr. Klov asked.

“Energy production,” the guard answered.

Dr. Klov and some of the others smiled.

“Why are you asking?” the guard inquired.

“We’re looking for such a sector. Could we speak to your superiors? We like to conduct research here,” Dr. Klov said.

“Right now you and your people need to get out of the desert. Then we’ll see. My name is Golan, by the way. It’s a good thing you left when you did. It’s rare for us to see anyone. You could have been out here for days. I know all of you have walked a distance but you’ll have to walk a little further. Our base is a mile away.”

The group dragged themselves behind Golan and two of his men. The other guards followed behind them. Just when they didn't think they could walk any further the guards stopped.

"Why are we stopping?" Dr. Klov asked.

"Because we're here," Golan said as two of the guards cleared a part of the ground in front of them exposing a circular plate.

Golan bent down and inserted his key into it as the two guards stepped back. He turned it to the right exposing a keypad where he entered his code and then joined the others. The plate released its seal and a handle popped up. The two guards then grabbed the handle and pulled it back to reveal a hole in the ground. Inside the hole there was a ladder that went down several yards.

"Follow me," Golan said as he climbed down the ladder.

The Klovis Group looked at each other as they hesitated. Dr. Klov then stepped forward and followed Golan into the hole. The rest of the group followed him with the other guards behind them. They were led to an underground tunnel that seemed to stretch for miles in both directions. Just as Dr. Klov lowered his head and the others started to complain, Golan quickly entered his code on the keypad on the tunnel wall. The heavy door next to the keypad cracked opened.

"It's just through here," Golan said forcibly opening the door.

Beyond the door was a large expanse filled with fifty portable beds with worn sheets and blankets. Along the wall on the other side of the room were bathrooms and meeting rooms.

"You can stay here for now. I'll inform my superiors that you're here. For now get some rest. You've had a trying day. There's food and water along the wall," Golan said gesturing to the supplies near the entrance. "I'll see you in the morning."

"You're not staying?" Dr. Klov asked.

"No, we have to go back on patrol. Don't worry you're being monitored."

The group looked around and saw the security cameras as Golan left. They were placed every five feet across the top of the cavern. The cameras made many feel uneasy. They were monitored in the North, but it was less intrusive. The group slowly walked over to the beds and claimed their beds. A moment later a few decided to try out the showers and were delighted that they weren't as archaic as they thought. Eventually all the members of the Klovis Group fell asleep in the cavern.

During the night Dr. Klov awoke suddenly breathing heavily. He sat up in bed dripping with sweat as he looked at his surroundings. A few seconds later he realized where he was and began to breathe normally. As he continued to look around the room he noticed that Sarasin was also awake. She was sitting up in bed clutching her knees and breathing heavily. The sheet that covered her was drenched. She began to calm down as she looked around the room. When her eyes met Dr. Klov's she stared at him for a moment and then gave him a half-hearted smile before she looked away. Dr. Klov wiped the sweat away from his face with the sheet that covered him, walked over to Sarasin and sat down on the side of her bed.

"By the look of things, you're having a rough night too," Dr. Klov said as he turned to face her. Sarasin nodded.

"Things will get better, Sarasin," Dr. Klov said trying to comfort her.

"I'm not sure about that, sir," Sarasin replied quietly. "Maybe it was a mistake to leave the North. I doubt that the Belt Sectors have the energy source we're looking for. If they did, they would be using it. And don't even mention the Southern Sectors. I doubt if they even have electricity, much less an energy source that can replace Vocam. This is a wasted venture, sir. We should have never left home."

Dr. Klov sighed while he thought about what was said. "I understand your concern, Sarasin, but we just got here. Although I have to admit I didn't think it would be like this. We haven't started our research yet and it's already harder than I imagined it would be."

"Did you suppose that it would be easy, sir?"

“Not easy, Sarasin, I wasn’t prepared for the physical demands of the trip. I honestly thought that there would be some kind of transportation that would bring us into Kepca’s main city. I also thought that we would be in better accommodations than this.” Dr. Klov looked around. “Look at it. Even our cheapest hotels don’t look like this. We’re in the middle of a big rock.”

Sarasin started giggling. Dr. Klov looked at her perplexed.

“Sorry, sir,” she said as she smiled. “I was just thinking of how elitist you sound. But the truth is I feel the same way. I may have watched those survival shows, but it’s different in real life.”

Dr. Klov smiled. “This is just the beginning. Once we start our research things will get better.”

She nodded.

“What did you dream about?” Dr. Klov inquired.

Sarasin looked at Dr. Klov for a moment and then looked down at her covered feet. “I dreamt about the destruction of the North,” she said barely above a whisper. “Sir, if we find another energy source will we be able to convince the leaders to use it?” She looked back at Dr. Klov.

“Pretty soon it won’t matter. The officials will have no choice but to use it when Vocam is depleted. I just hope that we find it and can find a way to harness its power before it’s too late.” Dr. Klov then got up and looked back at Sarasin. “Try to get some rest.”

“You do the same, sir,” Sarasin said.

Dr. Klov smiled and then returned to his bed.

In the morning, the Klovis Group rose and prepared for the day like they did while in the North. Since they didn’t have any projects to work on they went through their supplies and checked to see which of their gadgets were still operational. Luckily the portable media player that Conner, one of Dr. Sorensen’s assistants, brought was still working. Once Dr. Klov noticed that it was working he went over to Conner and asked if there was any news. Connor flipped through the channels until he found a clear station. The topics were the same as they were before. There was no news of the Vocam shortage. Dr. Klov reasoned that the leaders of the North wouldn’t televise a Vocam shortage anyway. At that time Golan came into the room and began looking around. When he spotted Dr. Klov he walked towards him. Then a thin female guard entered the room and closed the door behind her. She wore a gray military uniform complete with its hat and black shoes. Dr. Klov wondered why the female guard was there and began to feel uneasy.

“You are the leader of your people, correct?” Golan asked.

“Yes, I am. Will your superiors let us see them now?” Dr. Klov asked.

“The president wants to see only you. It’s a security precaution,” Golan explained. “Everyone else will have to stay here until he makes his decision.”

Dr. Klov sighed and then nodded. Golan led Dr. Klov over to the female guard.

“This is Captain Sillion. She will take you to see President Saffron,” Golan said.

“Follow me,” Sillion ordered.

Dr. Klov looked back at the Klovis Group while Sillion entered her code into the keypad and opened the door. He and Golan went through the door and into the tunnel. Dr. Klov watched Golan walk deeper into the tunnel as Sillion came through the door and closed it behind her. She then motioned for Dr. Klov to climb up the ladder. He ascended the ladder with difficulty and emerged through the open hatch. On the surface there was a tan jeep waiting with another guard that wore the same uniform as Sillion in the driver’s seat. A moment later she came to the surface and pushed down the hatch while she ordered Dr. Klov to get into the tan jeep. He climbed into the back while Sillion climbed into the front passenger seat. The tan jeep left the tunnel and headed towards the mountains in the distance. Dr. Klov looked at the interior of the strange vehicle as he bounced around in the back seat. It was cramped with just enough room for four people. The jeep was old and worn with its brown fabric peeling from the door. Dr. Klov then stared through the dusty window to try to get his mind off of the rough ride.



He watched the landscape go by as they traveled. It was dry but not as barren as he previously thought. Small creatures he didn't notice before began to run across the surface and eat the vegetation that was there. He supposed that he was too tired to take notice of what was around him when they walked through the desert before. Twenty minutes later, they began traveling through several abandoned cities. Four hours later they reached one of the inner cities where Dr. Klov finally saw people. The buildings in the city had the same worn look as those in the abandoned cities. Twenty minutes later they reached Kepca City, the sector's deserted capital.

Dr. Klov was surprised at the appearance of the sector and its people and wondered what happened. He wondered why he saw no one in the capital and was saddened by those he did see. He thought that the people would be a little bruised and battered due to their work but they looked worse. They looked unhappy and worn, as if they have been through a recent crisis or two. There were no smiling faces, only a few blank stares from those that bothered to look up. The others continued along as if they had lost all hope. Dr. Klov wondered what type of situation he led the Klovis Group into. It looked as if this sector was barely holding on. Five minutes later the jeep stopped in front of a large stone building.

"This is President Saffron's office," Sillion said. "He will meet you in one of the conference rooms."

Dr. Klov got out of the jeep and followed Sillion and the driver to the conference room. Inside the spotless room was a long elegant wooden table. At the other end of the table sat a short man in his forties with a serious face and a pudgy midsection. The man was dressed in the same uniform as the two guards except his uniform had a black belt that went across his chest. More stripes were on the shoulders of his uniform and on his hat. Dr. Klov stared at the man with wariness. Even though the leaders of the North disagreed with him, they would never leave any sector in such ruin.

"Have a seat," Sillion ordered.

Dr. Klov looked at Sillion and saw her staring back at him sternly. Dr. Klov obeyed and looked at the man at the other end of the table.

"You may leave us," President Saffron said looking at Sillion and the other guard. He looked at Dr. Klov and said, "You must be Dr. Klov. My people tell me that you're from the North. What brings you to my sector?"

"We're here on a research mission, sir," Dr. Klov said. "We're looking for a new energy source."

President Saffron looked at Dr. Klov suspiciously. "Why would a group from the *North* be looking for a *new* energy source?"

Dr. Klov paused for a moment. "This is a new objective, President Saffron. The leaders of the North want to create a new market with the Belt Sectors. If we can find a new energy source perhaps we can help to alleviate some of the burden of acquiring energy. Of course, sectors that specialize in energy production like yours will be the ones to manufacture it. You would also be in charge of distribution. Vocam is highly toxic. We need to find something that is safe for the people and the environment."

President Saffron sat back in his chair and thought about what Dr. Klov said. Dr. Klov watched him closely while he waited for President Saffron's decision.

"A new energy source could generate large profits for you. Since we came here first, you would be the first sector we would deal with, probably the only sector. A monopoly in the energy market would sustain you and your people indefinitely," Dr. Klov added.

President Saffron sat up in his chair and put his hands on the table. "If you guarantee that no other sector on Rendal has access to this new energy source then you can do your research here," he said peering at Dr. Klov.

"I have to tell my superiors about our research."

"Why, the North is not in need of an energy source. You have Vocam. There's no need for your

superiors to know anything,” President Saffron said.

“Okay, sir, all of the research stays with you.”

President Saffron leaned back in his chair. “It’s good that we have an understanding. Dr. Klov, welcome to your new home,” he said with a menacing smile.

“Thank you, sir,” Dr. Klov said humbly.

President Saffron summoned Sillion into the conference room with a whistle. She came into the room a moment later and closed the door behind her.

“Sillion, take Dr. Klov back to his people. Then escort all of them to the Compound.”

“Yes, sir,” she said. She turned towards Dr. Klov. “Come with me.”

Dr. Klov stood up and turned towards the door. Sillion opened the door and he went through it. She then walked through the door and closed it behind her. The guard that drove them was waiting in the same jeep outside. They walked over to it and climbed into the seats they occupied before.

“What is ‘the Compound?’” Dr. Klov asked as they headed back towards the base.

“It’s our main research facility,” Sillion said.

Dr. Klov was pleased that they would finally be able to start their research but concerned about the coming days. He thought about the president’s last words and wondered if he truly intended to keep the Klovis Group in Kepca. When the jeep reached the base Sillion led Dr. Klov back into the cavern where the rest of the Klovis Group was waiting. As Dr. Klov briefly told the others what occurred, Sillion walked through the room until she reached the far end of the cavern. Everyone in the Klovis Group watched her as she reached behind one of the bathrooms. Seconds later a section of the wall depressed further into the cavern. It then began sliding to the right behind the cavern wall as Sillion turned around.

“President Saffron has decided to let you do your research. Gather your items and follow me.”

Everyone gathered their things and walked towards the opening as the wall section came to its final position. Beyond the opening was a platform of the local train system. Dr. Klov looked around at everyone and saw many in the group were cheerful. He heard them whispering as they tried to contain their excitement about what was to come. Dr. Klov continued to look around and soon saw Sarasin who stared back at him. She knew something bothered him. He looked away at the tracks. A second later, a three-car train came and stopped on the platform.

“Everyone, board the train,” Sillion commanded while she looked at them. “Dr. Klov, you are with me in the first car.”

“I’d like to bring my assistant with me,” Dr. Klov said.

Sillion walked towards the first car.

“Come on, Sarasin,” Dr. Klov said as he followed Sillion.

“Yes, sir,” Sarasin said as she follow him.

Once everyone embarked the train, the doors closed and the train moved forward.

“The Compound should be sufficient for your team. Bedding supplies are in the utility closet. There are four showers in the facility. You will have limited access to our records. Any additional access, equipment or supplies must be cleared by me,” Sillion said as she looked through the front window of the train. Sillion turned around and looked at Dr. Klov. “It’s important that you keep me informed of your progress. I want a report in seven days and every week following.”

“Okay,” Dr. Klov said as the train came to a stop at a platform.

The door opened and everyone exited the train. They walked towards the large opened room at the other end of the platform and saw a lab. Some of the members of the group hurried into the lab only to be disappointed when they got there and began to complain about the equipment. Dr. Klov, Sarasin and Sillion walked into the room last. Sarasin let out a heavy sigh. Several dozen filing cabinets lined the far wall. In front of them were eighteen tables. One of them had old burners and another had old test tubes and centrifuge machines. The lighting was dull with a few of the bulbs

burned out. The showers were little more than plastic pipes exiting the wall with a drain underneath it. The toilets looked like they hadn't been used in years. The sinks beside them looked even older and the other equipment seemed to be in disrepair. Dr. Klov turned around to face Sillion who stood next to a panel that was on the wall next to the entrance.

"Use this panel to contact me. Press the button to speak, release it to hear," Sillion instructed staring at Dr. Klov.

He nodded.

Sillion then left the lab and went over to the keypad on the wall beside the entrance. The lab's large metal door began to slide to the right and closed a minute later with a big thud. Dr. Klov sighed as he walked over to it. He sat down on the ground and leaned his back against it as he watched the group. Many continued to complain about the conditions while others tested some of the equipment. Sarasin came over and sat down beside Dr. Klov.

"I doubt some of the assistants know what some of the equipment is. They're used to machines doing all of the work," Sarasin said as she watched her associates. "It's a good thing that a few of us studied the old methods."

Dr. Klov laughed.

"Sir, what happens to us if we have nothing to report in seven days?" Sarasin asked as she looked at Dr. Klov.

"I don't know, Sarasin, I don't know." Dr. Klov then rose to his feet and helped Sarasin up. "We just have to make the best of a bad situation."

Dr. Klov and Sarasin walked over to the rest of the group. "I think the first thing we need to do is take inventory of what we can use. Only those who know how to use the equipment should handle it. I need people to check the showers and the toilets to see what is working. Six more need to check the bedding supplies and anything else they left us that's not lab equipment. Everyone else start going through the filing cabinets and see if there is any useful information. We have a week to come up with something promising," Dr. Klov ordered.

Everyone reluctantly obeyed as he turned to face Sarasin.

"I need you to go by everyone and make a list of the working equipment," he said.

"Yes, sir," Sarasin said as she pulled out her tablet.

"Sarasin," Dr. Klov said as he put his hand on the tablet. "You need to use the *old methods*. We need to conserve as much power as possible."

"Yes, sir," Sarasin said putting her tablet away. "I'll look for supplies."

Hours later the inventory was completed. There were fifty sleeping bags, ten blankets and a cabinet full of paper and cartons of pens. Four empty but operational refrigerators stood in the back of the room. Besides them were two cabinets full of non-perishable food. All twenty of the test tubes were in working order as well as three of the five centrifuges and three of the five burners. All but two of the filing cabinets had useful information. They had three working showers and two working toilets. Since there was a shower close to each toilet, the group decided to use two tables to create a wall around it and an extra one on the other side of the toilet creating two stalls. A blanket was draped between two tables to create a door in front of the shower. Another blanket was draped in front of the toilet. They did the same for the other toilet and the other shower. Six of the tables were then moved to one corner of the room to create a low wall around the sleeping area. Within it fourteen sleeping bags were spread out along the floor. Three tables were moved closer to the filing cabinets. All of the files that had relevant data were stacked beside them. The equipment was arranged on the remaining three tables.

Dr. Klov then decided that everyone should work in shifts of eight hours each. That way part of the group could be sleeping while the others worked. Dr. Klov split the group into two teams of thirteen members and one with fourteen. The team of fourteen, which

included Sarasin and himself, would take the third shift. Dr. Baker agreed to lead those in the first shift and Dr. Shue agreed to lead the second. Once the teams were set Dr. Klov suggested that they start with the data that was collected from the files. Dr. Baker and Dr. Shue agreed. Dr. Klov and the others that were on the third shift went to the sleeping area and tried to sleep while the others continued working. Everyone that was awake went over to the files and began sorting the data. After four days, the group found things that would be useful but didn't find anything that would lead them to an energy source that could replace Vocam.

