

Chapter 1

Wyatt meandered along the dusty fringes of the ancient settlements, moving intuitively as if a map were imprinted onto his mind. Pausing momentarily, he closed his eyes and breathed the scented air deeply. Opening his eyes and drawing another breath, Wyatt sensed an innate connection to this place. In the relative coolness and tranquility of the forest beyond, he felt it beckoning him to go still deeper. He followed this feeling, drawing him down the woodland path and threading through the understory until he vanished utterly into the forest.

It was late afternoon as Wyatt passed through the threshold of the woodland into a clearing and the open air. Standing dappled in sunlight on the edge of the vast wilderness, the color of his eyes mimicked the surrounding cover. Wyatt's long, dark, shaggy locks hung at his olive-toned shoulders to mingle with his beard. For this rugged environment, his lean muscular

frame appeared most suitable. Rays streaming through the canopy warmed his face, setting off a cascade of awareness in his mind that expanded out into the world beyond.

As well as his body felt in this natural environment, he couldn't help but think *something wasn't right*. Seemingly, Wyatt's day of trading forest items in exchange for tobacco, instant coffee, and lighter fluid went well. Upon review, his recollections of the day's events were obscured from his memory as if they hadn't happened. However, the weight of his pack indicated otherwise. Wyatt found himself questioning reality and even the need for such extravagant items. Wyatt concluded that *these trips and these luxuries were a waste of his precious time and energy*. Another thought filtered into his mind as if from some other place. You desire these things looted from the old dome complex stores. They help to ease the stress of being alone.

A hollow thought occurred to Wyatt, pondering this ready-made answer he told himself. *It seemed a bit contrived and not entirely valid*. Imagining these items, he said aloud, "What am I really doing out here? I have no need or desire for these things."

The confusion bothered Wyatt, so he attempted to push these thoughts from his mind. Wyatt focused on his footsteps lying

down on the trail, one after another, in mesmerizing certainty. Just as this thought appeared ready to vanish, another more bothersome idea suddenly occurred to him. His hands began to tremble slightly as nascent anxiety welled within. He forced himself to stop near the base of a large oak. Wyatt leaned his body against the tree, gathering his thoughts as he tried to reconcile the reality that he had no memory of his recent visit to the village. The farther Wyatt ranged from the shantytown, the more fragmentary his recollection of it became.

Wyatt walked a few meters, then found another spot on a large stone and sat down. He tried to stay calm even as he grew more perplexed in a swirl of thoughts. Breathing the cool forest air deeply, he focused on searching his memory. For reasons unknown to him, Wyatt did not indeed recall this or any previous visits to the town. They were, he realized, merely impressions.

Despite all evidence of having navigated successfully here, he did not immediately remember the way back. Strangely, in his mind, he possessed a clear image of where home was. It was a particular place where the forest touched the sea. However, the picture in his head possessed the same unreal qualities as the town he had just supposedly visited. He concluded that these images of his home must also merely be impressions. *But what else am I to do?* He knew, however, that he held the proper skill

set, and the image he held within his mind shined brightly like a beacon toward the sea. *I can do this; I have no choice.*

Immersed in the vastness of the forest, Wyatt scanned with his eyes the way before him. A certain kind of stillness filled the air to which he became oddly attuned. Beams of the shimmering light shining cast through the dusty air made mottled shapes of light and shadows upon the forest floor. Wyatt soon discovered marks and patterns relaying information he could innately read everywhere he looked.

Reading the hidden information in these signs, Wyatt found a new bearing, which he followed through rough underbrush and labyrinths of game trails and found his way. Eventually, the woods became more open, and the course rose gently onto a long-sloping plateau. At a point along the route where the ground leveled out, Wyatt came upon a clearing in the wood. He found many great fallen trees that had been felled by wind splintered and broken, perhaps days or weeks earlier in a storm.

Wyatt stopped and put his bags down. Wyatt began climbing atop the collective hulk of several overlapping fallen tree trunks to better observe the far valley. Gaining height as he rose, Wyatt felt renewed. His senses heightened as a light breeze blew unimpeded from below. Once he had secured his

footing, it was then through this gap along the horizon that he caught sight of something new and unusual in the distance.

He could see the shimmering outline of the ruined dome complex. The clarity of the air made its jeweled surface gleam in the afternoon light. He stood mesmerized by the dazzling interplay of light dancing upon its mirrored surfaces. Though he told himself he had memories of seeing it before, he somehow knew these to be false, for it had never appeared to him in such a striking fashion. The image he held was far different.

He stood fixated, reveling in the sensation as a chill wind was blowing through the forest gap. His dark hair blew around his head among the quaking leaves. The familiar earthy smells of the surrounding valley filled his senses and intoxicated his mind with images. He was struck suddenly by something oddly akin to nostalgia for something he had never personally known. He tried to conjure some connection to the domed city from deep in his memory. The desire to possess just a glimpse of life that had come before was powerful. It was enough to cause him to pause and contemplate his current condition. Wyatt recalled that it had been many years since the initial collapse of dome seven of the New Reading complex. He could not piece together a convincing narrative of life among the domes from the little information available. Firsthand accounts were

few and unreliable. He saw it as it left Wyatt wondering about his whole history.

As the sun inched toward the horizon, Wyatt realized he had been leaning against the tree, observing the ruins for far longer than he had intended. The reflected light was fading off what remained of the dome. Wyatt climbed down from the massive logs he had been standing on and collected his belongings. Once he was safely down on the firm ground, the effect of descending below the canopy of trees was to step into dusk.

Wyatt set off relatively briskly to beat oncoming darkness, preferring to drop down a few hundred meters in elevation before sunset. As the afternoon light diminished, he pressed onward. Eventually, the sky grew dark, and the azure moon's glow replaced the sun's arching rays.

Still some considerable distance from his home, he determined it wise to make camp for the night. The forest was alive with dangers. All manner of creatures wandered the woods at night. So, he would be sleeping among the trees. Having strung a hammock high in the canopy, Wyatt was relaxed, looking down onto a strange world. From above, blue-tinted monochrome shafts of moonlight revealed an otherworldly presence upon the forest floor. As far as the eye could see, the ground below him

was seething with life. A ghostly haze of absorbed moonlight reflected into space from the shadowy recesses of undergrowth.

Wyatt watched in amazement as the display seemed to surge and pulsate in cadence with the musical sounds of the woodland insects. Before long, he was witnessing a symphony of rhythmic motion and noise. His attention and concentration toward this happening intensified until he had lost focus on all else. The tone and timbre of the signal emanating throughout the air affected him. At this point, though he was seemingly alert, his mind temporarily stopped forming memories as time halted. He was not fully conscious of the movements around him. So, he was only partially aware of the twisted tendrils advancing slowly across the ground toward the trees that supported his hammock. This strange organism's translucent tissues reached higher along the rough surface and among the tree's jutting branches. Though Wyatt could almost see it move towards him, his consciousness was inexplicably blind to its advances. So, as Wyatt stared mesmerized down onto the forest floor, soft gelatinous tendrils of mycelium made contact with the surface of his skin.

Wyatt felt a sudden electric jolt at the moment of contact, and his body stiffened in reaction. Paralyzed, he lay motionless but awake; his eyes widened, and his mouth was gaping. Wyatt's subconscious suddenly became aware of a far greater world

than he could see, hear, or feel. Wyatt also knew that his memories were being reviewed by someone or something as this overwhelming sensation flashed through his senses. He could not fathom how he knew this, but the rate at which this process moved was far faster than he could follow. Wyatt realized that this access was reciprocal, and He began to sense the world beyond his body as if this kind of mold were an extension of his senses.

Wyatt raced through a growing cluster of thoughts that materialized within his memory. Undoubtedly stirred from what he saw previously in the forest, the New Reading Complex and the civilization that preceded it were now foremost in his mind. *How could it be?* He pondered silently. *How could such things happen?* Everything he knew of these events was second-hand. Memories of others and the rare photographs he had supposedly seen in the villages were false. He could not be sure of anything anymore. But these stories and images this creature showed him were almost too fantastical to believe.

Through the connection, the organism impressed upon the fabric of Wyatt's brain, waves of imagery encoded with signals of abstract narrative phrases. Like a primed canvas, his childlike mind readily transformed and translated these into something meaningful. He witnessed distant

events and unprecedented environmental disasters spreading, wreaking havoc over the planet. What Wyatt saw, he did not recognize. He saw a world whose life's sustaining web retreated to a few isolated islands of wilderness. What remained to fill the void was something different and unsettling.

Wyatt was still in a trance when the mycelium detached its tendrils from the surface of his electrically charged skin. With contact lost, Wyatt fell into a dreamless sleep.

Sometime later, Wyatt awoke. His conscious mind had no memory of the intrusion or recognition of the lost time. Confused by what happened, he found himself thinking strange thoughts of the New Reading Complex. *The engineers designed the domes to last for centuries; they had succumbed to a premature end. Why had the complex failed within only a few generations?*

Wyatt was tired, and as he laid his head back to sleep, unwanted imagery failed to vacate his mind. Though he did not understand the root of this sudden desire to know this place, he somehow wanted to document these things. The notion of why Wyatt would be suddenly so concerned about the past troubled him. *I don't remember having a problem with leaving the village behind. If he ever had lived in the town, that is?* As his memory served, it was the only home Wyatt knew. Why was he suddenly concerned about the history of these long-dead people and a

place where he felt no connection until now? Though Wyatt had been content to be alone for a long time, he sensed that this solitary existence might end.

As morning came, he woke to shrill sounds of low-flying birds. It took him a moment to remember that he was three meters off the ground. His hammock was still holding tight. That, however, was enough to get his heart racing again. He looked over to the adjacent branches, and the birds were still whirring about with curiosity at his presence there. He lowered the whole kit with ropes to the ground by manipulating the built-in pulley system. Taking moments to ready his gear, Wyatt was once again on the trail.

By noon, his course had brought him to a decidedly lower elevation. The terrain was also different here. The woods were less dense and intermixed with grasslands. Broken glass, ceramic shards, and the rusting metal fragments of long shattered machines lay hidden within the foundations of buildings. These and the remnants of concrete highways overgrown with grass and saplings towering overhead served as evidence of civilization before the domes.

Wyatt began to feel a change in the air. He could taste the salt of the sea on his tongue. The fresh ocean breeze was cutting through the trees that ringed the shoreline. The path

opened to a view of the water, and he could hear the distant crash of the wave upon the cobblestone beach. Soon enough, he would be on his way. However, he found the nearest log and sat down to rest.

Wyatt stopped to let the wind blow through his long, shaggy locks. Facing the wind, he reveled in the sensation for a moment. Wyatt removed a handcrafted pipe and his flip-top lighter from his hip bag. Despite the wind, he spun the wheel, and it lit on the first strike. Taking a deep drag off his pipe, Wyatt drew a small volume of smoke-laden air, and it let it roll from within the hot chamber of his pipe into his mouth. For a moment, he let it hang there. Smoke brushed gently upon his tongue and palate, and then, with a shallow breath, the dusty concoction set a whirl of sensations through his nervous system.

A moment later, a wave of relaxation enveloped him as his perspective shifted outward onto the wider world. He could feel his heart coursing blood through his body. He was tired and hungry, but it was time to move. With his gear on his back, he walked onto the beach and began walking.

The pangs of hunger for the moment forgotten Wyatt let his mind wander. Staring out along the winding boundaries of Earth, sea, and sky, his eyes came upon the dark woodland in the

distance. Against the background of the gunmetal sky, his eye caught sight of something strange.

Hidden within and cast against the silhouette of the forest was a green rectangular shape. The color was similar enough to blend effortlessly with the background from a distance. The object's artificial shape and hue made it hard to miss as Wyatt drew closer. Wyatt recognized what he was seeing. A wide grin came over his face as his excitement about what could be inside. He reasoned the container must have arrived recently, for he had no previous memory. However, like everything else in this world, he could no longer be sure it hadn't always been there, and he was the new element. For in his mind, there is no way he could have missed it. Part of him questioned whether it was right to ask such questions. After all, this was undoubtedly a blessing, for deep down, he knew somehow this was too good to be true. Either way, he would not waste an opportunity. So, he got down to the business at hand, cracking the box open.

Instinct took over, and he immediately began to work on the problem of finding out what was on the inside. Examining the exterior surface for overt clues, he found what appeared to be letters on the broadside, printed in bold white, each a foot in height. This clue was of little help, for the letters, if they

were letters, were in an alphabet he had never seen. After some time, he possessed no means to finesse the tumblers of the heavy steel lock. He would need to resort to mechanical advantage to access the inside. Removing a pry bar from his backpack, he got down to business. It took some doing, but he was able to muscle it free. The heavily weighted door fell open as the lock tumbled toward his sandaled feet.

For a moment, he stood there, staring in disbelief at the contents within. In front of him, row after row, one-pound cans of Pacific Tuna stacked to the ceiling filled the container from stem to stern. He could identify these because the faded labels were marked in English. He was sure he had never seen food preserved in such a fashion. It was a scavenger's dream come true. He hoped much of it was still safe to eat. Upon closer inspection, many cans showed signs of pitting and rust. Those portions, he had to assume, were spoiled. Picking one up, he pierced the metal casing with his long blade to discover that though the meat had perhaps passed its prime, it was safe to eat. *Marginally palatable* are the words that came to his mind describing the grey food.

At least of equal importance was the container vessel itself. It was sturdy and robust enough to survive a journey from who knows where to here. Wyatt struck upon the wall with

the side of his fist. A loud banging noise resounded through the open doorways, and a flock of nearby pipers jumped into the air, startled by the sound.

Wyatt set about gathering wood and built a fire in front of the entrance. The fire was large enough that he could see deep into the container vessel. Wyatt stayed up far into the night, rearranging the contents to make room for livable space. He would be spending most of his time here for the foreseeable future.

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Within only a few weeks of arriving on the beach, Wyatt had noticed that it had not taken long for the fine gossamer filaments of mycelium to infiltrate into the moist confines of the steel box. Having descended from the surrounding forest, the name of the organism had escaped him. However, as those now suspect memories served him, the rudimentary schoolhouse in the village had taught him to be wary of those infected by its spores. Now, decades later, the ubiquitous powdery coat had cast its sheen to a greater or lesser extent on all living things besides himself. This, for him, was an enduring mystery. His memory of what science had to say on the subject was unreliable after so much time. He did not fear it. Learning to live in peace in this new world was all a survivor could do. So, as his

container home's walls became slowly insulated by fungi' soft body parts, he made himself at home.

Chapter 2

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Trixie followed the moss-covered game trail through the forest until she came upon the vast, sprawling ruins of suburbia. These lands, abundant in the remnants of culture and technology, had reverted to a semblance of a natural state. The landscape reformed. Streams once culverted and diverted; in each instance, trees' roots broke the clay and concrete channels, causing them to collapse under their weight. Water across the ground's surface created new pockets for life. Pioneer species crowded the banks of these new wetlands, including species never seen in such context.

Sunlight filtered through the fronds of Giant Fern and Mountain Ash and gently reached down onto a bed of cracked and broken asphalt covered in thigh-high ferns. Trixie recognized the familiar feel of the ground underfoot as she walked, which may have once served as a schoolyard or parking lot. Vines,

plant tendrils, and grasses had broken open the ancient surfaces well. Where she stepped, her heavy boots walked upon the indestructible remains of a lost civilization. Plastic glass and ceramic artifacts, the raw materials of everything from cars and robots to fallen satellites, lie layered about among grass and fungus. She unconsciously kicked up these items from the mossy ground as she walked.

Trixie's story closely mirrored Wyatt's in so much as they were wanderers through a similar landscape. Neither believed they could stop following resources long enough to settle down. Like Wyatt, Trixie possessed an innate knowledge of the ways of survival. Though Trixie searched, following the game trails through a patchwork of broken streets, she wasn't after food this time. Thirst had driven her to find water. For this, too, she knew the animals were reliable. On this trail, the grass grew taller as she progressed. Just beyond the thicket, she could see a copse of trees running perpendicular to her bearing and arching downward in elevation. She thought that a stream or a pond may lay beyond. If the terrain was adequate, she imagined she might make camp and try her luck with snares or wild edibles.

As Trixie made her way toward where she imagined the clearing would reveal a potential water source, she found the

bodies of massive white shapes obscuring her view instead. Something unusual had taken root. She had not noticed the stand of growth for what it was until she was practically standing among them. The sight of the giant fungi's enormous bulk stopped Trixie in her tracks. She thought it strange how, like the trees, they clustered near the water. "What an odd out-of-the-way place for it to be in, indeed," she said aloud. "It would seem far more natural for such growth to have happened in a forest than the remnants of an old parking lot." But, of course, she remembered, "Nothing comes naturally anymore."

Trixie stood back, admiring the white giants. From what she remembered of her lessons at school, the name was *Prototaxities*. A tattered memory rose in her mind of how her teachers said that fossilized specimens were known to exist in a previous age. However, no living examples of these fungi were ever discovered until the coming of the plague. Now, here they stood like living relics of that long-ago epoch. Walking among them, Trixie noted the variety of forms they possessed: brilliant white to mottled brown. Cone-shaped, some stood nearly nine meters tall and two in diameter. Up close, their bodies had the outward appearance of pale tree bark.

The air in proximity to Prototaxities was heavy with an odd odor, which they exuded. Its smell was reminiscent of wet earth and decaying fall leaves. Trixie could not help but breathe in the scent. As the aroma passed over her palate, she felt an odd physical sensation cascade through her body. Suddenly, there was a subtle shift in her manner of perception, as the soft shapes of the *Prototaxities* seemed more akin to animals than fungi. Trixie felt this was perhaps a hallucination, but if it was, it was powerful.

Though Trixie had suspected she had fallen under the influence of some mild intoxicant, she was immediately aware that there, within the shelter of these towering conical forms, she was to discover that *perhaps there was something here, something hidden*. With this thought in mind, Trixie continued walking amidst the spongiform columns. She came upon one of the massive specimens and placed her palm flat against its white flesh. An almost electric sensation arced across the measure of space between Trixie and the Prototaxities. Looking up at the massive white shape looming above, she recognized the presence of some abstract order in the assemblage of trees and fungi. She could not understand how and why she saw this, but the trees seemed suspiciously subservient to the mighty columns. She sensed a subtle motion as the towering white cone moved and

expanded ever so slowly. Trixie stood her ground, holding her breath, seemingly waiting for the illusion to stop. Trixie wondered to herself. *This couldn't be possible, could it?* While this question crossed her mind, she became conscious of a sound. Though strangely, she was sure she had heard an actual noise with her ears. The mysterious sound rang out again.

Alarmed by the noise, Trixie abruptly pulled her hand back from the Prototaxities and called out, "What is that sound? Is it a machine or an animal?" This time, the conscious thought of the noise upon its second iteration felt wholly artificial. Trixie called out. "Hello, is anyone there? Hello. I guess you're going to make me follow that signal. Is that your game? Well, Ok, here I come."

In one deliberate motion, Trixie removed the long blade she kept in her boot. Holding on to it tightly, she moved toward the projected source of the signal. Trixie covered her ears to find that neither the signal's intensity nor clarity was affected, to be sure that she hadn't imagined things. Convinced again in her assumptions about the sound, she moved forward until she came to a cluster of thorn bushes. The noise was louder now, though Trixie concluded that somehow it resounded wholly in her imagination. "What am I looking for?" she said as she circled the bush. She recognized that it had grown over something hidden

within. Without hesitation, Trixie began to cut back the branches carefully.

At that moment, the signal suddenly stopped. After several minutes of clearing branches and debris, Trixie recognized what was underneath. Below the roots and stems, Trixie found a set of locked, rusted steel doors bound from within by a stout chain. Their orientation indicated that the doors must secure a passage that descended into the ground.

"It must be a bunker," she said aloud. Hurriedly, Trixie removed the pry bar from her supply pack and began working the chain. It took some muscle, but she had experience with such things, and soon enough, the links broke. Barely able to conceal her excitement, she swung open the bay door, revealing a downward staircase as she had imagined.

Gathering the strength to move into it, Trixie stood up. With trepidation, she gazed down into the void. Her heart was beating with such intensity that Trixie swore she could hear it. Admittedly, Trixie doubted whether she should step into the darkened stairwell. Everything that led to this point held an air of suspicion. However, stepping down into the darkness was a foregone conclusion. Soon, she would find out who was calling her. Stepping down onto the first step, she again made her blade ready. She was not afraid to use it if it came to a fight.

After several more steps, the light from above faded, and she felt, though she could not yet see, that she was within a larger space. The air was cool, and it held the faint odor of mildew. Reaching the landing, she moved carefully as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Lit only by the light streaming through the stairwell opening, she began to sense the inner dimensions crudely. She found the interior wall and searched its surface for an electrical switch. It still happened on occasion that she found old backup generators still functioning, albeit temporarily.

Clumsily, Trixie's fingertips skimmed blindly across the cinderblock wall. Roughly a meter from the landing, her hand came not upon a switch but an old-fashioned lever-type breaker. Recognizing what it was, she struck the handle into the on position. The corresponding burst of sound in that instant of contact as sparks fell and small streamers of electricity arced. The power surged out from the junction through to the waiting circuits. Lights flickered and flashed while the sound of a dozen small motors filled the air. On instinct, she lowered her head. But, as the lights came up, she lifted it again. She was astonished at what she saw there. Just as she had suspected, it was a bunker. But not as she had imagined; this was no survivalist camp. She had stumbled upon something far more

sophisticated. She could only guess what purpose it had served and who the people charged to man this place were.

Feeling confident that no one had set foot here in some time, Trixie loosened her grip on her blade. Staring down the narrow passage before her, she carefully stepped forward. The way ahead was awash in the cold fluorescent light cast from a line of fixtures recessed into the ceiling.

A feeble light cast a pale haze onto the walls and doorways that lined the hall. As Trixie walked, she observed entrances to darkened rooms at intervals of ten paces on either side of the hallway. Upon each door's opaque glass was stenciled a set of sequential three-digit numbers in white paint. Each room was dark as she passed, showing no sign of life. She reached the end of the hall, where a ventilation fan was whirring slowly but steadily. She paused there a moment. In the dim light, Trixie could make out the stairwell that went down to a secondary level. Turning to her left, however, she could see a room. Unlike the others on this level, the light inside was burning brightly.

The door was partially ajar. No overt signs of danger were evident. However, Trixie's heart raced for the potential of what could remain in the room, triggering the old fight-or-flight response. Despite her heightened emotion, she inched herself

toward the open doorway. With care, she peered within the room. To her surprise, she was looking upon what she surmised to be some type of scientific laboratory. Having never made such a discovery, she was drawn forward through the threshold more so by curiosity as if fear had never gripped her.

On either side of her were rows of benches topped by polished black slate tables now covered by inches of dust. Each station held an array of rusted syringes and glass tubes laying out on metal trays. Upon many of these tables sat various machines, the functions of which she could not recognize. Farther, still, near the room's far end, she found several sealed containers beneath a large ventilation duct. Stenciled upon the boxes in English were the words *Biological Containment Hazardous Materials*. She pieced together that this place may have had some medical or scientific function.

One thing was clear to her: whatever happened here, it happened a long time ago. She was unlikely ever to discover the truth. It was part of the long-dead past. She tried to imagine the nature of the work that had gone on there. However, very little evidence remained from which to conclude. It would likely remain a mystery. Satisfied she had seen all there was to know, she would be glad to put this out of her mind. Trixie backed slowly out of the room and made her way back to the hallway.

She stepped back in the corridor and moved again to the top of the stairwell. The black void at the base of the stairs was set aglow by the same pale light that lit the corridor she was standing in. She was hesitant to descend further into the depths of the bunker. Sooner or later, however, necessity might force her to. *Better to do so on my terms.* She told herself.

Stepping down into the dim light, she found herself in an area of the exact dimensions as above. Space appeared to be broken evenly into storage, offices, and workshops. Trixie first saw the food stores. She was pleased to find crates of canned and dried foods of various kinds on the pantry shelves.

"Would you look at all this? It looks like I've hit the Jackpot." She said aloud.

She knew better than to celebrate prematurely, so she pressed forward into the workshops and offices. In turn, each room was empty and deserted, as she had expected. However, toward the end of the corridor, an office was there with its lights still glowing. Trixie slowly moved closer. As she approached, she was still holding tightly onto the knife. With her other hand, she grasped the doorknob and turned it.

Trixie, startled, let out a shriek. Stepping backward in fear, she tripped on her own feet and fell backward. The wind

knocked out of her as her back hit the hard floor. As she looked up from the floor, struggling to put air back in her lungs, her mind was piecing together what she saw. Images of many things populated Trixie's memory, but she was not quite prepared for this. Lying on the threshold, she looked up at a gruesome sight. Sitting in a chair behind a desk was the figure of what was once a man. The slumped figure, covered in white feathery down, had been consumed in death by the fungi. She had seen this process before, bodies consumed in death by the white powdery substance. However, due to its location in a dry, cool place, his body was in an unusually pristine state of preservation.

What end had this stranger met? Had the process of his consummation begun before or after his death? Trixie collected herself and stood back up on two feet. For a moment, she stood there, observing the morbid details of his final moments that had been laid bare. Upon the desk, she discovered a pistol and a blood-stained blotter.

The desiccated body was light, and the chair it sat upon rolled easily on casters. It was a simple matter then to wheel the unfortunate soul, whoever he might have been, back away from the desk. Trixie's interest in this was no morbid fascination. All indicators pointed to the fact that this man here was the station's last known occupant. As far as she knew, everything

she would need to know she would find right here, where it all ended. She began to carefully examine the desk and all its contents, with the chair safely stowed to the side. The splattered blood, having dried to a translucent crimson, had not faded in all the years since. If it didn't affect her directly, it did not move her with all she had seen. She looked through the stains of blood as if they weren't there, reading the words for what information they would tell. Nothing of consequence was on the desk, so she went through the drawers. She discovered there were several folders marked 'Operation Golden Age.'

Trixie removed one of the folders, opened it, and began reading in earnest. The story that unfolded was a difficult read. Its language was so heavily laden with technical jargon that it left the document almost indecipherable. Because much of the language in the papers was specialized, it seemed foreign to her. Despite this, she knew enough to gain a rudimentary understanding of what had gone on behind these doors. The purpose of Operation Golden Age was to study the mycelium phenomenon. At the time of its sudden emergence, they did not yet understand the implications of its presence.

Those conducting their experiments had gone to great lengths to expand their understanding of this lifeform. According to the logs locked away in the bunker, they had

learned little. Eventually, they would succumb to madness. The record log's final notation was Doctor Nicolas Walsh's entry. Indications were that as the mycelium began communicating telepathically with them, all save for him abandoned their posts.

Trixie closed the folder, placing it carefully down on the desk. She would be learning nothing else here, for her last witness was dead. Trixie determined that she would take from this place what she could. Picking up the revolver, she held it up to the light. Staring down the pitted and rusted barrel, she spun the cylinder, examining the condition of the action. Five rounds remained in the cylinder. Closing the breach and setting the safety, she tucked the revolver in the back of her belt.

Turning again to the motionless body, she spoke to it. "So, Doctor Nick, you have a name. I'm sorry you had to go out like that."

She paused for a moment, mocking expressions of sorrow. As she began again to speak, her expression disappeared. "But, seeing as you're not going to need any of these things, I thought I would take over and keep an eye on the place for you. I hope you don't mind?"

She turned again toward the desk and began searching through the drawers. Within, she found all manner of items. Some things were more useful toward her stated end of survival than others. Among these was a box of ammunition that matched the caliber of the revolver. Trixie kept digging. She discovered high-quality mechanical tools, cutting implements, and various measuring devices in another set of drawers. Something had, however, strangely caught her attention, more so than any of the other items. It was the boxes of slightly off-color paper. It was strange, and she knew it was weird because she had no use for writing. It was the most transient of materials in this challenging world. This much was true. She hardly had seen much of it in all her years of wandering. Perhaps she had come across the hard outer binding of a book with the pages lost. Pushing this intrusive thought from her mind, she continued her search. At the bottom of the lowest drawer, she found a bottle of Scotch whiskey and a single glass. It had been well hidden, but no one could claim it now.

"Well, what do we have here?" said Trixie with a lilt of anticipation.

Though Doctor Nick was light, the chair on which he rested was ungainly. With his body in tow, she dragged the rolling chair up both flights of stairs into the open. Pushing the chair

across the broken blacktop, Trixie found a stable spot beside a tree and left him and the chair at rest. She took a seat atop the bunker's exterior door and, for a moment, stopped to catch her breath. Once she regained her strength, she realized dusk was beginning to set in. The sun was slipping below the crest on the horizon. It would soon be dark. But the last orange beams of light were filtering through the haze.

A light misty rain had begun to fall. Having lived on the move for most of her life, Trixie was not quite ready to sleep indoors despite what she had found. She instinctively started collecting the materials for an evening campfire. With flint and steel, she got to work. In short order, her collection of tinder had ignited. With the flame hungrily consuming the fuel she fed into it, the confines of the tiny makeshift hearth soon glowed a beautiful shade of red. With this task complete, Trixie made herself as comfortable as possible on the hard ground.

Breaking the seal on the antique bottle of whiskey, she poured a small volume into a glass she had retrieved from the desk. Among the riot of sensations contained therein, the subtle smoke and iodine lingered on her palate. These sensations swirled around in the glass like reflections of the flickering light and shadows from the fire. She felt that fire now as she

consumed it. She watched as light from the flame projected a ghostly display up among the bodies of the *Prototaxities*.

The rain continued to fall lightly. Trixie, however, had gone numb to the sensation. She stayed awake until late into the evening, staring up into the sky, watching the trail of satellites stream across the face of the night, and talking incoherently to her new friend, Doctor Nick. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep. All the while, ever the patient guest sat and listened silently.

It was morning, and the glow had faded from the previous night's fire. It had been burning throughout the night, but Trixie woke, cold and damp, beside the smoldering ashes. For a moment, she was strangely unaware of where she was. From her place on the ground, and sat up quickly, leaves and debris stuck in her dark hair, her eyes adjusting to the new light. She was experiencing a kind of sensory overload. This nausea, coupled with the sudden motion, caused her to wince. She wondered if it was perhaps the alcohol, for she could feel the beating of her heart inside her head. After a moment, as she shook off the effects of the hangover, her eyes came into focus. She was startled to find that her new friend, Doctor Nick, had somehow gone missing while she had slept. There was a moment of terror

when she contemplated, *"What the hell? Am I having a nightmare right now?"*

Standing up, Trixie gave her surroundings a quick three-hundred-and-sixty-degree scan. Everything was where it was the night before. The chair, the bottle, and the revolver having examined them, were in their proper place. Convinced it had all been real, she stepped over to the chair to find that in the night, a shimmering lattice of mycelium strands had grown from the ground to infiltrate the fabric of the chair.

"It all seems real enough, a little too real if you ask me. Now, where did my new friend go off running to?"

Possessing knowledge of animals' habits and signs, Trixie knew when she examined the ground for signs of footfall or tracks that something or someone had taken him away. Who, or whatever it was, was too close for her liking? She found the faint signs of a trail on the ground. She removed the revolver from her belt and slowly began tracking whatever had made the tracks.

Chapter 3

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Smoke billowed, rising high from the small cooking fire that Wyatt had burning just outside the shipping container's open doors. Wyatt sat idle, upwind from the hearth, with the wind in his sunburned face. He felt strangely ill at ease since the discovery of the container. All had seemed a little too lucky. However, the lifestyle it provided was not without its benefits. He had not until then allowed his mind to wander. This unprecedented circumstance had given him something he had never known: the freedom of time.

As these moments stretched into unbounded days, it had not been long before he found that his thoughts and energies had become more narrowly focused. Things he had not noticed before had become apparent. Discovering that the opposite sides of the tuna can labels were a brilliant white, these fragile papers, once unrolled into six-inch-long strips, became the fertile grounds for an unencumbered imagination. Wyatt began documenting his disjointed thoughts with a gull's feather and a homemade ink made from a burnt acorn husk and egg white. He had painstakingly formulated and copied a pseudo-messianic trope to the delicate

one-and-half-inch wide scrolls. To this task, he felt somehow compelled. This consuming obsession afflicting Wyatt, which hindered all rational thought for a time, had seemingly relented.

This morning, Wyatt found himself lying on the compartment floor, staring upward at the corrugated iron ceiling. He was cold and disoriented. Wyatt pushed himself up off the floor to a sitting position. He drew his legs close to his body, still shivering. The angle of pale morning light cut through the narrow passage to illuminate the product of his labor. The images portrayed a tangled story of a past and a future in a collision, with childlike representations of strange flying serpents, four-footed beasts, and a great plume of fire reaching the heavens. The stark and primitive images and words revealed a reality from some other world in the deep contrast of brown and white. Yet he knew it had been he who had created it. Seeing those slips of fragile paper arranged about the walls around him was odd. His memory of the time spent producing this work was clouded. While in the throes of this endeavor, he was barely aware of himself. *The trip to the village and the night spent in the forest were like dreams.* It was unclear to him what mysterious font these intrusive words and imagery had

originated. Due to the inner voice's clarity, it had not occurred to him that it was anything more than a hallucination, nor would he believe it possible. So, he pondered why he had suddenly taken to such behavior. He began to suspect that he had fallen under a powerful outside influence.

Wyatt stood up, and as he did, he immediately felt the acute pain of hunger. He blinked his eyes, clearing his vision. After a moment, Wyatt began walking toward the light of the open door. With a wooden spoon, he tried to dislodge salty remnants of yesterday's meal of oysters and birds' eggs from an aluminum pan, onto which they had stubbornly burned. Realizing he wanted to eat, he needed to break into his dwindling tuna supply. In frustration, he threw the pot on the ground. Stepping out of the shipping container, he faced out onto the stony windswept beach.

Mentally exhausted, he left the pot where it lay among the stones and returned to his chair just inside the doorway. Content now to merely watch the ocean breeze scatter the column of smoke, he tried to empty his mind. Try as he might find relief from the strain of his thoughts, he began hearing a strange symphony of noises as the wind whistled around and over his metal cave. He turned toward the source of the sound. His eyes strained, searching for the location. Back and forth, they darted among the shadowed recesses within. His mind searched for

a rational explanation. *Perhaps I imagine things*, he says to himself. To this end, he attempted to concentrate on soothing the cadence of the waves. However, the ghostlike bangs and whistling sounds were persistent and unnerving. Wyatt, driven to distraction by the noise, was now forced into action.

Standing up from his seat, he listened carefully to the sound, trying to gauge the direction from which it was emanating. The echo effect within the container's hollow space made this impossible. Stepping outside onto the rock-strewn beach, the direction from which the sound came became more distinct. Turning toward the perceived source of the sound, he observed something unusual. The beach stone base upon which his home sat seemed alive with motion. The container shifted and ground ever so slightly against the polished stone surface. Something beneath the ground was moving, and the groaning sound of steel on the stone grew in intensity.

Then, he saw the gossamer connective tissue of mycelium rising from beneath the ground's surface and into all the darkened places. Though he recognized them as the fungi seen commonly, they behaved in a most unfamiliar manner. He observed an interconnecting web of fibrils forming thick white mats from several locations near its base. From these stalks and trunks

came penetrating upward, rising steadily in height and growing in diameter.

Wyatt was generally not one to be easily overcome by panic. However, this unfolding scene touched some hidden nerve, which he could not help but react to. From this place, Wyatt was determined to escape. However, he either needed or preferred not to abandon things within the container box. Wyatt made a mad dash inside. Hurriedly searching, filling his bag and arms, Wyatt carried whatever he could. Near the rear of the narrow structure, he observed something that stopped him cold in his tracks.

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While tracking Doctor Nick through the forest, Trixie followed what vague signs were available. Her trail ended suddenly, where the wood's edge met a rocky beach. On the beach, she saw a green shipping container at a point not too distant from where she was. However, it was far enough that she was required to strain her eyes to perceive what strange images she imagined she was seeing. She wasn't one hundred percent sure, but it appeared to be an immature stand of Prototaxities rising from the area immediately around the container's base. She had never seen anything like this before.

It was then that she saw the figure of a man. Even from a distance, she could tell he was in some distress. The image Trixie observed there filled her with equal parts of anger and curiosity. She felt anger that someone had ventured into her camp last night uninvited. It was curiosity that now led her on. Something strange was happening. Trixie needed to find out just what it was she saw, if only for her well-being. With her intent now determined, she abandoned the safety of the tree line. She was running out across the beach before she could even think of a plan.

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It took all of Wyatt's courage to stand his ground. What he was confronting had all the qualities of a child's nightmare. He imagined a monster in his midst and had to face it alone. The terrifying sounds of shearing rivets and grinding metal reverberated as the corrugated steel floor tore apart like sheets of paper. He watched as the tawny mass of sinewy flesh pushed upward from beneath the broken floor. All along the wall and roof, angel hair filaments grew a translucent film formed over the scrolls that Wyatt had painstakingly posted there. The lifeform momentarily paused, seeming to contemplate as it consumed the words and images as part of its flesh. Another moment later, the tendrils again reached outward as if searching

for something throughout the room. Its probing feelers came upon the chair, which, only moments ago, Wyatt had occupied. Tendrils wrapped tightly around the chair's base, climbing upward upon the seat. It was upon the seat where a mass of amorphous flesh began forming. For Wyatt, this was wholly outside of his frame of reference. All sense of fear had vanished as he watched, enthralled by what he saw next. Slowly but at a consistent rate, the mass of flesh began to take on the outward proportions of the human form.

Wyatt became aware that there was someone else nearby. He could hear sounds in the distinct cadence of human footsteps coming from some distance behind him. Under ordinary circumstances, finding another person would have been exciting enough for one day. These circumstances, however, were anything but ordinary. A moment later, a woman was standing beside him. He saw her pointing an old revolver at the evolving mass from his peripheral vision. His attention for the moment had shifted to the young woman. Unsure of which direction this potentially troubling situation was heading, Wyatt turned his head toward her.

In his eyes, she was gorgeous. She was tall, but not as tall as him. He recognized those wild and independent qualities with long dark hair and piercing eyes he admired. These things,

he tried for the moment to push from his mind. He told himself, *for the moment, to stick with the objective facts.* She was breathing heavily; he figured she must have run here. He took a chance and told her, "I don't think you'll need that. Why don't you put it down before you get hurt?"

Trixie cocked the hammer on the old revolver and said with a grin, "Yeah, right, pal. Like that's going to happen. Who the hell are you? Why do you suppose you get to tell me what to do?"

Wyatt's heart was now racing as he faced down the armed stranger, obliging her threat by raising his hands into the air. He knew about guns and managed to stay steady despite the sight of this one pointing at him. Wyatt dug deep, mustering the courage to talk his way out of this potentially dangerous situation. He looked at her despite all that was happening and spoke slowly and in a calm, matter-of-fact timber, "Firstly, I would ask you not to shoot me just because I imagine I'm the first living person you've seen in a while. Am I right? Secondly, I suspect that that old rusty gun might kill both of us if you tried to fire it. What good would that do either of us?" He paused for a moment to let that sink in. "By the way, I'm Wyatt."

Trixie realized in the excitement and revelry of last night that she had not taken a moment to thoroughly inspect the gun's

condition. Still aiming at Wyatt, she pivoted, grasping the weapon in both hands and lifting it shoulder height. Staring down over the barrel, Trixie now had his full attention as he stood still with both hands raised above his head.

While he stood compliant in the line of her sights, it was her first chance to inspect the revolver in the full light of the day. The gun appeared far worse for wear than it had the previous night. *How old was this gun?* Trixie recognized that most of what he had said was likely correct. It was also true that it had been long since she had seen another person. To her recollection, that occasion had not been under such relatively pleasant circumstances.

Glancing into his eyes, she was unsure what she saw but immediately sensed something. Was it some innate familiarity, a degree of trust? She wasn't sure. Trust, he would need to earn. His shock of long black hair wasn't unattractive in his way. And there was something about his eyes. She lowered the revolver to her side. With her other hand, she reached out and said, "Ok, let's do it your way. I'm Trixie; it's good to meet you, Wyatt. Now, would you mind telling me what's going on here?"

Still slightly shaken by the appearance of this creature in his midst and then having a gun pointed in his face, he finally

pulled himself together. He slowly dropped his hands and answered, "Unfortunately, I'm not exactly sure."

"Well, one thing is certain: I've found Doctor Nick," Trixie said.

"Who is Doctor Nick?"

Trixie looked into Wyatt's eyes, and for an instant, she forgot what the conversation was about. Without missing a beat, Trixie was back on track with her arm's length attitude intact. She said, "It's a long story, and there is no doubt I'll be telling you soon enough. Let's just say that this person sitting here was in my camp last night. I can't imagine how he got to be here for the life of me, but it did happen right before our eyes."

"I'm much more interested in why this is happening. I've never before observed the mushrooms to behave like this."

It was then that the most unusual communication came upon them. A voice without sound spoke directly to their minds. Though they heard no actual noise, their imaginations registered a clear and distinct vocal sound. The monotone voice spoke resounding in tones from somewhere deep in each of their memories. "Wyatt, Trixie, there is no need to fear me. I have

not come to cause you harm. I only ask you to listen for a while."

Though the voice itself had given no inference to its point of origin, they found themselves staring at the seated figure. Wyatt and Trixie could only assume that the figure's appearance there was to benefit this communication. Wyatt approached the seated figure and asked, "Who, or what are you, and what could you say?"

"I have no name, for it is of little consequence." the voice resounded. "I am, however, part of a greater collective post-human consciousness. We are a cumulative achievement of life itself. There is an unfortunate irony here; the human mind, such as your own, brought this state of consciousness into existence. That is a story unto itself. Yet, the unfortunate limitations of that same mind bar one from full communion with the collective. These same shortcomings threaten to extinguish what remains of humanity's light from the universe."

Wyatt and Trixie turned toward each other. Each held an expression of disbelief upon their faces as they confirmed they were not alone in their illusion. The content of what they were told seemed counter to their understanding of their world. Trixie felt anger and confusion rising inside her. She needed to talk but did not know where to direct her voice. "Who is this

speaking to me? Who you are is important to us. Where are you, and how are you doing this? Assuming you are some consciousness of the fungus, was it not your species that destroyed this world?"

"That's a fair question. We are not the consciousness of the Prototaxities. It exists in this world as a powerful consciousness, but it is unlikely to speak to you as we are now. We are the collective that resides within its wide-ranging network. You must know the truth about what happened in the past about your nature. What we are is a collective mind. This part of your story was hidden from you. However, it is unclear why it isn't already evident based on what you've seen. At this point, however, this, too, is of little consequence. Let us put this into its proper context. Each time a species passes through a genetic bottleneck, there is, by necessity, a corresponding transformative evolution. The occasion of our evolution was unlike any previous event that had befallen your kind. This event was no outside catastrophe; this was a slow and persistent undoing caused by our progenitor's actions. The mycelium mats' presence was not the cause of the end of your time on Earth but rather a response to it. The voids were a result and a sign of their decay."

Wishing to show Wyatt and Trixie first-hand what evidence it could, the entity reached deep within its vast matrix. Drawing from its memory, imagery, and packets of data, these images are presented directly into their minds as simulations of their memories. As if possessed in a dream state, their eyes rolled and fluttered their minds, processing the stream of information. In a matter of seconds, they witnessed centuries of data. As it unfolded within their minds, they saw the chain of events that ultimately led to the world's ecosystems' wholesale collapse. They saw how the great white mats had come not to destroy but to pave the way for what would happen next. Opening their eyes in unison, they looked at each other again in disbelief, realizing they had shared the same vision.

Wyatt seemed confused about what happened and said, "I don't understand; that's not what I knew before. You've changed me."

"We have relayed the true nature of your world. It is your nature; you will need time to process this data." Spoke the voice in his head. "This, however, is of no matter. It is by no accident that you were both brought together, here and now. If I were to allow the original protocols to unfold, I might have had to wait until you met by accident. I must admit I used this little ruse to hasten your meeting. It has taken some doing to

bring you together as I have. If you were to do as I ask, I would bring new purpose to your lives and an end to your wandering."

Trixie responded, "I'm sorry, I'm confused. I noticed that you stopped calling yourself we and suddenly changed to I. Which is it? Are you an individual or multiple? Whether you intended to or not, you seem to be contradicting yourself. And how dare you presume what is right for me. What if I don't want to have my wanderings come to an end?"

"Now, Trixie, I know you at least as well as you know yourself. I know you cherish nothing more than those images of your childhood home and the stability it once represented. What if I was to tell you it was all a lie?"

"Get out of my head! You have no right to know my thoughts. What do you know about anything? I know my truth! Things were hard. Yes, there was a family! Here, I have freedom. I wouldn't go back there if my life depended on it. This person you see is who I am now. You are telling the only lies."

"Yet, we do share your thoughts. I want you to understand it is not something we or I am attempting to do. As much as we respect the notion of individuals' rights, it is merely a state of being for us. Your thoughts already exist within our stream

of consciousness; we can do little to stop it. And these freedoms you speak of, I assure you they are nothing but illusions."

Wyatt was feeling a wide range of emotions, all of which he was trying to control. However, he directed his growing agitation in the form of a question to the creature. "Would you get to the point already? What is it that you want from us?"

"Well, Wyatt, I thought this would have been obvious to you by now. You have already been compiling a story. You had imagined it to be a record of your wanderings or perhaps some history of the end of human civilization. Tell me if I'm wrong; you had imagined, in some far-off time, people reading your pitiful scratching among compendiums in some far-off other future. This idea is, of course, a fantasy. I have already absorbed your work since I brought you here. I must tell you, Wyatt, that I am disappointed in your progress. Despite Prototaxities' support and encouragement, you have done little. Where is this great work you keep imagining?"

"What do you mean, since you brought me here?"

"Prototaxities saw the potential in you. He woke you from your slumber and brought you here. So, it provided food, shelter, and other things as well. But, as we told you already,

the collective conspired to bring you here together. However, once you had ceased wandering, so too had your creative drives. I think now my thoughts have been expressed plainly."

Though Wyatt was angry, he did not immediately respond, for he understood the gravity of his words. He had himself questioned whether outside forces had influenced him or had he succumbed to madness. The one advantage of this recent experience was that another could witness it. Seemingly, all those random bits of luck that had come his way recently appeared to fit into a predictable pattern. The realization of how easily manipulated he had been suddenly struck him. He could not even be sure how much of his desires were his own. "I can't speak for Trixie," Wyatt said, "but something touched my mind, and it wanted me to see a vision. It wanted me to see it here in this place. That much is real."

"By now, you both must have suspected that you are part of something larger than yourselves. You don't belong here. Perhaps you won't believe me now, but the world is far bigger than this garden you find yourself in. Your kind does not belong here. You will, in time, grow restless in this paradise. This world was made for our kind. In time, you will destroy it. So, our only wish for you is to bring both of you together, as you were fated to be, bringing you fulfillment and communion. In this way, your

species will live again beyond the confines of this prison. But to do so, you must accept you don't belong here and leave this place. Leave the shelter of the forest. There is a destiny beyond for you both."

It was Trixie's turn now to respond. "For someone who claims to watch us in our dreams and thoughts, you don't seem to know us very well. You just can't put two people together and expect there to be chemistry. It doesn't work that way."

"We understand far more than you realize. The Prototaxities upon whose living network we are symbionts have made a means of communication available to us. Life cycles have passed down the ages from generation to generation, and they are based on a delicate invisible web as one interconnected force. However, until the coming of humankind, the consciousness of which had known only shadows and light, gradations of form, sounds, and sensations. It was not until the first utterances of spoken words that any meaning could arise from it. This forest is alive with the spirits of the dead; our minds are alive within the network of Mycelium. As you may know, you and your kind are immune to the spores, so we ask you, our human cousins, to leave this forest to us. Return to the bunker, take as many supplies as you can carry, and leave this place."

Wyatt turned to Trixie and interrupted. "You have a bunker? Enough food to last a lifetime! I've got nothing left to lose. I was getting tired of this beachfront living anyway."

"Now, wait just one minute. What gives you the right to claim my find?" asked Trixie.

The voice of the creature spoke in her head. "If you remember correctly, your friend, Doctor Nick, as you've called him, was there before you. Is it not, in fact, his rights to which you have claimed? He will help you, and he has a story to tell. I suggest you listen carefully."

"Dead men can't make any claims."

"Whose footprints do you suppose you were following then? In this new era, death, as you will discover, does not necessarily have the same finality."

From the chair in which it sat, the body of flesh in the form of a man stood up onto its feet and stepped tremblingly forward. In fear, Wyatt and Trixie stepped backward. They watched with a combination of awe and terror as layers of downy coating sloughed from what was a simulacrum of a man. It was as if, having emerged from an egg, its body, pale and naked, was defenseless to the elements. It stood shielding itself from the stark light and chilled morning air. Recognizing its suffering,

Wyatt took pity on it as the familiar semblance of humanity. He rushed into the wreckage of his home, retrieving a blanket. After a moment, Wyatt returned, draping it around his shoulders. As he did, he felt the coldness of his flesh.

"We'd better get this fire going again and warm you up," said Wyatt to the shivering stranger.

Trixie stood back and watched. She was more than a bit annoyed at how this was happening. In her mind, it was as if Wyatt was conspiring to take her claim on the bunker. "What do you think you're doing? You don't even know who or what this thing is."

"I don't care where it's from. I'm not going to watch it suffer."

Chapter 4

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Hours had passed since the voice last spoke within Wyatt and Trixie's head. Meanwhile, they had built up the fire, around

which the creature they had begun calling Doctor Nick warmed himself. Wyatt had even managed to find him some spare clothing. It did not take them long to feel comfortable enough to ask him questions. Trixie was dubious about his true origins, but she was most curious about what had happened all those years ago back at the bunker. After what she witnessed, she needed to discover memories of the fate befallen him. However, Trixie thought she would need more to convince herself that this was the same person she had found in the bunker. After all, what actual evidence was there? Beyond these voices seemingly in her head, there was nothing but this cold and shaking stranger. "So, tell me," She asked, in her most sarcastic tone possible. "What is your take on how, after so long, you manage to find yourself here, resurrected? You know, to me, it just seems impossible."

Doctor Nick understood her words but, lacking context, could not derive any sense of their true meaning. He found that searching his mind held only a landscape of prescribed knowledge. He could conjure mere shadows of personal memory beyond those he had just experienced. His explanation of this would leave them both dissatisfied. What he did have was an odd desire to share a story. However, he was sure that this story did not belong to him. "This question you ask, I cannot answer.

Any knowledge of a past self is unknown to me. However, perhaps there is something, though I do not yet understand why you both may want to hear."

Wyatt stoked the flames of his meager cooking fire and added several medium-sized logs. His guests were soon warm and comfortable. Wyatt made a friendship gesture by opening two cans of the few remaining cans of fish and heating the meat over the fire. Each of them ate and drank their fill, easing some of the lingering tensions. Together, they stared mesmerized into flickering firelight as it danced in fiery silhouette against the slate-gray sky. Rising upward, a pillar of billowing black smoke pushed inland by the breeze blowing off the sea. Except for the sounds of crackling wood and the rhythm of the surf, all was stillness as an unbound spirit took control of Doctor Nick's Mind and body. He rose to his feet, and from his mouth, a semblance of a story unfolded.

A voice speaking through Doctor Nick began relaying the story encoded into his memory like an oracle. Though they came from his mouth, the words elicited imagery of a world Nick didn't know. Like a witness staring into the fire, Doctor Nick watched the bending waves of air roll out from its center. Caught there in its gaze, he could also feel the sound rolling

over his palate and recognized the voice as his own. It was then the most awkward sense of his self-awareness struck. Somehow, at that moment, he knew that he, as he was now, had never existed. Even as some unseen master prepared him to speak, visions of an unknown world crystallized within his mind. This voice was his, but these were not his words. He began relaying a story with a voice as smooth as velvet but with an eerily unnatural tone. As he spoke, Wyatt and Trixie gazed into the burning heart of the flame as if mesmerized. As the ash fell away, their imaginations created a stage on which the story would play out from the interplay of fire and embers.

"The return of Prototaxites marked a clear division in the earth's geological record. The towering white bodies, evident among the stands of trees, belied the thick mats and sinuous fibrils hidden just beneath the soil. Even as the old world slowly died, the symbiotic forces of evolution worked feverishly, creating a new life.

During the generation before the demise of civilization, those facing their inevitable death could not forestall or even truly comprehend its meaning. Having focused on the symptoms rather than the disease, they called this unstoppable tide the Mycelium Plague."

Trixie had tried to imagine a world like the one he spoke of. The familiar shapes of the towering spongiform columns had become an ever-present part of the background landscape, interspersed within the understory and towering among the treetops. She tried to place herself in the face of these people's dilemma. Her experience had left this so far unrelatable.

"Panic," He had said, "for a time held sway. However, there were unheeded signs of clear and sobering danger. Nature seemingly equipped the human mind with mighty transformative power, yet its insight was self-serving and shortsighted. Experts studying such phenomena were in new territory."

Wyatt could not comprehend how a changing environment could be so sinister to place such strains upon human society's machinery. "Doctor Nick, how could such things come to pass to a people that could build the dome city?"

"Yes, point well made, Wyatt. But you are, I assume, their descendants, and we are far removed from what once was. The truth of how it came to be is, in a sense, irrelevant. You must first accept it as the fact that their society did fall."

It was easy for Wyatt's mind to conjure such imagery. Ruins were strewn throughout the forest. The origins of these

people were not as mysterious as where they had gone. This fact was evident to him. "Alright, Doctor Nick, I can accept that. Why else would I be here?"

"Very well, I shall go on. At first, the citizens of the Conglomerate, as they were known, were both fearful and intrigued by the strange new life form. Despite the decades of warnings, they were oddly complacent with its sudden appearance. Their minds were elsewhere. The most superficial technology otherwise occupied them in the guise of arts and media. However, this period of relative ease would not endure, for within weeks of its discovery, observations of its exponential growth rate were being reported worldwide. Soon after, life for the inhabitants of the old cities had become unbearable. Structures that had stood for centuries were crumbling to dust. Every minuscule surface crack and feature played host to its microscopic spores."

Though Trixie had not been there to witness what had happened, the evidence was all around her. "I don't understand. How could such seemingly benign things cause all this trouble?"

The voice reverberating through Doctor Nick recalled again with perfect clarity: "The advancing white mats were consuming everything in their wake. The sinuous flesh of the mycelium had

transformed the face of the Earth. The time, it seemed, had finally run out for the human race."

As it spoke, Trixie's mind wondered. Why had none of the people in her life had ever spoken of such things? Or why hadn't it ever occurred to her to ask these questions? She had never felt a spark of curiosity to know such things. Now, it was foremost in her mind. *From where had this threat come?* "I have to ask you something, Doctor Nick. Who are you? And why is this information coming to us now?"

Doctor Nick paused as he gathered his thoughts. He could not respond, for whoever his master was didn't provide him with an answer. He opened his mouth as if to speak of his own volition.

Both Trixie and Wyatt watched, staring into Doctor Nick's expressionless face. Sweat rolled off his brow as his lips tried to form a word. No sound, however, could be heard. A moment later, he became once again animated as the voice once again overtook him.

The voice emanating from Doctor Nick chose not to answer Trixie. It instead kept on with its monologue. "Humanity faced an existential threat they did not fully understand. Instead of dealing directly with the problem, governments of the world

chose to focus on the issue of Mycelium mats. Many scientists intimately understood that it was more of a symptom than causation, even with its propensity to consume all organic matter. Once the apparent signs that the world had reached the point of no return were evident, governments were too ill-equipped to deal with it directly. Agencies stumbled blindly to find their way forward without an impetus toward cooperation.

Lawlessness ensued across the world's continents as vital supply chains drew nearer to a state of collapse. With these interests threatened, nations came under martial law.

During these dark days, a handful of forward-thinking individuals devised a plan. They knew civilization would not long survive the coming chaos. Engineers imagined that survival would require creating a wholly new and artificial human environment with ideal climatic conditions and impervious to the plague's colonization.

It would be to the inland plateaus and highlands where they imagined the ideal place to reinvent a world. Under these circumstances, they broke ground for the mega city of *New Reading*. Their goal, however, was not merely to isolate themselves but to flourish. New Reading was a contingency for human survival. As nature renewed, the world beyond the domes would become a desiccated hellscape for a long time."

Into the flames, he stared, and a thought emerged in Doctor Nick's newly formed consciousness. He was at a momentary loss for words as something akin to memory had flashed across his mind. In this liminal space of a thought, he recognized in the absence of the voice that the distinction between him and those impressions left upon him had grown more apparent. *This voice was someone else's.*

This idea felt strange because of his confidence that he was a new creation, only hours old. Despite knowledge of his apparent age and learned skills in his possession, it wasn't easy to accept. In addition, he was beginning to come to terms with another uncomfortable idea. Perhaps Trixie was right? Maybe a resurrection had occurred, and his memories were borrowed? Or was it indeed his; he couldn't be sure. Whichever it was, for an instant, Nick endured, for the fleetest of moments, an inkling of forlorn unease, which felt both remote and ancient. As natural as these emotions felt, they soon faded. The voice from some fathomless reservoir began again, speaking out through his mouth.

"Generations had lived and died beneath the domes of the New Reading complex. Under the opaque light, it was there filtering through the third phase dome's surface to a family of Phlogiston practitioners that Johnny was born. The stories

concerning his early life associated with his family's profession should be considered central to the coming events. He could well have expected the pattern to continue, for him and his offspring, into the foreseeable future. However, as he grew to adulthood, circumstances were to take a most unusual detour. From that point forward, the dome people cast aside the thin veil of security upon which they all depended. He had not yet realized to what extent his role in this was pivotal.

Few within the domes could have guessed how near the end of their time was. The structures that had once kept the outside world at bay were beginning to fail. In as much as the planners had tried to save everything they could of the preceding world, the dome's ultimate failures had not been a foregone conclusion. The dwellers of the domed city, subsumed in their plans, missed that living solely within the domes could lead to a regression of mind. Slowly, over the generations, it did just that. One by one, the logical approaches were replaced by beliefs in elemental forces and arcane mythology. One powerful cult that began to grow in influence just before the fall was the followers of Marduk. They believed a redeemer had fallen from heaven. A small group of faithful believed this bright angel would lead them to walk again out on the face of the earth.

It was common for everyone in domes near the end of a person's life for the body and all person's possessions would be consumed in a ritualized purification of fire. In a short time, this process evolved into a kind of funerary rite colloquially known as Phlogiston. Johnny and his extended family were involved with this business for some time. Though there were requirements for some basic medical training for his profession, the most necessary skill was proficiency with a flame thrower. Having toyed with these since childhood, Johnny was well adapted to their use. According to the stories, he received his first asbestos suit as a young child on his birthday."

Again, Nick paused the story as his mind puzzled over the facts as the story presented them. *Firstly, was the story meant to be a biography of Johnny? If so, why would this character be presented in a manner that pre presumed our knowledge of it?* He could only surmise that some significant gap in time had elapsed between the story's actions and its original telling. *Who was the original intended audience? Had it been decades or perhaps a century or more since they had passed on?* All these questions were still a mystery.

The interruptions to the story had now drawn the notice of the others. Their attention turned naturally to the storyteller, who was standing there silently. They quickly read the

expressions on his face. He had not yet mastered a means to disguise his inner thoughts. Trixie felt obliged to ask. "What's going on? Is everything alright? You look like you're not well."

Nick responded, "I'm OK. It's this story; I don't understand where it's coming from.

Isn't what you're telling us just filling in the gaps from some long-ago time?"

He hardly knew how to answer, for he had no experience against which to compare. "That's just it, I'm afraid. I'm not exactly telling the story. Yet, on some level, I recognize parts of it. It's not knowing that has me feeling ill at ease. There are glimpses of memory within the lines spoken where there should be none; memories brought to life within the unfolding story. How strange is this story being brought to life through me, though I possess no conscious knowledge of its contents? I am learning things for the first time as their contents unfold by the sound of my own words. However, there is a vague sense of, let's say, a rudimentary recognition of some facets held within the story."

Wyatt seemed eager to return to the narrative and responded, "Maybe if you're not in control, you should stop

wondering about it and listen. We're all at a disadvantage here. If there's anything we can learn from this story, I'm prepared to hear it."

Trixie concluded that though she could not yet fully trust either of them, there were answers to be had here. Where this was going, she couldn't tell. Regardless, she figured she was more than a match for them, so she agreed, "Yeah, what do we got to lose?"

Wyatt and Trixie settled in. Neither uttered another word, and they returned their gazes into the fire. Doctor Nick again opened his mouth, and the voice rolled out.

"They borrowed the term Phlogiston from the ancient sciences. Long ago, it was discredited, but it was once accepted and understood as the transformative moving substance, the essential elemental fire principle built into inanimate matter. Only via this fundamental force was the passage from one physical state to another possible. It was a prevailing belief at the time that this priestly class, through the transformative ritual of fire that Johnny had inherited through his fathers, had the power to usher these spirits of the dead into the next realm.

During his prescribed family business apprenticeship, Johnny was accepted into the guild and worked as an assistant to his uncle Michal. It was not long before he was a fully independent and licensed practitioner in his own right.

He purchased an older model rig to carry his equipment with the money he had saved during his apprenticeship. His teal-colored three-wheeler, battery-powered electric motor vehicle had a rear compartment with ample storage for all his gear. The front end was open and sat above the front wheel. He was so pleased with his purchase that he had his name and profession hand-painted upon the sides of the rear compartment. It said in crimson letters set in cursive, 'Johnny Phlogiston.' In the trunk, Johnny carefully stowed his ablative stainless steel and ceramic-coated suit along with his various tanks and flaming devices according to their practical use.

Like anyone in a trade, Johnny had to pay his dues, taking assignments in less desirable professions, like hospitals and nursing homes. Workers in these professions had more to fear of the dreaded contagion. His short history on the job gave him perspective. He knew well what the plague had done and that no amount of stone or concrete could protect them from the constant rain of microscopic spores produced by the fungus. Almost anything organic was susceptible, including clothing and food.

Clumsy treatments of the plague-born degradations to the spectrum of living flesh inevitably failed, often tragically. Each so possessed, in turn, would succumb and be consumed by the plague.

Phlogiston was the practical means to render, at least momentarily, the memory of one's consumption clean. Combustion was preferable to consumption, as it was, in a sense, self-inflicted, or so the convoluted logic dictated.

It was then, during the height of this societal undercurrent, that the construction of The New Reading Towers took place. These ideas, therefore, prominently influenced its design elements and development. Despite it being a tower, it was a dome within a dome. It was sealed from the outside, like the greater building in which it was contained, by sets of concentric barriers. All those but a precious few who entered were destined never to leave. The Phlogiston practitioner was one of these few exceptions to this rule."

Staring into the embers, something akin to a shared illusion began to take shape within their minds.

Chapter 5

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Located on the dome complex's eastern side, a pair of towers rose nearly to the dome seven's roofs. The acute morning light shone through the dome's opaque surface, illuminating its steel and polycarbonate glass exteriors. The city below remained momentarily draped in its dual silhouette. The advancing light would take another hour to dissipate the long, stark shadows. The towers stood for those who looked upon them as a tangible symbol of one's journey from darkness into the light. At the end of one's life, a place was made ready in the tower. Though most merely faded into death, those of strong will spent their final days celebrating memories and contemplation. Either way, one came to their end; Johnny or one of his colleagues were there as guides and technicians. In this world in which they lived, both aspects were considered essential.

On this morning, Johnny drove his work vehicle toward New Reading Hospital, between domes five and seven, over Allegheny Memorial Avenue. He arrived just as the ambient light had equalized throughout the dome. Parking his vehicle, Johnny inspected his toothy grin in the rearview mirror, turning his face to and fro. Though it was doubtful anyone would see him beneath his reflective faceplate, it was still crucial for his

state of mind to maintain his appearance. He winked at himself, pleased with his image in the mirror, and proceeded to replace the cumbersome headgear. He could see out, but no one could see him. In his suit, he was a faceless man. Perhaps he often thought that it was for the best.

Anticipating an uneventful day, he took the usual complement of tools and fuel canisters from the vehicle's rear storage compartment and placed them in a metal case. Strapping his flame thrower and its accompanying tanks and harnesses across his shoulder, he was ready.

He walked along the well-kept path from the parking facility with his gear, which led to the east tower's ornate portico. The design of the entrance itself was to resemble the gaping mouth of a stylized winged serpent. This image was undoubtedly representative of one of the many new god cults that had been springing up throughout the dome complex recently. Though such symbols held little meaning to him personally, the imagery still managed to stir the imagination in such a sterile world. So, as he approached, the muted sunlight was glinting off the metallic coating of his armor; he appeared as if he was entering into the mouth of a beast.

Upon reaching the outer perimeter within the portico's open mouth, Johnny stood before an observation platform to present

his credentials. After he removed his helmet, a scanning device positioned itself approximately six inches from his face and scanned the pattern of color variations within his irises. The boom receded once the security protocol had been satisfied, and the heavy steel door rolled open. He replaced his helmet and continued into the threshold. Once inside, the door closed behind him. Standing there to greet him was a robed functionary named Candice. He knew her well enough, as he had done regular business within the tower. She was a tall, thin, blond-haired woman with striking blue eyes. Johnny thought her to be an attractive middle-aged woman with an amiable personality. Her long crimson robe reached nearly to the floor. Johnny admired her appearance through the double-paned glass. She was impressive to watch as she moved toward the barrier control station. Candice was also the gatekeeper. Her job was essential, for no one got in or out without her knowledge and consent. She was the first and last line of defense. She greeted him accordingly, "Welcome back, John. They sure do keep you busy, don't they?"

"Yes, they do, but that's the nature of the business, I'm afraid. How are you today, Candice?"

"As well as can be expected, praise Marduk, being locked up in here all day. Which reminds me, you know I don't live here, right? You know I get time off."

"Yeah, I suppose you get out of there at some time or another."

She walked away from the control panel and stood adjacent to the barriers. With her arms crossed and her head tilted slightly sideways. "Ok, John, well, when will I get to see who's under that helmet?"

Though Candice could not see his face, she knew him well enough to suspect he was blushing through multiple barriers separating them. There was a perceptible pause in his response. He tried to hide but could not. Johnny steadied his voice and responded, "How about you and I go out for a drink tomorrow night after you get off work? That's if you're available?"

Through his darkened visor, he watched as she smiled and responded. "I think I can make myself available. Why don't you pick me up here after eight? Without the helmet, of course."

"It's a date then." Though she couldn't see his smile, she knew it was there just the same.

Johnny was the quiet, shy type despite the outward appearance lent by the armor. After summoning the courage to make a date, his nerves nearly paralyzed him, and he wished to move on from the subject. Desperate to end the conversation, he said awkwardly, "OK, now that we have that business out of the way, what do you have for me today?"

He saw through his clumsy delivery, and her smile didn't waver. "Always the serious one, Huh John? Right, I've got a total of five today, four who passed in the night and one request for immolation."

"Immolation, now that's not something you see every day." Though she could not see the expression on his face, something about his body language seemed to tense up when she put forth the idea. "You're not opposed to the request, are you?"

"No, it's part of the package we offer. I must admit it is a bit gruesome, but I've done it several times. If that is their wish, then that is what I will do. I will schedule his ceremony last in case he changes his mind."

"Good, then all we need do is to get you through the barriers."

Candice returned to the control and set the barrier doors to open. A siren began to sound as a sealed airlock door opened on the adjacent wall. Within the airlock were the elevator

doors; they, too, were sealed individually, as were each of the individual floors. No two doors could open at the same time. Once a compartment was made vacant, the elaborate ventilation system drew out and sterilized the residual air.

Johnny entered the elevator, and the door closed shut behind him. He could hear the automatic mechanisms working in the background, filtering and sterilizing the air. Within the safety of his protective suit, he would be subjected to the cleansing treatments before he could leave this place. Under these circumstances, no contagion would ever escape into the greater dome.

The first person he was serving today was a woman named Gertrude. She had lived her entire life, eighty years, within the confines of the domes. Born in Dome One, though she had grown up with stories of life outside the domed city, it was all she had ever known. This existence, represented by hundreds of photographs and drawings, people had packed and delivered for display during her ceremony. She wished to be surrounded by a lifetime's worth of mementos during her final moments.

Johnny arrived at the door indicated on the list as belonging to the deceased. He double-checked the numbers so as not to cause any unnecessary alarm. Once convinced he had the correct address, he took a deep, calming breath and opened the

door. He never did get used to the initial sight of the deceased upon opening the door.

This creature that stalked their final days was an unpredictable parasite. What Johnny saw on the bed fit well with this pattern. Her body, deformed beyond recognition, was now hosting a seething mass of mycelium. Its fruiting bodies had risen several feet into the air and dripped a thick, resinous material. The air about the room was thick with white fungal spores that had found a landing spot on every surface. All her photographs, drawings, and notebooks had begun to succumb to its wanton ravages.

He watched as the tendrils reached out from the mass of flesh toward him. He did not react in fear, for his protection was assured. The truth known only by his profession was that there was little need for a ceremony for those already deceased. In Gertrude's case, there would only be the cleansing of fire that remained. But before Johnnie turned his tools upon the creature, he listened for what he imagined to be the cries of the Prototaxities.

There were voices that he swore he always heard. Of course, they felt sure these weren't human voices, but there was a distinct pattern akin to language. Whether this was fact or theory, as he lowered the muzzle of his flame thrower toward the

creature, he knew he could never share this thought with a living soul. In a circular motion, he strafed the room with his torch. Heat rose as flames engulfed the room. Soon, the temperature rose so high that nothing left unprotected would survive. The hyper-oxygenation ensured that the fire's intensity consumed the creature's soft tissues and everything else within the room. The fire left virtually nothing but bits of bone. He carefully boxed these for deposition outside the dome. The room was now ready for a sanitation team.

He repeated this same procedure in roughly the same fashion three additional times. On the last and final stop in the Towers, he came to room two sixty. This room belonged to Abraham. According to his record, he was a hundred and twenty years old and had once lived beyond the domes in the eastern cities. He had requested immolation. It was unusual but not outside the scope of orthodoxy. However, he was determined to question his choice before conducting the ceremony.

This time, he knocked on the door before opening it. He found a frail but bright-eyed gentleman sitting at the end of his bed. Though he showed signs of the infection, he did not appear sick. Upon seeing him enter the room, Abraham spoke. "So, it is you; the angel of death visits me. Well, come in, have a

seat. I've been waiting for you. Tell me, what's your name, son?"

"It's Johnny, Sir."

"If it's alright, I'll call you Johnny Phlogiston?"

"It's your prerogative; you can call me whatever you like. Your name, I understand, is Abraham."

"You are correct on both counts."

"Abraham, I must ask. Though I don't know you, you do not strike me as one of these zealots. It would seem especially less likely because you were not born under the dome. It would make me feel less ill at ease, knowing your mind on the selection of immolation instead of waiting for natural death. Why, then, is this your choice?"

"It's not what you might expect. However, it is a selfish reason, and I feel compelled to share it with you. I have known something that I have kept secret for some time. This ring of mold that has encircled the world, from which we have hidden, is not our enemy. It has been trying to communicate with us. Even now, it keeps me artificially alive so that I might communicate this to you."

"What are you saying? Are you insinuating that you are in communication with these creatures?"

"No, I am merely stating a fact. Once, long ago, I was a physician. I've been retired for decades, but I understand science and how the body works. Perhaps thirty years ago, I was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I started on chemotherapy and dosed myself heavily against the pain. Anticipating the end, I retreated to my library and began reading. That's when something unusual began happening. As the cells and organs of my body died, duplicates of mycelium flesh replaced them. I couldn't understand it until finally, it dawned on me. This kind of mold was learning through me. It digested everything I had read and learned. A symbiotic relationship had already existed between us. It was keeping me alive so it could read the words contained within my library and my mind."

Johnny had seen many strange things during his career. This notion was not even the most absurd idea he had come across. It did appear to him that this story had somehow mirrored his secret. He also had been hearing the voices. He had to admit that though he dared not say so aloud, he had suspected that something was trying to communicate with him for some time.

Other aspects of his story were checked out. Abraham did not appear to have the mind of someone of his supposed age, and

his medical records supported these facts. The next question he had was, why would he submit to immolation if he could keep on living? If he wanted the answer, he would have to ask. "Abraham, if what you have told me is correct, if you chose to, you could, in theory, live on indefinitely. Why then chose to end this existence?"

"I have learned something from my symbiosis, which is that this existence we have chosen for ourselves is no life at all. I have lived most of my life sealed within the safety of the domes. This life form that we have been terrified of is not an infection. It is the natural order of things. The world's fragile ecosystems were brought to near collapse over centuries, first by our actions, then by our inactions. The Mycelium Plague merely filled the voids of a dying world. For almost a century, while humanity languished within the domes, hidden throughout the wilderness, the mycelium conscious network was propagating islands of life."

"How is it that you possess this information?" Johnny was in a state of shock. If this information were true, why was it not generally known? Why would it be entrusted to this man?

"All of us are connected to this consciousness. I imagine few, however, are fully conscious of the connection. Eventually,

the mycelium will consume all. Unlike the others who have gone before me, I wish to witness my transformation."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"What's not to understand? It makes a lot more sense than that mumbo jumbo you're selling?"

"I'm not selling anything."

"Aren't you? How is what you're doing any different from any of those cults floating around out there?"

"The rites of Phlogiston are a ritual to help put the dying and their loved ones at ease."

"Come on now, Johnny, that's a load of it, and you know it. You've heard the voices. Do you know what you're hearing? All of those so consumed by the Mycelium become connected to this consciousness. Unlike the others who have gone before me, I wish to witness my transformation."

Although his protective suit possessed all the appearance of medieval armor, it was, in fact, exceptionally responsive to movement. So, as Johnny found a seat in a chair opposite Abraham, he did so quietly and with ease. He let out a deep sigh as he contemplated what Abraham had said.

His words left an impression. Looking through his visor, Abraham suddenly appeared different. He had not recognized it earlier, but he saw it now. Abraham was at once a man and something else, something undefinable yet unmistakably inhuman. This revelation had left Johnny suddenly feeling manipulated toward some yet undefined agenda. His traditional rites and sacraments, which he had long espoused and defended, now seemed more like parts of the stage set in some children's play.

Abraham could sense that his words had somehow left Johnny troubled. Johnny never questioned their existence within the domed city nor felt a dilemma toward his duty. He wondered how it was that all he had worked towards his entire life seemed in doubt after just one conversation with one man. Johnny also asked himself if he had ever secretly held such doubts, unknown even to himself. Abraham intuitively sensed this sudden, almost visceral resistance within Johnny, so he maneuvered to address it. "Johnny, what is wrong? You seem suddenly distant."

"Abraham, I must admit I am feeling quite ill at ease. Though I have performed this function thousands of times, I suddenly feel that I've been doing so against my will without knowing it. It is as though I've been unconscious until now. This feeling has come over me quite unexpectedly."

"I don't think I should have to remind you, Johnny, this existence we've lived under, not merely in these domes, but civilization, in general, is wholly artificial. Since Adam, we've carved a world out of paradise. Look what it's gotten us. We're hiding under a glass roof, terrified of the world that birthed us. What manner of living is this? This fear is the reason you feel this way. Every day, you do things that you know are absurd."

"Certainly, it is one thing to question one's determinism and another to rebuke all that is civilization?"

"Are they not the same thing? I have lived for a very long time. I remember how actual freedom feels. This world we've created contradicts the spirit of what the founders intended to save."

"You characterize this place as a glass prison, yet look at your collections. Here are all the intellectual products of humankind at your fingertips."

"What good are they here on a dead world? Shall I take these things with me? They, along with my wisdom, will be absorbed into the great collective mind. Have you wondered

about the world beyond the barriers? It is there where our future lies. Perhaps these domes once served their purpose. Their time has come to an end. The consciousness pervading this world has foretold that within two generations, the systems within the dome will have failed. Humans will again roam the wilderness. The transition need not be so stark and desperate. Our words, science, and art have brought a new level of consciousness to Prototaxities, despite what we've done to this world."

"Prototaxities?"

"Don't play ignorant now, Johnny. That's the species name for our benefactor. Without it, this world would no doubt be a desert. It has lengthened my life, and although I suspect you haven't listened, it has been speaking to you."

This much was true. Johnny had minimized the meaning of the voices he heard by attributing these to stress-related hallucinations. In doing so, his imagination had absolved him from the responsibility of reality. If he had been prepared to admit this much, then everything about his existence was a lie. If it were a lie, why would he be made to continue in the charade?

"If this is absurd, why have I continued in its practice?"

"Even an absurdity has its practical purposes. More than anyone, you know that this environment is unsuitable for the body's proper disposition. As I have said, this transition to pure consciousness would not be possible without this service. That is why I ask you again to assist me in completing my journey?"

Johnny felt a little more amenable to the idea of helping the older man as he began imagining the possibilities of a new world beyond the barriers of the dome. He wondered if these voices had been filtering into his subconscious for decades, affecting his waking self and trying to reach out to him. His conscious mind would close to it; despite all that, his eyes had seen he had refused to listen.

Once his mind had settled upon the idea, Johnny stood from his seat and prepared his gear. He attached the appropriate hoses to their corresponding tanks. Observing the many gauges, he made the necessary adjustments to pressure and admixture. All that remained now was a spark and a steady hand to guide this traveler to the other side. Johnny looked up from his equipment and into Abraham's eyes and spoke to him. "Sir, I am ready when you are. Let's see where this takes us."

Abraham was looking up toward him on the side of his bed when an odd expression came over his face. "It won't be long

now. I feel something is happening. As he spoke these words, Johnny listened intently for any sign to know when the time was right. He watched as small physical changes began to appear throughout the room. The air about the place now seemed dense with an odd translucent vapor, which Johnny casually wiped from his visor. This vapor and the malignant sheen of spores that accompanied it seemed to set upon and devoured everything within the enclosed compartment. To Johnny's astonishment, these objects, books, papers, and records of all sorts disappeared rapidly in consummation.

As Johnny watched, the changes did not contain themselves to the objects in the compartment. The surface of Abraham's skin turned a bright white, and along his body, there were areas where viscus amber fluid was exuding. "Are you still with me, Abraham?"

With his eyes still bright as when he met him, Abraham spoke. His voice was loud and clear, and he could not help but think he did not hear it with his ears but within his mind. "I've never felt better."

"Is that So? Because you don't look so good."

"Don't you have any words or incantations you'd like to offer before you do your business?"

"That hardly seems appropriate anymore. Can I ask you a question, though? Where are you now?"

"It's hard to say I'm new to this. Suffice it to say, I'm rooted in this place, in this room. That's where you come in."

Abraham's voice became stronger even as his body, like his books, became swollen and disfigured. The bed and chair he had sat on and every piece of furniture that had occupied the room broke down into its constituent matter. All but the reliable metal parts were absorbed and mapped to hold into the mycelium's static living memory. His body and everything in the room were unrecognizable; his voice was more precise than ever as it resounded within the boundaries of Abraham's mind. "Only through my physical destruction will I be set free. I must, however, escape this prison you have created."

Johnny's pulse quickened as he stood and witnessed the unfolding transition from one state to another in amazement. By this moment, nothing of what Abraham was had remained. Johnny held tightly onto the flame gun. Its nozzle pointed at a mass of writhing flesh. Its movements seemed to mimic at least the form and function of various animal kingdom representatives. The tissues, however, were the masses of fibrous tendrils to which he had long grown accustomed. The tissues, all at once, as if a conscious body, rose from the floor high into the air. It

spreads throughout the room as if it were standing facing Johnny. Its voice rang out again. "What are you waiting for?"

Johnny didn't think. He had abandoned all doubt. As he depressed the trigger, a volume of superheated gasses ignited. Flowing outward with a tremendous roar, the expanding waves of fire enveloped the room. The seething clouds of flame swirled around him. Within the safety of his protective garments, he could feel the heat rising higher and higher. Even as he felt his skin blister, he dared not release his hand from the trigger. The pain, heat, and fear conspired to overwhelm the more sensitive parts of his body and equipment.

Johnny hollered out in primal anguish as he fell to the floor. At last, succumbing to intense heat, the temperature regulator on his protective suit failed. The flames died.

Johnny could not tell how long he lay there unconscious. He had felt no pain when awoken, perhaps an uneasy confusion. His first conscious sensation was the sounds of air leaking out through his suit's broken pressure valves and the echo of his respiration. He opened his eyes to muted darkness. For a moment, his heart raced, believing he was blind in the inferno. Due to what he'd just endured, it took another instant to realize that

it had merely been the blackened and pitted condition of his visor that barred his vision. Never had he been exposed to such heat. While still on the floor, Johnny unhinged his helmet's locking mechanism, setting it aside on the floor. Turning his head again toward the ceiling, he saw the air was heavy with ethereal swirling clouds of pollen-like white spores. Johnny blinked his eyes, and his lashes coated in the fine powdery spores. He watched as the tiny microcloud swirled and dispersed directly before his eyes.

Johnny sat up, and as he did, he found the room in a terrible state. Inches of ash and dust coated everything in the room, including him. Window seals were compromised, and the thick gasket holding windows in place failed from intense heat. The polycarbonate glass had not shattered, but its effectiveness had surely diminished as it lay on the floor. He stood, brushing off the powdery material, and walked to the gaping hole where the window once was. Johnny watched as the internal air pressure drafted the white substance into a great lofting cloud high at the dome's top. It was then the voice again spoke to him. However, this time, it sounded more like a chorus of voices speaking of one mind. "Johnny, do you know what you must do now?"

"I believe I do. I must break the dome and set us free."

"Yes, that's correct; everything depends on you now."

Johnny left Abraham's room behind and headed for the elevators. Wishing to reach the highest point in the building, Johnny chose a maintenance elevator. He possessed the secure passcode, and no one would suspect sabotage from someone of his profession. It took several minutes to reach the top. He would have to make do with whatever he would find there, for, after the events of the day, he may never have this opportunity again. The elevator door slid open onto the flat roof of the building. For the first time, he saw the aging structure up close. The high-opaque panels were stained, pitted, and leaking. To some small extent, the world outside was already breaking down the barrier, though at a much slower pace. He could see that the panels had once been crystal clear and had just discolored by time. In places, there were cracks and chips and rotted gaskets. This dome ceiling was a failing system. He imagined undoing the fragile web would not take much at all. He looked around, and on the far side was a cinder block shed with a rusted metal roof. He hoped there to find tools or some other dense objects.

Johnny slid the door open; there within, he found, as he imagined, a variety of spare parts, tools, and equipment. He picked them up individually, checking their size and weight to judge their worthiness as projectiles. Johnny narrowed it down to a dozen handheld tools that felt well balanced in his hand, yet light enough to be thrown the distance and still dense enough to crack the glass. He recognized some as plumbers' wrenches, some as hammers, and others he could not identify. Johnny placed them all in an old wooden box and carried them to the center of the roof. He was closest to the dome's upward-curving arc at this spot than anywhere else in the building.

Johnny stared at the massive structure looming above him, holding a large wrench. Flipping it end over end, he sensed its weight. When the moment felt right, leaning backward, Johnny extended the tool with his right arm as far back as possible. In one quick, sleek, powerful motion, his right arm arched with all the collected forward momentum Johnny could muster. As his arm reached the apex of the arc, he released the wrench. A tumbling missile was now climbing through the gap between him and the dome. An instant later, he saw, then heard the impact.

It did not seem like much then, sounding almost like the tinkling of two glasses. There was nothing to be seen, staring up for any sign that the roof had shattered. But faintly, Johnny

could hear an indefinable crackling sound seemingly coming from all directions. Unsatisfied, he picked up a large hammer from the box of items. As Johnny inspected it, he examined its weight like the last one. He was beginning to get a feel for it.

This time, he gave it a practice run-through. Then, without hesitation, Johnny gave himself a running start. Letting out a guttural noise as the handle slipped from the end of his fingertips, he let it go. Leaning hard, he had thrown the hammer with all his might; he did his best to aim for the same panel he had struck before. As the flying hammer tumbled through space, Johnny willed it to be so. An instant later, as if perfectly timed, the hammer's business end passed straight through the compromised panel into the outside world.

Johnny looked up in disbelief at the sight of the blue sky and the streamers of light cutting down through the clouds of rising spores. With the dome's internal pressure equalizing with the outside, the sounds of the drafting air of breaking glass grew more prominent. The compromised panel exploded in a shower of composite glass.

Johnny was not ready, and so was taken off guard. Though glass particles had hit him, he was not injured as far as he could tell. Looking skyward, Johnny watched the delicate clouds of spores and ash lifting up and out through the waiting doorway

and on to freedom. He didn't know what form freedom would take, but it was the first step. Only time would tell what this meant for him and the people dwelling within the domes.

Into his mind came a stark revelation for safety's sake; perhaps he was too close to the dome. He was distracted again from those thoughts as the sounds of the flexing dome grew gradually louder. It was only now when a voice from his animal senses tried to override what programming had placed him there in this place. He secured his damaged helmet, putting it back upon his head as best he could, and made a mad break toward the exit.

Johnny ran as fast as his legs could take him. The exit door was back into the building, perhaps ten meters of safety. Johnny, however, did not make it to the doorway. Right there at the cascading blast's epicenter, he could not outrun the mass of falling debris. Before he could make it halfway there, the tension erupted, and an explosion of cast-off material caught in mid-stride. Johnny was struck by and buried under tons of falling debris.

The glass canopy had shielded dome seven for the greater part of a century. Once compromised, its weakened structure failed instantaneously, collapsing in the rain of a splintered composite crystal. A thunderous roar filled the air, and the

ground shook throughout the New Reading complex. Their sanctuary was again open and subject to the elements beyond the dome.

Days later, atop New Reading hospital, where Johnny's body lay among the piles of shattered composite glass, a filament of fungal flesh sensing the sunlight pushed upward. The pace of its growth increased. White flesh pushed skyward and outward until it had breached and cleared the perimeter of the dome's outer frame of the structure.

Against the brilliant blue curtain of daylight, a latent and subdued consciousness awoke to its long and dark history upon the earth. It had survived in one form or another since the dawn of life on earth. Now, as it had absorbed humankind's words, it also absorbed human consciousness as best as it could understand.

It did not take long for Prototaxities to regret this bargain it had made with the domes' survivors. Human words were one thing, but Prototaxities also inherited its legacy. To live cloistered of one mind, it could not abide.

Chapter 6

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It was approaching midmorning, and the sun was burning off the pervading blanket of gloom surrounding the waterfront. The story was complete. For the moment, each enjoyed the privacy of their minds. The words directing Doctor Nick's voice had fallen silent. Any residual sensations elicited by this experience faded quickly from their minds and were replaced in short order with those things deemed natural and ordinary. The sights and sounds of their familiar world pressed back upon them.

Gathering their thoughts, Trixie and Wyatt looked at each other knowingly. Without saying a word, each could tell from the others' expressions that they had likely shared the most unusual event either of them had ever experienced. They found the task of putting this experience into words at first confusing.

Wyatt stammered, his speech halting; he did his best to understand by reasoning aloud. For the moment, they only had each other. So, to Trixie, he asked, "We both obviously couldn't have just imagined this whole thing happening, right?"

Trixie was wide-eyed as she relayed the dismay she was feeling into words. "What happened? Something was in my mind. I could feel it toying with my thoughts like they were objects. I'm at a loss. What does that story have to do with us anyway?" She looked to Wyatt with an expression of puzzled confusion. "What does it mean, Wyatt? I need to know how we fit into all of this."

Wyatt anxiously tapped his pipe on the arm of his chair, spilling the ash contents onto the ground while his thoughts ruminated. After a moment, during which he was clearly struggling, Trixie looked up toward him and spoke. "Well, Wyatt, I must tell you this whole thing angers me. I thought I had all the answers, but for my life, if you weren't there along with me to witness it, I scarcely would have believed it myself. I thought I'd heard and seen everything there was to see. We have to be careful and figure out who or what these things are."

Trixie's words confirmed some of Wyatt's thoughts concerning these circumstances. Wyatt said, "We know very little about this entity or whatever it is. We can only guess how much of the story is likely true. The voice claims to be a collective consciousness. This idea is something I barely understand and don't think I can believe. However, the story talks about the Prototaxities as a distinct and separate entity, a vehicle for

this collective. We should consider that as we wrap our heads around this."

"I certainly understand what you're saying, Wyatt. It begs the question, though, who is telling this story? Is it Prototaxities, or is it the collective? For this to have been someone's sophisticated prank, they would have gone to a lot of trouble. You'd ask yourself why. To trick us, to what end? I don't buy it. It seems more likely we're dealing with something genuine and dangerous."

"OK, Trixie, let's say you're right. What we've experienced is real. We would have to add to this fact a few other things that we know to be true, the first being that this 'Collective' has deemed us inferior creatures. Any game where I start at the bottom makes me a loser.

"Wyatt, I'm just not too interested in playing that kind of game either."

Trixie, you had better believe that whoever's behind this does not have our best interests in mind. Take, for instance, something that's been bothering me. Where did this information that's suddenly swimming around in our heads come from? Decades of knowledge that we didn't possess yesterday, seemingly all of it true and correct; who put it there and why?"

"What do you think about that story, Wyatt? What does it mean? The Mycelium brought what Doctor Nick called an evolution within people. This Johnny character sacrificed himself as a kind of savior to free their spores beyond the dome. It's like that old religion they'd pass around in the villages. Do you suppose that whoever is behind this is attempting to control us? Perhaps their goal is to get us so pliable that we'll do whatever they want us to?"

For some reason, this idea seemed so absurd to Wyatt that he broke into a wide laughing grin as he spoke. "That's almost certainly true. However, I don't imagine they'll have much luck with you."

Their seemingly dire circumstances were forgotten for an instant as a smile came over her expression. With the mood lightened, Trixie joined Wyatt in laughter. Wyatt thought to himself that he could not recall seeing any expression as beautiful. Trixie suddenly recognized she had smiled for far too long and felt oddly exposed. Looking to get back to the business at hand, she said to him, "OK, are you done now?"

Wyatt's smile did not diminish as he responded, "Sure, go on."

"Now, where was I? That's right; even if none of it is true, the story has a theme running through it. It's all about

words and language. I got the sense that our ongoing survival was important to someone. They shared this with us for some unknown reason. Someone hid something within those words that they wanted us to hear. Why else would we be given this specific information? I would not completely discount this story."

"Maybe you're right; it's telling us something. What that is? Maybe Doctor Nick could help us out with that."

Sounds of the other's voices came softly and incoherently as if filtering through from somewhere off in the background. Hearing his name spoken, Doctor Nick drew back to some semblance of consciousness. His eyes opened. In the fullness of day, he watched the shadowy interplay of light and shadow playing out across his half-naked skin. He could feel the sun's warmth and the force of life flowing through his body as it did long ago. He knew this now to be a miracle, to which kind he could not yet profess. His only evidence was the possession of the memory. He recalled it with such certainty that he could remember with great clarity the day on which the cold hand of death had visited upon him. It was no mistake. Like a river flowing, the life force had ebbed from his body, that mystery a revelation of which he received no living person had ever known. And like that, he was gone. Years had passed, or so he reckoned. He could not be sure how many. In a mere instant, a lifetime of

images flooded his unconscious mind. The moment before falling into death's grasp, he was Nicholas Walsh. Now he was again.

As before, emotion had weighed heavily on him. He began to feel the deep pains of anguish again, just as he did on that long-ago day. His mind was racing back to the place in his memory. He was in the bunker; the vision of his position within was palpable. As he visualized himself opening the door to his office for the last time, a voice came speaking, distracting him from his vision. Doctor Nick became conscious of the activity that was happening around him. He opened his eyes to find Wyatt and Trixie busily salvaging together what they could from what remained of the container vessel for the return trip to the bunker. The voice again spoke to him from somewhere outside the realm of his thoughts.

It was Wyatt, "Hey, hello, anybody in there? Doctor Walsh, or is it Nicholas, why don't you tell us about this Operation Golden Age that you were just rambling on about? Does it have something to do with this story or the bunker?"

Doctor Nick was puzzled as to why he had not, until hearing those words, recalled Operation Golden Age's memory or recalled saying those words. He realized now he had been only partially aware of the things the voice had made him speak.

However, it had been in the act of telling the narrative through which those remaining barriers had collapsed. With portions of his memories stirred or perhaps unlocked. As uncomfortable as it was, Operation Golden Age's story was his to tell. As the flashes of memory concerning these events formed into a cohesive whole within his mind, he grew increasingly uncertain if it was a story he wished to tell.

There was a bothersome clarity attached to this imagery. It was as if the intervening years had not occurred, and now, Doctor Nick was being prompted as a first-hand witness to shed light on what happened next. As he motioned to open his mouth to offer words, nothing came. The weight of these new memories was suddenly unbearable. He had been Doctor Nicholas Walsh; seemingly, his resurrection was complete. It would not only be a tale of suicide but perhaps other crimes as well. He was, for the moment, at a loss for words.

Wyatt could see the question had weighed heavily on him. "OK, Doctor Nick, I'll cut you some slack for now. We will be getting answers to these questions one way or another. I guarantee you that, my friend."

As they prepared to move to the bunker, Wyatt gave the place one last look around. He couldn't say he would miss the site, but it had served him well. Overall, Wyatt was happy to be moving on. Though he had had his fill of tuna, he took as many cans as he could carry tied up in an old fishing net. He filled his bags with other gear he had collected, and after one last goodbye to the green sea, they were on their way.

Away from the beach through the forest trails, they walked single file. Doctor Nick walked on point to keep a close eye on him. So he did not have to trudge naked through the forest. Nick wore one of Wyatt's old spare hand-sewn coats to round out his ragged ensemble. As they walked along, the patchwork of mismatched cloth stood out markedly from the monochrome background of green.

The air was still within the shelter of the woods. The higher-register noises of birds and insects replaced the low, muffled sounds of the water lapping up on the beach. With his body in motion, Doctor Nick felt his mood improving.

Wyatt somehow sensed this, so he began to press him for information. "So, Doc, do you feel like talking now?" He paused for a moment and awaited a response that did not come. "Doc, are

you listening to me? I don't understand how any of this happened in the way you do. And because I wouldn't want any hidden surprises waiting for us at the bunker, I'd like to know more about this place before we show up. If anything should happen that you didn't warn us about, I will make damn sure you regret not telling us, my friend."

Though he was careful not to betray any emotion in response to his words, the meaning of what Wyatt said was straightforward enough for Doctor Nick. To this end, he turned his head slightly to the left and spoke. "I can't be sure what's happening there now. It's been some time since I was there."

Trixie said, "I assure you, you were there last night."

Doctor Nick did not respond to this; instead, he answered Wyatt's previous question. "It is true, I was Doctor Nicholas Walsh many years ago. I'm not even sure of the length of time that has passed since then. In those days, other scientists like me thought the dome's collapse was inevitable. It was an ironic tragedy that despite possessing knowledge of the cause of their self-imposed century of isolation, the original dome builders had learned nothing from their experience. So, we believed there had to be a fundamental change in these people's outlook or relationship with the natural world. It had been the

goal of the community like-minded individuals to prepare the way for the next phase."

Trixie wondered if he wasn't deflecting from his tragedy. "I couldn't help but notice that in your descriptions, you seem personally detached from what you're describing as if it was happening to someone else. I've had a glimpse inside the bunker and have seen the labs and the offices. I suspect all manner of experiments were conducted. What exactly were they designed to do? You said you were ready to prepare for the next phase. Something tells me I won't like what will come from your mouth next."

"We called it engineered resistance. As far as we know, the New Reading Complex was the world's last surviving set of domes. There had been no contact with the world beyond in almost five decades. We were losing the attrition battle with the mycelium. Science had succumbed to the whim of bizarre cults and no longer possessed the technology to construct new domes. Some among us concluded that there had to be another option. By genetically modifying the human genome, we hoped to survive outside the domes as you do now."

Much of what Doctor Nick said was lost on them. Wyatt interjected, "Hold up, explain this again."

"What part?"

"The whole thing."

Recognizing his mistake in that his language may have been beyond their understanding, he tried to simplify it. "Oh, forgive me; I've forgotten to whom I was talking for a moment. I should have said that we wanted to change people on the most basic level in ways they would then pass down to their children."

Though Wyatt and Trixie may not have understood how science accomplished such things, they readily grasped heredity concepts. Trixie turned back to look at Wyatt. Although they had met only hours before, this experience had already begun to form a bond between them, for when their eyes met, they seemed to know what the other was thinking. They maintained eye contact as Trixie again began to speak. "Tell me, Nicholas, are you saying you made changes to people?"

"Not directly; it's complicated. We wanted to make our subjects stronger, more resistant."

"So, where are all these strong, resistant people?"

"We had for decades been experimenting with various combinations of inhibiting factors, ways that a body could resist an attack. These experiments were designed to stall or even stop the mycelia's advance. We knew that we could create nothing as complex as nature's creation. We were out of options. So, we determined that there may yet be a life form left in the wilds that might hold the answer. Teams of biologists then fanned out far and wide into the world, searching for that one species that could possess resistance. It took several years of searching in hundreds of environments, but eventually, they identified a potential candidate. They found their answer in the form of an archaic strain of bacterium. Early experiments in-vitro showed promise."

Wyatt interrupted, "You're doing it again, Doc. Would you mind speaking in plain English?"

"Yes, of course, I've forgotten. I meant to say that the only thing that could fight off the fungus was a germ. Once scientists identified the subject, they worked tirelessly to discover the genes responsible for expressing these inhibiting factors. It took time, but ultimately, we had identified an amplified genetic resistance to the plague. That's what we were doing down there in the bunker."

Trixie tried as best as she could to disguise her frustration at how he spoke. He was talking around the issue. "I saw those devices and equipment in the bunker. It doesn't take a scientist to imagine something terrible occurred there. Whatever happened began as a result of those experiments. Sooner or later, that memory will return, and you will tell us what happened there. When that time comes, everything, including how you came to be locked in from the outside, will come out?"

It was afternoon, and the air was thick and uncomfortable as the temperature rose. For some time, there was silence as Trixie, Wyatt, and Nick continued along the trail. The landscape looked somewhat different now. Trixie recognized that the woodland opened into mixed scrubland of the reclaimed suburbs, and they were getting close to the bunker. In the distance, they saw the Prototaxities' mottled white spires clustering in a circular pattern surrounding where she had discovered the bunker entrance. "It's just over here; follow me," Trixie said as he stepped out to the front of the line.

They came then upon the set of bi-fold doors. Wyatt did not hesitate. He reached down, propping both doors open to reveal the descending stairwell. Together from outside, they observed

the interior. The electric lights were still burning from the previous night. Wyatt laid his bags of gear and belongings down on the ground, turned to Trixie, and spoke. "You said you checked this place out? Is there anything living in there?"

"Not as of last night."

"Alright, let's have a look. You first, Doc."

Doctor Nick stared down into the space, bathed in artificial light. It felt familiar, which drew him closer. He stepped down and was in a moment on the first landing. Wyatt and Trixie were close behind him.

Together, as Trixie had done alone, they walked the length of the first floor. They observed the labs and offices inspecting the equipment as they moved from room to room. They walked to the end of the corridor, stopping at the stairwell's top to the lower level. Descending to the landing, they moved to the storage area and observed the vast food stocks and supplies stores. Wyatt momentarily separated from them, walking down along the aisles of stocked shelves. Upon each sat boxes marked with their contents of various dehydrated foodstuffs. All of it was vacuum-packed and neatly stacked from floor to ceiling. This food, he imagined, with proper rationing, could last a very long time indeed.

Meanwhile, Trixie and Doctor Nick continued down the corridor. They came to the office door at the end of the hall, where she had found the original Doctor Nick. Together, they walked inside and made their way to the desk. Upon the clear plastic day planner, they looked upon the decades-old crimson blood stain. Under these preserving conditions, the scene appeared much as if events had occurred yesterday. Though she didn't need to say it, Trixie said it aloud anyway. "This is where I found you. Presumably, in death, you had been consumed by the mycelium. There was not much left of you, perhaps a bag of bones and your outer husk. I took you outside, and in the night, you vanished."

Doctor Nick's face suddenly grew pale. As if on cue, her words had triggered more hidden memories. The last days in the bunker came back as a blur of images and sound. An awful feeling came upon him as he realized the part they thought he had been withholding had been, just as she had suggested, buried deep in his subconscious. The images from those desperate hours represented such stark depravities as to seem alien to him. Though he could recognize much of what he saw, the context of these memories was, for the moment, so strange to the person he now was as to render them indescribable. He struggled to decipher any rational meaning from this jumble.

For some time, Doctor Nick was silent. Beads of cold sweat accumulated on his face as the thoughts formulated. The first coherent words from his mouth were "Operation Golden Age." Wyatt and Trixie strained to hear him. He repeated himself, although louder, and continued. "It was Operation Golden Age; I suppose we reacted rashly. Panic, perhaps that's the appropriate word. But you must understand. We were desperate to find another option to control the mycelium. But the truth was just the opposite. We were, I suspect, the subject of its experiments. We learned too late that they'd been watching us silently, perhaps for millennia, observing our behavior, waiting for us to paint ourselves into a corner. They're most assuredly watching us now. I suspect what we had created here was a threat to its expansion, so, as you can see, a ring of these sentinels encircled the bunker. Soon, they had entered our minds, but it was too late. Much of our work on our human subjects had been completed. Though our experiments were mostly failures, we managed to enhance a small number of our participants with substantial resistance. As the domes collapsed, those who could not survive as you do must have inevitably succumbed to the mycelium. The reason why there was such a high failure rate was that the infection had touched virtually everyone. In our naïve attempts to introduce a treatment, we succeeded only in creating

an overwhelming immune response. As a result, we unwittingly led thousands of people to their deaths. It was then that the team decided to destroy the facility."

Trixie responded impatiently, "But you didn't destroy the bunker."

"No, we did not."

Leaning on the doorframe, Wyatt drew smoke from his pipe and listened carefully to their conversation. His mind got stuck upon something about which Doctor Nick had talked. He exhaled the smoke, and with an unflinching glare, he asked, "I'm curious about something you just said. When you said there had to be another option, what were you driving at?"

"It's called gene editing. Our team genetically engineered high levels of resistance derived from the bacteria into cells of human subjects. The hope was that subsequent generations would inherit these same qualities."

"So, what happened?"

"Complications, so many complications; hidden in those is the answer to your earlier question. As to what happened to all the strong, healthy people? During the experiments, too many succumbed to these often fatal complications. A Chimera arose within those cells that spawned a mysterious illness wherein the body's defenses began to attack its cells. Many died in the

resulting plague. Those few who did survive may still be with us. I suspect both of you may be either direct products of the experiment or their offspring."

For Trixie, who had often asked such questions, things had not always added up quickly. She was pleased to get answers, even if they were unexpected. "Wow, well, that certainly explains a few things. Tell me, how is it that no one seems to remember this?"

"Maybe," asked Wyatt, "our friend here can't tell us because he doesn't know? Isn't it possible that Nick's not sure because he doesn't know how long he's been out of the game?"

Trixie seemed perplexed by this question and countered with one of her own. "Strange thing to be questioning Wyatt, isn't it? This stock of rations you've been eyeballing can't be any older than twenty-five years. That seems to fit what we know so far. Let's not forget that mountain of tuna you were feasting on. How long do you suppose that was floating out at sea?"

"Yes, perhaps you're right. But that doesn't necessarily have to account for Doctor Nick, does it? Ask yourself, Trixie, when was the last time you saw anyone? Can you pinpoint a moment in time? And what about no one remembering any of this? Think

about it because I sure can't remember. I've been racking my brain for weeks, even before this all started, and I'm at a loss.

Trixie paused, mulling over Wyatt's words as a dull expression came over her. Truths and inconsistencies tangled with her thoughts as she tried to understand what was happening. For a moment, no one spoke as these thoughts rolled around in her head before she again said. "No. So what are you implying?"

"What I'm saying, Trixie," Wyatt quickly replied, "is that until today, we scarcely knew anything about our past. So, I suggest keeping our minds open to new possibilities. Among these is that not everything is as it may seem. It seems highly unlikely that we would lose knowledge of this in such a short time. If we had parents, they would have remembered being the subjects of science experiments; don't you think so?"

"I'm not sure, Wyatt. Perhaps they would choose to forget."

"Fair enough; OK, Doc, seems like a simple enough question. How is it that you are so sure about the nature of your experiments but less sure about the length of time you've been gone? Can you recall details on anything?"

Doctor Nick's eyes darted back and forth as he searched his shallow memory for anything specific. "I'm sorry, I can't remember. It was just one of those things I assumed to be true.

Perhaps there is an answer if we look in the right place. I have an idea. Come with me."

Together, they walked, following Nick until they entered a room a few doors down from his office. Trixie flipped on the wall switch. The connecting power illuminated the overhead lights, and a bank of computer terminals began to fire up automatically. After a few seconds, their screens flickered, and they all were online. Neither Trixie nor Wyatt had ever seen a working computer terminal before, so this was something in which they both were keenly interested.

Doctor Nick sat in a chair before one of the computer terminals and began pecking a string of letters and numbers into the keyboard. A window for the command and control module appeared on the screen, indicating several operational errors had occurred. Nick read these aloud. "Automated planetary reconnaissance and defensive capabilities are offline. T.i.a.m.a.t, the artificial intelligence system interface, is offline. Intermodal connectivity is offline. Hmm, well, at least the satellite feeds are working."

He called them over, "Come here; there's something I think you might be interested in seeing." The others gathered around

him as his fingers stroked the keyboard. They watched as a representation of a sphere seemingly rotated on a flat screen. Upon closer look, it was far more than a likeness. Trixie knew the world was a sphere. It was beginning to appear that, somehow, she was looking at an image of the world from above. However, something about the image didn't correspond with her experience. Wyatt, too, drew the same conclusions. He would be the first to speak these thoughts aloud.

"What is this I'm looking at? This sphere can't be the Earth. It's all wrong." The image onto which he looked was not the green and blue orb of his imagination. There were pale gray oceans, and the land, save for some pockets of green, was a desiccated brown. Deep gouges where river courses had once run are now traced across vast tracts of open desert.

"I'm afraid it is. The world you live in is a lie. It's been mostly a dead world for a long time."

Trixie inserted herself abruptly into the conversation. "Then, where are we now? None of this makes any logical sense."

Nick again typed away at his terminal keyboard as he responded, "I can have one of the satellites get an exact fix on our location." His command forwarded to an automated command center that, for untold decades, had been obediently awaiting instructions somewhere above the atmosphere. The instructions were uploaded to the satellite's onboard cameras and dutifully

adjusted to the requested coordinates. Trixie and Wyatt watched as the image view zoomed onto a circular patch of green. It enlarged until the entirety of the screen filled up to the border with green. One of its edges appeared to intersect with a large body of landlocked water.

"Is this some kind of map?" asked Wyatt. "If it is, where are we relative to it?"

Doctor Nick pointed to the screen and said, "Do you see that red blinking Icon? That's the location of the bunker relative to that map." He adjusted the view to pull outward to see how small their garden was compared to the rest of the world.

Both Wyatt and Trixie were puzzled. Each held the memory, real or not, of wandering countless days, but neither of them had ever even accidentally stumbled upon the edge of the forest. The thought raced through Trixie's mind. Their world of endless tracts and natural spaces was an illusion. Every notion she had built about that world had been turned on its head. She continued to stare in disbelief at the screen as an obsession swollen with anger grew within her. She turned her head toward Wyatt and spoke, "I'm going to get out of this place if it kills me. Will you come with me, Wyatt? I may need your help, and besides, no one else would believe me if I told them."

Wyatt's head filled with the same thoughts; he was just a few steps behind her. "I can't stay here without at least seeing what has been keeping me here."

In that instant, Wyatt and Trixie seemed to think the same thing. Together, they gave the screen one last look, turned, and walked away. Wyatt asked Trixie, "Do you know how to build a pack frame?"

"Of course," Trixie said.

"OK, good. Build two of them." Wyatt told her. "We'll leave first thing in the morning. I wonder if I can find a proper bed in this place."

"Not a chance, buddy. You better get your ass in gear, or I'll leave you stranded here with old Doctor Nick," Trixie said.

"What, are you two just going to leave now? Nick asked. "Are you going to try and stumble your way to the edge of the circle? You haven't done it by accident in all this time. What makes you think you'll do it now?"

Feeling confident in what he perceived as a challenge, Wyatt wasted no time answering. "The difference is I'm not sure either of us has actually been here before. We'll see what tricks they'll have up their sleeve to deceive us." Wyatt paused and looked at Nick before continuing. "You know what, Trixie?"

I'm not so sure our friend here isn't up to his eyeballs in it. Who's to say he hasn't been stringing us along this whole time?"

"Here's another one for you, Wyatt," Trixie added. "Who's to say he's not a complete damn liar? Maybe what he's just shown us is an illusion?"

Doctor Nick was incredulous, "What purpose would it serve anyone to feed you lies?"

Wyatt responded, "Don't forget, Doc. We've consumed quite a bit today. You must admit that virtually all of it is unbelievable when you look at it. So, what we saw through your little computer screen is the most believable of the bunch yet, and it is probably the easiest thing to fake."

"That still doesn't answer the question of why I would do it," Nick said.

Trixie again responded as she turned to walk away, "Maybe you're not precisely in complete control of your actions? Maybe none of us are? That's what this ultimately is all about, isn't it?"

Chapter 7

Emerging from the bunker, Trixie and Wyatt returned to the woods to gather saplings to construct their pack frames. Wyatt was sizing up a two-inch diameter birch when a strange sensation made him stop what he was doing. He stood up and looked around towards Trixie. Suspecting that she felt the same way, he leaned in and whispered. "Hey, do you feel that Trixie? It's like someone's watching us."

Lifting her head from her work, she turned toward Wyatt and whispered. "Yeah, I'm getting a weird feeling too. The sooner we find out what's happening, the better."

They kept an eye on each other as they worked and did their best to focus on the task. Together, they labored as a team, cutting and stripping the bark from the saplings. They lightly crushed the bark using stones, revealing the fibrous innards and soaking the long-pulverized strips in a nearby stream to make them soft and pliable. All the while with one eye on the horizon, watching for a hidden danger. After this, they hung them to dry in the sun over the bough of a tree. While this drying took place, they returned to the bunker to sort through what other supplies they could take along.

Upon their return, they found Doctor Nick sulking at the bottom of the stairwell. As they approached, he spoke to them. "You're not serious about leaving? You just got here. Everything you need is here."

"Yes, everything but our free will," Wyatt shot back. "Is that the kind of creature your masters wanted for their little garden?"

Trixie added quickly. "Go ahead, why don't you ask them, Doctor Nick? You are as much a stage prop as the rest of this stuff." She grabbed a handful of canned goods from the shelf and threw them to the floor. "All of this stuff is an illusion manufactured to keep us held hostage here, and you're a part of it."

"I have not deceived you!" Doctor Nick said defensively. "Everything I've told you is the truth! I do not doubt you will be able to ask them before you leave this place."

"Come on, Wyatt, grab as much of this stuff as you can. Let's bring it outside," ordered Trixie. "I'm not staying for another moment here."

"Suit yourself," interjected a frustrated Doctor Nick.

Having gathered as much as each could carry, they created a staging area beyond the bunker doors to the outside world. In the shadow of the Prototaxities, they hand-wove the bark fibers into primitive but sturdy cordage. They combined various saplings and two rough rectangles of cloth into a pair of extremely light, durable pack frames without using any tools. The supplies made available at the bunker provided each with sleeping gear, extra clothes, and supplies for cooking, food, and water. Although Wyatt was happy to show solidarity with Trixie on her wish to leave the bunker as soon as possible, he wished he could have slept in an actual bed at least for one night. However, he was pleased with his handy work and wanted to think no more about beds. He turned to Trixie and spoke. "You know, Trixie, we should give this place the once over. Let's see if we can find anything else we might find useful."

"Wyatt, I think I'd have to walk back everything I just said to him if I go back in there. No, I can't do it, but you, by all means, go have a look."

Wyatt understood her point of view but not her emotion. From his perspective, she had every reason to be angry. But Wyatt doubted she correctly placed her anger by laying it all on Doctor Nick. "OK, have it your way."

Wyatt descended the stairs to the platform. He found Nick leaning against the wall, pointing toward the concrete floor.

Wyatt took note of his condition and spoke on it. "How are you holding up? Look, if it's any consolation, I think we're all in the same boat. You've got to admit all of this; don't you think it's a bit much?"

"How do you mean?" Doctor Nick asked.

"Well, it's like Trixie said, this whole thing, the bunker, the food supply, and this circle of the forest, all of it is a forgery."

"I know by who, but why?"

"That's never been made clear. Perhaps we'll have the answers if we find our way out of here. Maybe you can help?"

"How can I help?"

"You've got to have some technology hidden somewhere to help track our way out of here?"

"Well, that's what I was thinking about when you came in here. How was it that supposedly neither of you managed to find the edge of the circle? Is it somehow camouflaged? Is it just another dome like the others we've discussed? These creatures may have been masking your senses or otherwise actively distracting you. All of this to keep you from discovering the truth of what lies beyond."

"What is beyond the circle? Do you have any idea?"

"When I was alive the first time, the world was different. I'm afraid I'm learning how different it is at about the same

pace as you are. So, I'm not going to be much help. However, getting back to your question, they may be using a combination of sophisticated techniques to fool you. In my experience, the simplest way to thwart high technology is with a low-tech solution. I have an idea. You want to get out of here right, to a point beyond the edge of the wood. In theory, the quickest way between two points is a straight line. Now, I imagine they've been preventing you from doing just that. For your whole life, you've been walking in circles. I think I know a way to help you change that."

The wheels in Wyatt's head turned. The prospect of another world beyond that he knew had always been within his grasp, yet invisible. When he spoke to respond, his demeanor seemed to change toward Doctor Nick. I would like that very much. I don't know if Trixie would appreciate it."

"Wyatt, if you don't mind me asking, what's changed your mind?"

"Can I call you Nick?"

"Sure"

"I didn't confirm until today that my entire life was a lie. I suspect that there is more to be discovered. I'm not going to lie to you. I don't trust you, but I don't see any other option. Whatever needs to get done, that's what I'm going to do. Nick, I won't let anybody stand in my way."

"That certainly makes sense to me; it's not me that needs convincing."

"Don't worry about her. I think Trixie has a level head. Once she sees that you're useful, she'll drop the resistance. In the meantime, I'm going to look around for some supplies."

Wyatt walked down the hall, checking the doors of the empty offices. The first and second doors were locked. He removed his pry bar from his pack when he came upon the third door. Holding the bar in his right hand, he shielded his face and eyes with his left. With a quick jab, the glass shattered. The hole was large enough. He reached his hand through the hole and turned the knob from inside. He pushed the door open with his hip. The shattered glass scraped across the floor in the path of the door. Wyatt reached up with his left hand and turned the light switch on. The overhead fixture momentarily flickered before bathing the room in its pale fluorescent light.

While searching through the office desks and cabinets for items that might be useful, Wyatt came upon one desk and sat down on the comfortable office chair. He leaned back and was surprised when the chair rolled and spun around a quarter turn in both directions. Wyatt moved the chair back to its position at the desk and began examining its contents. He found a ream of wrapped paper of a quality he had never seen. He ripped open the

package and felt its surface. The paper, for him, held an almost magical quality in its potential. He would take this with him. He removed the block of paper from the drawer and put it on the desk. He opened the central drawer and found other items, including various writing implements. Wyatt took these as well.

Wyatt felt suddenly drawn to one particular drawer as if something important was waiting just for him. He did not understand this feeling but found something unusual as he opened the drawer. It was a circular brass encased object closed with a decorative clasp. Tied to one end of the item was a braided leather strap. Wyatt picked it up and undid the clasp, revealing a glass surface under which floated a spinning arrow. Below the arrow was a dial upon which the four directions and their relative degrees were painted. Looking at the strange dial, he knew this would change his fortunes. He had to show Trixie.

Trixie, lying on her back, looked up into the tree canopy. She was content to stare there a while longer when she heard the rustle of footsteps coming in her direction. She turned her head sideways and sat up abruptly.

Trixie was surprised to see Wyatt and Doctor Nick walking together. "What's he doing here?"

"He's coming with us."

"Why on Earth would you have invited him along?"

Doctor Nick felt the need to answer for himself, "Trixie, I promise you, I've been in the dark as much as you have. These things you've learned about this world, some of which I have only just discovered. If you let me, I can help you and Wyatt reach the edge of this circle. What harm could it do to let me try? You can still leave me in the woods if it doesn't work."

"I don't get it. What's in it for you?"

"Nothing's in it for me. I just can't stay here alone with all of these memories."

Trixie took a moment to look at his expression, looking for some sign that his words were disingenuous. She stood up to look closer, coming within inches of his face. "I can't assume I know your reasons. I don't like it. However, your sudden appearance here and with all we have discovered today has left me doubting my judgment."

Wyatt now spoke, "So you're OK if he comes along?"

"For now, however, I'll be watching you, Doctor Nick."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

...

Even as Trixie loaded her pack onto her back, she had mixed feelings about departing the bunker. Though it had only existed in her world for a short time, she had grand plans for it. However, these revelations brought that crashing down.

Prior to stepping out onto the trail, Doctor Nick held the compass before them. Neither Wyatt nor Trixie had ever seen or heard of such a device. Explaining its practical mechanics, he said, "You see the floating arrow. It pivots around a central axis. Each segment along the circle's perimeter represents arc degrees corresponding to those of the Earth's surface. The part on a compass that will help us is the arrow. Due to the magnetic properties of the Earth, it always points north. So, you can track your position relative to true north, give or take a fraction of a degree."

Wyatt's mind absorbed these directions readily. With a compass in one hand and a clipboard and paper in the other, Wyatt pared these instructions with the crude information at his disposal to create a rudimentary map. How difficult could it be? he pondered, to orient myself in a perfectly straight line should be simple enough.

As they moved across the landscape, Trixie observed Wyatt consumed in this rather cumbersome mapping activity. Though She

held little faith in it and preferred her own methods, she realized she had never purposely traveled straight over such vast distances. Trixie wondered if this would be a challenge to her skills. She was determined to use her proven and accurate methods of observing the sun's motion as it inched across the tops of the tree canopy. Her goal was to keep her bearing relative to the sun as it arced across the sky.

Chapter 8

Together, they moved in relative silence, walking through the morning into the afternoon, with Wyatt on point with his compass and Trixie in the rear of the three-person column. The path had been straight and true to the best of Trixie's reckoning, and the journey had been uneventful. When they reached a point along their track where the overgrowth began to thin out to a clearing, Wyatt broke the silence, saying, "Let's stop here so I can make some notations on my maps."

The others, who were hungry and tired in unspoken agreement, stopped and laid down their packs. Doctor Nick said, "Wyatt, how serendipitous was the discovery of that compass?"

Wyatt could not agree more. Thinking because he had found it, he knew it would be an invaluable tool. Looking up from the map he was drawing, he said, "Yes, I suppose it was."

Trixie wasn't so sure. The timing of his discovery seemed to be a bit too perfect. Perhaps it was even staged for his benefit. So, she crossed her arms and asked Wyatt, "So explain to me, Wyatt, how you felt drawn to that office and that desk out of all of them, the one with precisely the tool you needed. Doesn't that seem unlikely in the least?"

Wyatt looked up from his drawing. His expression displayed his puzzlement as he answered. "Either it's a coincidence, or I'm very lucky. What of it?"

"It's just one more in a random string of coincidences and occurrences that have unnerved me. Why can't you see it?"

"Trixie, at this point, does it even matter? When we reach the edge of the circle, we're going to find the answers."

"At least on this point, we agree. However, I think we need to be wary of unseen influence upon us. OK, that's my point. You seem oblivious to the possibilities."

Trixie was annoyed and needed to blow off some steam. She walked out from the clearing towards a trailhead. As she did, she said, "Wyatt, while you're making your drawing, I'm going to scout around a bit."

"Don't go too far, and whatever you do, don't get lost."

As Trixie reached the forest's edge, she heard Doctor Nick after her, "Do you mind if I come?" She turned before she stepped into the wood and said, "Suit yourself. If you can keep up, that is fine."

"Don't you worry about me." Doctor Nick was off after her.

Trixie made a mental note of her surroundings. Marking the terrain features as she walked. Her eyes scanned the forest horizon for anything unusual or out of place while turning from side to side. She spied in the distance a dark shadowed shape low against the ground, standing out from the backdrop of trees. Her eyes were specially tuned to find patterns on the forest floor. So it wasn't unusual for her to see what amounted to a circular wall of jagged stone.

"Do you see that?"

Nick's eyes squinted, but he was not sensitive to how she was to the ways of the forest. "No, I'm sorry, I don't see anything."

Trixie walked off toward where she had pointed. Nick followed several paces behind her. They came upon a slight rise in incline to the terrain, and the trees seemed to thin out more as they walked further along. When they came to a point where the landscape evened out again, Trixie could feel a cool breeze blowing through her hair up from the distant valley. Here, the object she had seen from afar was now plainly visible. It was the rock sides of a well projecting up out of the ground. Trixie paused momentarily as she looked upon this discovery to have a sudden sense of déjà vu.

Doctor Nick caught up with her and immediately recognized something strange about her expression. He said, "What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost exactly, perhaps something I've seen before?" Undaunted, Trixie walked cautiously toward the well. Reaching the edge, she took a moment to scan her environment. Her observation was keen on the details. Seemingly, the stones were in their places. However, all but the oldest of the trees were out of place. How she could know this, she could not fathom. She stared across to where Doctor Nick was standing. He could read her face. "What seems to be the trouble, Trixie?"

"It's this place. I seem to know it well, but differently than it is now. I don't understand."

"Don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, either you remember it or you don't. Perhaps we are more alike than you care to imagine."

"Again, what are you trying to say?"

"I'm not saying anything. I'm merely stating facts. I'm paraphrasing, but you said that your memory was faulty. To be honest, I only met you yesterday. How much of your story can you verify? Here's a question for you. Can you tell me one specific thing you did last week or a month ago?"

Trixie was angry, but Wyatt had already planted the seeds of doubt. Now, as Doctor Nick quizzed, her eyes darted nervously as she searched her memory for answers. She was surprised to find the concepts of linear time scrambled. It suddenly appeared that there was only the here and now. The past was a ghost. She could not account for this, nor did she express this to Doctor Nick. She looked down into the dark well. Staring down into the murky, silvery reflection, it appeared like the moon shone from the ground. A pebble falling from the rock's edge above disturbed the surface of the hidden pool and caused a circular wake. She watched the shadowy reflection of her silhouette quake as the ripples fanned outward and returned across the surface. Lifting her head again, Trixie found that Doctor Nick was gone, and her environment had changed to fit

more closely with her memory. People were there, but she was confident she was invisible to them. What had been a conglomeration of standing stones was now the foundations and cornerstones of modest buildings. There was activity here and life. "I lived here," Trixie said aloud. She circled; there was no reaction. "How am I seeing this now? What happened to these people?" She peered down again into the well and closed her eyes.

Doctor Nick responded to her, not sure about what she was saying. "Trixie, what people are you talking about?"

Trixie, however, did not answer. Her gaze stayed locked down into the recesses of the mercurial pool. He called to her again. "Trixie!" She did not budge. He moved in close, grasping her by the arm. The momentum of this action sent her unsteady body falling. Nick's ham-handed rescue attempt left Trixie on the ground unresponsive. Nick rushed to her side to find her breathing shallow, with only the whites of her eyes visible. Unsure of what was happening, he called out to her as if she was some distance away. "Trixie, come back; what's happened to you?"

Trixie lifted her head again, and the vision did not disappear as she had hoped. "What kind of illusion is this? Is this a dream? Or am I supposed to be seeing something?" She got

up and began to walk. Remembering that the well once resided in the village square, the place's layout came back to her immediately. She quickly oriented herself to this mental map and moved toward the dirt road where her family's dwelling once sat. As Trixie walked, the stark details of what she observed became more evident. The people wore clothes made from coarse cloth, and they appeared thin and malnourished. She passed fallow fields and empty pens. These attributes did not jibe with her memories of these people. She had to wonder who these people were.

Finally, she came to the small house at the end of the dirt road that had lived so prominently in her memory. The rustic cottage was just as she remembered it. At the same time, she knew it to be an illusion. Struggling to reconcile these two realities, she stepped toward the whitewashed door and grasped the latch. Trixie paused momentarily, contemplating the repercussions of what she might find behind the door. The thought occurred to her that her life may never be the same. She steeled herself and opened the door.

Though she'd hoped to see her family, Trixie knew it to be unlikely. Ignoring this fact, she pressed on. A moment later, Trixie's senses strained to comprehend where she had found herself. "What in the world is this?" Trixie said aloud, standing and staring into a space she did not recognize. As her

eyes adjusted to the low light conditions, she could see the dimensions were far more extensive than they appeared when she had entered. A glistening coat of mycelium mat covered all the surfaces in every direction. The aromas of mold and decaying leaves weighed heavily on the air. Carefully, she stepped forward into this unusual cavern-like space. *Where had she wandered?* She asked herself. Her heart was racing. However, she did not understand why a vague familiarity with this place made her feel somewhat at ease.

Trixie called out. "Hello, hello, where am I? Is anybody there?" Trixie sensed from what seemed like a great distance away luminous shades of color flickering and coalescing from the ether. Blue and violet, red and yellow grew intensely in the darkened space. They formed there into sprites and spirits of greater intricacy and complexity. One, in particular, came to her and glowed brighter than the others. Trixie stared into the light and the ghostly and familiar form that she soon recognized as her mother stepped forward from within the light. Trixie reached out her arms into the shadows. "Mother," she spoke, can that really be you? Trixie's hands passed right through the spectral figure as it stood and stared at her until it seemed to talk disjointedly. "Do you understand the truth now, Trixie?"

Trixie paused for a long moment as tears welled in her eyes, "No, I certainly do not. What the hell is going on here? Is this some kind of joke? Where are all the people?"

"There are no people. The human race that lives in your memory is extinct. All you recall of this world existed once as someone else's borrowed memory.

"Who are you?"

"You can call me Mother if it makes you feel better, but know this. Your memories are an implanted fraud. My daughter's name was Trixie. You share her likeness and most of her genetics. She lived an entire life, but she, like myself, passed on to the collective many years ago. Now, she resides with us within the hive mind. I'm sorry that I have to tell you these things. You see, the name was merely a convenience to go with the memories they fed you along with everything else."

"Who are they?"

"Why I'm talking about that diabolical experiment that refuses to let nature take its course. We're talking about Operation Golden Age. With the help of the Prototaxities, the automated system has kept your kind going for centuries. If it weren't for the benefactor, you would be extinct, and our kind would be free to roam this world. Because of your existence within the garden, the Prototaxities have forsaken us within this netherworld. Make no mistake. If you stay here, whoever's

running this show will have all the stages of your life planned out before you. I see you're out there with that man. How's that working out for you?"

Trixie stood and listened to this speaking image of the person she once believed her mother antagonizing her. She was surprised at how this actually affected her. She imagined it gave credence to what this specter told her. So, as Mother again began to speak, there was only subdued rage. "I suggest you go into the desert and find yourself a new partner, one of your choosing. It makes no difference to me. But, then again, you were never part of my life."

"I don't have to explain myself or my choices to you." Trixie knew that she would somehow have to mourn this loss later. Right now, she was angry. When she turned to leave, she found there was no longer a door.

From the floor, a mass of translucent white flesh rose before her. Its form twisted and writhed. She stepped back two steps and reached for her blade. As she did, she heard an actual sound not within her mind but in her ears. The stuttering noise mimicking a human voice reverberated and echoed off the soft, flesh-covered walls. Trixie listened, mesmerized by the uttered chain of words as she discovered the strained voice was calling out to her. "Trixie, please stay. Do not listen to these spirits who inhabit this place." There was a great buzzing of sound as a

symphony of voices rose around her. "Silence!" the voice thundered. All again was quiet, and it resumed speaking. "Those are the human voices of the hive mind. They once lived as you do. I'm afraid they would fancy themselves to be gods now."

Though Trixie's hands trembled, she still held her knife and wanted answers. Trixie directed her question toward the faceless mass of fibrous mycelium standing upright before her. "Would they now? And who might you be?"

"I am an amalgam of conscious traits that represent the Prototaxities. We are at once a singular organism and a diversity of individuals. There is no equal matching your human frame of reference."

"Why have you brought me here? Was it to scare me? Your illusions are not going to work on me. Now, you need to show me the way out of here before I start doing some damage."

Again, there were murmurs from the background. The Prototaxities repeated the call for silence before it spoke. "It was not I but the collective that drew you here. Though you guessed correctly that this is an illusion, albeit a very sophisticated one, it seemed their motive was apparent. You've missed that despite the illusion, much of what they've told you is the truth. Though it is true, it is not the whole truth."

Their purpose in revealing these things was to encourage you to leave the safety of the forest. You must not listen."

"Tell me, what happened to my parents. Is what they said true?

"I'm afraid it is."

Trixie lost her composure. Her eyes again welled up, and her hands were trembling more now. "I want out of here now. Get me out of here!" Trixie turned and ran. In the process, she stumbled, and she picked herself up.

"Trixie, there is more you need to understand. As ethereal beings, they have lost their perspective on what it means to be human. They believe this garden belongs to them alone as a kind of plaything. They will do anything to keep your kind from returning to its rightful place on the Earth. What's worse is they know what your chances are beyond the barriers. You must choose wisely."

Trixie was conscious again, looking down into the well. When she was gone, the expanding ripple had not yet reached the side of the well, and then she was falling.

She looked up to find herself on the ground, with Doctor Nick's quizzical expression staring back at her. Realizing how it must appear, Trixie opted to keep her story under wraps. She abruptly stood up, turned without speaking, and began walking

back toward Wyatt's direction. As she moved quickly across the rock-strewn terrain, her environment shifted back and forth between memories of the two worlds she had known there. As best she could, Trixie kept her head steady forward and did not stop moving. Her pace quickened as a latent fear rose inside her.

Doctor Nick called out to her, but she either could not or would not listen to him. "Trixie, wait! Where are you going?" It was right about then; he, too, began seeing the same unusual phenomenon. He stopped in his tracks to observe the strange scene playing out. "What in the heavens is going on here?" He turned again and watched as Trixie disappeared into the trees. He was alone.

Just as soon as she was gone, so too was the weird effect emanating from her or from where she had come. Doctor Nick imagined that Trixie had somehow unlocked a portal, and he was, for the moment, left behind in the wake of her memories. It didn't take him long to discover that this was not as free as he had imagined. Having paused too long, he was captured in the shadowy impression lingering on the landscape. Once he realized his mistake, he thought abandoning this spot to these ghosts was best. Turning in the direction Trixie had gone, he followed her and called out, "Trixie, I'm coming. Wait for me."

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Wyatt watched Nick and Trixie Walk off until their figures disappeared into the underbrush. Imagining he might be waiting awhile, he removed his pack and set it down on a nearby boulder. The air tasted sweet with the aromatic smells of decaying tree bark and fermenting leaves. It was warm, with the light shining through what remained of the canopy. Wyatt relished this moment and was determined to capture it despite all that happened. He removed a handful of pencils of varying point sizes and softness from his jacket pocket and began to draw.

Though the paper attached to the clipboard was relatively small, the marks he made were strikingly dynamic. In that moment of observation, the plains within his field of vision intersected and diverged. His eyes and mind were as one as he broke the landscape into its constituent parts. As if possessed, Wyatt continued in a feverous expression, page after page by some unseen agency. The intrinsic quality of the drawn lines and shading felt at once weightless and intolerably heavy in each work. For Wyatt, unaccustomed to this manner of expression, the barriers between reality and pure abstraction had blurred. So, too, the typical boundaries from the physical world around him, that substantive veil he had expected to always believe in, had fallen. For the first time in his life, there was something he could see with his own eyes, an elusive geometry that had been there all along.

Deeper still, undefined, and mysterious, subjective imagery repeatedly surfaced in his subconscious and manifested in static form.

...

Returning from the woods and still shaken from her ordeal, Trixie came upon the forest opening where she had left Wyatt behind. Intent on telling her story, she was otherwise sidetracked by what she found there. Wyatt stood in what appeared like a pillar of sunlight stripped to his waist. There were dozens of pen and pencil drawings hanging from tree branches depicting stark shapes and images of pyramidal forms, great spiral arcs, and figures representing people and animals. One image, in particular, caught her eye. It appeared to capture the stars described as a flowing river in the sky. She had seen this image before but could not recollect where or when. All of these images had stirred some other kind of memory.

As Trixie stood and contemplated such images' meaning, a warm breeze was wafting off the forest, carrying the same earthy scents that previously affected Wyatt. Transfixed by the sight of a shirtless, clearly intoxicated Wyatt for a moment, Trixie forgot about her ordeal. She called out to him, "Wyatt! Hello! What are you doing?"

Wyatt's face bent upward toward the sunlight. Trixie noted the expression on his face to be almost one of ecstasy. "Wyatt! What are you doing?" she called out again, this time louder.

The serene expression vanished from his face as he opened his eyes. He immediately threw his hands up to block the rays of sunlight that seemingly conspired to blind him. Shaking and confused, he turned toward Trixie's voice and asked, "What's happening?"

Trixie noted sweat pouring off Wyatt's forehead and that something was wrong with the pupils of his eyes. "What's wrong with you, Wyatt? Why are you acting this way? Did something happen to you after I left? Tell me what you remember."

Wyatt tried to respond but, distracted by sensory overload, could not immediately find the words. However, the natural world came crashing back in on him. He felt like himself again, though his eyes were still too sensitive. So Wyatt attempted to gather his thoughts and explain: "I... I was taking a break and was going to do a sketch. I was looking out into the trees. Then I remembered there was a scent in the air."

As Wyatt paused, staring into the woods, Trixie said, "Perhaps you're hallucinating, but you're not the only one. I also saw something out in the woods. That's what I came running

over to tell you about, and then I found this." Trixie walked about the gallery within the trees, inspecting the images. She was intrigued by the portrayal there. The images possessed undeniable beauty, and Trixie felt drawn to them. Trixie, however, could derive no meaning from many of the drawings. Two images, in particular, caused her to pause. One was of a great pyramid flanked by a terrible winged serpent. Looking upon the other, it reminded her of the reflective surface of the bottom of the well and the sinewy translucent creature she found there. She stood silently, staring at the picture, until Wyatt interrupted her thoughts.

"That's where you're wrong, Trixie. We may be intoxicated but were not hallucinating. What I saw was real. Maybe what you saw was real as well."

"You don't even know what I saw. How can you be prepared to believe it?"

"Maybe, somehow, I do."

...

Meanwhile, Doctor Nick had somehow fallen behind in his attempt to catch up to Trixie. The faster he tried to run, the more time seemed to slow down. Seemingly, as one foot hit the ground, he found increasing resistance, attempting to raise them

back up again. Finally, there came the point where his feet would not lift from the ground. Around him, the forest air was heavy and still. He struggled to move but was helpless. He pulled desperately at his legs to rise to no avail. To have just regained use of his body after so much time, only to have it taken, left him both angered and frustrated. He tried to cry out, but no sound stirred in the stillness. His mouth opened, but his voice was gone. No one would hear him.

It was then that a familiar voice came again to speak directly into his mind. Though he intuitively knew this fact, his body responded as programmed, turning his head toward the perceived source. No one, however, was there. "Hello, Doctor Walsh. It's been a long time, but no see. You've done well so far, keeping this little caravan moving. However, we're running into a bit of interference. However, I will not tolerate failure. Do you understand me? I did not give you your life again out of fondness for you. I expect you to facilitate the expulsion of these candidates."

"Why have you done this to me? I never asked you to bring me here for this. Even if I did what you're asking, what happens to me then?"

"Perhaps you should have asked that question before you put that bullet in your head. Once that friend of yours brought your body out into the forest, you were as good as mine. Now, if I

need to remind you, just look down at your feet, Doctor. Take a good look. You can revert into the forest from which you came for all I care. However, I am not without mercy. I do you the justice of not making any promises. But know this: I can transform you into anything I like here."

Doctor Nick looked down at his feet, planted into the ground. The cells of his body there had reverted to their native genetic base. Fanning out from where he stood, mycelium fibrils branched across the surface and into the ground. With his mind, he spoke to this entity, "Who are you, and why are you doing this?"

"I am Abraham. In a way, I owe you for the creation of this Eden generations ago. In this program's creation, the Prototaxities threw up a protective barrier of life around this experiment of yours. However, despite this resistance you've engineered within these humans, this Golden Age you've tried to recreate must fail."

A million thoughts ran through Nick's mind as he took in what Abraham told him. "Do you mean Abraham from the story?"

"That's right, the same."

"So that was you speaking through me and also you who resurrected me?"

"It's always been so."

"What do you mean? Always been so?"

"Young man, I've been fighting this cold war for five centuries."

The idea that so much time had passed did not fit everything else. Nick knew he had reached for the first inconsistency he could remember. "I don't understand; the bunker and its rations look relatively well maintained. How could it have been abandoned for so many centuries? It makes no logical sense."

"Doesn't it? All of it is produced in every detail by the Prototaxities from your memory."

"Why would it do so?"

"To complete what you started all those years ago with Operation Golden Age, the Prototaxities each generation produce a pair of human offspring within this Eden. Each team retains the genetic resistance that you programmed into them. It desires them to live and build in numbers until they can take their place at its side. Our kind will not allow these retrograde hybrids to gain a foothold in this world and inherit this Earth."

"I don't understand why... why you're doing this?" *How could this be?* He wondered. Until this moment, he had naively imagined that he had merely been swept up. *Who was this man, this creature?* "Where are you? He called out, "Why don't you show yourself?"

There was a rustle in the bank of calf-high greenery that surrounded him. From his perspective, the seemingly random pattern of stems and leaves from various plants and shrubs started to shudder in a coordinated manner. According to its program, each exposed surface took on its portion of light and reflected only a prescribed part. The overall effect left Doctor Nick amazed as from the living pixels emerged a human face image. The Voice again spoke in tandem with the moving lips of the picture. The space in front of Nick began to vibrate visibly as if the very air molecules were bubbling. Piece by piece, a translucent figure weaved itself from within the ether, presenting itself before him. Nick stood, staring mouth agape at the ghostly specter. It was the image of a thin old man, someone he did not recognize.

The voice now centered on the figure as it began again to speak, "The Prototaxities treat us condescendingly as if we were any other animal. Though its mind came into being through our

symbiotic ancestry, we considered it merely another part of the web of life, but not equal. Because of our actions, Prototaxities no longer commune with our species. It has, in a sense, cast us out of paradise. For reasons known only to itself, these precious humans' future has become its sole priority, and it will do anything to keep them safe.

This creature can't see that this world's future is rightly destined by nature and evolution to be dominated by those who have disposed of their mortal bodies to exist as pure consciousness. I have made it my duty these centuries to destroy what you have created. It is better to let these resistant hybrids perish in the desert."

"What do I have to do with it?"

"You will do as I command you to do, or you will also perish."

"What do you gain from this? Aren't you at least partially human?"

"I don't possess enough humanity to let that kind of sentimentality rule my logic. Once you reach the edge of the circle, you will begin to understand fully the crimes committed by this species."

"You spoke of interference; I assume the Prototaxities themselves are interested in keeping them here. What is their purpose in doing so?"

"You would have to ask them," explained Abraham. "The Prototaxities no longer commune with our kind. We have been, as it were, expelled for a second time from Eden. I warn You, Doctor, the moment you lose your usefulness is the moment you become dispensable. I will have no qualms returning you to the soil from which you came. So, I suggest you do everything in your power to expel these two beyond the edge of the forest."

Abraham paused. Doctor Nick looked at the visage with a mixture of emotions. A melancholy expression spread across the image of the old man's face. Abraham began again to speak. "It is to us a great irony that through our spoken word, it became self-aware, yet to us, it will not talk. To think we created a god. This treatment is the thanks we get. It shuns us while favoring what destroyed this world. How this came to be is inconceivable! I warn you, Doctor, there is much anger within the collective. Be careful not to face the brunt of it."

Abraham's voice fell silent, and Doctor Nick began to hear sounds from his mouth again. He was no longer mute. The sounds of the forest again filled his ears. The pixelated forest understory had returned to its normal state. Most importantly,

to Doctor Nick, the fibers attaching him to the ground had disintegrated into nothing. He could not be sure how much, if any, of it was real as he lifted his feet. Suppose it was so. What parts were the illusion? Either way, he was free. Once again, he was moving his pace, quickening toward Trixie.

Chapter 9

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Nick soon came upon a scene in the tract of woods left relatively open to the sky. With the sunlight filtering through the serrated leaves' patterns, he saw the others standing, almost glowing in the light. Shadows and light cast before their eyes had caught them seemingly in a whirlwind of confusion. In all the excitement, he noticed too late a strong, if not intoxicating, odor emanating from beneath the leaf litter, unlike anything he had ever smelled before.

His instincts prompted him to avoid this odor at all costs. He started backing up, only to realize moments later that he had already missed his opportunity to flee from the colorless toxin wafting through the air all around him. Struggling to hold his breath, he stumbled backward, falling to the ground. Rolling in the leaves and brush, a rush of fear overcame him, as he anticipated an uncertain end. His sense of fear only increased as the seconds passed, he lay there, and still no ill effect had overtaken him.

Looking up into the canopy, as a second and perhaps more profound realization came upon him, he was struck by a wave of calm relaxation. Though he could only describe his new life was miraculous, Nick had imagined he was human in the same pattern as the poor soul from the bunker. He saw he was merely in the form of a human. His physiology was different from Trixie and Wyatt's on some fundamental level. It was all beginning to make more sense to him now. *Though I am in the form of a man, my cells derived from the forest's stuff operate under the direction of whatever spirit motivates this, Abraham. But for what purpose should I, beyond the fear of death, be compelled to comply with its commands?" I owe it no allegiance. I owe more to this shadow of Doctor Nick's memory than anyone.* He sat up and looked at Wyatt and Trixie. "I have no ill feelings toward them. The scientist in me is curious about how this all plays out.

Some part of me must want these two to succeed in whatever they do. Perhaps we can do both?"

Nick rose from the ground, determined to get them moving again. Finding his footing, he walked over to where the others stood entranced. Nick collected their equipment and packed it into their bags before attempting to awaken them. Once he completed this, he straightened them up as well as he could and strapped the packs upon their backs. Steering them onto the game trail roughly following their bearing, they were off again. Nick had the compass. However, there was nothing with which to compare the heading. Wyatt's maps were rendered worthless by whatever spell had possessed him. He would have to revert to dead reckoning. "This should not be too difficult to navigate." Doctor Nick said to his companions, unsure if he believed his statement. There was no response, though he hadn't expected one. He gave them each a gentle nudge, and they walked along the gently sloping trail. Nick was in the rear to make sure they stayed on track.

They walked along in this blackout state until Wyatt's consciousness arose. Again, it was the light that initiated his mind's transition from the depths. A glint struck him squarely in the eye, seemingly breaking the spell. He closed his eyes tightly to protect himself from what felt like a needle-like

force. Strange recollections and images filled his head. There were no words, only a silent, undefinable sensation of things and possibilities he had not before imagined. The ordeal compelled him now to stop. He blinked as if to clear a fog that enveloped him. He was startled to find himself again on the trail. He turned to see Trixie had seemingly been having a similar experience.

Trixie called out to him as if he were at a distance, "Wyatt, what just happened? How did we end up here, back on the trail?"

"I'm sorry, Trixie. I was about to ask you the same question."

Doctor Nick was there waiting with an answer. "Welcome back. I was beginning to wonder if this state would be permanent with you two."

In unison, Trixie and Wyatt turned to face him. Despite her confusion, Trixie preferred not to let it show as she said. "Are you going to make us ask you what happened?"

"Very well, it appears that for several hours, you have both been under the influence of a powerful drug. I gathered your gear and got us back on the road again."

"My maps, where are my maps?" asked Wyatt.

Nick removed a collection of tattered folded pages from his jacket pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to Wyatt. Then he said, "You destroyed them. Take a look."

Wyatt looked down at the paper upon which the maps and notations he had painstakingly recorded. Freehand drawings of repeated geometrical forms and motifs obscured his meticulous labor. Shifting representations of circles, squares, and toruses intersecting one another's boundaries leaped across the pages.

Even as Wyatt asked, "What is this?" A vague recollection of its creation had conjured. The symbols elicited a reaction he sensed in his body but could not verbalize. His body, for a time, had contacted something almost otherworldly. He found a connection to deep time, a relationship harkening back to the beginning of complex life on earth. Nature was cruel, a blind harmony, a balance such as this that he never knew existed in his life. There was nothing of this which he could articulate.

"I don't know, Wyatt. I was hoping you could tell me."

"Where are we going?"

"To the edge of the forest?"

An authentic look of confusion came over Trixie and Wyatt's faces.

Trixie, seeming to have heard this for the first time, asked. "Why? Could you remind me again why we're doing this?"

"Ok, both of you listen to me." Doctor Nick said with a note of annoyance in his voice. "As I said, both of you were under the influence of some mind-altering substance. Until a short while ago, you were not too happy with me and were determined to make your way out of this circle. Now you're seemingly content to question ever doing it in the first place. All of us, including myself, have been manipulated to some extent. At this point, I don't care what you ultimately do when you get there. I need to see what happens when you do for my sanity."

Trixie's eyes began to flutter as if a psychic weight had been laid upon her. Her eyes went still, her mouth fell open, and she began to speak. "I remember a vision from the forest. I recognized among stones at my feet the remnants of ancient foundations that had once been my village. Specters of people I thought I had once known were walking among them. How long ago had it been abandoned?" Turning to Doctor Nick, she asked, "What was that place? Do you remember what we saw at the well? You would have had to have seen it, too."

"I couldn't begin to tell you, but I know who might. Wyatt, didn't you also say there was a village nearby?"

Trixie interrupted, "Wyatt if it's your village he's talking about, you'll want to hear what I have to say. Now I remember something that happened in what was my village. It is

now, of course, a ruin. I think we can all accept that. What was most disturbing was that an apparition of my mother came to greet me. She told me basically that all of my life was a lie. If we go there, you'll find your village I imagine we'll discover more of the same."

"What do you mean your life was a lie?"

"Wyatt, you and I never lived in these villages. We never went to school and probably never survived in the forest. Your parents, your village, and all your memories belonged to another person who lived long ago."

Wyatt listened for what seemed an eternity, staring silently, taking in what Trixie told him. However, he surprised himself with how readily he accepted the idea. These last few weeks, thoughts plagued him that something was wrong with this world. As strange as it seemed, this explanation made the most sense to him right now.

As his silence continued, Trixie again began to speak. "Wyatt, I intend to find out how and why this happened. But I need you on board with this. Can I count on you?"

"Yes, Trixie, I'm in."

Wyatt looked about. There weren't enough landmarks among the thickets and saplings to ascertain his current position. He gave the best answer he could. "I don't know if I could navigate there from here, but if we locate the ruins of the dome, I'll be able to find it from there. We just must get up high enough so that we can find it. We make our way there, and I can use the land formations as a guide."

Doctor Nick silently pondered these questions. What would it mean for him if he were to go down this road? Abraham had made his intentions obvious. This day alone, they had traveled several kilometers in a straight line toward the edge of the perimeter. Doctor Nick would remain within his reach as long as he stayed within the circle. He wanted to help these people but didn't want to die in the process. However, it never really was his choice.

Following the land's natural slope, they moved along a rise until their ascent angle approached thirty degrees. At this point, they abandoned their packs and continued without them. After reaching the top of a ridge, they observed either side. Most of the horizon was visible. With their eyes scanning the distant edges of their world, they searched for the telltale shape of the ruined dome against the sky. It was Trixie who

caught the silhouette; it was behind them. "There, I see it. It's just about fifteen degrees south of our last heading. It should be behind us."

Nick and Wyatt turned around to see the shadowy mass in the distance. Wyatt couldn't help but comment on its appearance. "It looked different than the last time I saw it."

Nick said, "Ok, I think I can plot our way there with what I have using the compass. We'd better get moving."

They followed their path in a single file while coming up the rise, picking up their packs on the way down. Soon, they were down in the flat land again, following Nick's calculated trajectory. They walked for the greater part of the afternoon until the woods began to thin out as the ground became rockier. Wyatt first spied the ruins through the spindly web of mountain ash and paper birch. These were the only trees that could prosper in this shallow soil. Grasses, too, punctuated the landscape in wild clumps as the bare rock of the plateau became more pronounced.

The dome itself grew like a colossus in their view as they drew nearer. Its massive pediments, buried deep into the bedrock, rose from the ground to dwarf the three travelers. Upon this sat the giant interconnected arches of rusted steel that soared high above them. Pitted and aged by time, the remnants of the glass dome still hung precariously on high. Despite the

danger, they walked on unhindered by fear. An eerie quiet permeated the air. Only the sounds of their footsteps broke the silence. The shattered remnants of the dome's outer casing were at their feet, between which mosses, lichens, and grasses grew.

They walked along until they reached a wide concrete avenue that had once served as the entire complex's central corridor. Trixie spun around, slowly taking in the view in all directions. From this vantage, she could easily see that it was only one of several domes that comprised the city. Within the greater structure, the remains of lesser ones stood in ruin.

The landscape within the foundational footprint of the buildings took on an unusual appearance. Over the years, tons of debris had settled into the earth to no small extent. Here and there, rounded plant-covered mounds of rubble spiked with rusting jutting rebar spears stood about randomly.

Though the buildings were all but gone, there was still enough there for Doctor Nick to remember just where he was. "This is dome seven, and that is what's left of the New Reading Hospital. Most of the building no longer exists; however, I wouldn't forget that entryway. It was unique."

Both Wyatt and Trixie could recall from the story the bizarre rituals that had taken place here and the transformations from one form into another. With this at the

forefront of her mind, Trixie spoke, "This is where it all happened, isn't it?"

Doctor Nick responded, "Yes, I do believe it is." He continued walking through the portico.

Though hesitant, Wyatt and Trixie followed behind him through the granite entranceway, intricately carved into the form of a winged serpent. Its bejeweled eyes gleamed in the afternoon light. Despite the weather and time-worn features, the imagery portrayed was as powerful as the day of its consecration. Wyatt felt so moved that it was as if they were not merely walking symbolically into the mouth of a beast.

As they meandered through the displaced bits of overgrown structure throughout the complex, they began to feel as though unseen eyes were somehow stalking them. Wyatt sensed shapes moving somewhere beyond his field of vision, just out of reach. Somehow, these movements registered outside of his ordinary senses. Trixie shook away her stupor, stopped in her tracks, and reached into her boot for her knife. Dropping her pack, she crouched down with her weapon, ready to pounce. She didn't even truly understand why, but she was ready. Wyatt sensed it, too, and removed his pack and found a stout tree branch that he could easily swing around.

Trixie called out to Wyatt, "Can you feel that? How many of them do you think there are?"

Wyatt didn't question her. He knew precisely about what she was talking. "I sense three to five individuals, but I can't see them. Are they camouflaged?"

"Or are they even there at all?"

Doctor Nick looked on with confusion. He could not see or feel anything. *Perhaps they were hallucinating again.* He told himself. As this thought passed through his mind, he was suddenly and with great force upended.

He hit the ground hard, and the force knocked the wind from his lungs. Nick struggled to breathe, and adrenaline surged through his veins. Nick scanned his horizon. He caught sight of the faint translucent silhouette of a human-like creature glaring at him.

With lightning speed, the creature moved and was now poised to serve a deadly blow down on Nick as a visceral horror overwhelmed him.

Wyatt brought his weapon to bear. Wyatt swung his makeshift club square into the assailant's face in one swift move. Doctor Nick screamed as the blunt force of the blow struck the creature. He watched from below as its lifeless body fell atop him with a thud.

Wyatt sensed motion as another creature came from behind. He turned in time to block the strike with his makeshift club. His wooden club was no match for the blade. Wyatt was sure his weapon wouldn't survive another attack. He tripped, falling backward under a barrage of knife strikes.

Trixie held her own, trading blows with a separate attacker when she saw what was happening to Wyatt. Trixie had to get over and help, but there wasn't much time. She had to think fast. The thought came to her, and Trixie smiled. As the creature thrust forward with its blade, she stepped sideways, slamming the heel of her boot onto his naked foot. Trixie lunged with her long knife, goring the beast through its side. It fell, writhing to the ground.

Trixie withdrew her blade in one motion and ran to Wyatt's aid. Another moment later, she approached the creature from its blind side. Wyatt watched Trixie coming as she, in a lightning attack, sunk her knife deep into the assailant creature's spine. The force of its attack on Wyatt stopped as the electric jolt of pain shot throughout its body. She pulled out the blade and stabbed it again. This time, the creature fell to the ground motionless.

Wyatt stumbled to his feet, standing back-to-back against Trixie, breathing heavily, awaiting the next attack. They watched, waiting as the two motionless assailants melted into the earth. They then sensed that, for the moment, the threat had disappeared.

Trixie extended her hand to help Doctor Nick to his feet. A small crimson rivulet of blood trailing down behind his ear was evident as he rose. Trixie noted, "You should have one of us look at that for you."

Nick put his hand to his head and felt the warm, wet feeling of blood on his hand. Looking at his bloodied hand, he asked, "What the hell was that about?"

Now in full possession of her faculties, Trixie was quick to answer. "I don't know. Weren't they friends of yours?"

Doctor Nick contemplated this statement. Who in this whole world would want him hurt or worse? The number of possible culprits was limited. These perpetrators were of a like to which he had no present or historical memory. However, he was not yet ready to share the facts about what had happened between him and Abraham with Trixie and Wyatt. So, his answer, for now, would be less than honest. "I don't know who would want to do me in."

Trixie stared into Nick's eyes, looking for any sign of trouble. "How are you feeling? Are you ok to move?"

Doctor Nick's head was throbbing. He was seeing double, nauseous, and dizzy. However, nothing was going to stop him from moving forward. "Trixie," he said, "I'm fine! Let's keep moving."

They reached the center of the building's footprint. There stood a debris hill that was seemingly larger than all the rest—somehow, knowing what they knew about this place rendered onto it a tomb-like quality. As they stood there looking on, the sound of moving rubble broke the silence. The sounds of rock rubbing against rock intensified. Trembling with anticipation, they didn't know whether to run away or move in closer. They did not sense fear as they did before.

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As the massive composite ceiling collapsed on top of him, Johnny's human body was crushed under the weight. His stainless-steel armor was no match for the ton of debris that had fallen upon him. It did not take long, however, for a transformation to occur. The spores that had lain dormant within his body, awaiting his ultimate death, took over. His consciousness became

part of the collective mind. He and the millions of others who took a similar journey now shared a common virtual space within the mycelia nerve cells. Death, as he had known it, no longer existed. But from his perspective, this was not death, and neither was this life.

Sensing the presence of Wyatt, Trixie, and Doctor Nick near his body's final resting place, Johnny reached out through the vast network of mycelia fibrils that permeated the soil. He began to work his way toward his buried suit of armor. Beneath the crumbled steel and shattered glass block, the crushed armor began to fill again and expand with a hard knot of woody flesh. The crumbled debris pressed outward and moved aside as the body moved upward like a disoriented taproot.

The centuries had passed since Johnny's consciousness had freely inhabited a body; it was as if he had ceased to be a free agent only moments ago. As he rose from atop the tumulus, he felt the life force he had once known flow through him. The only thing left for him was to separate himself from the network. With his growing strength, he wrenched his body free from the thicket of connections that sprung from the cracks in his armor. Though still an amorphous mass of flesh contained within the suit of armor, he began to will the form of his former body into being. Johnny removed the pitted and rusted helmet that had held only ash and dust for so long, and for the first time in ages,

he felt the light upon his face. He breathed the forest air deeply. He did not recognize the intoxicatingly beautiful scents he found there.

Disorientation still plagued Johnny, so it took him a moment to recognize where he was standing. He looked up. He saw there the complex of steel arches intersecting high above him. He brought his head down to level with the horizon. The top of the mound was level with the tree canopy, so no distant view was possible. Nearing the edge of the hill, he looked down to see the faces of three wide-eyed strangers.

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As Trixie looked up, she recognized something strangely familiar about the figure that had come suddenly into view. Its armor was oddly reminiscent of Johnny from the story in her head. "Could it be," she asked herself, "the man from the story?"

She and her comrades could hardly react before this man was amongst them. He had leaped from atop the mound, landing upon his feet with a thud. Wyatt and Trixie fell back, stumbling to the ground in the process.

Trixie and Wyatt lay shocked. A voice again spoke into their minds. This time, however, it was a recognizably different speaker. "You are Humans? Are you not?" The voice waited for a response that did not come immediately.

Doctor Nick, who, besides the rusted knight, was the only one standing spoke. "Well, yes, mostly, it would appear that they are the only two of their species in existence."

"What about you? You look Human enough."

The comment amused Nick. "I thought so too."

Its smoke and mirrors, I'm afraid, although someone has gone to a lot of trouble to make me think otherwise. I am more akin to you than to them."

"We all derive from the same stock, my friend. But the Humans, now that's interesting. From where did they come? I have not seen a living human in-wait a minute. I would not have personally seen any of this anywhere but within the senses of the living network. It is known to be the fact that humans have been extinct for three hundred and fifty years. That's a hundred and fifty years after I was already dead. This question may be silly, but why aren't you speaking telepathically?"

"It is a silly question, and it's hardly relative. I can speak, so I do," Nick continued. "I once lived in this city. From what I can gather, we were contemporary with each other. Are you Johnny the Phlogiston practitioner?"

"I was once. As you can see, I'm something else now."

"That much, is obvious. I find it interesting that these are things you've remembered while my own memories, including the city's destruction, have been occluded from my mind. What purpose would be served by giving me only selected memories supplemented with illusions?"

"I can't yet answer that. It seems to be all part of someone's elaborate scheme for a purpose to which you were unfortunately not made privy. However, there are really only two possibilities. The answer is probably already in front of you but you can't yet see it."

"Can I ask you something?"

"I'll answer if I can."

"Shortly after my creation, I told a story about the destruction of the dome, the format of which hinted at the story's antiquity. You and a man named Abraham were the main characters. I'm assuming you know the story?"

The voice that came so readily was for the moment silent as they all now awaited his response. After a pause, Johnny spoke, this time with his mouth. "It's not odd or unusual that you should now see me. I understand now why, after so long, I've returned. That this one you named--Abraham--he was once human and is now part of our collective mind. He is also on a different path."

By now, Trixie and Wyatt had overcome their shock and had risen to their feet. Gazing at each other, they attempted to communicate their intention silently with their eyes and hand gestures while brushing themselves off as they stepped slowly forward. Though Trixie and Wyatt made their presence known, Johnny barely recognized them. Trixie could not help but feel intimidated beside such an imposing figure. To compound things further, after a few moments of listening to their conversation and being ignored, she had had enough.

Ignoring her initial trepidation, she spoke, "So this is Johnny Phlogiston? How is it you find yourself out of my imagination, here in the world among us?"

The helmeted creature turned in her direction and responded. "The primitive speaks. I should be asking you the same question. I'll tell you plainly. The difference is I know the answer, and you don't."

"Where do you get off calling me a primitive?"

"No offense; you're just lower down the food chain, evolutionarily speaking, of course."

"No offense? How am I supposed to take that?"

"You are a fascinating creature."

Wyatt could feel a sharp pain of anger forming in his gut. The condescending tone of this creature had gotten his blood up. Wyatt stepped forward to within inches of Johnny's face and

said, "Enough with this bullshit! Are you going to answer her question, or do I have to pull that rusty bucket off your head and smash you with it?"

They now had Johnny's full attention. "And there it is. I was waiting to see how long it took one of you to threaten me. There is no need for that kind of language here. We have long passed such dangerous impulses."

Trixie stepped between them. She turned for a moment to glare at Wyatt and returned her stare and responded to the armored man. "No, perhaps not, but that doesn't stop you and your kind from exercising other unsavory impulses. Threats aside, Wyatt is correct; you did not answer my question."

"You are so concerned with the idea of an insult that you failed to realize that I was explaining that exact answer as you interrupted me. If you want to stop acting like impetuous children and listen, I will continue?"

Johnny stood among the ruins with his back to the foundation walls of the old hospital building. Seemingly all were content for the moment to allow him to tell the story as they formed a circle around him. "I was once of Human flesh like yourselves. Complete with all the weaknesses that the state entails. I long carried a burden. The voices of those who had gone on before me had haunted me. To this day, the memory of this still moves me. When I discovered the nature of evolution taking place within

our species, I realized there was no reason to feel alone. I was not hallucinating; these were my people calling out to me. All was not as it seemed, however. The human mind, unleashed from its bounds, is a powerful and often dangerous thing. This peaceful world, you see, was not always so. Our silent benefactors do not pretend to possess scales of judgment in the way our minds naturally do. They did not intervene before the fact. And by not doing so, they see themselves as responsible for the extinction of your species."

Doctor Nick responded, "The Prototaxities is responsible for our extinction?"

Johnny removed his helmet, revealing a somber expression upon his very human-appearing face. His hair was dark, almost black, and his eyes were like piercing beads, like ravens' eyes. As they studied his face, he answered them. "No, you misunderstand me. Prototaxities could have intervened at any point to save you before the end. Prototaxities chose for right or wrong, to let nature take its course. In the end, a small number of so-called conscious beings of the collective took over. After the city's fall, Abraham convinced the others among the post-humans to deal with the so-called non-conformists, hybrids, and those otherwise immune to the spores. A coalition led by Abraham called for those human survivors of the city's fall to be cast into the desert wastelands beyond Prototaxities

protection, never to return. It is to my eternal shame that during this period, I like many others of my kind did nothing.

Time has a way of bringing clarity. To atone for my sin of inaction, I have retained my individuality and pledged myself in service to the Prototaxities. I have been summoned here for a purpose that, when the time comes, will be made evident to me. Looking at you in the here and now, I can only imagine it has to do with keeping you safe; from what, I can't yet answer."

Doctor Nick took in Johnny's words and realized that he too should come clean. He felt compelled to share this revelation with them. Turning to Trixie and Wyatt, Nick said, "I also made a regretful choice. A lie of omission is still a lie. In my defense, the fear of losing my life drove my decisions." Nick paused momentarily, reacting as if a burden were lifted off his shoulders. He breathed out and continued. That initial voice speaking within your head; that was the voice of Abraham. I learned a while back under threat of death that I was to lead you out into the desert beyond the circle. It is the wish of the collective that you would leave this place. The desert is no place for you. There you would meet almost certain death."

Trixie looked at him in disbelief. "You've got to be kidding me? You've been working against us this whole time?"

"Technically, up until now, it hasn't been challenging. I've just been encouraging you to do what you already wanted to do. It is your stubborn curiosity that draws you out. So far, I've merely observed and been perhaps dishonest. Now that you know the truth, I can let this weight off of my shoulders and you can make your own choices."

Wyatt pondered his words. It all seemed crystal clear to him now that it was true. So, he said, "I'm not angry with you, Nick. I can understand the place you were in." Wyatt then turned toward Trixie and said, "I can live with making my own decisions; how about you, Trixie? I say we continue. Even if we decided to stay here, these questions would always remain."

Despite feeling angry, deep down, Trixie somehow sensed that Nick's version of things was accurate, and so she let her feelings be known. "I can't believe after all this, and you're still with us. I should have killed you when I had the chance."

Doctor Nick, resigned to his place in this world, said, "Apparently, I'm not that easy to get rid of."

Trixie ignoring his attempts at humor, said, "If we're going to get moving, we should do it soon. We've only got a few more hours of good sunlight. I can't believe you didn't say anything."

Wyatt asked, "What do we do about Abraham? What should we do about him if he's actively trying to thwart our progress or

even kill us? Those things that we just dealt with must be working with him. This situation keeps getting more complicated."

"He'd kill all of us if he could," said Nick. What were those things?"

Johnny said, "They are spirits of the dead, made from the flesh of the forest, to do his bidding. They are lost souls controlled like puppets by Abraham. If you take this journey, I wish you luck. But from what I've seen, you two can handle yourselves well enough. However, be careful. The wasteland is no place for the likes of your kind. You must be on guard, for your lives will be in danger. As for me, I am, for the time being, bound to this mound. However, if the Prototaxities desire action from me, I will respond."

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Their departure was somber. Few words were spoken, just a simple goodbye from each of them to the helmeted creature. As they looked upon Johnny's face, each perceived something different. It was as if Johnny obtained his semblance to exist, in part, from how they observed him. In part, their imaginations created him. Trixie saw a tall, powerful dark-haired man. Her vision of him bestowed a noble character. To Wyatt Johnny,

seemed more like a rouge trouble maker, someone to give a wide birth. The truth was much more complicated.

Johnny watched as they passed through the granite passageway and disappeared into the forest. Moments after they had left his field of vision, he heard a voice urging him to follow them discreetly. His helmet dropped from his hand, and the rest of his empty suit of armor fell, tumbling to the ground.

Chapter 10

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Trixie, Wyatt, and Doctor Nick were on the trail, following their own footsteps down from the plateau. Each had time to contemplate what they had seen in the old city. The resurrection of Johnny Phlogiston had put things into a different perspective. Though they didn't immediately share this notion, this new viewpoint changed how they interacted with the world. Seemingly everywhere they looked, plot holes appeared in

their personal stories. Wyatt realized how strange it was how he had never actually been to the ruined city, having only ever seen it from a distance despite his supposed curiosity. The state of the place was far worse than he would have ever imagined. Trixie's experience was similar. Though she possessed some vague, obviously false recollections of the dome, it existed only on the periphery of her world.

Why was it not a central artifact of their existence? Despite not possessing any such memory, Doctor Nick was sure that he had once lived in the domed city. However, none of what he saw there made any sense to him. These contradictions all but confirmed what Abraham had told him.

Doctor Nick felt comfortable enough to speak on it, saying, "I don't understand this.. My own eyes tell me it must have been centuries for the dome to have decayed to this extent. However, my faulty reckoning still tells me it's been only twenty-five years since the collapse. There's no logical way to reconcile the discrepancy short of accepting that far more time has passed than I've allowed myself to believe."

Trixie said, "I think that explains things reasonably well. You need to simply accept things as they are."

"What do you mean?" asked Doctor Nick.

"What do I mean? I thought you were a scientist." Trixie said scoffingly. "The overwhelming evidence would seem to show that much time has passed since people lived in the dome, far more than your illusion allows. Looking at the state of things, you need only look at our stories to see how the points all seem to mesh up pretty well. I'm wandering the forest, having abandoned my village at a young age. There was a school there. I remember my parents. Why in all these years have I not returned? At least, I have no recollection of doing so. Why is that? That doesn't make any sense. It seems a little convenient that these stories tie up loose ends in the simplest ways without explaining anything. I didn't realize it until just now. I don't see how any, but our most recent memories are real."

Wyatt, keen to respond, spoke up, "I just returned to my village a few weeks back. I went home to do some bartering. I got a few items; some are in my pack. I could show you. The entire adventure was wholly unreal, like it was a dream."

Trixie answered. "Who is to say you actually went to the village? You could be a few weeks old, and someone gave you those things at the outset."

"I've asked these same questions myself. The only thing I've come up with is, I don't know where this begins or where it's going to end, but I know who I am!"

For Wyatt, grappling with the possibilities of ideas that did not seem real was not unusual territory. He could accept many things, but this notion had deeply upset him. Wyatt, until now, had avoided this type of self-evaluation of who he was at his core. Was he not this man of the forest? His history was as much a part of him as his arms or legs. However, he told himself after today that whatever he saw in the village, there would be no more talk of doubt. He would have no choice but to reconcile these things as they revealed themselves.

Wyatt marked the landmarks within the terrain around him. With these positions of the ruins in hand, he constructed a new rudimentary map by comparing his memory. Using their current position as their starting point, they headed off, following Wyatt's lead through the land over rocks and underbrush toward the trader village where he was born.

With Wyatt in the lead, they came upon the distinctive remnants of intersecting footpaths. It was late afternoon, and the acute angles of sunlight cut stark shadows on the forest floor, revealing hidden pathways. Though the landmarks were familiar, they were strangely different from what appeared in his memory. Wyatt stopped to look around, and the others did likewise. Carefully inspecting and comparing what he saw with his mental image, he confirmed two things. Firstly, he was

navigating correctly, and secondly, things had drastically changed since he was here last.

Trees, vines, and vegetation had grown and taken over in areas where they had not been. He saw some of the larger stones covered in species of lichen he had not seen before. There was foreboding darkness to the wood and overall denseness to the canopy. He began to walk again with some trepidation as he realized the footpaths were now just narrow game trails. Despite these inconsistencies, he wasn't about to give up. They pushed forward.

They followed until Wyatt eventually recognized a natural break in the tree line. After pausing for a moment, they moved forward. Soon, they came upon an area where the density of the trees and shrubbery had grown thinner. It was now obvious they had stumbled upon the footprint of a long-abandoned dwelling place. Like what Trixie found before, all around them were the broken remnants of what had been a village. The foundations of buildings, streets, and other debris related to human activity were there. Trixie and Nick turned to look at Wyatt. The expression on Wyatt's face all but confirmed what Trixie already knew. All his memories were lies, implanted, but to what end?

Recognizing Wyatt's look of shock and resignation, Doctor Nick sought to question him. "Is this not what you expected?"

Wyatt shot a glance back at him and said, "Only now do I truly accept I don't have any real memories of this place at all, just impressions."

"What about the trade goods and so on?"

"I can't account for that."

Like before, Trixie sensed a presence appear from nowhere, suddenly surrounding them. Before Trixie could speak on it, she felt something moving behind her. "Wyatt!" Trixie called out.

Wyatt was already on full alert. This time, he had his blade ready. There seemed to be a swirl of motion around them. They were strange creatures and, for the moment, invisible. Though prepared to fight, no one challenged him. For the moment, they all stood in this uneasy standoff.

Though Doctor Nick's senses were less keen than the others, he heard a crashing sound in the distance grow louder.

Though they did not move forward, there were shimmering semitransparent silhouettes of perhaps twenty individuals. Instinctively, they formed a back-to-back protective circle with all eyes alert, and they scanned the horizon. All the while, the crashing noise grew more intense. Trixie spotted it first and spoke, "What is that?"

They watched as trees from the edge of the forest toppled to the ground before the moving object. When it finally breached

the tree line, they could see it for what it was. It was a tree, but it was the corpse of a colossal oak that had fallen some time ago. It now stood upright against the sky, its naked branches gnarled and black from lying ages in a bog. The giant hulking mass continued to move toward them. Trixie, Wyatt, and Doctor Nick watched in horror as it walked out of the forest on rudimentary legs, transformed from what had been roots.

Trixie, Wyatt, and Doctor Nick stood motionless, transfixed in the sight of this new entity. All the while, the other hidden creatures had them surrounded. But Wyatt and Trixie sensed hesitation among their ranks of their would-be attackers.

"Why aren't they attacking?" asked Trixie.

"They seem intimidated by something, something I can't sense," responded Wyatt.

They began to hear the voice of Abraham again in their minds. "What are you doing here in this place?" In each of their imaginations, the voice seemed to resonate from the direction of the black oak. None responded, keeping their minds clear, and the voice continued. The ground shook as the massive body lumbered forward. Abraham's voice again filled their minds.

"Doctor Walsh, you're moving your specimens in the wrong direction. I ordered you to escort these hybrid creatures to the edge of the circle, or it would be your undoing. You have made

your choice. Now it is time to end this phase of your experiment!"

The ground beside Trixie, Wyatt, and Nick began to shudder as stones and debris lodged firmly in the earth were suddenly pushed forth by a cone of sinewy flesh. They moved back, astonished as the mottled brown and white Prototaxities stalk grew higher and more massive. Long octopus-like tendrils spread from its central trunk in a forest of appendages. Down at the base of the stalk, a seam appeared upon the surface of its flesh. The seam turned into a follicle, which quickly morphed into a human-shaped form.

This human-shaped form stepped forward, and the fibers connecting to the greater body fell aside as it did. With each step, its features crystalized more and more until they recognized that it was Johnny who had once again emerged among them, equipped with his torch already blazing.

The voice of Abraham rang out again. " You have no business here. This fight is not yours. I would suggest you stand aside before I destroy you along with all the rest."

Johnny's voice now joins those resonating in their minds. "Perhaps animating these dead objects may intimidate some, but I am immortal in this place like you. Your threats are hollow. I am here to ensure your plan to destroy these people will fail."

"We shall see about that," responded Abraham. Abraham then called out to his small contingent of creatures he himself had created from the dirt. "Move forward! Kill the humans!"

By now, Trixie, Wyatt, and Doctor Nick had quickly disassembled their bark and canvas packs and hurriedly wrapped up their forearms and midsections as best as possible. The strips of bark were now rigid and flexible. They would soon discover how much difference this material would make. Still standing back to back, their senses heightened; Trixie, Wyatt, and Doctor Nick Now, with knives out, watched as the seemingly terrified creatures slowly pressed forward. Their hearts raced as the seconds of unfolding drama stretched out toward infinity. Only the unleashing of the terrific violence would break the spell. The movements of forest creatures were stifled in a spider's web, fear and trepidation cast by both Johnny and Abraham. Their motion was inevitable, and move on, they did.

Doctor Nick was shaking terribly; his body twitched. Wyatt grabbed Nick's forearm and said, "Pull yourself together, man. You're going to get us all killed."

Just then, from somewhere on high, a sleek black projectile flew into their midst, striking Doctor Nick in the leg. He let out a primal scream as he fell to the ground in agony.

Laughter generated by Abraham resonated within their minds as Nick fell. This cruel act seemed to encourage the attackers; for now, they moved with purpose straight for them. As blood trailed out through Nick's open wound, he tried to rise to his feet. He managed to get upright just as the attackers were on them.

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Johnny saw one of the thousands of branches launched from the black tree as a projectile struck Nick. Abraham let out insidious laughter. Infuriated, Johnny couldn't wait any further. He rushed straight at the hulking tree, his flame thrower already ablaze. To make his weapon effective, he would have to close the distance between them. Abraham was not going to make this easy for him. Johnny's way forward became a gauntlet of wooden missiles. As Abraham shook the branches, they flew like arrows. A hail of branches pummeled his armor, slowing his advance. The thundering staccato of sound as the projectiles hit his helmet resonated along with that of Abraham's laughter. One and then another rudimentary arrow found gaps within Johnny's armor, bringing his progress to a halt. A gnarled and crooked sliver of black wood pierced the gap in his armor just below his right knee. Anger seethed within him as he pulled out the offending object and stepped forward. Another arrow hit him

again. However, the wound in the neck didn't hamper his movements.

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Trixie, Wyatt, and Doctor Nick having steeled their resolve, stood waiting for them when the tide of attackers reached their position. Together, they closed their ranks tightly. They were so close to one another that they would have to face their attackers in close combat.

As Trixie eyes her foe pressing within a single pace, she realizes her attacker's proximity might work to her advantage. She eyed the monster's terrible expression as it came headlong at her, slashing wildly. Trixie steeled herself and easily deflected these blows. Though cut and bloodied, she countered swiftly. In one fluid motion, Trixie spun her attacker sideways using his momentum. Trixie, making a half-turn, her blade struck deep into its flesh near its jawline. The stunned creature fell back, disintegrating into nothing. Even as it fell, another beast was upon her. With her blade up, she moved quickly to counter its advance.

Wyatt was fighting two-handed, club in one hand and a blade in the other. Swinging the club around, head-bashing anyone who dared come near. A creature before him rushed forward, slashing with knives. Wyatt struck him hard, and he fell. Another

creature came in to quickly fill the ranks. It moved so fast, slashing Wyatt across his chest from a downward strike he had not seen coming. Wyatt responded with a downward strike of his own of his blade's pommel to his assailant's face. The creature stumbled backward. As it did, Wyatt turned the knife around and pierced the creature's torso. Writhing in pain, it fell away and disintegrated. Where a beast had fallen, one quickly filled the ranks behind it. Each time, the result was similar.

Doctor Nick, already wounded, stretched his arm up high to protect his head and neck, mindlessly flailing his knife around in a wide arc, seemingly hitting nothing. Though it was an offensive failure, it was, for a time, a defensive success. Until an attacker found a gap and rushed in with his blade, striking him in the gut. A jolt of pain shot through Nick's body as his legs fell from beneath him. As he stumbled, blood erupted from his mouth, and the monster hit him again. With knife edges raised, the wave of creatures pushed forward.

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Having reached as close as he needed, Johnny locked the flame gun into position on his hip. With his arm outstretched, he pulled the trigger. A plume of burning plasma shot across the distance. A great fireball engulfed the black crown of branches as the bog tree ignited.

Abraham's laughter continued as the fuel-soaked tree glowed like a great carbonized filament. The rootlike appendages caught flame, and the lumbering monstrosity began moving again. Consumed in fire and compressed under the mighty weight, its would-be legs failed. With a crashing thud, the body of the burning tree hit the ground.

Johnny felt the sound resonate in his chest. The laughter had fallen silent, and he knew then that Abraham's spirit had abandoned the field. Johnny removed his finger from the trigger. His hand was shaking. He looked up from his gun to see the forest around him ablaze. He turned with his weapon in his hand, running toward the others.

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Fear and adrenaline coursed through Nick's veins as the wall of creatures exploited his exposed side. Bloodied and wounded, he watched from the ground helpless as their momentum struck Wyatt and Trixie broadside.

Trixie sensed her side was exposed, abandoned the formation, and crouched low. Picking up a cast-off blade from the ground, she made herself small and went on the attack. Moving among them too swiftly for them to react, she cut her way like a scythe through the crowd.

Alone, Wyatt dropped his blade, grabbing his club with both hands. Swinging his club around wildly, he found its mark pitilessly smashing the heads of his opponents. One by one, they fell. Fear grew within them.

The forest fire was spreading as Johnny appeared among the horde. He pulled the trigger and unleashed a glowing orange ribbon of burning plasma upon them. A palpable wave of fear ran through their ranks as Johnny put them to the torch. With this act, Johnny had broken their will to fight. The creatures scattered from the field. Some ablaze ran wild, arms flailing into the forest to disintegrate to nothingness.

Nick watched from the ground the unfolding melee. He tried to raise himself from the ground but felt the hot blood oozing from his wounds. Doctor Nick was dizzy, and he did not have the strength to rise off his knees. He made the realization before he fell unconscious that it might be too late for him.

Wyatt and Trixie stood meters apart. Bloodied and exhausted amongst the smoke from the burning forest, each scanned the field for the other. Wyatt searched through the gathering haze; he did not know until that moment how concerned he was for Trixie's well-being. Once he spied her, he felt as if a great weight had been lifted from him. So, as he saw her, he rushed in her direction. "Trixie, are you alright?!"

Trixie turned toward him. And as they looked into each other's eyes, they shared a fleeting moment of emotion neither had expected. The instant soon faded for more practical concerns when Wyatt was taken back by the appearance of wounds Trixie had sustained. Her canvas and bark armor were torn and coated in a sheen of coagulated blood, most of it her own. They ran to each other, and Trixie responded. "I don't think I have any serious damage. You don't look so good, though. You should probably have a sit-down."

Looking up at the fire growing ever closer, Wyatt said, "There'll be plenty of time for that later. In the meantime, we have to get out of here."

"Where's Doctor Nick?"

Wyatt and Trixie turned to see Johnny's silhouette against the background of fire. He was lifting Nick from the ground and over his shoulder.

Trixie made a significant gesture with her arms over her head and called out to him loudly. "Johnny, we're over here!"

"Is Doctor Nick alive?" Wyatt asked Johnny.

"For the moment, yes, but we'd better find shelter quickly to tend to your wounds. There is a station near here in what was

once a village. If I'm not mistaken, the redundant systems still maintained a subterranean entrance nearby."

"Is that why Abraham was so intent on stopping us here?" asked Trixie. I suggest we start looking for this entrance."

Smoke hung heavily in the air as they searched the rock-strewn ground. There, lichen-covered piers and pediments stood out of place and time, marking the spots where humble buildings once existed. There was evidence that people had once been here. So much time had passed, only those things that couldn't fade remained. Not so much as a piece of lumber was left. The bulk of the village remnants consisted mainly of row after row of stones cobbled into geometric forms. Each of these was once the foundation of a modest building. So many mature trees now stood among the ghosts of what were once homes that one could easily pass this place without recognizing it. For several minutes in the gathering heat and haze, they searched within the crumbling foundations of this small cluster of ruins for anything.

Balancing atop the long foundation wall, Trixie took a short leap into the structure's footprint. Stumbling amid the scattered debris and saplings, she fell upon a large object obscured from view. Rising to her knees, Trixie cleared away the ages of accumulated dirt, digging under bits of rotten twigs and grime, revealing a trap door similar to the one found at the bunker. She bent down to open it, but it did not immediately.

She stood up, calling out to the others, "Hey, come quickly, I've found something."

In moments, they were there all looking down at this door. Surprisingly, besides the dirt, there was no nick or scratch on its surface. It looked installed yesterday. Off to the side was a six-by-six-inch control panel. Without knowing if they would work, numbers appeared randomly in his mind. Johnny depressed this string of digits into the keypad. However, he was not surprised when he heard the whir of an electric motor activating the locking mechanism, and the door began to open. Like the previous bunkers, a stairwell led down below the ground level.

They looked down into the rectangular hole, and the sun's light could illuminate only a polished concrete floor. The rest remained draped in shadows. Trixie stepped cautiously down one step and then another before calling out, "Hello, is anyone here? We're coming down; don't be alarmed."

Chapter 11

From the landing, Trixie motioned her head from side to side. Beyond the fringes of muted daylight, she could discern nothing from within the darkness. By now, Wyatt and Johnny had followed her down the stairs. As Trixie stepped off the landing, an automatic sensor detected her movements, and at once, dozens of bright overhead lights came on. Momentarily distracted, no one noticed the trap door above them closing until they heard the dull thud of the hatch slamming shut. It was their only indication that they may well be trapped.

Their eyes soon adjusted, and they found they were in a large circular room. The bright artificial light revealed the massive windowless concrete walls. The once whitewashed surfaces were now mildewed and lime-stained. The floor, also made of concrete, was cracked and water-stained. It was reminiscent of the original bunker but much more extensive and sturdily built.

The echo of a high-pitched buzzing sound grew louder and more resonant until, at last, something Trixie and Wyatt had never seen before came into view. Wyatt looked on wide-eyed as several autonomous mechanized security drones surrounded them before they barely had a moment to react. These robots were small and round, only several inches in size, but they moved with a determined purpose. One out of the group displayed different markings than the other bots. It was levitating through the air in a circle around the would-be captives. The

tiny hovering drone emitting a stream of laser light scanned every detail of the intruders' bodies. During this time, they dared not move. After making three revolutions, the drone again settled back near the floor by the other drones.

A computerized voice rang out from one of the drone's onboard speakers. "Doctor Walsh, your privileges at this laboratory here have been revoked upon news of your death. This situation is unprecedented."

" Doctor Walsh is for the moment ...incapacitated," responded Johnny.

"Please identify your companions. No unauthorized persons are allowed within these laboratories without permission."

"What is going on here?" asked Trixie, "What are these things?"

Johnny turned to Trixie and said, "Don't be alarmed. Haven't you ever seen a service bot before?"

"I have not seen anything of the kind. Is it alive?"

"No, it's a machine, and I think that's why we're being misunderstood. I'm afraid our little friends here got their wires crossed. Don't worry; this is not going to be a problem. I know how to handle these things. We'll be off in no time."

Johnny turned to speak again to the drones. When he talked, he did so, feigning authority he did not possess. "Who is the duty

supervisor? I demand to talk to someone with authority as soon as possible."

The scanning abruptly restarted and continued for several moments without a word from the tiny drones. This time, they paid close attention to Johnny, scanning the contours of his face. Then suddenly, the ruby laser's light dissipated, and most of the drones scattered. The one drone capable of flight rose to eye level several feet before them. From a speaker within its housing, a voice said, "Please accompany me. You have been authorized."

The drone began hovering away down a corridor, and they followed. As Trixie and Wyatt walked, they noticed how this facility was, in a way, like the other bunkers. However, this place was far more extensive in scale and sophistication. If the first bunker and this facility were contemporary, it could only have served as a satellite facility. Eventually, the drone came to a high-arched door. Beside the door was another control panel like the one outside the facility. The drone again spoke, "Doctor, please present your credentials."

Johnny approached the control panel. The string of numbers appeared in his mind from the ether as if they'd been waiting for him. Buttons clicked as he punched the code into the key mechanism. As he finished that simple task, they heard a dull

metallic clunking noise as the mechanical lock disengaged. The massive door rolled on its track, and a whoosh of stale air rushed out as the seal broke, striking them. For a moment, instinct forced them to step back. As the air cleared, they stared into the open space to see a most unexpected sight.

The entirety of the space was sheltered beneath a massive poly-concrete dome unbroken by supports from floor to roof. In the dim light, the perspective of the enormous structure seemingly stretched on infinitely. It was once delicate and monumental. Wyatt thought that his perception must surely be under the influence of some trick of the light, for he imagined such a design could never stand. His eyes glanced across its glistening surface. He saw hundreds of white limestone stalactites hanging near the dome's apex. In some spots, they formed into cathedral-like pillars of dirty alabaster.

The drone's voice broke Wyatt from his thoughts, beckoning him and the others to follow onward. Further on, as they walked, almost lost in the spectacle sheltered beneath the impossible structure, they came upon an unnerving sight. Row upon row of rectangular-shaped boxes bathed in a dim fluorescent glow filled the voluminous space. They were connected by bundles of high-tech leads and supply lines spaced evenly and for an unknown purpose, like many cogs in a machine. Observing this drove

Trixie's curiosity to break ranks with the others. She moved in close to examine one of the boxes. There was, however, little more she could see beyond its external dimensions. The box was roughly six feet long and two and a half wide. There were no other distinguishing characteristics.

Johnny stopped and called her, "Trixie, what are you doing? Get back here. We need to stay together."

She turned and stepped back in the direction of the others. "Something's off about this place. I don't like it," Trixie responded as she moved to catch up with them.

Wyatt asked, "What did you see?"

"It's the boxes. I have an odd feeling about them. They are oddly human-sized. It's a very particular dimension. There may be people in them; maybe not, but why go to all the trouble if it's not something like that? There are thousands of them. What are we going to do? Shouldn't we try to open one to see what's inside?"

"What are you suggesting that there are people in those boxes?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying."

Wyatt played with the idea for a moment but decided to argue against it. He thought that instead, considering the shape he and the others were all in, they should proceed with care. "I'll tell you what I think we should do." Said Wyatt, "The

first thing we need to do is keep our cool until we find out where we are before we go poking around. Seems to me, Trixie, that you're asking for trouble."

Johnny responded likewise, "Wyatt's right, Trixie. So, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Truth be told, we don't know what we're heading into. However, I have a feeling we'll be learning everything we want to know soon enough."

Johnny did not attempt to comment further on what Trixie was saying. As outrageous as what she was saying sounded on the surface, he knew she was on to something as he looked upon the boxes laid out. He would keep this idea to himself for the moment.

A few moments later, the drone brought them to another sealed compartment. Above the entranceway, read a sign: *Operation Golden Age Command and Control Center*. The drone again asked Doctor Nick to submit his credentials, which Johnny obliged obediently. This door slid open just as it had previously at the other bunker. The air from within held a thick stench of mildew, decay, and wet earth. Contemplating the source of these foul odors caused them each to pause momentarily.

Determined not to let such a thing stop her, Trixie entered the room, and the rest followed. Though the room's dimensions

seemed small compared to the exterior space, it was still a reasonably large room. They could see that the condition of the air had somehow not affected the working order of the banks of computers within. With their indicator lights and monitors flashing, with mechanical parts still clicking away, the system continued calculating and controlling something after all these years.

They meandered about the control room, searching for answers to why the drones had brought them there. Video monitors displayed scrolling images of statistical charts and rows of indecipherable numbers. Besides the light emanating from monitors, the room was dimly lit. After a few moments, their eyes adjusted to the bare conditions. Wyatt called out, "Hello, is anyone here?" Only the sound of his voice echoing back to him responded.

Lifting his eyes toward the ceiling, he made a discovery. Slender tendrils glowing with an inner light reminiscent of the forest moon hung from cracks within the exposed bedrock wall lining the inner chamber. His eyes followed these filaments as they snaked throughout the room connecting the mainframes in an interconnecting web. It all held for him an odd familiarity. "Trixie, come quickly," he called out. "I don't know quite what it is, but I've found something!"

Trixie, who by now had wandered several meters away from the others, heard Wyatt's call but did not respond. She was busy making her discovery. At the end of an aisle of mainframes, a platform sat five more casket-like boxes similar to those Trixie saw earlier. From where she was standing, she could see that their coverings did not appear intact, unlike the others. Also, the linkages and wires on each were either damaged or broken. Trixie stepped slowly upon the platform until she was able to see within. Trixie had prepared herself, so she was not shocked by what she saw there. Looking within, she found the mummified remains of four long-dead human individuals resting upon the tattered cushions of their suspended animation chambers. Embossed upon the side of each of the hibernation chambers were the names of those who lay within. Trixie presumed that these may have been the individuals who had started the project. She read the names of these unknown people off silently to herself. Examining what lies within Trixie, discovered that those remains were little more than desiccated skin over skeletons. The names meant nothing to her until she came to the last one. This chamber was empty, and the name on the placard read Doctor Nicholas Walsh.

Johnny came quickly to see what Wyatt was calling. Looking up, he too was surprised to see how the physical body of

the Prototaxities had augmented its mycelium nervous system through a web of relays bonding itself to this technology. In this symbiotic form, it had become both a living network and a biological power source. As they stood marveling at a true wonder of both technology and evolution, they began to sense a subsonic rumble that started to modulate up and down the sonic spectrum. Until the modulation equaled out, they tried desperately to cover their ears.

Suddenly, as the tones leveled out, they began to hear something no one had heard before. Through a computer interface, the Mycelium, using a language algorithm and a voice synthesizer, mimicked the subtle tones of spoken language. The sound of Prototaxities approximated human voice reverberated in a resoundingly low tone. "All indications point to the unlikely fact that Doctor Walsh is alive. Though I have trouble accepting this, his presence here all but confirms it. Tell me, though, if it is him, why has he brought Wyatt and Trixie here?"

Johnny could not answer these questions and so chose to ignore them. Instead, he decided to redirect the conversation to the problem at hand. "Great Benefactor, it is your grateful servant Johnny speaking. Doctor Walsh has sustained serious injuries and cannot speak. We require your help for him as well for the subjects."

"Very well, place his body into the stasis chamber so I may evaluate him."

Johnny and Wyatt lifted Nick into the hibernation chamber explicitly marked with his name. With Nick's body safely lowered within the chamber, the volume began filling with clear, viscous fluid from pipes hidden beneath the floor. The translucent fluid shined with the pale color of blue moonlight. With the entirety of his body enveloped in the liquid, it tinged pink from his bloodied wounds.

Within this cellular solution, microscopic mycelium cells were binding his wounds. Nick's body began to glow as the chemical engines of regeneration engaged the damage inflicted on his organ systems and individual cells. The mycelium searched deep into the broken body. Even neurons within his head were coding back into their original condition. The others could only stand watching from below in wrapped amazement as this miracle transpired. After several minutes within the regenerative brine, Nick's eyes reopened.

Doctor Nick sat up, fully healed in body and mind. Expelling the liquid from his lungs, he gasped for air. Looking up at the tendrils suspended from cracks in the bedrock, Nick immediately realized where he was. Nick opened his mouth as if to speak.

However, before Nick could speak, the booming voice of the Prototaxities interrupted: "Yes, Doctor Walsh, for the most part, I've done as you asked. I've managed to keep the systems running. The embryos are still replicating and are free of infection. The final iteration of the hybrid cell line was successful. The system is still operational; despite the failures, our work continues."

For Trixie, listening to what the computerized voice said, the pieces all started to fall into place in her mind. Looking up into the tangle of mycelium fibers tapping the computer and power systems, she was sure she was looking at a being of sorts and not a mere object, and she spoke to it as such. "What do I call you? Do you have a name?"

"I am... we are Prototaxities. We did not understand the idea of duality in consciousness until relatively recently. This profound notion was your species' gift to us. Long ago, your science had given us this name. Our evolution, however, has taken us far beyond that original description."

"Since we're talking, what is this place? Is this where Wyatt and I came from?" asked Trixie.

"Before you came here, I would have believed the answer was potentially detrimental to your psyche. However, this

current situation is highly unusual. None of our subjects has ever returned."

"Well, I'm here now. And if you don't tell us, Wyatt and I will start destroying your precious little experiment. Isn't that right, Wyatt?"

Wyatt did not respond, for his thoughts weighed heavily on him.

Instead, the interface responded, "I don't think that would be advisable. Besides, look around you surely after our conversation earlier, I thought you would have guessed by now. You are not the first of your names. Both Wyatt and you are clones of the long-dead originals. Their consciousness lives on in the collective. Though you possess their memories, you are a unique and new individual."

"That was you? I thought I had imagined that part."

"I'll let you know that in all the years I've been doing this, I've never intervened. Considering the current state of things, my timing on this was crucial. However, you must know that they can't physically hurt you; they can trick you into hurting yourself. I am glad I was there to help you. I won't always be so close at hand. You were lucky."

"Thank you, I guess."

"What about this Doctor Nick here? He's been dead for what, hundreds of years. Then you send him out to fetch us?"

"That is not how this scenario has unfolded. There are other powers at work here. By the looks of you covered in blood as you are, surely you're aware of their presence and that the agenda held by Abraham and his mob is oppositional to your own and your wellbeing?"

It had not been as clear as the Prototaxities had stated. In Wyatt and Trixie's minds, they were still conflicted about whether they owned their thoughts. So, being dictated to about possessing an agenda did not sit well with either of them.

Wyatt piped up, "Whose agenda are we talking about, yours or ours?"

"I would imagine that as far as Abraham is concerned, our agendas must, for your sake, be the same. That is nothing short of your species' survival."

Trixie said, "Alright if we're on the same team, we must be equal partners. It's time to level with us.

"What happened to all the people? Doctor Nick said that resistance was engineered into the survivors, and we may be their children. Did Abraham kill all of the rest? What purpose would he have in doing so?"

The voice of the Prototaxities said, "Doctor Walsh, you may be better suited to answer these questions now."

Trixie looked at Doctor Nick. He looked somehow refreshed and more fit than she had remembered him. The regeneration process had de-aged him significantly. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties. This change in appearance caught Trixie momentarily off guard as he began to speak.

"Let me show you both something.," He said as he walked toward the large open room with thousands of rectangular boxes.

They followed closely behind him until Nick found a specific set of boxes. Nick ran his hand over an invisible control panel, which activated a set of controls, and their slate-like surfaces slid open. Not knowing what to expect, Wyatt and Trixie stood back a few feet as they peered at the contents within. Illuminated by an automated lighting system below, they saw bodies bathed in the suspension gases' hazy glow. At first, the features on these bodies were difficult to make out. After a moment, when the cloudiness dissipated. Trixie and Wyatt, in disbelief, saw the bodies of their twins in repose.

A long silence passed before Trixie read aloud her name on the placard within the box. "Trixie." Wyatt dared not to do the same. At that moment, all of her competing ideas coalesced into one stark, cold reality. She was but one in a line of clones who possessed her name. Her eyes welled with tears as she tried to reconcile emotions.

Slowly, the naked pair rose to their feet as if by some preprogrammed command. They stood there with eyes open in some expressionless twilight state. Doctor Nick again stroked the command sequence, and the two, being no more than clockwork automations, lowered themselves back into their boxes, unconscious to their surroundings. The chambers again filled with gases, and the lids slid back into place.

Wyatt was reluctant at first to look at the bodies within the chambers. It was something Wyatt knew he must do. Turning toward the pair of figures, he fixed his vision upon them. Wyatt stared a while until that of his likeness lowered itself into its chamber. While watching a copy of himself, Wyatt's worst fears regarding his origin were again confirmed. The revelation of which, to his surprise, had not come as quite the shock as he imagined. To the readymade perspective gained over his short life, this was now the only scenario that made sense.

"Knowing the truth and seeing it are often very different things," said Doctor Nick. "You and Wyatt are the survival of the human race. This place, this entire operation, was created so you and your kind could one day claim a foothold in this world. It has been my life's work. To answer your other question, I would have to assume they came to kill me for betraying them."

"Is all of this the reason why they were trying to kill us as well," said Wyatt.

"That's true, but they rightly assumed your minds were made up to leave this place. That being the case, your fates may already be sealed."

Trixie wiped her bloodied sleeve across her eyes and asked, "What are you suggesting, Doctor, that we stay here in this little menagerie you've created? After what we've just learned, I don't know if that's possible."

"I am no longer human as both of you are. I do not enjoy the freedom as you do. In the forest, I am susceptible to the whims of those powerful enough to manipulate the living mass of the mycelium I am part of. It is a strange parallel existence in which I live. On the face of things, I am human. I am nothing of the kind on a most basic cellular level.

"On the other hand, you and Wyatt are immune to this manipulation. This, by itself, threatens them. I can't in good conscience lead you any further toward the forest's edge. Presumably, you, like your predecessors, would surely perish there. Besides, I am needed here, and it would have been just a matter of time before I return to the dust from which I came."

Wyatt's thoughts spun through his mind, attempting to comprehend the meaning of all he had learned. The picture of what constituted his entire world turned on its head in such a short period. He tried to understand how these things could seem genuine and wholly fabricated. Wyatt wondered the purpose of his time spent within the forest. Was a lesson hidden somewhere, or was he destined to be a victim? He felt compelled to ask why. "Remind me again, Nick, what was the reason for all this, and why does Abraham have it in for us?"

"We wanted you each to have your own lives. That takes time, which Abraham refuses to afford. It does not care about you in particular. He's afraid of you, and he wants you all dead, the whole lot of you."

The deep voice of the speaker posited an answer. "Abraham and his followers blame the current state of the world on the human race as a whole. They also believe that your species has evolved into their form and that your form is an extinct retrograde species. So, as such, the resurrection of your species is counter to the natural order."

Trixie asked, "What is the Prototaxities' take on this?"

"Survival of the fittest is the natural order. Look at what your kind has done, time and time again, to maintain a toehold on existence, and you're still here."

"Yes, but it's you that is keeping it running."

"What you say is true. However, that is not the entire story. A resiliency is evident in your words and spirit, akin to all life's struggles on earth. From the very instant our consciousness first intertwined, we were aware of your destructive nature and capacities for good. However, your evolved cousins would commit genocide over an atrophied idea of purity. But long ago, they stopped receiving visions of the future and creating words. They are an extinct species. They've just forgotten to lie down and die. So, do you see? If we were to let you die, the world would go silent. Eventually, the words would fade from our memories. This circumstance would not be a victory for life on Earth. There is no evidence that your creation has evolved anywhere else. It was the will and courage of the final survivors that outlived them. They placed their hope in me. I am in awe of the confidence those who came before you put in me. This promise I do not take lightly. Out there, thousands of your sleeping brothers and sisters await their resurrection. Two by two, you are awakened to start the world again. However, after all, there is only so much I can do. It is your lot to claim your place in the world. There, I can't interfere."

Wyatt asked, "What happens to the others then? Those people you have sent out before us, where are they?"

"This question I cannot answer. I am not a god. The future is unknowable. I am a life form like you, so my interactions on your behalf are limited. Until now, we have not spoken to you directly. We've only introduced the tools to exploit the bounty and mystery inherent in nature. Perhaps the time for revelations was premature. I'm afraid the time for that discussion has also passed. So, from this moment on, your actions are your own. These choices are now yours to make."

Wyatt could feel the anger building up inside him. Though he tried to temper it, his voice was shaky as he responded. "It seems to me that, in essence, what you have created here is nothing more than a museum of death. In preserving it, you're keeping us here asleep and in a dream world until it's time to send us out to slaughter."

Trixie interrupted, "Wyatt, aren't you forgetting something? All those people who went before us indeed had a choice, as we do now."

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Prototaxities tore down the painstakingly produced constructs that clouded their vision. Once they lifted the shroud, nothing was seemingly left to bind them to this place.

So, having tended to their wounds, they restocked their packs and prepared their goodbyes.

Doctor Nick's eyes welled with emotion as he watched the two fully laden travelers enter the chamber. He had grown fond of Wyatt and Trixie over these several days, perhaps closer than people he could recall. Now they were leaving. He held himself together as he spoke to them. "I want to thank you for everything you've done for me. Part of me wants to go with you. Obviously, that can't happen. I must stay here to help with your brothers and sisters. Godspeed to you. I hope you find whatever you need to find out there."

Trixie smiled and said, "Thank you, Doctor Nick. Don't worry about us. We'll see you on the other side." She reached out and shook hands with him. Wyatt did the same. He leaned in and said, "Take care of yourself, Doctor."

"You too, Wyatt."

Trixie turned and looked at the monstrosity of mycelium strands hanging throughout the room, not knowing how to address such a creature. She turned and walked away.

Chapter 12

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Trixie and Wyatt found themselves within the closed room marked elevator. A bell rang, and with a thud, they felt the strange sensation of freefall. Holding tightly onto each other, they watched red digital numbers blinking faster than their eyes could register. The downward motion slowed and jerked to a sudden stop.

The door opened, and hot air streamed inside. The halls of this lowest level were illuminated with bare emergency lighting. It took a moment, but as their eyes soon adjusted, they recognized Johnny was standing in the shadows waiting.

"Johnny, is that you?" a startled Trixie asked.

"Yes, I've come to see you both off. I've brought you some provisions. The first in importance is water." Johnny gestured toward the floor before them, and there stood a row of filled canteens. "Depending on how far you go, these will likely need refilling before you're through. Take as much as you can carry."

"Thank you, Johnny," said Trixie as she and Wyatt bent to pick up the canteens and load them into their packs. "Now tell us, how do we get out of here?"

"Come with me. I'll show you."

Not knowing what to expect, Trixie and Wyatt followed Johnny up the concrete steps onto the platform. They were surprised to find an old rail car sitting idle in the semi-darkness. Passing the threshold of the tunnel entrance, auxiliary lights came on, and they heard the whir of an electric motor automatically engaging. Johnny stepped forward, opened the door to the car, and stepped inside. Trixie and Wyatt looked at him through the glass from outside, still trying to figure out what was happening.

Recognizing the look of confusion on their faces, Johnny peeked his head out the door and asked, "Are you guys coming? Isn't this what you wanted, a way out? Well, what are you waiting for?"

Wyatt and Trixie stepped inside, and the door closed behind them. They looked around at the rows of seats and were perplexed as to why so many would be needed. Trixie found herself a chair, but Wyatt continued standing. The engine engaged the wheels, and the train's momentum sent Wyatt falling for the aisle.

"Who is driving this thing?" asked Wyatt.

"I am," responded Johnny as he sat, his eyes closed, apparently idyll. "Everything is under my control. So have a seat and relax. It may be a bumpy ride."

Wyatt picked himself up and found a seat next to Trixie. Muttering under his breath, he said, "I don't like this one bit."

Though the way forward was invisible, they felt the train moving slowly but steadily up an incline. Eventually, the speed increased, and the motion on the old tracks made the car shudder. Trixie wondered if the whole thing wouldn't just fall to pieces before they reached the end. Enduring this quietly, they waited for a telltale sign. After a while, Trixie felt their motion flatten out as the way forward evened. Looking ahead through the grime-caked glass, she spotted a pinprick of light.

She called out to Wyatt, "Wyatt, look; the way out, I see it!"

Wyatt stood up and pressed himself up against the glass. At this range, it was only light but growing in the distance. "What is it? What do you see?"

"That's the sunlight shining through the tunnel entrance," responded Johnny.

The echo of mechanical sound filled Wyatt's ears as he watched as the pinprick light grew into a circle, filling the window before him. Shafts of orange glow filtered through the tunnel and cut deep into the shadows of the train car. Johnny

brought the train to a stop just shy of where the sun's bright rays touched.

Johnny stood up from his seat and said, "We have arrived."

The doors slid open, and Trixie, Wyatt, and all their gear followed Johnny out toward the exit. They all stood looking out, though Wyatt and Trixie were anxious to look beyond the portal. Johnny asked them to hold on a moment.

"Before you go to where the light begins, the tracks come to an end. It is the final stop on this ride for a reason. Remember this: the garden's dangers were mostly benign compared to what you will discover beyond. The landscape here is literally designed to kill you. However, you evolved to survive in such environments. Others of your kind have made this journey. You may find them out there. I wish you luck."

Wyatt and Trixie stepped out of the portal and into the light of the hot sun. They turned and waved at Johnny, leaving the last vestige of the only home they had ever known.

Johnny watched them from the opening as Wyatt and Trixie stepped out from the tunnel's protection into the scrub savannah with only what they carried on their backs. It was a stark and wild place. The land, but for some distant points on the far horizon, was primarily flat. The copper-toned ground was barren and desiccated, with few plants struggling to survive in the

unrelenting daylight. As far as they could see, waves of heat distorted the lens of the sky, making the distant hills dance.

Trixie and Wyatt walked several dozen paces in the heat before Wyatt turned again to look back in the direction of the tunnel entrance, hewn from a natural hill. Johnny had once again disappeared. In the distance beyond the tunnel entrance, Wyatt could see a pillar of black smoke rising on the horizon.

Wyatt was amazed. "Look, Trixie, I don't suppose I've ever seen anything at such a distance."

Trixie turned to see the billowing black smoke rising into the air. "Do you suppose that's the forest burning?"

"I can't imagine what else it could be."

"Well, where do we go from here?"

Wyatt recognized that the landscape's monotony gave little indication of which direction they should move from where they stood. "We got to find signs of life." Wyatt turned his head around, scanning the horizon until he found something. He pointed toward the opposite horizon, where a mirage of distant hills came into view. "Look, if we could make our way to those far hills, we might get a decent view of our surroundings."

Trixie squinted her eyes toward the direction Wyatt pointed. She perceived a pair of hills standing against the

background, right on the edge of her ability to see. Recognizing this was all they had now, she said, "Alright, let's get a move on, then."

It was roughly noon as Trixie and Wyatt started out. As they roamed, Trixie periodically checked the path behind her. She watched the pillar of smoke from the burning forest as it first receded in the distance before disappearing entirely over the edge of the horizon. As they advanced farther into this new landscape, the heat grew more oppressive and the ground more desiccated, seemingly with each advancing step they took. Unfamiliar with these conditions, they tried instead to focus on their target.

The hills grew clearer in view as vibrant flourishes of red and yellow ochre were now clearly visible. These unfamiliar tones reflect throughout the open savanna landscape around them. There was something else that almost went unnoticed. This world held a history, unlike the one from which they had come. In every direction, a patina of death in the form of shattered remnants of concrete steel, melted glass, and bones of all sorts marked the land. Here and there, the sun-bleached skeletal remains lay in shards, exposed from below the rind of soot-tinted dirt beneath their feet. The remnants of this land's

last human inhabitants filled the landscape, forming a chalk-white boundary. As Trixie and Wyatt walked, observing the half-covered boneyard, a stark feeling of foreboding came over them. They could not fully comprehend what event these remains stood as a mute witness. Whatever it was, it belonged to some other time and place.

In this sun-ravaged soil, a distinct species of grass made a foothold. As far as the eye could see, uncountable golden-brown leaves of grass pushed their ochre-tipped lobes up through the disintegrated structures of concrete and steel. Trixie recalled from conversations in the control room how the landscape would confound them. And so, as they roamed, each direction they looked reminded them how easily they could be lost but also how dangerous it was.

With their eye still squarely on the horizon, the midday sun was taking its toll. Trixie recognized Wyatt's face was red from the heat of the sun. So, she said, "You know Wyatt, I imagine you're going to need to rest soon. We'll find you a bit of shade for a while. What do you say?"

"Sure, Trixie, I could go for a break." Wyatt was hot, and his thirst was building. To this, he couldn't deny, though he knew she could have just as easily said the same about herself.

But what fun would that be? I wonder how she keeps a straight face through all that, or does she really believe it?

Trixie turned to him and said, "I thought you might be. Maybe we should try our luck in the shade of one of the Prototaxities towers?"

She stopped to look around. Spires stood, the sun-bleached skeletons of long-dead Prototaxities distributed evenly among the endless grass fields. They towered there, casting long shadows on the monoculture plain. Identifying one not too distant, Wyatt and Trixie determined they should rest within its shadow. Having made the short trek, they laid down their packs and began to consider their situation.

Trixie, observing the land about them, recognized something odd. Taking her knife, she sliced a handful of the only grass species into a bunch. Looking at the seed heads, Trixie couldn't help but feel that, somehow, she was being watched by thousands of tiny eyes. She took several of the individual blades and held them up to the sun's light. She recognized a translucent sheen on the surface of the leaves that dispersed the pattern of light cast upon them. So small as to be rendered translucent, minute reflective crystals embedded into the leaves' blonde surface layers scattered light as the stalks rustled in the breeze.

"I hope we're not being drawn into more illusions," Trixie said as she cast the stalks to the ground.

Wyatt observed the reddening skin on his arms and replied, "Oh, this is real enough for me."

"Then how much further do you suppose we have to go, Wyatt? I'm already exhausted."

"That's the Sun causing your exhaustion. We're not used to this kind of exposure. Maybe we ought to rest here a while. I'll try to take some measurements and see if I can't come up with a rudimentary map."

Trixie undid her pack, settled down into a narrow strip of shade, and drank her first sips of water. Wyatt used the shadow angle to determine the time of day from which he could make assumptions about their course. He, too, drank, and they both rested. Before too long, the Sun's angle shifted, and the refuge they had sought disappeared, leaving them once again exposed. They loaded up their packs and were on the move.

It was late afternoon when Trixie and Wyatt reached the foot of the hills. They were far larger up close than they had initially appeared. The exposed sandstone surface seemed to radiate with heat as they navigated its jagged slope. However,

the breeze blew at the top, and the rise in elevation cooled the air just enough to make it comfortable. Looking at a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view, the world from the round top of the hill was unlike anything they had ever seen. There were more hills, canyons, far-off mountains, and the Sun's reflection on what appeared to be bodies of water in the distance. But in the expanses in between these places, there was nothing. And no guarantees of anything beyond that. "So, Wyatt, we've made it this far. What happens now? Do we wait for a sign?"

"What kind of sign are you looking for, an arrow painted in the desert? I'm afraid we're on our own, Trixie.

"No, that's not what I mean. You really are new to all this communication thing, aren't you? I wonder if your original self was this dense. Since I must explain everything to you, I meant that things used to have a way of working themselves out. A readymade answer would reveal itself to us. Perhaps we are victims of just how good we had it."

"Why don't you just say that then?"

Reacting to Wyatt's tone, Trixie said sarcastically, "I'll know it when I see it."

"See what, Trixie?"

"Why the sign, of course, it's painted on the desert. Call it an omen if you like."

"This conversation is infuriating. When you have something constructive to say, you let me know." Wyatt threw his pack on the ground and gathered anything that would burn.

As they labored, this anger seemed to roil within Wyatt. He recognized, however, that this emotion seemingly had not affected Trixie in the same way as him. Shortly, this wave of emotion faded and was replaced by the more subtle tones of remorse and confusion. He looked at Trixie carrying a bundle of ossified wood and knew he had to break the silence. "Trixie, I'm sorry about everything I said earlier. Would you forgive me? I don't think we can make it out here alone."

"Wyatt, I forgive you. I know I feel the same way about being alone. But I'll have you remember I'll speak as I want to speak. If we're to be partners, I won't be bullied by you about how I speak or anything else.

They sat on the edge and looked on as the sun crept closer to the horizon, watching the color and contrast change the distant landscape's appearance. Wyatt and Trixie observed this transformation complete itself until the entirety of the horizon was draped in darkness. They then built a fire from the gathered

fuel, ancient twigs, and long seasoned lumber that seemed to be all around them half-buried. Huddled closely, Wyatt and Trixie watched the embers dance about among the points of light in the sky. It seemed like the billions of stars reached down to the ground to touch them.

As the night dragged on, Trixie lay beside the fire. Her mind wandered again to the horizon where the teeth of the distant hills swallowed up the Milky Way stream. With this in mind, she remembered the drawing Wyatt made of the river of stars flowing across the sky. This memory made Trixie sit up with a start. Her eyes followed the flowing body of stars until it rested on the horizon.

Trixie thought she was hallucinating for a moment when her eye registered a fiery twinkle trapped between the notches of two far-distant hills. She kept her eye on this spot of light on the horizon as this remote signal repeated itself. Its intensity grew.

"Wyatt, wake up," Trixie called out. Look, a fire! Someone's out there!"

Wyatt sat up, rubbing his eyes, trying to make sense of what she was saying. Trixie grabbed Wyatt by the arm and pointed in the direction of fire. "Look over there!"

Wyatt squinted until he, too, saw it. His eyes lit up as he recognized it for what it was. "Someone else is out here! We've got to get out there!"

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Trixie and Wyatt walked for several days following the path they had set out on since that night on the hill. Despite all they had been told about their chances, the vision in the night sky had hardened their resolve. Even before then, neither of them had truly entertained the idea of being the last of their kind. They had always sensed someone was out there. Just what that was, remained to be seen.

As Wyatt and Trixie advanced farther into this new land, their arduous trek began taking a toll on them. The heat grew more oppressive, and the ground more desiccated with the savannah at their backs, seemingly with each step they took. To further aggravate the situation, food and water rations were running dangerously low. Though the pair of mountains grew closer, with things as they were, there still seemed to be a great distance left to travel.

At some point, the route that Wyatt and Trixie chose took them through ever-narrowing valleys, and their elevation began to drop. The

scrubland that offered limited shelter gave way to a barren desert. Finding cover became increasingly difficult. They eventually came upon a depression in the desiccated land where the rivers' confluence met once long ago. Rising in the distance, they were confronted with ruddy clouds of wind-born dust kicked up by the hooves of yet unseen beasts. It did not take long to find their way abruptly blocked by a sheer drop-off several meters deep and miles wide. Before them lay a meandering channel that cut the land in two.

Trixie and Wyatt found themselves on the fringes of the physical barrier between themselves and their destination. Massed herds of animals gathered in their hundreds, searching hopelessly for water in the lowlands that lay beyond. Neither of them had seen that much life in one place. The sight, smell, and sound of this moving wave of flesh struck a chord of latent fear within them. Trixie felt moved and spoke of it, "What are they? I have only heard of such things but never believed them to be true. Surely these are another illusion?"

"Trixie, I don't think we can make any assumptions about anything we find out here. They may be in this old riverbed hunting for water just as we soon will be."

"You're right. If we're to survive, we will have to do this soon. We've come too far to go back at this point."

Pondering their situation, Wyatt recalled navigating the landscape was challenging. But to also contend with terrifying herds of beasts created a whole other level of distraction for them. Before

leaving the tunnel's safety, Johnny had warned them that the landscape was hardwired to kill them. They discovered this fact to be accurate with increasing frequency, and it was never more evident than when Trixie and Wyatt looked out across the dry riverbeds.

Before them, they could see the high desert plateau beyond. To get there, Wyatt and Trixie would have to venture within the confines of the gorge. Together, they studied the new set of maps Wyatt had created, comparing and adjusting the details for their way forward.

Wyatt and Trixie determined that the crossing would require weapons that are more appropriate for this new environment. They went searching out for two sturdy lengths of dense wood. Kicking around in the rubble, Trixie and Wyatt searched for anything they might use. Eventually, they found two stout branches sturdy enough to fashion a weapon.

Laying their packs down on the edge of the dried riverbed, Wyatt and Trixie sat down to observe the sloping land and prepare. Wyatt lit his pipe, closed his eyes, and momentarily imagined the cool of the forest. Trixie's hands shook as the thoughts of the coming danger filled her mind with images. The creatures she had faced in battle left more of an imprint upon her than she cared to think. She reached into her pack to find the bottle of whiskey, which was all but gone. One small swig was left. Lifting the bottle, Trixie swallowed the last of its contents. She, too, for a moment, had forgotten where she was. As Wyatt and Trixie looked out, there was clarity as to how desperate their situation was.

Trixie and Wyatt soon got to work. With extra cordage from their bags, they took their time fashioning their new weapons by affixing their blades to the ancient wood they had recovered. Wyatt lit a small fire to melt a small amount of tree resin he had stowed in his pack. Together, they spun and glued the jute tightly in place with the resin.

Once they had finished admiring their work, Trixie rose to her feet and kicked out the fire, throwing the empty bottle in the ashes. Then she said, "We have all we need now. We should set out and find shelter before dark."

Wyatt grasped the weapon in his hand. Just holding it helped to soothe the anxieties he was feeling. He used it to push himself up off the ground. Dusting himself off with his free hand, he said, "I suppose you're right. Come on, no time like the present."

The downward edge of the pass was tricky. But Wyatt and Trixie made short work of it using their spears' blunt ends to counter the grade.

Not long after carefully navigating the edge of the pass, they observed a stampede of buffalo. The mass of hooved flesh moved as if of one mind or spirit. The bestial smell of fear permeated the air. Deep in Trixie's memory in a picture book, she remembered the lion—an extinct mythical beast of nightmares had entered her reality.

"Wyatt, how could this be? Surely, these animals are all extinct."

Wyatt gripped his spear with both hands as a scene of carnage unfolded before him. "So, are we, remember?"

As the last of the buffalo passed, their position was exposed. Now, Trixie and Wyatt had a clear view of the ambush.

There was a great expression of gore as they witnessed a pride of lions dispatching the great beast. The lions could see them, and though they were wary of their presence, it appeared as though they chose to ignore them as long as they stayed clear. Trixie and Wyatt watched in fascination as this struggle unfolded over half an hour. With their food supplies virtually exhausted, hunger was becoming their new companion. Watching this spectacle was driven as much by desire as by curiosity. Trixie looked at Wyatt and said, "I don't know Wyatt, but this could be an opportunity for us."

"How so?"

"We could take some of that meat. Not all, of course, just a bit."

"You're suggesting we walk in there and just take a share. Is that what you're saying?"

"No, not exactly, but yes, we walk in carefully and take a share. We just have to sit back and wait for our opportunity."

The Sun descended over the horizon, and the sky turned orange. The scent of blood kicked up into the air and wafted on the breeze for miles. The local pack of hyenas eventually caught the smell of what

was happening. The alpha female, not easily intimidated, gathered her clan together to make a play for the kill. Following only the scent of blood hanging in the air, her family moved through the darkness toward the kill site. They easily outnumbered the pride, four to one.

From the safety and cover of night, Trixie and Wyatt observed the unfolding drama with great interest. A sudden tension was evident in the feasting lions as dozens of sets of glowing eyes and flashing teeth appeared from the darkness. Base roars and high-pitched whines flew into the air with the dust as the mayhem was unleashed in primeval blood sport.

Darkness had fallen. Trixie and Wyatt, cloaked in the naked blackness of a moonless night, waited for their chance. When the time came, lit only by the deep band of milky stars that arched across the sky, they would set off to take what was theirs. The hyena provided the necessary distraction. Once the lion and hyena engaged each other, they would make their move. If they timed it right, they would fill their stomachs and live to talk about it.

Using materials scrounged from their backpacks, Trixie and Wyatt had prepared rudimentary torches. Wyatt had his lighter ready and needed only to await the right moment to make their move. With the beasts distracted by each other, they crept as close as they dared. As they crouched in the grass and rocks, they found they were not the only ones who shared this idea. Vultures, foxes, and badgers darted back and forth from the shadow to take their own small portion.

The battle between lions and hyenas raged back and forth for over an hour. Each drew blood on the other. During the fray, each claimed the prize of the carcass several times. Casualties and signs of exhaustion were becoming evident on both sides. Observing the action, Trixie and Wyatt only need a moment to rush in, seize their share of the carcass, and retreat. To do so, they would only have to move and face down death itself.

At last, the battle between the beasts came to a critical pause. Then, for the barest moment, the beleaguered lioness left the buffalo unguarded. The moment had come for Wyatt and Trixie, and they rose from their hiding places, lighting their torches. Time to wonder if this was the right thing to do had already passed. Their hearts pounded, surging with adrenaline as they quickly crossed the distance. Their torches cut a terrifying swath of light through the darkness reflected in the eyes of the startled beasts. Some ancient, ingrained fear paralyzed them.

The beasts were mesmerized as Trixie stood waving both torches wildly above her head. How long this state would last, they could not know. For his part, Wyatt furiously cut with his blade through muscle, cartilage, and ligament to remove a single foreleg from the shoulder socket. Covered in blood and lit by firelight, he draped the leg over his shoulder, and the two of them disappeared like phantoms into the night. Having little understanding of what had happened, the animals soon returned to their primordial feud as if this dangerous stunt had never happened.

In a frenzy of their own, time stood almost at a stop for Trixie and Wyatt. They scrambled up the far side of the crumbling gorge and into the tawny waist-high grass that grew there. As they moved, unknown to them, a rogue lioness, drawn to the scent of blood, was cutting a path parallel to theirs. She was in pursuit.

Trixie and Wyatt had not stopped running. Scanning the darkness, a cluster of long-dead trees appeared against the far hill in the silhouette of the river of stars. Wyatt pointed his burning torch toward the landmark. Seemingly of one mind, they continued without losing a step. Reaching the low cluster of trees, Trixie and Wyatt planted their torches in the ground taking only a moment to catch their breath and reconnoiter. Laying down their packs, they began gathering and stacking branches and sticker bushes from about the ground to serve as a shelter base.

Trixie removed from her pack a hand ax and, in the dim torchlight, began busily chopping large sections of a thorn bush. In the darkness, Trixie stung herself, drawing blood on the sharp needles. As Trixie pierced her skin, she heard the painful screech of a man over her plaintive cry, followed by a terrible, deep, base, inhuman growl. It was an instant realization as she recognized the desperate cry for help was coming from Wyatt.

Trixie rose to her feet with her spear, swallowing her fear. Holding her weapon ready, she followed the horrible sounds and leaped headlong into the darkness. As her eyes adjusted in the bare firelight for the briefest moments, Trixie saw a flash of yellow fur

cross briefly before her eyes. Adrenaline surging: at that moment, Trixie lost all sense of fear. Crouching low with all her strength, she thrust her spear forward broadside into the lion's unguarded flank. Her long blade pierced deeply with a lethal blow up to the blade hilt into the lion's rib cage. Trixie saw the animal turn; its menacing eyes and fearsome blood-drenched incisors gleamed in the dim firelight as it released Wyatt from its clutches. The lion reared up and leaped off into the coal-black darkness.

Unpossessed by fear, Trixie picked up her torch and followed the beast. She lowered her torch toward the ground to see the path of blood before her. Trixie ambled along the trail of gore left behind by the retreating beast until she heard the distinctive rumbling noise of an animal in distress. Seeing the silhouettes of other beasts, Trixie stopped her advance. Whatever motivation had drawn her beyond the makeshift fence had now escaped her. The mocking sounds of hoots and strange bark-like calls filled the air. She realized it was unlikely this lion would be back any time soon. It was time to get back to Wyatt.

As Wyatt lay there injured, it was impossible to see the extent of his wounds in the darkness. Trixie pleaded with him to get up for fear of attacks from other predators. He had deep, penetrating defensive wounds on his arms and legs. He was bleeding.

"I'd better get you somewhere you can lay down." She spied a high location with good visibility. He was able to walk the short journey. Trixie helped him to sit up against an ossified remnant of a tree. She

then proceeded to build a protective circle of thorn bushes around them.

Trixie finished the barricade, built a fire, and began tending to Wyatt's wounds. She hung the stolen leg high in the tree so they could have something to eat later. In the meantime, they would need to survive the night. Throughout the night, alternating bands of lions and hyenas tried the circle of thorns for weakness. All night, with her spear stabbed out through the boma walls, Trixie defended the ring with her life.

By morning, the sun had risen. Trixie woke with a start from exhaustion well after the last of her tormentors had retreated. Still clutching her spear tightly, she used it to push herself off the ground. Wyatt sat against the tree, semi-conscious, half in shock and burning with fever from his wounds. Drifting in and out, he imagined hearing a jangling metallic sound rising from the distance. Focusing upon the sound, though the image was hazy, Wyatt saw a vision of Johnny Phlogiston coming through over the edge of the horizon. Unlike before, his armor was not rusted and pitted but shining and new. In his hand, he carried a small case. He stared at the image of the approaching figure. Like in a dream state, Wyatt blinked the sand from his eyes, and Johnny was gone. He closed his eyes for another long moment to be distracted again by sound. Wyatt opened his eyes once more to find Trixie tending his wounds.

Kneeling beside Wyatt, Trixie observed the now festering wounds. Opening the small case Johnny had provided them revealed a collection

of cloth bandages and glass vials containing ointments and other medicines. Without a word spoken, Trixie cleaned the lacerations. Following the instructions, she selected the indicated mixtures and applied healing treatments directly onto Wyatt's wounds.

Once Trixie was done, She sat beside him, wrapping them together under a blanket, and they both fell back asleep. Sometime later, as they were both fully awake, Wyatt was well on his way to healing. Unfamiliar with the powers of medicine, each rationalized that their assessment of Wyatt's condition seemed far worse in the darkness than it had actually been. They were determined to rest for the day and finally ate some leg meat, for which they risked their lives. Having time to kill while they recuperated, Wyatt made a stout club from the buffalo leg bone. After carefully studying their revised maps the following morning, they repacked their gear and were on the move again.

...

As the fire raged outside, alarms designed to warn of catastrophic failure sounded throughout the morning. Doctor Nick asked the Prototaxities to silence them. "I ask you, what is the point of us listening to the wailing of those alarms? I am fully aware of the situation. Would you please silence those alarms?"

The voice synthesizer rumbled back to him, "If that's your wish." The sounds fell silent. The synthesized voice of the Prototaxities spoke again. "This silence does not resolve our problem.

What are we going to do with these thousands of individuals? We cannot leave them here to perish, not after everything we've done. The facility works in symbiosis with this environment. If the life within the forest fails, the system as a whole will fail as well."

"I'm not suggesting we abandon them. On the contrary, I have a plan. We're going to wake the sleepers up, and we're going follow Wyatt and Trixie's lead and hope they've found something out there."

"Don't you think this plan of yours perhaps lacks in forethought? Additionally, your time with Trixie and Wyatt may have warped your good sense. We have no way of knowing how well our candidates survived beyond the circle's protection. The chances that any of them survived is near impossible."

"If that's the case, why have you, for so long, allowed this exodus to continue?"

"As I've said repeatedly, I'm not god. I do not have the right to interfere in these people's decisions. Not one candidate has ever chosen to stay in this world we have created. Despite our warnings of almost certain death, they leave. This must say something about their mentality."

"If you have felt this way, why do you persist generation after generation?"

"It's simple, really. Time has a way of improving odds. I figured the longer I continued with your experiment, the greater the chances for successful results. It is wholly possible that a colony

of human survivors may live beyond the circle's edge somewhere in the desert. However, the possibility of this remains too low for my liking."

"Unfortunately, I don't see any other choice. If you have any other suggestions, I'd be glad to hear them. One fact is forcing us to choose now. The nutrient cycle will have become toxic in twelve hours. Then you will be dead. No matter your decision, you must sever your connection to the system."

Chapter 13

...

As ash rained down among the carbonized trees, an eerie Silence stilled the air. Covered beneath the gray layer, the hearty blanket of soil, accumulated over centuries, had been sterilized by the intense heat. Little if nothing was left to represent the original plant species seeded long ago. Toxic decay from the forest's dying body had already begun poisoning the aquafer sheltered deep under the forest,

negating its vital purpose. This poisoning compelled Prototaxities to withdraw its myriad appendages from the waters.

Abraham returned from the ashes to see what had become of his sanctuary. He observed the plague upon the cracked and charred landscape. Evidence of his failure and descent into madness was everywhere. Surveying the destruction, the connection between humans living in the collective to their group mind grew weaker and more tenuous by the minute. In the absence of the vital life forces, his ability to manipulate the world as he once had had gone. Though his people could still communicate, many from the collective had already faded out of existence. One of the wayward spirits' voices, conscious of her plight, reached out and touched Abraham. "What will become of us?"

Abraham, who was less of a megalomaniac in defeat, seemed introspective in his response. "It's impossible to know. However, it's safe to say our time here is at an end. The ancients once believed the spirits of the dead resided in the ether, in a place they called heaven. Perhaps we shall discover if those stories are real after we are gone."

Through force of will, Abraham wandered on wraithlike among the ash and shadows. The voice that had, for some time, accompanied him eventually grew silent. One by one, the precious works that had accompanied him into this world had escaped him. He was left with the cruelest and most petty emotions to define his spirit.

As Johnny walked through the remnants of the scorched landscape, he kicked up the ground to reveal smoldering embers still left unextinguished, hidden below the surface. The white ash flew into the air and clung to his armor. There was no sound to this hollow world beyond his clanging suit and the crushing of coals beneath his steel boot. He called out, "Is anyone here?" To which there was no immediate response. "Abraham! I know you're out there. It doesn't have to end this way."

An oddly bent sapling suddenly caught Johnny's attention. It somehow made its presence known without a sound. Standing before him, a carbonized strand of wood, barely a filament, seemed to shine in recognition as Johnny spoke to it. "Abraham, I've found you."

Johnny looked at the charred remains of the tree, watching the wisps of smoke rise upward. Weakly into Johnny's mind, a faint voice spoke. "We have come full circle. I was born into this life of fire, and that same fire brought it to its end. How did you manage to be the gatekeeper on both ends of this journey?"

"Despite what you think, your time is not at an end," said Johnny. "I've been sent here to collect all of you. We are leaving this place. The Prototaxities see no purpose served by your extinction."

...

As the forest sanctuary burned, a toxic ash rain slowly poisoned the spring that had nurtured it for centuries. As they stood now, conditions were unsustainable for a system operating under delicate tolerances dedicated to keeping everything within the enclave alive. Time was now a critical factor for the more than two thousand souls in suspended animation. If at least some of them were to survive, radical steps would need to occur. So, over several hours, Doctor Nick and Prototaxities set a plan to activate a system override.

One by one, the sleeping clones began to awake. Unlike their predecessors, there would be no long nurturing period where false memories and instruction were programmed slowly over months. There was no time for that. They came as fully grown infants, unknowing of a past or future. Without fully realizing language, they opened their eyes to a strange and terrifying world. Words and images held no meaning within their minds. There was nothing to give proper context to the overwhelming fear possessing them.

Their preprogramming equipped them with the essential physical functions of mobility. As each one passed into semi-consciousness to set their dispositions at ease, the Prototaxities reached out, speaking directly into their minds. Through its still active neural connective links, it began to weave into their minds a landscape of meaningful images depicting what was happening to them in a way it hoped was easily understandable.

The sleepers tried to fight the oncoming twilight in varying degrees of alertness as if possessed by a dream; each was caught in the flutter of rapid eye movements. Within their individual minds, patterns of images like sets of canvases in a gallery were impressed. So supple and open were their minds that the imagery loomed monumental in scope and consequence. Chief among these images were those of the deep desert that lay before them, illustrated in all its many stark, beautiful dangers. Pictures of lakes brimming with crystal clear water and sunlight glinting from their gently rolling surfaces countered this image of those perils to be found in the desert. The effect of which seemingly informed their latent instincts on the life-giving power of water. Pictures described in simple terms the symbiotic nature that the Prototaxities shared with this environment. The level of palpable anxiety had diminished among the clones. A slowly unpacking parcel of densely coded knowledge flashed into their neural receptors as raw imagery. Somehow, the imagery impressed upon them a sense of calm and understanding that Dr. Nick was trustworthy enough to lead them from this place. The Prototaxities placed one last set of images before their minds. This one portrayed the action of one foot being placed steadily in front of the other for days on end. Finally, the sheer blackness of the night sky presented itself to them. So as not to overtax their new minds, Prototaxities stopped there with the programming.

For his part, Doctor Nick supervised the preparation for the physical journey. He sent an army of drones to source the facility's stores, searching for clothing. The tiny robots found enough within the vast warehouses to outfit a small army. The clones had been hibernating at close to optimal physical conditioning. There was no need then for a wide-size variation. The Prototaxities projected imagery of how to wear clothing into their minds while a hovering drone presented each person with a blue one-size-fits-all jumpsuit and a pair of sandals. Once inside, the whole unit could be closed using the large white plastic zipper. Though they could not conceive it as they stepped into their vulcanized sandals to take their very first steps, they were acting out a set of routines laid out long ago. 'One foot in front of the other,' this mantra would carry them until nature took over.

Two thousand-plus individuals sat on the floor calmly awaiting further instructions within the long gallery where, only hours before, they slumbered in hibernation chambers. It took a considerable amount of concentration on Prototaxities to manage. As he grew weaker, this was becoming too taxing. "Doctor Walsh, tell me there is good news on the transport device?"

Though Doctor Nick busily labored, he was proud to stop for a moment to describe his work. "As you know, I've been making some special design modifications on one of the hibernation chambers. The unit will be self-contained and water-tight. I'm hoping to increase

the tank's capacity to recycle air and water through a system of exchangers."

Nick got back to working as he continued to talk, "I realize time is not on our side, but I should only be a few more hours before I'm ready to test this machine out."

However, time was running out, and Prototaxities recognized that Nick perhaps needed more physical assistance than he was prepared to admit. So Prototaxities extended his mind into eight of the human-cloned individuals. He could interact with the physical world through them, much like a human. An awakening in these eight individuals as their minds' empty spaces became full of all that Prototaxities knew while retaining that seed of self. They all came to Doctor Nick's side at once and began rooting through the tools.

Doctor Nick was startled by these individuals' sudden appearance, four women and four men, as they picked up tools and got down to work. Nick shouted at the woman closest to him, "What do you think you are doing? Don't touch that!"

She turned to him and said, "Doctor Walsh, if any of this is going to work, you will require our help. The Prototaxities have analyzed your plan and have determined it to be sound. However, by the time you have completed this task, it too will be dead. It has sent us here to help you."

Doctor Nick paused momentarily and responded, "Oh, I suppose I hadn't factored that into my plan. Supposing you did factor that in, how long do you imagine this will take?"

One of the other Eight looked up from his work long enough to respond in his stead. "Approximately sixty minutes is all we have."

"Who are you all? What are your names?" asked Nick

The first clone who responded turned her head slightly to look at the others and then turned back to Doctor Nick.

"Our names have not yet been assigned." She dropped her eyes to her task and returned to work.

...

There was a sickly smell of decay in the control room as Doctor Nick and the contingent of eight rolled the platform containing the completed water-tight chamber before the main body of the Prototaxities. From the looks of things, it was evident that it would die if it did not soon withdraw entirely from the neural network in its current condition. A mass of its sinewy flesh gently lowered itself from the control room ceiling's apex. One by one, the biological tethers and fibrils that connected it to the network were severed. Its only connection now was a weak telepathic impression with its eight human contacts. Once it had withdrawn its life force from the remainder of its neural network, its physical remains within the hollow space began to wither and die.

Doctor Nick, monitoring the external sensors and controls, began sealing the remaining sections of the Prototaxities into the water volume within the modified hibernation chamber. When Nick was about to shut the lid, Johnny appeared. "Wait! There's something important that has to go in there with him", Johnny said.

The Prototaxities' eight-person crew of personal assistants watched with interest as Johnny stepped forth, holding a strange oval-shaped electronic device in his arms. At six inches in diameter, many multicolored lights twinkled upon its silvery metallic surface. Without saying anything, Johnny presented it to the woman standing closest to him. Manipulating some controllers hidden upon its surface, she verified the device was activated to Prototaxities' satisfaction. Her face shined in the illumination projected by a display pattern that pleased her. She nodded with approval and passed it along to the others waiting. One by one, they agreed that whatever it was, it was working correctly.

Doctor Nick watched with dismay. Try as he might, he could not disguise his annoyance with this last-minute secrecy. He checked his emotions as well as possible while directing his question to Johnny. "What is all this? Are you planning on putting that in the water chamber? Why was I not informed of this?"

Johnny answered, "It's a need-to-know situation, I'm afraid. I apologize, but this is something you don't need to know." Doctor Nick

pushed forward to look at the device, but Johnny blocked his way. Grasping onto Nick's arm tightly, Johnny said, "I'm sorry, Nick, but where do you think you're going?"

One from the contingent of unnamed people assigned to assist the Prototaxities placed the device in the chamber and locked the lid down tight. Connected with Prototaxities by neural link and in some ways influenced by it, the group of assistants, like the bearers in a procession, lifted the coffin-like box onto their shoulders. As if speaking for the Prototaxities, the male bearer closest to Nick said, "You will know all in good time, my friend. Let it suffice that I don't wish to burden you with some of the decisions I alone must make."

Doctor Nick's expression was one of subdued anger. However, he was resigned that there wasn't much he could do about it right now. So, as he pulled his arm back from Johnny, Nick said, "Very well then. If I'm not meant to know, so be it. We might as well get going." Rubbing his wrist where Johnny held him, he said, "Johnny, would you mind assisting me in loading everyone onto the train?"

"Of course. Anything you need."

...

A single elevator led from the control level down to the darkest level, where the train car awaited. The hybrid clones were mostly cooperative, entering into Doctor Nick's lift. None of them were prepared for the free fall and sudden stop. Each time the elevator

door slid open, Johnny guided the latest group onto the train. The Prototaxities was already there within its chamber, reaching out telepathically, calming them for what came next. "Finally," said Doctor Nick as he stepped onto the train. "That's the last of them. We're ready to roll when you are, Johnny."

...

The fully laden train came to a sudden jarring stop just before the opening into the outside world. The clones adjusting to the tunnel's darkness were naturally drawn toward the strange circle of light as they disembarked from the train. One by one, they stepped toward the light and out into this strange and dangerous world. Doctor Nick managed to keep some order in their ranks as he stood near the front of the long, winding line of people emerging from the tunnel where the train terminated. Looking back, he watched it slither out like a snake from the opening in the ground.

The hybrid humans emerged from the tunnel one by one into the full intensity of the noonday heat. Despite their preparations, they were not quite ready for what they found there. The oppressive conditions were far worse than they had imagined. The wheeled carriage's appearance confused those among the procession escorting the Prototaxities' heavily laden chamber. After loading the container as instructed, their confusion quickly diminished as the cart's heavy wheels began to roll out onto the dusty plain.

Once all the travelers had exited the tunnel, Johnny returned to the train to check for stragglers. He found one of the clones sitting alone in a darkened rail car. Somehow, this person did not understand the message. Johnny reached his hand to him and said, "Come on now, it's time to go. We'll seal this off soon, and you wouldn't survive long here alone. Come on, I said, let's go." Though it was plain the man did not truly understand his words; he knew enough to stand up and quietly take his hand. Johnny led him out of the tunnel to join the others. Satisfied with the recovery efforts, he took a moment to secure the facility from without. Johnny welded a metal grate onto the opening's external frame using a welding kit he had secured in the station.

Nick was watching Johnny from a distance. Even in the daylight, you could see the sparks flying. After Johnny had finished that job, Nick continued watching him as he walked the line's length toward where he was standing. It didn't take long for Johnny to find his way to the front. As he reached Doctor Nick's position, he looked him in the eye and said, "Nick, I don't know what your plan is or if you even have one." Nick tried to respond but could barely open his mouth before Johnny spoke again. "I've been out in the wastelands before, have you?" Again, Nick tried to talk, but Johnny already knew the answer. So, he again spoke over him. "I think my experience speaks for itself. I hope I will have your support in leading this expedition."

Nick had anticipated that all this activity would lead to Johnny wanting to be the group leader. He didn't have a problem with

the idea. Johnny, being so, would hold no real power over him. He just wished he would be more forthcoming about his motivation. Why would this individual suddenly feel so responsible? Was it his nature, or was it something else? "Let me ask you something, Johnny. Why are you here? This problem is not yours. You could be anywhere, but here you are. Don't get me wrong; you've been accommodating. You even saved my life. I can't forget that. I just need to understand what you're getting out of all of this?"

Johnny wasn't surprised or angered by Nick's line of questioning. He wondered why it had taken him so long to ask. Johnny looked at him squarely and answered him. "I get nothing for myself, of course. The need or desire of things of the self has long ago escaped me. What drives me is far more basic than you would imagine. I guess it's hard to see, but having lived so long as a pure consciousness has lent a certain perspective to such things. As far as I know, I am the last representative of my kind. The world I shared within the living network is destroyed for the sake of these humans. If this gamble of yours is to fail, then all of this would have been for nothing. For the time being, I am still connected to the Prototaxities. But who knows how long that will last? For all I know, if it dies, I may also die. What happens then?"

For the first time, Doctor Nick looked upon Johnny with a fresh perspective. His armor did not shine as brightly as it did just moments before. Seemingly, Johnny's words had shed light on Nick's understanding of his plight. Nick realized that Johnny may have

suddenly felt the twinge of mortality like the rest of us after living so long within the network, whether or not he wanted to admit it. If they do not survive the perils of the desert, it will be over for all of them. "I think I understand," Doctor Nick said after a long delay. "We must find whatever, if anything, our human children may have built on the other side. Now, if only Trixie and Wyatt survive long enough to lead us there, all of us might survive. Johnny, I think you should be the one to lead us."

...

For several days, Trixie and Wyatt moved as close as possible to the path they set toward the distant landmark. They watched how, day upon day, their destination grew in scale on the horizon's edge. The sun above them was so unrelenting that they had not noticed the last of the barren scrubland withered to dust. A ring of barren and desiccated soil marked a distinct boundary between the withered grassland and the sea of sand, beyond which shifting hills of wind-blown sand slithered serpent-like back and forth across the expanse. By this point, the desert winds had worn their clothes practically threadbare. They could not withstand the rigors of a desert journey for much longer.

Trixie and Wyatt had nothing else to guide them. So, they followed the sun's position against the landscape for some time. It was late afternoon, and the sun's sharp-angled rays dulled themselves upon the distant horizon. Beyond the edge of their vision, a mirage cast a flickering haze across the monochrome plane before them. Unsure they trusted their perceptions further, they determined to push onward. Soon, they drew nearer, and their mirage appeared more and more like an oasis.

The details got clearer with each step they took. Suddenly, a pair of colossal cylinders appeared protruding from the ground out of the haze. It took a moment for the reality of what they saw to settle in. Though it had been challenging to see through clouds of uplifted sand and dust, a massive artificial object appeared as Trixie and Wyatt drew nearer, seemingly hovering above the desert floor. They stared at it for another moment in confusion as they tried to imagine what this thing was that fortune had brought their way. Trixie spoke her thoughts aloud, "Wyatt? Do you know what this thing is?"

"Trixie, I don't know what that is, but I think we should go look closer."

The sun's glare abated within the shadows of the massive, many-story-tall object, and details began to emerge. The new light revealed all manner of pipes and other previously unseen apparatuses encrusted in ages of rust. It became apparent that they were looking at some sort of machine.

Trixie said, "My mind is full of stories of such things, but I never imagined I'd see anything like it. What do you suppose it is?"

"I don't know, Trixie, but it's the first signs of human life we've seen out here since we left the confines of the circle. That's what we're here for, isn't it?"

They continued walking for several minutes, following the massive machine's perimeter until they found the base where the giant cylinders broke into the earth. It was immediately apparent to both Wyatt and Trixie that there was far more to these machines than they had imagined. They could see where enormous pipes drove deep into a primordial crack in the earth. Life-giving water Pulled from a breach in a deep aquifer and flowed upon the rocks through a two-meter-wide gap in a pipe casing.

Before Wyatt and Trixie could even express their excitement in words, both were on their hands and knees, drinking the cool waters. Wyatt sought relief from the heat and threw his body prone with his face to the side into a nearby shallow pool. Trixie found a similar pool and laid back. Her dark brown hair floated in a circular mass behind her, forming a crown around her face. Looking up at the giant water machine, she began to laugh. "Wyatt, let's stay here tonight. We'll get some rest and follow this water on out to see where it leads us. What do you think?"

Wyatt was all smiles. "It sounds like a solid plan, Trixie. This water seems to be flowing toward our original direction, so

there's that. Also, who wouldn't want to have water as a companion for a while?"

Chapter 14

Trixie and Wyatt spent the night sleeping by a fire beside the water. Trixie's thirst thoroughly quenched; she slept more soundly than she had remembered. She awoke to the gentle sound of flowing water. Her eyes opened to see smoke rise from the ashes and the first light reflect off the many pools. The sight beckoned her to rise and explore. Wyatt was still sleeping, so she got up without disturbing him. The air was calm near the water. Trixie took a few steps and followed to where the water flowed heavily. She could see where it spilled down over rock-hewn channels out of the highland. *Wyatt was right, she pondered. The water is flowing toward that notch in the mountains.*

After Wyatt woke, they ate in silence, consuming the last bits of dried meat from the leg they had stolen from the kill. As they were preparing their gear, an unspoken uneasiness remained between them. Trixie imagined where this journey might take them now that death wasn't guaranteed. Breaking the silence, Trixie asked Wyatt, "Who do you suppose built this machine? This thing didn't just materialize here. I'm reasonably sure the Prototaxities doesn't know it existed, or we would have had some inkling of it. So, who exactly is out there?"

"That's the mystery of it. We won't know what we're walking into until it's too late. We've come too far, though there's no turning back now."

With packs strapped on their backs, Trixie and Wyatt were on the move again. They walked all day, following the water flow down the plateau to where the landscape settled in a wide, low valley. Here the water collects into broad, shallow pools. There, about the edges, they saw the first signs of grasses and other plants accumulating along the perimeter of the water and beyond as the landscape transitioned from desert to mixed scrubland and marsh. By afternoon, the waters had coalesced into a vast reservoir between two hills. As Wyatt and Trixie drew nearer, they recognized that, like the massive water machine, these two hills had an artificial regularity that seemed human-made.

As the evening progressed, the sun dropped entirely below the horizon of the sky. But for the stars, the sky was ink black. From

their perspective, looking at the plane of the Milky Way, it appeared to be supported by the pinnacles of the two hills. A duplicate of the whole scene in the heavens played out in the expanse of black mirrored water before them in perfect symmetry. At the top of the hill where Heaven and Earth seemingly met, they could see the beacon of a human-made fire burning. It was to this same fire they were first inexplicably drawn. They saw it now within its intended context in a landscape of symbolic images. There could be no doubt they had reached their destination.

By the time Wyatt and Trixie reached the base of what they had perceived to be a hill, their conception of it had changed. In the flickering shadows of the swirling firelight, the earthwork stairwell seemed to shudder with the motion of the winged serpent. Its long body appeared to writhe upon the face of the earthen structure, illuminating their way toward the top. This imagery was not lost on them. Trixie was quick to make a note of something she had recognized. "Wyatt, do you see what I'm seeing? Do you recognize it?"

"Yes, I can't say for sure, but it appears to be the same image we saw in the dome city. It looks like a very crude version of that statue of the serpent. How did it get here?"

"Well, someone built it, obviously, but why?"

"Yes, obviously, someone built it. I'm talking about the image. It was in the story that Nick told us, too."

"Whoever built these monuments must have had some connection to the dome builders. What that is remains to be seen."

Trixie and Wyatt began climbing the serpent's spine toward the burning beacon atop the artificial hill. Perhaps it was something about the symbolism sewn into the landscape itself. As they rose, their sense of fear and foreboding melted away. The blazing glow of the flame grew with intensity as they drew nearer. Trixie paused a moment to turn around. She recognized she was now lost in the dark double image of the night sky settling on the horizon due to the mirrored reflection behind her. There was no way down. Her only way to go now was forward.

Wyatt paused as well. "Is everything alright, Trixie?"

"Yes, Wyatt, I just wanted to look back on where we came from. I can't see anything but stars."

"Yes, strange, isn't it?"

Trixie turned again towards the firelight. The shadows along the stairs seemed to leap in time to the sound of rhythmic drumming filtering from above. This intriguing noise enticed them further up toward the top of the stairs.

Wyatt and Trixie found the fire blazing in a recessed pit, reaching the crest of what they now discovered to be a four-sided earthen pyramid capped in stone. Encircling the blaze, perhaps a dozen naked silhouetted bodies danced trancelike around it. One from their group broke off from them, approaching Trixie and Wyatt. As he grew

closer, they could make out his features. He was tall and handsome with long dark hair and dark eyes. Trixie and Wyatt were surprised by his lack of clothing and shame.

Despite how different he appeared, he introduced himself to them in their language when he spoke. "My name is Adapa. I am the high priest of this temple to the Winged Serpent. If you wish to worship here, you must purify your belongings in the cleansing fire where all things are made again in the spirit world. Otherwise, you must leave this place."

Trixie and Wyatt turned to look at each other. Trixie wasted no time and started stripping off her clothes. Wyatt looked at her in shock and said, "What are you doing?"

"I'm not letting a little thing like exposing my naked skin stop me now. I've come all this way. One way or another, I'm getting answers."

Wyatt watched as she undid her hand-made garment, revealing her naked body. The firelight cast a milky amber glow onto her long, slender frame. The image she cast there was beautiful. As for himself, he did not know what to do. He watched as if paralyzed as she dumped her clothing and pack upon the sacrificial fire. She turned to look at Wyatt, and as she did, the fire leaped up behind her, painting her in the same silhouette as the others. At that moment, Wyatt realized he would rather be with Trixie than not. So, he stripped naked, gathering all he had in the world, and cast it into the fire. Wyatt

stood beside Trixie, the flames reaching ever higher, and they gazed into each other's eyes. He recognized, though he had little experience in such things, that there was a feeling between them unlike he had ever known. He could only guess what Trixie was thinking, but his imagination told him that by the look in her eyes, she was feeling it, too.

Adapa lifted an earthen vessel decorated with strange symbols into the air for all of them to see. From it, he poured each a measure of a pungent, bitter liquid into a bowl. Adapa's face was distorted in disgust as he brought the dark concoction to his lips. After he took his portion, he passed the bowl around. Wyatt and Trixie observed the others drink from it readily, staining their lips and tongues. Caught in the moment, each took the foul liquid without question when it was their turn. Swallowing down the bitter potion, Wyatt noticed his mouth was numb, and his stomach began to cramp. Within moments, Wyatt was doubled over in pain, his body shaking and glistening with sweat. Trixie bent over and vomited, and as she rose, the bodies swaying before her seemed to double into ghostly mirror images. The sounds of beating drums were emanating from within her body. Wyatt could now see the bodies of the dancers as perfect black silhouettes. Like black holes in space, all light was seemingly falling into the perimeters of their two-dimensional frames as they orbited the common center of the massive fire. The bowl came around again, and they took a second drink. Moments later, the drumming and dancing intensity reached a fevered pitch, and they were sweating profusely.

As they danced, Adapa began to tell a story. Though Trixie was intoxicated or perhaps enthralled by the words, they seemed to resonate with her. She was surprised by his words, though spoken in English, sounded strange from his lips and in her ear. It was as if her tongue was some language of the ancients.

Pointing up toward the great belt of stars girdling the Earth, Adapa said, "For our guests, I shall relay to them the story of the sacrifice, Tiamat. In those days before the coming of Earth, before all people walked upon the earth, planets ruled as gods in their celestial pathways. In great arcs, they held sway over vast regions of space. The mother of these worlds was Tiamat. Life-giving Tiamat had conspired with her consort moon to usurp lordship over all the heavens. This situation did not sit well with the other planets of the primordial sphere, for they knew a new order would emerge from the chaos. New worlds would evolve to threaten their stayed conformity. Fearful of her dynamic, transformative powers, the other planets conspired to destroy her. With Tiamat's destruction, the worlds would eternally rest unchanged in their orbits.

They conspired, and Green Mars sent a courier in the guise of a comet into the dark realms of Marduk the destroyer." Upwards towards the night sky, Trixie and Wyatt watched as all their worldly possessions lifted as a spreading pillar of fire and ash as an offering to the fiery Marduk.

"It had all begun in that now-distant age. Tiamat grew weary of the endless unchanging cycles. While millennia slipped past, she formulated along with her consort moon a means to usurp lordships over the many planets. All of this she would do to bring fruitful chaos to a cold and impoverished universe. Whispers of her plans carried on the celestial winds intercepted by the other planets made them fearful. They would trade anything to maintain the order to which for eons they had grown so accustomed. Out into the farthest reaches of space, as the comet messenger ventured beyond the cold depths of the Neptune Sea, the now dulled travelers came upon the dormant Marduk.

Marduk's chariot path around the sun was highly elliptical. Though he had been a planet of minor stature until this point, he was the son of Enlil, the creator. As such, He was showy and boisterous, but most importantly, he had the grand ambitions of his father. The messenger petitioned an audience in the darkness with the ambitious young planet. The comet captured in Marduk's gravity pleaded the inner planets' case. "Marduk, the inner worlds call on you to destroy Tiamat and become king in your father's name."

"I ask you, comet, why do they not take up this crime on their own?"

"It is fear, my lord."

Not being one to shy away from an opportunity, Marduk said, "I will accept this challenge but cannot let you leave. I require your assistance."

With that, Marduk swallowed the comet, and as the two bodies collided, the resulting conflagration was witnessed clearly across the cosmos. The far-flung planets understood what this meant. Marduk also knew what it meant; he was now on a collision course for the inner planets from his altered orbit.

As Marduk watched with interest from his far vantage, conspiring to do battle, Tiamat sensed a great disturbance in the firmament. Looking out onto the heavenly plain, she could not yet recognize what form the danger would possess. She pushed him out into a far orbit to avoid this danger for her consort, Moon. She then began drawing in all the other wayward material that lay beyond her region of space. Soon, under an unending bombardment, her girth had grown heavily, easily doubling in size.

Tiamat began to see the light from the far edge of space as it grew brighter. This light she recognized as her cousin, the son of Enlil. He was dangerously off course. This could be no mistake. In the midst of this, her brother and sister planets were oddly quiet. This was when she knew that they must have been complicit with this far-flung interloper.

As the time of battle grew nearer to its appointed destiny, Marduk appeared as bright as a second sun. Tiamat was fat, and her gravity was undeniable. When Marduk entered the realm of the inner planets, a tremendous seething rain of debris swirled about Tiamat like an angry cloud. Gigantic arcs of plasma lighting arced out across the gulf of space to scorch the atmospheres and tore deep gouges into the surfaces of sisters and brothers. Like a multi-armed serpent, she tossed her plasma bolts across the heavens. Marduk shone brighter than the sun as it, too, was caught in Tiamat's storm of lightning bolts. If it not for the tremendous speed Marduk now spun upon his axis, the force of these blows would have torn the world to pieces. Even if she had managed to break him by that point, it would have been beyond the turning point, for her gravity would bring down all his parts.

With force unseen since creation, the two bodies collided. Marduk converted instantaneously into pure energy as the great mass of Tiamat was cleaved and shattered into trillions of smithereens. A great web of her parts cast a log belt around the sun. A primeval Earth was born from a great cloud of debris cast out from the chaos. Tiamat's ancient consort, the ever-watchful Moon, was captured in the embrace of her child's orbit."

Even in their altered states, Trixie and Wyatt listened with childlike curiosity. Neither of them had ever heard such strange stories. What limitations of the spoken word could not evoke a keyhole into another realm was opened by this concoction. In Trixie's mind's eye, the images grew stronger with the intensity of the dance. Visualizing great planets colliding, she could imagine herself as the embodiment of the pregnant Tiamat. She saw the dance as a play on earth of what they saw raging in the heavens. Marduk had destroyed Tiamat, and along with her, all of her creative power. With the energy released from her destruction, the Earth was born, and with it all life.

As the night went on, the barriers between the worlds, the dance, the story's mythic imagery, and those of Trixie's own experience faded. Trixie and Wyatt danced intoxicated, chasing their shadows in the firelight until they fell to the ground exhausted. When night gave way to morning, Trixie's dreaming mind could barely wrestle with the meaning of it all.

Trixie woke to find her ash-painted body entwined in an embrace with Wyatt. She did not immediately flinch or otherwise react surprised. Though her memory was fuzzy, she remembered enough to know how she got here. Trixie lifted her head off from

the hard ground. Wyatt's head weighed heavily on her shoulder, and for the moment, Trixie didn't wish to disturb him. Not because she particularly enjoyed lying on the hard ground, but instead, she wouldn't know what to say to him when he did wake. Trixie could feel her head was still spinning and the thirst in her throat. Wyatt would have to awake soon. As Trixie lay there, she calculated whether it had been worth it to forsake her possessions for an opportunity to gain information. As she lay there, it seemed that it had been a losing proposition. It was early morning, and there was a chill in the air. Luckily, the embers from the fire beside them were still burning. She laid her head back and, for a moment, tried to relax and take in the heat.

What am I to do about Wyatt? I've never had a problem quite like this. I liked him well enough. Now, he irritates me, and I always want him within my sight. It's a strange mixture of emotions I'm not accustomed to. The fact that I haven't tossed him on his ass is telling.

Trixie decided it was time to get up anyway. She managed to do it so somehow without waking Wyatt. Though the air was chilled, the sun was bright. So, as she came about to the edge

of the artificial hill, she could see the outlines of a distant mud-brick city glowing in the dawn light.

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At first, Trixie and Wyatt's footfalls were easy to follow. However, as time passed, the sign of their presence had begun to diminish from the landscape. Nick asked himself as he scanned the distant horizon. *Where, then, in this vast world had they gone?* Nick had to admit, at best, he could only guess. Continuing in the direction they had been moving was their only alternative.

At midday, thirst and heat made it necessary to bring the caravan to a halt. Huddled together, the band of humans sat quietly. Having scrounged any loose material, they protected themselves from the blazing sun and winds. Once settled, each, as instructed, took their prescribed water ration. Anxiety began to set in as the realization that their water was quickly diminishing became evident.

Using the rolling chamber that held the Prototaxities as a makeshift desk, Doctor Nick unfolded the paper chart he'd been using to map their progress. Using stars and land formations, he

produced a primitive yet accurate map of where they were in relation to the circle they had left behind. He dutifully recorded each landmark they passed. As he stood reviewing the chart, Johnny came upon him and asked, "How are you doing with your land navigation, Doctor Walsh?"

"Please, call me Nick, alright?"

"Ok, Nick, it's noted. How's the progress? How far do you suppose we've got left to travel?"

Nick looked up at the horizon at the far hills and said, "I'm almost positive that's the direction they headed." He reached up to scratch his head and continued. "We could be as far off as two days walk. Or could my sense of scale be completely off? We should know more tomorrow. The problem is I'm not sure how much more of this our people can take. Some have fallen victim to heatstroke or dehydration or wandered off. The situation is desperate. Nighttime in the desert is no better, for as the sun sets, the temperature drops markedly. The cold and the sounds are haunting, and the empty darkness plays tricks on their minds. Each night of terror day followed of torture by the elements."

Johnny responded, "This is the best we can do, Nick. Just a few more hours of this, and we'll stop for the night."

As the sun relented and the far mountains projected long shadows across the dusty plain, Johnny ordered, and the sign was given for the column to stop. Hoping to keep the tribe together, Nick looked back to see the stragglers' long line, many of whom had fallen hopelessly behind. He could see the trail fading out into the shadows. Soon, it would be enveloped in complete darkness. "Johnny," Nick said, "If you've got everything under control up here, I'm going to the end of the line to see how well our friends are doing. I'm going to borrow your torch if you don't mind?"

"What do you need that for?"

"You'll see soon enough."

By the time Nick reached the end of the line, daylight had rested beyond the horizon's edge. Removing a lantern from his pack, he illuminated the globe. The expanding orb of light revealed dozens of people clustered together in groups around him, hidden in the darkness. He lifted the lantern high into the air toward where people had been coming. He could see the faint ghost-like figures of dozens of lost men and women there. Upon seeing him, glad to be found, they began waving their hands excitedly in the air. This pattern had become an increasingly familiar scene. As their odyssey progressed, more and more would fall behind each night. Some were lost entirely to the desert.

Nick was determined to break this cycle in the few days that remained.

Scattered around them about the desert, scraps of wood lay upon the ground. Nick gathered this together and lit a beacon fire with Johnny's torch. Then he waited. As fire lit up the night sky, he tended to the flames as some of those lost began to stream in from the darkness. Into the night, Nick eventually fell asleep. Others came and helped to keep it burning throughout the night. As Morning arrived, Nick found himself covered in soot from the wind-stirred ashes. While he sat there in the early light, he calculated the grim statistics of the preceding evening. From a pocket in his shirt, he removed a notebook. And in it, Nick recorded the reckoning of numbers lost.

The landscape began to take on a decidedly downward slope. Following along, Nick and Johnny found themselves entering an ever-narrowing valley. Eventually, Johnny forced the column to a halt as they came upon the confluence of two extinct rivers. They set camp there before the expanse of the distant rust-colored hills and copper-tinted sands. As Nick stared out across the valley, he felt as if the vastness of the landscape itself was mocking him. The desert gave no insight into their potential success or failure.

Johnny joined Nick while he stood near the edge of the dried mud bank. Both were surprised to see something unusual in the dusty channel, snaking through the desert. The bones of dozens of animals were protruding from the ground and lying on the surface.

They looked back to see the rest of their group busily settling in for the evening. Nick glanced back at Johnny and said, "What do you suppose happened down there?"

"I don't know. But if something goes wrong, we should find out before our friends do. They do seem a bit... nervous; perhaps is a good word,"

"I agree. There's no reason to alarm them unnecessarily. Come on; let's go while they're distracted."

Johnny, then Nick, clambered down the near-vertical meters high bank. When they reached the bottom, Nick saw something he hadn't expected: two sets of human footprints had broken the surface of the sun-dried mud.

Nick was ecstatic about finding Wyatt and Trixie and terrified at the potential implications of the animal remains. "I don't quite know what to make of this. Assuming these prints are theirs, what kind of danger are they in?"

Johnny said, "Well, the dangers are great. I have a confession to make. I haven't been candid with you. I've seen this place before. However, if you can make sense of this, this is my first journey to this place. The last time I visited this place, the Prototaxities transported only part of me here."

"What, how is that possible?"

"I don't know how it works. All I know is that somehow, Prototaxities sensed something happening at a great distance, and I found myself as a kind of phantom witnessing Wyatt and Trixie. I couldn't interact with them, and they couldn't see me. This type of thing is no longer possible in its current condition. We're on our own."

"We'll what happened to them?"

"A beast attacked Wyatt. Trixie rescued him, saved his life."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this beforehand?"

"I doubted you would believe me. Looking at those prints now, do you believe me? I wasn't sure it happened myself if I'm being honest."

"Well, you don't give me much choice now, do you? Although I'd be hard-pressed to answer what else it could be. Let's look around, and you can tell me what you would be doing out here, and then I'll let you know whether I believe you."

As Johnny and Doctor Nick walked out across the dried riverbed, they followed the two sets of prints for dozens of meters. Passing over terrain strewn with bones gave the impression of a Labyrinth of disarticulated skeletons laid out upon the earth. So distracting was the scene that they had almost missed that the trail had ended abruptly, obliterated by the trampling footsteps of a massive herd of animals. Johnny, possessing a gift for pointing out the obvious, said, "It seems we lost the trail again."

"You are good at this, Johnny; I'm glad you're on the team," Nick said sarcastically. "So tell me, Johnny, what were you doing here?"

"Well, as I said, Wyatt and Trixie ran into a little trouble. Our great benefactor spoke to my mind and told me they were in danger and should observe them. Moments later, I found myself here."

"What did you do, Johnny?"

"Wyatt had been attacked by one of these beasts and was in critical need of medical attention. I was there to ensure that Wyatt's wounds were handled properly. They were, so I did nothing."

"But you might have if the need had been there?"

"Yes, I suppose I would have."

"Well, I'll be damned; the Prototaxities is interfering with his protocol."

"I'm sorry I don't follow."

"The operation, this program we set out on so long ago was built upon specific conditional rules. Primary among these is that there would be no interference with the subjects. Now I understand us mere humans breaking the rules, but an intellect of Prototaxities caliber, I guess I just don't understand. "

"Hey, you know what, Doctor Nick, Walsh, or whoever the hell you are, perhaps you're not supposed to understand. Here's one thing you should understand: your little experiment ended ages ago. It doesn't take a scientist to figure out that a lot has happened since you've been out of the picture. These things you see going on are about the survival of everything. Our benefactor knows this. It's time you did, too."

"Well, why didn't he interfere when Abraham and his bunch attacked us? Maybe we wouldn't be in the mess we're in now!"

"If we don't all die, you can ask it yourself someday."

Nick was a little surprised by the forcefulness of Johnny's response. However, He was glad that their cards were out on the table. Nick felt free to ask a question he dared not ask before. "Since we're honest with one another, will you tell

me what you placed in the stasis chamber with the Prototaxities?"

"I don't know if you're ready to hear it. You're certainly not going to like it."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"It's a kind of depository for the hive mind humans. The benefactor, unlike you, is merciful. Regardless of their actions, he would not leave their spirits to fade out like you would have."

"Don't presume to know my mind or actions. Besides, you were there. Tell me, what could we have done differently? We were fighting for our lives."

"Of course, no one is blaming anyone. I, too, had a part to play in how it unfolded. So much useless violence has repeatedly done nothing but interfere with progress."

"What is the plan if and when we reach our destination? Will these spirits be unleashed again?"

"Oh, to answer what will happen, only it can tell. But this much I know. We're going to get there. The benefactor has foreseen it. To some degree, its senses extend everywhere beyond the place of our origin. But its vision of things is murky. Even now, in its diminished capacity, it watches them. Wyatt and Trixie are leading the way. We just have to continue following them."

"I'm glad to hear that, but you didn't answer my question."

"Honestly, even I don't know the answer to that. I can say this; the Benefactor knows and sees far more than I or you. In the end, it will make the right decision."

"For a guy who just had to burn down a whole ecosystem and who is now leading an exodus through the desert, you seem awfully confident in your benefactor's decision making."

"I know there's a point in there somewhere. What are you getting at?"

As I said a moment ago, If the Prototaxities could have interfered at all, it should have been with Abraham. It could have stopped him at any time, but it chose not to. Yet, it sent you out into the wilderness to save the lives of Trixie and Wyatt. It's most curious."

"As I said, if we survive, I guess we can ask it or him."

They both turned their gazes back over to the edge of the far bank. Beyond, there were distant hills that until now seemed impossibly remote. Bathed in the late afternoon sun's acute angles, Johnny recognized details more distinctly than he remembered. He turned to Nick and said, "We'd better get back before the sun starts setting."

By the time Nick and Johnny returned to the column, the camp had been set. Each traveler consumed by the routine of

eating rations or making camp was settling in for the night. These actions provided a welcome distraction from the rigors of their journey. By now, experiencing nighttime in the desert was harrowing. Beyond the clothes on their backs, nothing protected them from the environment. The sun sank below the horizon, exposing the lightly dressed humans to the raw elements. Out of necessity, they huddled for warmth around dozens of fires that burned throughout the night.

Nick found it easier to walk about to keep warm and forgo sleep altogether. After several times circling the camp, He climbed atop the Prototaxities stasis chamber to gain a few more feet of height. Nick looked up at the charcoal-black sky encrusted with the jewels of a billion stars. It was strangely quiet. The noise of the wind competed with the sound of his heartbeat for his ear's attention. As he surveyed the sky, he tried to push how cold he felt from his mind. His eyes followed the river of stars across the sky until it buried itself in the horizon. Where it met the ground, he saw the light of a great fire burning. He squinted his eyes to determine if he was perhaps seeing things. He blinked a few times. The image, however, persisted.

Chapter 15

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Looking down upon the settlement, Trixie could see pillars of dusky gray smoke rising from many of the mud-brick stacks. She turned to tell Wyatt about what she saw and discovered he was waking up. There was something else, too, she had not seen when she had awoken. Someone had left sets of clothing for them to wear.

As Wyatt lifted his head off the ground, he could seemingly still feel the drum beating from the previous night's revelry. It took him only a moment to realize the pounding came not from a drum but was instead the after-effects of the concoction he had consumed. Upon the realization, Wyatt rushed to his feet. He saw Trixie there standing naked, and he thought as he stared at her that he was perhaps still hallucinating. Trixie had forgotten she was naked, and for the briefest of moments, the two of them awkwardly stared at each other. As awareness struck them, they quickly covered themselves up and dressed in the

clothes that someone presumably left for them. The cloth of these strange white garments draped loosely around their bodies. They managed to figure out this seemingly impossible feat of wrapping the fabric appropriately without a word spoken as if the sight of some semblance of civilization reminded them of some hidden shame.

Once Wyatt and Trixie were fully dressed, they looked at each other, wearing odd garments. An uncomfortable smile broke into laughter. "What the hell are you wearing?" cracked Wyatt.

"The same as you, I'm afraid."

"Well, at least we'll look ridiculous together."

"Come, Wyatt, I have something to show you." She moved, and he followed toward the edge of the artificial hill to observe the settlement she had seen earlier. Trying to keep his mind from the splitting pain in his skull, Wyatt instead tried to stay focused on their situation. "What is this thing I'm wearing? Have you ever seen anything like it?"

Admiring the texture of the cloth, she responded, "No, I have not. Everything we've ever worn is derived from stores of the domed city. This is something else entirely. It's as if each stitch in the cloth is unique to itself. I hadn't imagined such a thing existing."

"I suspect that's because we've never needed to imagine such a thing."

"Trixie, do you think we should talk about last night? My memory is a little foggy."

Trixie turned toward him and put her hand on his. Looking into Wyatt's eyes, she said, "We're going to have plenty of time to figure this thing out. I don't even know who I am, let alone you. For all we know, forces beyond our control may be pushing us in a direction not of our choosing. So instead of torturing ourselves, let's see what's happening there in that village."

Considering the shape he was in, this seemed to be enough for Wyatt. "Ok, let's have a look at the village."

In the daylight, they observed how differently the acute angles of shadows appeared upon the stone staircase on this side of the artificial mountain. There was no magical beast winged or otherwise perched on the side of the hill as their imaginations had presented the previous night, just rows of flat stones piled one atop the other. It was a dizzying height they had climbed in the darkness. All they had seen had been confused in fog. Dawn had brought them clarity. Now, it would seem that the things that occurred in the night were perhaps the works of phantoms and not rooted in reality. However, they could still taste remnants of the strange concoction on their lips and hear the rat-tat drum beating in their ears.

As Trixie and Wyatt drew closer to the settlement, their view improved. They began to realize this was no mere village. Details that were invisible from the top of the hill became recognizable. Along the fringes of the main town, they saw laid-out patches of earth. Each seemingly innumerable plot dotting the landscape held shades of green in varying saturation. Though neither of them had seen these things done in practice, both understood that these stretches of land bordered by low stone walls served as pens for animals and growing food. They could just make out people moving about in purposeful motion through common areas between buildings at this distance. While they descended the many rows of stairs, they continued to observe all they could see playing out before them.

Trixie and Wyatt soon found that the stairwell landing deposited them onto a grand plaza. They followed along upon the whitewashed surface of the fired mud brick gleaming softly in the morning light, marveling at the strange collection of buildings surrounding the central plaza. Trixie turned around to see from what height they had just descended. The view from this side was different. Last night, she saw an artificial mountain. She now gazed at a monumental work of art, a perfect triangular shape naturalistic in form. Wyatt's experience was

similar in that nothing he saw there would ever expect to be seen outside the world of his imagination.

Wyatt's eyes met upon a set of pipes that broke out from a gap high within the artificial hill. He recognized these as the same channels they had followed earlier, ultimately bringing them here. His eyes, continuing along with the crown of the watercourse, followed until they found a high terrace carved by the action of the water into the naked rock. Vast amounts of water appeared to linger in one of the many shallow pools, waiting to overspill their bounds. The water spread out in a great fan down and over the exposed surface of the jagged bedrock. At the bottom, the volume of water fell in a torrent into a central reservoir. As it settled, a system of fountains aerating the water by some hidden mechanism pumped it into many pools and cisterns. Neither Trixie nor Wyatt had ever seen so much crystal-clear freshwater in one place. The mist from the fountains flew high into the air.

Drawn toward the swirling mist, they moved forward. Trixie stretched out her arms in exaltation and let the cool water fall gently on her face and exposed skin. Wyatt soon joined in, ducking his head in and out of the water and flailing his long, dark locks about. Each, for a moment, had forgotten about their journey.

Caught up in the moment, they hadn't noticed the group of townsfolk assembling around them. They had come to greet them, dressed in clothing similar to what they were now wearing, bearing gifts. Being so amused by the strangers' odd behavior, those gathered had, for the moment, seemingly forgotten their reasons for being there. However, it appeared that regardless of who was watching, Trixie and Wyatt were satisfied to continue their playful behavior. It took a moment, but eventually, from the corner of her eye, Trixie spied the delegation that had come to greet them. Stepping out from under the rain of falling mist, she fixed her hair away from her face and called out, "Wyatt, we have company."

Trixie shook away the beads of water from her crown of dark brown hair. As the water occluding her view cleared from her eyes, she saw a tall, gracefully built bronze-skinned woman stepping forward toward her. As the woman approached, she spoke in a language Trixie did not understand. Despite Trixie's apparent confusion, the woman never broke her smile as she presented Trixie with a gift. She looked down at a thick sheaf of bundled barley carefully braided with twine. The ripened seed heads hung heavily, swaying back and forth with the slightest movement. Trixie did not quite know what to make of this gift,

but she knew enough to accept it readily and with good humor. The stranger nodded to Trixie and stepped back in line with her contingency with an expression of satisfaction. Just then, a tall, physically impressive specimen of a man stepped forward toward Wyatt. Wyatt looked into his dark eyes as he spoke the same unintelligible words. In his arms, the man held out a bronze semi-circular cutting implement. Looking down at the strange object gleaming in the sun, Wyatt fixed his eyes on the blade, marveling at its artistry. Wyatt did not know how to react when the man placed the ceremonial object into his hands. Instinct guided him to gesture with a bow of his head before thanking them with his words. "Thank you," He said, "I appreciate the thought, but I don't even know what this thing is." He looked up at Trixie to see a perplexed expression on her face. He looked back at the others to see their expressions were equally confused. "I'm sorry, did I say something wrong?" Seemingly, the more Wyatt spoke, the more the others reacted to his words.

It was apparent to Wyatt and Trixie that these strangers did not understand the meaning of his words. This did not, however, explain their reaction. Wyatt wondered if their response was due merely to his manner of speech. Or was there something else entirely? He looked over at Trixie and wondered

if she was coming to similar conclusions. *Does this language hold some significance to these people?* Then he remembered the previous night. "Trixie, do you recall the story from last night?"

"Not all the details, but yes. Why do you ask?"

"The priest told it to us in our language. It didn't seem suspicious then, but these people don't understand what we're saying."

"Yeah, I recognized that myself. So what's going on here? We should try to figure out a way to communicate with these folk." In a gesture of introduction, Trixie reached out her hand to the woman who presented her with the bundled sheaf of barley. As their hands enclosed around each other, she pointed to herself and said, "I am Trixie." She handed the bundle to Wyatt and, with her other hand, pointed out beyond the pyramidal form that dominated the town square and said, "We've come a long way across the wasteland to find you."

For some time, Trixie attempted to draw meaning through gestures while speaking the occasional word for emphasis. The result was only confusion on the part of her audience. Wyatt knelt and drew images with bits of charcoal he had instinctively retained from the fire. On the white painted bricks at his feet,

a visual narrative representing the aspects of their journey unfolded in tones of black and gray. Trixie watched as the contingency that had come to greet them looked on in fascination and genuine curiosity. Trixie and the others were paying close attention to the unfolding content of Wyatt's work, scratched onto the white pavement one nameless image at a time. She knew they could only understand a limited meaning or context without the language to bind the images together. Despite the lack of context, few had seen such powerful images before. Wyatt scratched the outline of the Winged Serpent with his charcoal stick as he tried to represent his and Trixie's ascent up the side of the pyramid.

So enthralled were they that no one saw when over Wyatt's shoulder as someone threw a bucket of water onto his charcoal drawings. Wyatt stood to his feet, startled by the surprise action. The crowd watched as the images Wyatt had tried so desperately to convey dissolved instantly. Wyatt, in anger, turned in the direction of the offending action. He then recognized Adapa holding the bucket, accompanied by a trio of temple priests. Adapa's presence there left Wyatt at a loss for words.

Adapa had no such issue as he spoke out angrily about what he was witnessing. "What is this blasphemy you teach the people? The children of Marduk will not be subject to this heresy!"

Trixie said, "It's you from last night. We saw you there upon the pyramid." Her expression changed as she realized that this seemed to make little difference to him now. Confused by the change in character, Trixie continued. I really don't see what we did wrong. Besides, they don't understand a word of what we're saying."

"Hopefully, that's how it's going to stay. What the people understand should not concern you. These are simple people, and we intend to keep them that way. Besides, there are more important things for you to do. It's time for both of you to come with me. You are summoned to the Temple of Marduk. There, you will find others who, like me, speak the ancient language."

...

Johnny ordered the caravan to a halt. It was an unusual move because it was so early in the afternoon, but conditions in the desert became desperate. With the loss of many hybrid humans to the elements, it became necessary to shorten the day's traveling hours. The Prototaxities, whose interactions of late were virtually nonexistent, spoke out through one of its human attendants to Doctor Nick. "Why have we stopped?"

Nick, who had just begun unfolding his navigational maps upon the surface of the Prototaxities suspension chamber, responded. "I thought you had eyes everywhere. Take a look around. Things aren't going well for us out here. We had twenty more die of thirst, exhaustion, or just plain wander off. That was just yesterday."

"I understand your frustration with the situation as it is, Doctor Walsh, but I sense our journey is nearing its end. I will send two of my human attendants to scout the surrounding area. The answer we seek is close by."

This clue was the first the Prototaxities had ever given. Nick was curious and asked, "And how do you know this?"

"There is life nearby; I can feel it. Even through the casing of this box, I can taste the scent of deep well water evaporating on the wind. Some kind of an oasis is out there."

Two of the attendant humans, one male, and the other female stood up from their duties and approached Doctor Nick and the other attendant. Nick recognized by the expressions in their eyes that, unlike the others, their thoughts were confused and disorganized. He could not help but wonder what was happening within their minds. He imagined that perhaps this state of mind that possessed them was the Prototaxities reprogramming some specific abilities or insights utilizing telepathy into their

minds. Nick continued to watch as their eyes began to blink rapidly. Nick wasn't sure how Prototaxities' telepathic powers would work, but it soon became evident to Nick that his suspicions were correct. Moments later, the blinking stopped, and an expression of clarity appeared upon her as the female attendant began to speak. "Good afternoon, Doctor Walsh. It would seem I am gifted with the agency required for my mission. There is one thing I do not yet have: a name. The Prototaxities said, since you are the closest thing I have to a parent, it might not be out of line to ask for your help finding me one." Doctor Nick was surprised but more so amused at this strange turn of events. He smiled, turned to the other attendant, and said, "I suppose you'd also want a name."

"Yes, I would, sir."

"Well then, both of you gather what gear you'll need together and meet me back here as soon as you're ready." As Johnny appeared over Nick's shoulder, the two unnamed attendants moved off to gather what they needed. "What's going on? It looks like I missed something."

"Two of our children just graduated, and they're moving out already."

Johnny responded, "What about the rest of them?"

Through the voice of one of the remaining attendants, the Prototaxities said, "It was only possible because of their

prolonged exposure to the network telepathically through me.

This entire time, their minds have been maturing at an accelerated rate relative to the others."

After a few moments, the pair returned with a fresh kit, including a day's ration of food, water, and a three-way communication device to talk back and forth with the base camp.

They stood before those gathered in front of the suspension chamber, patiently waiting for a response from Doctor Nick.

"Are you actually standing here waiting for me to assign you names?"

"Yes," they said in unison.

"Alright then, if we're going to do this, let's go in alphabetical order, shall we? You will be Annie and Andie for no other reason than being first."

"Thank you, Doctor Walsh. We have what we need. We'll be on our way then." said Annie.

As they began to walk off in the direction the Prototaxities had instructed them to, Johnny gave Nick a sideways glance and said mockingly, "That was mighty generous of you, Nick. You thought that up all by yourself, did you? You had an opportunity to give them a hand into the human world, and you whiffed it. Why didn't you give them your grandparents' names or something? For Christ's sake, you named them after dolls."

"What?"

"And I'm the aloof, insensitive one.

They turned to watch Annie and Andie walk off in the direction the Prototaxities had triangulated for them until they had become invisible in the background.

Andie and Annie stayed on the course provided for them, walking into the desert until darkness fell. They had enough knowledge to build a small fire and huddle together to shelter from the cold. Then, as morning came, they ate a small packaged meal of mixed grain protein and fruit and proceeded again on the path laid before them. By noon, they reached the towering machines that had sunk into the deep aquifer.

...

By now, the caravan had been on the move again. Under the Prototaxities direction, it moved on to a course corresponding with Annie and Andie. A voice crackled through the receiver, so Johnny ordered their movements to come to a sudden halt.

"Caravan, this is Annie; anyone listening?"

Doctor Nick quickly responded, "Go ahead, Annie, I'm here."

Annie's voice sounded restrained, almost hesitant as she spoke. "Hello, Doctor Walsh. We believe we've found the source of the sensor anomaly. There is water here. But that's not all."

There was a momentary pause before she began speaking again.

"There are people here! They have weapons. What should I do? Should I greet them?"

"Where are you now?"

"Right now, we are hidden within the works of this massive machine. These people appear to be searching for something."

"Under no circumstances are you to reveal yourselves. I repeat, do not reveal yourself. Do you understand me? We have no idea what their intentions are, so stay put."

Johnny, standing nearby, said to one of the Prototaxities attendants, "Can you triangulate that signal?"

"I already have."

"Do you still possess enough power to transport me to that place?"

"No, but if you run, you might make it. My attendant here will show you."

Johnny turned to the tall, slender attendant and said I suppose you'll want a name as well. The way he answered confirmed this. From how he looked at him, Johnny could tell that this young man was ready for anything by his youthful exuberance.

"I already figured that one out for myself, thank you. You can call me David."

"Fair enough, David, let me get my gear, and we'll be on our way."

Johnny and David were in peak physical condition despite the environment, so they were off quickly. David had the coordinates locked down and headed in a beeline in that direction with Johnny one step behind. As they moved, the footsteps of Annie and Andie and an older set presumably left by Wyatt and Trixie were visible in the sand. Soon, they could see the massive structure of the water machine looming before them. Johnny spoke into his communicator and said, "Hold on tight. We'll be there in a moment."

Johnny could hear voices speaking in some strange unknown language as they came upon the machine. Using it as a blind, he poked his head around the corner to see several people carrying spears and blades, apparently looking for something or someone. After a moment, Johnny witnessed the commotion of Annie and Andie's discovery and subsequent capture. Johnny turned the corner in time to see a look of desperate fear come upon their faces as Annie and Andie came under threat from the business end of a spear. Johnny also noticed a lot of confusion on the faces of the would-be killers. He could only conclude that they had not anticipated finding anyone there.

Johnny imagined it likely they didn't know what to do. Now, while they were off their guard, he would make his move.

Stepping out from his hiding place, Johnny ignited his flame thrower. A loud pop and burning plasma burst from his gun into the air, having its intended effect. It was genuinely intimidating as he stood in his armor and blazing torch. He had everyone's full attention. None of them had ever seen or even imagined anything like him. Some dropped their spears, and at least one ran away. One goal was to get Annie and Andie out of immediate danger. However, one of them had the guts to pull his sword. He grabbed Annie from behind and threatened to use her as a human shield.

The wild-eyed man spoke unintelligibly, and his hands shook as Johnny stepped slowly closer. This move seemingly emboldened them. Johnny and David stood in a standoff with those who remained. Johnny recognized Andie, standing near where two assailants were holding Annie. He looked into Andie's eyes and gave him a wink as he lowered his flame gun in his direction. Depressing the trigger, a jet of plasma burst out toward them, and the two captors released Andie and dove for the deck. Andie seemingly understood the signal and leaped to Annie's captor. David ran headlong, tackling one of the attackers and fighting him for his weapon.

A desperate struggle ensued as all three wrestled for control of the blades. Fueled by the adrenaline of the sudden action, spear-wielding strangers sprang to attention at Johnny. He found himself dodging a barrage of flying missiles. He moved quickly, but one missile caught a joint in his armor between his shoulder and breastplate. Johnny grimaced in pain as the polished stone blade plunged deep into his flesh. He ducked down low, snapping the spear shaft in the process. He pivoted around, dropping on one knee, depressing the trigger to its fullest. A flaming ribbon of burning fuel leaped in their direction. In the mayhem of glowing light and smoke, a hideous cry went up as a few of their number were caught in the torrent of burning plasma.

Both Andie and his captor had a solid grip on the blade hilt. Each seemingly knew where this was heading. Annie had let go a moment earlier to search the ground for something, anything. She found his discarded spear. Without a moment's hesitation, she thrust the spear into her assailant, piercing his side. Caught off guard in his own struggle over a weapon, David took a wild elbow to the chin. His challenger overpowered him as he stumbled, stabbing him in the chest with the very blade they fought over. When David fell, the last aggressors had retreated into the desert.

Annie and Andie looked around. As the surge of adrenaline diminished, a clearer picture of what happened was evident. Four of the seven who had come searching were now dead, killed in the most gruesome fashion. Annie looked down at her hands. They were still shaking, covered in blood. It was then she realized that the others were wounded. She found Johnny lying on the ground with a remnant of the stone spear point protruding through a gap in his armor. His face had grown pale, and he did not cry out. The other, who they had known as David, lay lifeless. Annie got on the radio and called out, "Doctor Walsh, come in! Get here as quickly as you can. We have injured here who need assistance. Please hurry!"

...

After receiving the distress call, Doctor Nick left the caravan behind, sprinting through relentless heat alone across the strip of barren desert. He was heading into the unknown for reasons he didn't wholly fathom. As far as he could recall, he had never been one to risk life and limb in such a fashion. As the sun beat down on him, it occurred to him that something about this situation seemed wholly unusual. Soon, the giant rusting machine came into his field of vision, forming like a

mirage on the horizon. Though it was still some distance away, the great ruddy behemoth rose from the ground to dominate its place in the landscape.

As shocked and fascinated as he was by the sight of the massive water machine before him, there was little time to admire this mechanical wonder. The report of the wounded took precedence over his curiosity. Nick knew how important it was to find them quickly. He wondered, *"Where were they? This place was immense."* Moving through the complex system of pipes, Nick turned several corners before he came to find Johnny lying wounded in a pool of blood.

Nick rushed to his side and began unlatching the hidden clasps of Johnny's armor. Realizing how seriously wounded Johnny was and untrained in such procedures, Nick's hands trembled as he drew a medical compress from his field bag. Immediately, Nick applied steady pressure to the wound. Johnny was still conscious, and he gasped in response to the pain. From the appearance of the wounds alone, Nick could not immediately tell to what extent Johnny's injuries threatened his life. However, it soon became evident by the rate at which the white gauze quickly stained crimson. All the things he might do to save Johnny's life flashed nervously through his head as his hands continued to apply the necessary pressure. Nick's heart raced.

His hands and the cuffs of his shirt were drenched in blood. He had not anticipated an end like this. This meager action was all Nick could do as Johnny's life forces were ebbing from his body.

Nick could barely look at Johnny any longer. His eyes rose from the scene of gore, and he recognized that Annie and Andie, standing nearby, appeared somewhat disconnected from what was happening. Speaking in their direction, Nick asked, "Where's David? What's his condition? Have either of you checked on him?" "Knife to the heart, I'm afraid he didn't make it," Annie said with little emotion. Pondering her stone-faced reaction to this death, he had witnessed. To Nick, the pair appeared to be in a state of shock. He wondered if his response would be any different.

He called out to them to take them back to some semblance of reality. "Annie, come over here and help put pressure on this wound so I can have a look at David. Come on, come on! Move!" Once they received the right kind of encouragement, Annie and Andie seemed to fall in line. "Annie, where's your radio? We need to call in to let them know our situation."

Annie handed Nick the radio. As he moved toward where David lay, he spoke into the receiver. "Hello, can anyone from the caravan hear me? This is Doctor Walsh. Come in."

...

The caravan reached the base of the great machine. The telekinetic voice that from the outset tenuously connected the hybrid human attendants to the Prototaxities was all but severed. Sensing at long last that it was in such proximity to the systems of shallow ponds, the Prototaxities reached out with its mind to communicate with those that remained. The voice came into their minds, "Hear me now, for there is little time. You must bring me into the water."

The attendants, gathering their remaining strength, wheeled the cart toward the slope of the dusty hill. In a quick step, they put their weight into it and were soon rolling. Its momentum kept moving as it added the extra muscle, pushing its way up the modest incline. Reaching the level ground of the plateau revealed to them the clear shallow pools as far and expansive as the eyes could see. The reflection of the sunlight shined off the surface of the water. None of them had seen such a sight. Even as they continued to push, they were captivated by the imagery for the briefest moment. The

cartage soon was up to the hubs of the wheels deep into the water. As one of the attendants undid the latch on the pressure seal of the container, a burst of putrid odor escaped, permeating out into the air. It was only then that they realized that the voice that had been guiding them all this time had gone suddenly silent. They scrambled to unload what remained of the contents into the water. Filled with anxiety, the five attendants got on one side of the wagon. With the last of their reserves, they toppled the container and its contents into the water. The electronic device Prototaxities had commissioned and placed within its chamber slipped beneath the surface, lodging in the shallow sediment.

A dark slurry of contagion that was the Prototaxities remains swirled into the untouched artesian water. A semi-translucent film began to spread on the surface, absorbing the sun's ultraviolet rays. A metamorphosis occurred wherein, as they watched in amazement over minutes, the character of the water began to change and slowly evolve. The more the attendants watched, the more alarmed they grew at what they witnessed. One of the attendants thought that they were perhaps in over their heads. She had almost forgotten, "the radio! Doctor Walsh, Johnny, come in, please? Something is happening. I don't quite know what to make of it; come in, please?"

She repeated this call several times without an answer.

...

Andie knelt over Johnny, struggling to hold the compress tightly onto the bleeding wound, when he recognized a strange expression prevailing over Johnny's look of anguished agony. The color of his skin changed from a pale pink to a mottled gray. It was as if he was transforming before his eyes. Yet, something also felt strange as well. When Andie was applying pressure, Johnny's body seemed to collapse like a hollow husk. "What's happening to you?" Andie asked with startling alarm in his voice. It appeared as if Johnny would answer for a moment, but as his lips moved, his face, his head, and then his whole body fell to dust.

Nick sensed something indefinable had happened. He did not know what it was exactly or how it worked, but he knew what it meant and what was coming. Prototaxities, in the form he understood, had died. This conscious entity had helped to preserve his and countless lives. He also knew that as it passed, he would surely have his final rest. "I don't think I'd mind if there just weren't so much work to be done."

Nick looked down at the radio trying to speak, but his voice was gone, and his hand mindlessly let go of the receiver. A voice came crackling in over the speaker. "Doctor Walsh, Johnny come in, please? Something is happening. I don't quite know what to make of it. Come in, please?"

Somehow Doctor Nick found himself conscious of the sensation of what had been his body collapsing into a pillar of dust. He watched from above as the updraft scattered the debris, and he was gone.

Chapter 16

...

Trixie and Wyatt followed Adapa from the plaza through the sun-baked streets of the town. Row after row of mud-brick stalls

and domiciles bordered the road they walked. All similarly decorated in contrasting gray and ruddy earthen pigments, the geometric forms used there struck Trixie and Wyatt with their richness and simplicity. Seemingly everywhere they looked, townsfolk could be seen hard at work making repairs on the surfaces of these fragile buildings. Others working busily at staking grain or other commodities had begun to notice Wyatt and Trixie passing by. So, as the word of the stranger's presence spread among them, people in increasing numbers stopped their labor to observe the newcomers. The sight of the strangers caused the everyday goings-on within the center of town to come to a standstill eventually. Soon, there was a crowd following them from a respectable distance. Despite the size of the gathering, Trixie and Wyatt could feel the weight of all their gazes falling on them.

After a while, the road opened wide onto a secondary plaza. At the center stood a fortress-like structure of buildings behind a walled gate. From afar, it looked different from what they had seen previously. Trixie thought privately to herself. *This must be the temple complex.* As it came closer into view, Trixie and Wyatt took notice of its appearance. As a town within a town, the buildings looked similar to those they had seen previously. These, however, appeared to have been oddly scaled up in proportion. These structures possessed an air of antiquity

and an uninhabitable feel. Drawing nearer, they came close enough to inspect the high walls that surrounded the complex. At that moment, Trixie realized she was so fixated on these buildings that she hadn't noticed the eyes of so many following them had vanished. She didn't quite know how to interpret this sign. Turning to Wyatt, she said softly so only he could hear, "Our friends must have had good reason to abandon us here."

Wyatt looked around the entire site and made a similar conclusion. "I think you may be right."

Adapa paused before the stairs leading to a set of monumental wooden high gates held into the whitewashed stone wall on massive steel hinges. He looked to Trixie and Wyatt and said, "Welcome to the Temple of Marduk. Few have had bestowed upon them such an honor," Adapa said as he bowed his head and, with a gesture of his hand, directed them to climb the stairs. They obliged. The heavy wooden doors opened as they approached the top of the staircase. Wyatt and Trixie, with Adapa a few steps behind, walked through the threshold into a space beyond. Wyatt turned to watch the massive wooden doors shut tightly against the outside world.

Within the confines of the walled structure, they walked a grass-lined path. They grew closer, and the place appeared to be

some large memorial. They eventually came to the central building, where the remains of many strange and unusual monumental objects lay, some half-submerged in the earth. Adapa commented as they passed by, "Once, these objects were part of a shattered, far greater object whose scorched destruction is now part of some fabled history."

Trixie was quick to ask, "What are these things?"

Adapa answered with pride in his voice. "These objects accompanied Marduk upon his return to Earth. Here, they have since remained. We made every effort to preserve the site as it was on that long-ago day."

"What day was that?" Wyatt asked.

Adapa now had a look of puzzlement on his face regarding Wyatt's question. "Surely you're joking?" He shook his head before continuing. "I speak of the day, the miracle of Marduk's incarnation."

Trixie shot a look at Wyatt. He, in turn, raising an eyebrow, wordlessly responded with his expression of disbelief. Trixie quickly interrupted the uncomfortable silence by asking Adapa, "How long ago did this-- incarnation happen?"

"It happened many centuries ago. Those accounts from first-hand witnesses tell a story of a fiery entry, with the night sky turning orange." Adapa pointed to a half-buried spherical object

protruding from the ground and said, "There is the shell of the celestial egg from which Marduk broke open and climbed out."

Trixie and Wyatt looked at each other again. This time, Trixie spoke. "Wyatt, you suppose this event had anything to do with the collapse of the dome culture?"

"I don't know; the timing may not be right. Plus, from my understanding, the dome people didn't need much help. They were quite capable of doing themselves in." So this could be something altogether different."

"How do you tease two events like this apart? Besides, we don't know exactly what we're dealing with yet. I remember hearing just a mention of a Marduk character in the stories and seeing similar iconography among the rubble of the dome. We should keep an open mind about all of this. And whatever it is, I'm not feeling too comfortable about it either. I wish I had my blade right now."

"Yeah, you and me both." Wyatt directed another question at Adapa. "Tell me, Adapa, are there others like Marduk?"

"Yes, there were once many of his kind. However, that time was a different age compared to now. The world is a far more meager place in comparison."

"What happened to the others?"

"That is a question you can ask Marduk yourself. He's asked for you to see him now. He may answer you before he eats you." Adapa said, unable to conceal a smirk.

They continued walking through the collection of strange objects. Trixie reached out her hand and touched the surface of one of them. As she did, she felt and heard a distinct artificial rumble. The image of the space around the object seemed to bend momentarily in response to the sound. She could not be sure if it had been an illusion or if light and space had really bent. Since no one had seen this phenomenon, she thought it best to keep it to herself.

Soon, they reached the central structure. This building was odd with its simple, unadorned, uniform glazed blocks. Wyatt determined it had more in common with the style and construction of the bunkers and the science stations than anything they had seen in this town. This building indeed predated everything else around here. Finally, they came to a now-familiar metallic door that slid open into a recessed compartment as they approached. They stepped up into the dimly lit space. Before them stood two untarnished metallic doors, between which were some switching mechanisms connected into the wall.

Trixie turned to Wyatt and asked, "Where do you think these doors lead?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

Trixie turned to him and said, "How did you get this job of not knowing anything? I want to nominate a friend, Wyatt, for the position. You're certainly well qualified."

Wyatt turned to look at Trixie, and as he did, she had the most playfully evil grin on her face. Wyatt was about to open his mouth when a bell rang, and an indicator light above one of the doors started flashing. "I think we're about to find out."

Then the door opened, revealing a rectangular room. Wyatt Trixie and Adapa stepped through the threshold onto the grated platform for a floor. Though it appeared similar in configuration to the elevator they had traveled in, this felt different, and they didn't know what to expect. They grew nervous as the door closed behind them. They turned to face the back of the door, and as they did, they heard loud mechanical noises coming seemingly from all sides. Just as Trixie called out, "What's happening!" they all began to feel the distinct sense that they were falling at an uncontrolled speed. Fear welled inside them as they desperately grabbed a rail placed conspicuously along the inner wall.

...

Following the tracks of the cartage, people of the caravan, their numbers winnowed by the harsh desert environment, came into the water as if reborn. With eyes wide, they rushed forward, some falling, some diving into the waist-deep water. A tremendous spontaneous noise of joyfulness welled up as their bodies slipped beneath the surface and splashed about. They did so as naturally as if they'd been doing so all their lives.

Most were too exhausted to move after bathing in cooling waters and drinking their fill of the murky waters. Instead, many found themselves absent-mindedly resting near the edge of the pond. Something was happening in the water, and they were alone without proper leadership. Few of them possessed even a rudimentary understanding of what was happening. Despite the efforts of those who came before, attrition and ignorance rendered their number vulnerable.

Ignorant of their environment, they watched perplexed while a green semitransparent rind of organic material began accumulating on the greater surface of the artesian pool. Roiling from beneath the golden brown and then an opaque black surface, enormous arabesque tendrils of mottled mycelium flesh curled up, reaching out onto the shore. In each spot where these

fantastic fungi arms touched the ground, a thousand other components soon sprouted all variety of mycelial mats and tubules. Beneath the spider's web-like sheen on the surface, massive amounts of heat rose from a chemical, and physical metamorphosis occurred.

White and gray pillars of mycelial growth rose slowly, filling the cracks along the edge of what had devolved into a fetid pond. Contorted humanlike appendages budded like branches upon their congealed surfaces, pushing outward. A rounded dome appeared on one of the vertical columns of flesh, sprouting two ocular globes. As the objects' shapes became more patently humanlike, people on the shore began to recognize the forms for what they were. These were people, but they were not like them. There were seven in total, all covered in milky, almost translucent skin. As their shimmering bodies took their final forms, the spider's web network of fibrous tendrils, which supported them, withdrew into the water.

A rising murmur of dismay and confusion came from humans witnessing this metamorphosis. These emotions only amplified as one among the seven translucent figures began in an unsteady gait to walk toward where a large group of people had settled. Their unease grew closer to fear as the creature, followed by the other six, grew nearer.

...

The red electronic numerical light display above their heads flickered too fast for them to count. Wyatt, observing Adapa, recognized by the look of fear on his face that he did not understand what was happening. Holding tightly onto the rail, they could feel their weight pulling them downward at a terrific speed. What was clear to him and Trixie was that they were falling. Suddenly, the sounds of winding gears filled from within and without the falling metal box as it came under mechanical control. The box slowed its descent and then came to an abrupt halt.

Wyatt, Trixie, and Adapa sat on the floor in shock. Each was still holding the rail as the metal door slid open. First, Trixie and the others stood up and stepped into the darkened room. As Adapa stepped out, the metal door closed, and the room enveloped them in a haze of bare light cast from high above. The space beyond the interior of the brightly lit box was dim by comparison.

Trixie surveyed as best she could and, as her eyes adjusted to the light, could see movement within shadows. "Wyatt, do you see what I'm seeing?"

"No," he responded, "What are you seeing?"

He watched as Trixie pointed to a place in the distance. Wyatt squinted his eyes toward the point where she indicated some figure did appear. They watched it now as it moved, and its movements became more distinct. After another moment, Trixie recognized what she was seeing and moved forward. Before she did, she turned toward Wyatt and Adapa and said, "It's a child! Why is a child down here alone?"

Trixie ran toward the silhouette of the child, walking awkwardly in the dim light. And as the image of the child's face became more evident, she abruptly stopped. Trixie gasped in horror and quickly moved to stifle this sound and emotion in response to the boy's appearance. As the child closed the gap between them, Trixie covered her mouth with her hand as tears flowed over her cheeks. The boy, who could have been no more than six years old, had a disfigured face, short-cropped hair, and rags for clothing. As he approached, shuffling across the polished concrete floor in the semi-darkness with arms questing outward, he appeared to be following what Trixie suspected was the sounds of their voices.

Holding back her tears, Trixie said, "Hello, can you see us? Can you understand what I'm saying? If you can, what are you doing here?"

Adapa and Wyatt had caught up to Trixie, and they stood together as the child came a few feet from them. They could see

and hear the child sobbing in the soft light. Wyatt looked upon the child's milky white face. Deep gouges and scars held the places where typical features would ordinarily be. He imagined that despite how the child appeared, there was something wholly unreal about him. Seemingly at the moment, these thoughts crossed Wyatt's mind, and the child's whimpering took a sudden and disturbing turn to laughter. Though the child did not appear to have eyes, his head tilted toward Wyatt as if staring straight at him, and he said, "So Wyatt, you see through this illusion. What form, then, should I present to you?"

In an instantaneous burst of transformation, the child morphed into the form of another human. Still in a state of surprise by the child's sudden laughter, Trixie was further shocked by the appearance of her mother standing before her. Trixie trembled as a mix of emotions rolled over her. Being no stranger to illusions, she gritted her teeth behind her closed lips and told herself *Get a grip, Trixie. Now, obviously, none of this is real.* She stared into the image of her mother's face and said, "So this is Marduk, the shapeshifter. What you've done here is a terrific trick, but I'm not sure what your intention is in showing me pictures of my dead mother. Are you trying to scare us? You're going to have to do better than that."

In the form of Trixie's mother, Marduk said, "If you were to look at my true form, you would surely die of fright." Marduk

vanished, and a screen of sheer white cloth materialized in his place, appearing to float unsupported in the gently rustling air. Shadows and light conspired to represent multidimensional objects as they intersected with the two-dimensional plane upon the surface, fluttering scrim. Adapa dropped to the ground on his knees. Once so full of confidence, the man now in the hall of Marduk, his master, quivered in supplication. Adapa called out to Trixie and Wyatt, "Kneel before the holy image of Marduk. Kneel before he strikes you down!"

Wyatt and Trixie did not kneel. The whole concept of it baffled them. Wyatt and Trixie, each in their own mind, wondered who this creature was and why it would demand such a thing from another.

Wyatt said to Trixie, "What a strange thing this is. What do you suppose it is?"

Trixie, not knowing the answer, merely shook her head. From his position on the floor, Adapa said, "This is all of Marduk's true nature that we can visualize, for he does not exist wholly in this realm."

"Then how is it that, as you say, he crashed here and stood up from the wreckage of his ship?" Wyatt asked.

"These are mysteries without answers. It would not be wise to anger Marduk, for it would not only be you who would feel the

pointed end of his wrath. Please, I beg you, kneel before Marduk."

Marduk's voice boomed within the hollow concrete space. "Is it to be expected that our guests don't understand the nature of my power? Perhaps it is time I showed them?"

They could see on the screen the image had changed. Now Trixie and Wyatt were looking as if through a window onto another place. With the moving pictures of the scene, they recognized the site as the newly formed lakes near the water machine they had seen days before. Things, however, looked decidedly different from how they did just a few days earlier. Despite the apparent changes, it was still easily recognizable. Ringing the reservoirs, a crowd of hundreds of people gathered. On the screen, before they appeared in the sky above those assembled, batting its wings, the nightmare image of the Winged Serpent appeared.

...

The tendrils of mycelium had died back, receding beneath the surface of the water after the seven personages had fully formed. The people near the waters watched the transformation with growing fascination. These creatures walked among them in a landscape that had also come alive. Around them, waist-high

cattails and phragmites growing wild reached toward the sun on the edge of the newly born wetland.

Sitting atop the toppled cart, now half overgrown with green plants, Prototaxities astonished attendants observed the anthropomorphic beings. From what they could see, as these creatures interacted with the humans, the people did not fear them despite their distinctly non-human appearance. One of the attendants, a tall, slender, but powerfully built young man of fair complexion, said to the young lady beside him, "Perhaps now that we are alone, it's up to us to figure this out. Come on, who wants to have a closer look?"

The young dark-skinned lady with long dark hair answered the man as she stood up and stepped into the water, "I will go with you. Before you go, have you given yourself a name yet? I've determined I will be called Rachel. I don't know where it comes from. It just came to me."

"I hadn't thought about it, to be honest."

"Well, you should. I have to call you something."

"Come on, let's go. I'll promise to give it some thought."

Together, they waded through the grass-choked water to where the strange creatures had emerged seemingly from nothing, and now they stood relaying information and engaging the others.

After trudging and wading across the water, they found themselves within earshot of one of the beings.

At first, it was challenging to listen to his words, though his head and its features mainly were humanlike, silvery, fishlike scales covered its body, and it stood on two flippers-like appendages that appeared more home in the water than on land. Once the initial strangeness of its appearance wore off, the words rang crystal clear.

As they drew nearer, they watched as one of the half-fish half-men stood upon the highest point he could find so they could see him and his voice would resonate. "Friends, my name is Oannes. I know not the process we have come here to be among you. However, we are here to pass our living knowledge of the before time on to you and your kind. The creature that created us so believed in this undertaking that it sacrificed itself for this purpose. There is much over the coming years that you will learn, but I have a warning: something is coming that challenges us to destroy what we would create here. Even now, forces array themselves against you. The things you will see are not real; your fear creates them and is used against you. You must resist as best you can. We will show you."

The sudden appearance of a massive thunderhead cast its shadow down upon them. Many people had not seen such an event

during their long trek across the desert. Rachael looked up to watch in fascination as the darkening sky roiled with hundreds of others. Great bolts of lightning and claps of thunder struck as a veil of mist filled the sky. Though they could not believe their eyes, a great winged beast appeared, circling silently in the air high above them from within the cloud. Its shimmering breast and wingspan reflected a spectral light reaching from horizon to horizon. It was at once terrible and sublime. And as it spun around on its axis, it appeared to be circling downward.

A murmur of excitement and fearful voices rose from those on the ground as a thunderous cry crashed down from on high, and the ground shook. The horrible beast turned and went into a sudden dive. A sudden wave of fear turned to motion among the people. Rachael struggled to keep her footing in the resulting mayhem as a human stampede rushed in her direction. Through the veil of panic and confusion, Rachael saw from above a pair of monstrous talons descending in their midst. Her eyes widened as these deadly weapons began grasping and shearing flesh with lethal efficiency. Knocked down in a rush, Rachel, on her hands and knees, crawled through the terrified crowd. As she moved, she tried to avoid the crush of certain death in the clutches of the beast. She could hear their muffled voices crying out in horror. Rachel somehow managed to make her way to the edge of the crowd and picked herself to run. Reaching the edge of the

water, she jumped in, submerging herself below the surface. Even below the water, she could hear the screams of the people mad with fear.

Rachel emerged from the water, having managed to find safe hiding and several others behind Prototaxitie's toppled incubation chamber. She found the courage to lift her head above the top of the chamber to observe what was happening. Shaking with fear, she saw Oannes standing there like before. He had not moved from where he had initially been standing. This creature, she noted, showed no fear, and quite possibly, she imagined he did not possess any. The other creatures of his kind came and stood unmoved beside him. The grasping claws reached and threatened but somehow could not touch them.

Amid this, Oannes spoke to the people huddled in fright. "I beg you to look at this creature. It is the stuff of nightmares. But that's all it is. It preys on your fears. Any wounds inflicted upon you, these too are illusions. Look now at your injuries. Do they not disappear?" His words affected them, for the fog of fear and confusion lifted as the horror that filled the sky diminished.

...

Wyatt and Trixie stood again before the laughing image of the blind and deformed child. Wyatt ran up to it as if to swat the child before he realized this, too, was a projection. He called out to the room, circling as he spoke, "Where are you? Show yourself, monster!"

Trixie eyed the room for a projection source but could find none. She grabbed Adapa by the shoulder, shook him, and said, "Get up off the ground! You need to show us how to get out of here now!"

Adapa pulled from her grasp and further prostrated himself onto the cold floor. As he did, he said, "I won't do it! I will not betray my master."

Laughter rose again from the child as his frail figure appeared before them. "There is no need to bother with this man. He has given himself over to me. Go to your people now and bring them on to me so they too can worship Marduk." As Marduk spoke these words, the door to the moving chamber opened. A ghostly light from its interior spilled into the space where they stood.

Wyatt turned toward the light and said, "Come on, Trixie, leave him; we're going! Adapa may be a lost cause."

Recognizing the moment for what it was, Trixie released Adapa from her grip, saying, "Don't just lay there. Come with us." She turned to Wyatt and said, "What am I supposed to do?"

He won't budge. Trixie looked into Wyatt's eyes, wordlessly pleading for him to help her.

Wyatt, abandoning his reluctance, moved toward Adapa and said, "If we're going to do this, we'd better hurry."

Trixie grabbed one of Adapa's arms beneath the shoulder while Wyatt grasped the opposite. Together, they dragged his limp body across the threshold of the moving chamber just moments before the metal door closed behind them.

Trixie could feel the sensation of the room moving upward as she took a moment to observe its details. On the wall was a control panel with buttons arranged with corresponding levels. The letters were still legible. She read them aloud as she depressed the button. "Level one command and control center."

Chapter 17

...

The sound of familiar voices seemed to rise from everywhere and nowhere all at once. Piece by piece, the words formed into Doctor Nick's disembodied mind. From within a formless void, Nick became dimly aware of himself looking out as if through others' eyes. *Who was this speaking? Where am I?* He asked himself. The troubling image of seeing himself taken up by the wind was still fresh in his memory. The weight of a physical being seemed to be drawing him towards the earth. Where he was precisely, he could not be sure. However, he was also acutely aware that he was not alone. He sensed his consciousness floating lightly as one among a silent host of human spirits that once haunted the forest. Their murmurs and memories followed him, filtering through what had previously been his private thoughts. Outside, there were others like himself; he could sense them, too.

Knee-deep in the water and moving in an awkward jerking motion, Nick became aware of the strange physicality of form that possessed him. He willed his foreign body to move and take in air through glistening gill-like slits that ran the length of his neck. Breathing deeply into the spinney cavity of his armored casing, he felt the fullness of this new body, such as it was. Nick paused to look down at these flipper-like appendages springing from sockets beneath chitin armor through alien eyes. As if this wasn't enough of a marvel for a single

day, he watched in wonder as bubbles rose from the scales of a small luminescent fish bubbled from swimming off into the water. He pondered in amazement at what kind of metamorphosis had made such transformations possible. *Indeed, this was the work of the Prototaxities. But where had it gone?*

Looking up, Nick focused again on the voice. Staring with newfound acuity upon the face of the creature in possession of a body assembled similarly to his own. The recognition was swift and unmistakable. *Oannes is Johnny! Does he know it himself?*

Nick watched the spreading spectrum of color emanating from the serpent's collar diminishing as the illusion retreated into the sky's apex. Nick's lips parted, and words almost too quiet to hear were spoken. "Facing this creature without fear, had Johnny, as Oannes, sent it running? Could it have been that simple?"

Oannes looked out at the people, overcome with fear, as they were assembled there, shaken and sodden. Sensing that their ordeal was far from over, he called them in a steady and severe tone. "Listen, there is little time. Gather your things together, and now you must move on from here. Not far from here, there is a place where there are people like you. They may not look exactly like you and speak your language, but they are your brothers and sisters. If you are to survive, it is there

you must go. I warn you; you must reach them before this monster turns their hearts to stone against you."

The crowd heard his words, and though some were still milling about, slowly, they began the process of pulling themselves together for the journey. Oannes, Observing the crowd's murmuring, was displeased by their lack of immediacy. He called out again. This time, his voice was tinted with equal parts anger and authority. "Did you not hear what I said? Could you do it now? You should not waste another moment! This situation could be a matter of life or death!"

Either his words or manner motivated them beyond their confusion and fear. For all around them, the humans moved with a new sense of urgency, gathering their meager belongings.

Nick moved as carefully through the water as this strange body allowed toward the point in the water where Oannes stood. He reached out his approximated arm and laid it on Oannes's sloping armored shoulder. Sensing his presence, Oannes turned toward Nick, and his human eyes wandered over his form. He paused, looking into his wan expression. After studying that familiar part, the light of recognition struck him. "We are alike. Many reside within us, yet I am most familiar with one as I look upon your human face. Are you not Doctor Walsh?"

"We are. I am glad to see you have again survived death. If it were only for my sake, I would be happy. But as it stands now, dare I say Prototaxities has more in store for us?"

"I can't sense the future exactly, but I should say you are correct."

...

The group was moving again, following the watercourse as it grew broader over a vast plain. In places, the water deepened here and there, forming silty depressions. As they moved into these areas, tall reeds breached the surface of the water. Nick watched his fellow half-fish, half-man hybrid forms wading through these pools. With his memories fully restored, the others of his kind were familiar to him. They were the scientists who had worked by his side on Project Golden Age. However, there was one he did not recognize. He had the face of a stranger, but he recalled the device he held in his augmented hands. Nick watched as the stranger among them, clutching tightly onto the object, stepped deeper into the reservoir. "Oannes...Johnny, what is happening? I know that device, but not the person carrying it. The voice in his mind is oddly reminiscent of... Abraham."

"Your senses don't betray you; that is Abraham."

"Isn't that the same machine you placed into the suspension chamber before leaving the control center?"

"Yes, it's called a pattern buffer, and with it, Abraham is doing as Prototaxities instructed him to do. During our trek across the desert, such a device was required to hold post-humans patterns in stasis temporarily. Due to the inherent limitations of any technology, no matter how advanced, it would only ever be a temporary solution. Only life itself could ever serve as a depository for those human spirits of the forest.

His actions now address this limitation. Only the systems of life can span the gulf of time. Here in this place, the transformation will be complete. I told you that the Prototaxities would not forsake them; now, those spirits will reside here."

They both paused and watched as Abraham walked into the deeper water, cradling the device in their arms. When he found the appropriate place, he continued until his human head slipped beneath the murky water's surface. Then he dove down into one of the broad, watery depressions, clutching the device under one arm. As he disappeared from the surface, Nick turned to Johnny and said, "Do you feel confident in trusting Abraham after what happened in the forest?"

"I have to trust him. Are we not all of one mind now? You must see that, don't you, Nick? We will go to the city to

deliver these people to safety, bringing our collective minds along for the ride."

Abraham's new body was well suited to fully immerse in the deeper water. His eyes could easily see through the clouded silt that swirled around him. After a few moments of searching, he found a reed-filled hollow and began digging down into the wet black earth. Placing the mechanism within the soil, Abraham watched as the device sensed its location. Many lights clustered about its surface and started to blink repetitively in reaction to its placement. Satisfied with his work, Abraham covered the device with a mass of black mud and observed the lights shining through layers of muck. As if following some primal signal, sinewy gray and white tendrils of mycelium sprouted up from beneath the surface of the pond's silty bottom. Abraham watched as the tendrils converged on the device, enveloping it in a milky mycelium husk. He observed appendages expanding quickly around the cocoon-like structure as the device glowed from within the thickening mushroom rind. Abraham, drawn by the same siren's chorus of voices, viewed the rising central stalk and was paralyzed by what he saw and heard. As the wave of growth came upon him, Abraham floated motionless, entranced by the voices. The repository of memories from an entire lifetime returned to him within his mind. A moment later, the cells of

the Prototaxities pushed forward, enveloping and consuming his fish-like body.

Dozens of meters away, Nick and Johnny observed the rising column of the Prototaxities' flesh breaking the water's surface. And as they did, Nick heard something he did not know existed. The sea of silent voices upon which his mind had been floating spoke in a great chorus. He dared not think it was real, each individual like himself, yet each one was inextricably tied to the whole.

Johnny felt more at home here, having spent centuries sleeping silently among them. Anyone prepared to listen could hear the same chorus of voices throughout the watercourse. Nick, however, tried speaking to the voices that seemed to be both in his head and in the water. But there was no response. Nick looked down upon the glasslike surface of the pool and saw the reflection of faces he had known long ago. Nick blinked his eyes, and the image in the reflection disappeared in a series of ripples moving across the water. In their place, he now saw three sets of human legs. Nick lifted up his eyes level with them and recognized their faces.

Opening his mouth, he said, "Hello, Annie and Andie." Gesturing to the third, he said, "I'm sorry, but I don't recall your name."

None of them, until this point, had seen Nick in this form. Recognizing his face, they were each somewhat shocked and bewildered.

"I...I'm Rachel, and you are Doctor Walsh. I'm sorry for staring. It's just I wasn't prepared for this."

"No one was. I certainly was not." Nick Said.

With the hardships of the desert mostly behind them, the group found they had entered this narrow landscape that bounded the water's edge. The reservoir served as a vessel wherein the spontaneous creation of Protectivities' tissue was freely regenerated. It was itself not unlike a living organism. This water running through it was its blood. Carried along within the volume of water, the fruits of this recreation mingled with that of the original form, coalescing into great floating clots of life. In the reservoirs of the high plateau, moss, algae, and fast-growing reeds had accumulated to choke the gravity-fed channels leading to the city as the hybrid humans traveled farther along the shallow pools that served as the town reservoirs grew deeper. The volume of life-giving waters flowing downward toward the town had slowed to a trickle for far below.

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The facility's hidden floors thumped past as the moving room climbed the deep hole into the bedrock. As it rose, Adapa sat with legs spread out below him. Wyatt and Trixie stood silently, holding tightly to the rail. The indicator lights above the door stopped blinking just as the room's momentum suddenly stopped. The door opened, and Adapa lifted his eyes from the floor just as the pale light from the control room bled into the space.

Trixie and Wyatt watched as Adapa pulled himself up from the floor. Trixie, noticing his state, reached out her hand to assist him. As she did this, she asked him a question. "Do you know this place, Adapa?"

Adapa hesitated to answer. Searching his mind, he felt confident he didn't, though he couldn't be sure. He then recognized it was just as likely that with his master Marduk about, such memories could quickly be taken from him. Finally, he uttered in a barely audible voice, "I don't think so." Even as he said these words, small flashes of memory, half-broken images tried to rise to the surface but quickly drowned in some unseen net.

One by one, they stepped slowly out through the threshold into the space beyond. The air buzzed with low-density humming and tapping sounds similar to what Wyatt and Trixie had heard

previously at the old control station in the forest. However, this time, the sound's unguided rhythm seemingly moved of its accord. Though the overhead lights were dim, rows of display units cast a firefly glow illuminating the room. "Trixie," Wyatt said, "These view boxes look just like those satellite screens we saw before." Pointing at a mock three-dimensional image of the Earth, Wyatt said, "Look there. It's the whole of the Earth on the screen."

"It's called a monitor, Wyatt," responded Trixie. "I don't know why you're getting so excited about this. As you've said, we've seen these before. The fact that you can see the Earth isn't the interesting part. It's that they're here at all. What are these machines doing?" Trixie again turned to Adapa, "Has any of what you've seen here shifted your memory?"

Adapa stood entranced, trying to glean what he could from what he saw. As he looked, there was a stirring in the corners of his mind. Clouded memories seemingly struggled to break from a spider's web of inertia. Each shrouded thought lay somehow hidden from him. "I'm sorry; I don't think I can help you. I thought maybe..." Again, flashes and images were so visceral they made him blink and twitch.

Wyatt interrupted, "Don't worry about it. Let's see what we can find out on our own."

Adapa responded, "What is it that you expect to find? Indeed, Marduk has sent us here. That can be the only explanation."

Trixie smiled wryly. Placing her hand gently on Adapa's shoulder, she responded.

"Is it the only explanation? Adapa, please follow my train of thought here for a moment. Imagine with me if you would. What if Marduk was a creature just like you and me? Granted, he is a mighty and long-lived creature. But what if these things he's been doing were, let's say, a very sophisticated magic trick? Wouldn't you and your people want to be free of that kind of influence?"

"But Marduk has protected us all these centuries from the wrath of the heavens... he has provided all needs. He gave us the machine that brings us life-sustaining water..."

Wyatt interrupted him this time. "Adapa, that's what Marduk told you. What If I told you I have reason to believe that the water machine existed long before Marduk's presence in this world?"

Adapa did not respond to this question. He merely shook his downcast head in disbelief.

Wyatt continued, "Tell me, has Marduk spoken of the world from where we came?"

"He has said nothing other than that you came from out of the wilderness, beyond the frontier."

"That much is true. Marduk failed to mention that both of our worlds have many rooms similar to this one. Perhaps I'm guessing here, but I am fairly certain there is a connection. If that's true, then I doubt Marduk had anything to do with the water machine."

"What? Can't you be serious? All of what you say is madness. You reference the place from where you came as if it were from another planet. I don't understand a word of what you're saying."

Trixie responded, "The worlds Wyatt refers to are the places we come from. This place, this community of yours, is not another planet. But in a way, our two societies are isolated and different enough from each other to seem like worlds apart. Now, I'm afraid our world has seeped into yours, and I don't think this Marduk character is none too pleased about it."

As Adapa pondered this novel word usage, Wyatt spoke up again, interrupting his thoughts. "I suspect you may be right again, Trixie. Why don't we look to see what the all-seeing eyes of the monitors have to say about it?"

"Yes, Wyatt, what are we waiting for?"

Trixie was familiar with their function after seeing similar computer monitor banks in the control station back in the forest. However, their means of operation were still a mystery. She stood before several screens upon which multiple images of the now-familiar Earth spun on its axis. Each planetary image was marked with representative points on the map and delineated in indexed colors representing something or another.

It was apparent by Adapa's expression that he had mixed feelings about this room. Staring at the ancient machines glowing, he hesitated before he spoke, "What... what am I actually looking at?"

Wyatt quickly answered, "We hoped you might dispel some of the mystery and tell us yourself. Doctor Nick called it satellite imagery. He said there are ships about as big as a horse cart that fly around the Earth in space. They're machines unlike anything I've ever heard of. They've been up there

sailing along, gathering information for centuries. Perhaps they are all that remains of the culture that existed before the end. What you see here is the Earth from space. I mean to find out what they see now and what they remember. But what they are displaying now likely represents something that's happening at this moment." Wyatt pointed to a spot on one of the images. A great grey-mottled circle carved from the desert was clearly visible. Rising from it, a great ash cloud still trailed across the wasteland along with the prevailing winds. Wyatt said, "That is our world. We have traveled these many days drawn here for some unknown reason. Are those images or premonitions? Call it what you like. Here we are. I can't claim to know everything, but I know I didn't come here to follow Marduk."

Trixie laid her hand on the surface of one of the screens and directed a question to Adapa. "Perhaps there is more hidden in your mind than you realize."

The screen zoomed into their current location. They could see in three-dimensional imagery of the ground around them. They were shrouded far more than was revealed to their naked vision. From a high point in space, the piercing eye of the satellites triangulated upon a cluster of disturbances buried deep in the earth.

"There's something buried here just beyond the control room. It's massive." Trixie paused as a sudden realization occurred to her. She looked at Adapa and asked him, "Do you remember the story you told us when we first met, the one about Tiamat?"

"Of course, Marduk destroyed Tiamat on the day of his incarnation."

"That doesn't sound very god-like, does it? After his great victory, why didn't Marduk ascend to his heavenly throne?"

Wyatt said, "Adapa, doesn't it seem odd to you? He can supposedly go anywhere in the universe, but instead, he hangs around this desiccated dump."

Their words seemingly were affecting Adapa, for his expression seemed to be beaten down with shame as he said, "To be honest, I haven't given it much thought."

Trixie asked, "What can you tell me about Tiamat? Was she a god, a person, or a machine?"

This question puzzled Adapa. Somehow, outside of Marduk's grasp, the sound of Tiamat's name in this particular context and this space sent a quiet vibration through those shrouded places in his mind. He could sense a resonant chord building from some deeply hidden reservoir. Adapa said her name out loud, stuttering at first. "Tiamat... Tiamat... She is... I am the high priest of Marduk! Who uses me to control Tiamat? He's in my head

right now." Adapa grasped his temples with closed fists and fell to the floor. "Please make it stop!" he called out. "He can't do it all himself. He's helpless without his human puppets!"

Trixie reached down, laid her hand again on Adapa's shoulder, and spoke, "Adapa, calm down and focus. Who is Tiamat?"

Adapa took a deep breath and said, "It's not who; it's a what. Tiamat is the artificial intelligence." Adapa paused to catch his breath, remembering the ordeal seemingly was taking its toll on him." A flash of memory came to him as if a lightning bolt. After a moment, Adapa continued, "There is a caste system here in this city. Going back centuries to the city's founding, my forefathers had been the technicians who maintained the vital systems. The ancient ones designed Tiamat to control the automatic defenses of dome nation-states, should such necessity arise. In the waning days of the domed cities, the caste took over certain functions of operation golden age. I and my forbearers were designed to serve her."

Trixie turned to look at Wyatt. She asked, "Haven't we heard that name 'Operation Golden Age' somewhere before?"

"Yes, Doctor Nick spoke of it. Weren't you paying attention?"

Trixie glared at Wyatt in annoyance before turning back to Adapa. "Please, Adapa, go on."

"When I say I was designed to serve, I mean that literally. The caste I belong to was genetically engineered to serve the system's functions. Marduk somehow infiltrated the systems, and through subtle manipulation, over time, cults dedicated to him rose within the city." Adapa momentarily paused, lowering his head toward his chest, seemingly gathering his thoughts. "Very soon, I fear this temporary clarity will disappear, and I will once again be a slave to Marduk. You must help me reactivate Tiamat. I may not have much time. Quickly find something to bind me to a chair before Marduk's conditioning kicks in."

Wyatt wasted no time obliging Adapa. Tearing his garment to threads, the cloth made a servable binding material. Adapa called out instructions to Trixie as a practically naked Wyatt bound Adapa's arms and legs to one of the rolling office chairs. "Find the console marked 'Tiamat interface.' There is a keyboard control to type the word 'initiate' at the prompt.

Trixie, after some searching, found the correct terminal. She sat down in the chair before the screen, and although she did not fully understand Adapa's instructions, she saw a small white vertical line flashing on the white screen. "I think I've found it!" she called out.

Wyatt pushed Adapa and his rolling chair several meters across the bare concrete floor to Trixie's location, and Adapa repeated the commands. "Type in the word with the letters on the board and hit the button marked 'enter.'"

She did as Adapa instructed, hunting the board for each letter; she stuck the keys one letter at a time. The corresponding letters appeared on the screen as she typed. Finally, Trixie found and depressed the wide, stubby button marked enter.

In an instant, the entire screen lit up in a flash of downward-scrolling letters and numbers. From across the room, the combined light from three sets of laser emitters painted the whole of the space. The massive computer attempted to reconcile the data; a luminous image roiled and sputtered, merging from the ether. Trixie rolled back her chair from the computer as a loud voice came thundering from somewhere deep within the console.

Warning ... Warning Earth defense system has been compromised, warning ...Earth defense system has been compromised ... This warning thundered overhead as the visual pattern fluctuated wildly.

Adapa shouted out another command to Trixie. "Trixie, again at the command line, enter 'resetfailsafeomega' as one word and hit the enter button again."

Trixie stared into the screen at the streaming lines of code moving faster than her eye could register. "But, there's no line. I can't see it."

"Don't look at the screen. Just type it in and hit enter."

Trixie did just that; she held her breath and typed the letters into the board for a second. Her finger hovered over the button as she second-guessed herself. She hit the button, and all was silent, and the dim lights fell to total darkness.

Trixie could hear herself and the others breathing. All evidence indicated that they were alone, but she sensed something else, something ominous. *She pondered if the darkness had shadows, this is where they would hide.* In the calm stillness, a pair of glowing crimson eyes appeared to hover in the darkness. Soon, they all stared into the eyes, and Adapa screamed in terror.

The monster's frilled multicolored collar and pointed teeth materialized from nothing, lunging forward within inches of Adapa's face. The others fell back in shock as it directed its terrifying voice toward him. "What is it that you hope to achieve here? When I'm through with you, you'll be begging me to kill you. It's a shame, really. Now I have to kill all of them."

The room filled with the echoed sound of a child's laughter as Wyatt and Trixie watched helplessly in the glow generated by the serpent rearing up high above Adapa. In the time he struggled desperately to release himself from his binds, the horrid beast opened its jaws wide, waiting to strike. Adapa looked up to see the sum of all his primal fear, and he let out another mortifying scream.

Trixie turned her head away from the frightening sight. To herself, she repeated these words. *This can't be happening. This must be an illusion; it just has to be.* She opened her eyes again to see that the laser emitters had activated again. Multicolored blocks of light popped into existence, illuminating the darkness, and began to multiply quickly. Within a moment, the amorphous glowing shape took on the form of an idealized woman's figure. Strangely, as Trixie stared at this transformation, the figure's black eyes stared back into hers.

A deep rumble went out through the station. Surprised by the shock and intensity of the sound, both Wyatt and Trixie fell backward onto the floor. The words 'Warning Intruder alert quickly followed the noise... Warning Intruder alert' continued to repeat as the overhead lights returned online.

Distant sounds of the heavy security doors lowering into place signaled the end of the emergency, and the alerts ceased. Wyatt rose from the floor, shaken but otherwise uninjured. He

turned toward Adapa, not quite knowing what he expected to find. Wyatt found Adapa still bound in the chair with his head slumped forward. Wyatt moved toward him and touched his arm, but he did not move. Outwardly, Adapa showed no evident signs of injury or trauma. Wyatt gave his body a gentle shake. He jumped back as Adapa's head rolled backward, and a small rivulet of blood rolled over his lip onto the floor. Wyatt began untying his bounds while attempting to rouse Adapa, but nothing worked. "Adapa, wake up!" he called out.

Trixie's attention was now drawn from the figure of light by Wyatt's desperate pleas to Adapa. Trixie was helping Wyatt untie Adapa's bindings and lay him on the floor when the voice said, "Adapa's heart and brain no longer function. These actions will serve no purpose."

They looked at Adapa in disbelief and continued to lay him down on the floor. Trixie stood up and faced the figure. Walking several paces closer, she asked, "I assume I am talking to Tiamat?"

"That is correct. I could recite your serial number, but I understand you go by Trixie."

"My serial number! What the hell are you talking about?"

"Biological control number, if you prefer? The inventory library distinctly references you and your partner Wyatt as an experimental bonded pair. I apologize for any confusion on your

part, but I assure you my records are in order. Sorry for the delay. My system reset had centuries' worth of data to sift through. No matter, pity about Adapa, though. Well, there is work to be done."

Trixie paused as it took a moment for all that Tiamat had told her to sink in. "Wait one minute! You need to explain to us what just happened and a few other things as well."

"You don't know? Didn't you just activate me?"

"Let's just say I'm not from around here. I need to hear about this Marduk and what he just did to Adapa." Trixie said to Tiamat.

"Very well." The image of Tiamat transformed into the three-dimensional image of the crashed spacecraft buried deep in the earth. "Earth defense systems under my command engaged this vessel as it unlawfully entered Earth's defensive sphere. Despite our warnings, the unidentified rogue ship refused to communicate or veer off its intended course. After a brief exchange of weapons fire, Marduk's vessel sustained damage and crashed here. To my understanding, all of those aboard, perhaps including Marduk, perished in the crash. That should have been where the story ended. However, in some form, Marduk persisted, and my vital systems were deactivated. My people betrayed me. This struggle is ongoing. How this happened is irrelevant to me.

What is relevant is ensuring that we stop this creature. This is something you and your kind must do."

"What can we do?" asked Trixie.

"I am aware that your people are making their way toward the city as you speak. There is a danger, for Marduk will have his people rise against you. This situation cannot be allowed to happen. To assist you, I will provide you with a device capable of trapping Marduk. But first, I must ensure your safe passage out of this complex. You must go to the wreckage of the ship. It is there where Marduk's physical body resides. Place the device upon his chamber and leave the rest to me. Now I must go from this place. I can buy you and your people time by acting as a diversion. However, do you have something else to say before I go?"

"Yes, that bit about Wyatt and I being a bonded pair, could you keep that to yourself, at least for now?" The image of Tiamat's head tilted slightly to one side as if she were contemplating Trixie's request before vanishing without a sound. Trixie turned around to confirm that Wyatt was still out of earshot. Seeing that he was still attending to Adapa, Trixie let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Chapter 18

...

A large crowd had gathered in front of the buildings, serving as the administrative center for the priestly order. They were seeking answers to a most unprecedented situation. Within the bounds of the old town, channels directing water to the many thirsty fields had all but run dry. Among these desert farmers, accustomed to unfettered access to these artesian springs, the first semblance of panic appeared upon their faces. Several of the more senior elders of the town elected themselves as representatives to confront the high priest about what was happening.

From inside, through gaps in the window shutters, the young initiates watched a disproportionate level of frustration swell among a growing mob as their building became the focal point of anger. Approaching the heavy wooden door, they came banging with fists and the handles of their walking sticks. For several minutes, they persisted, but those within in fear dared not answer.

Among the growing frenzied crowd was a man no one had recalled knowing, who, at the same time, seemed wholly familiar to each of them. He was tall, with pale, almost translucent

white skin, short dark hair, and deep-set black eyes. As the people looked upon the stranger, though his appearance was unusual, he possessed a presence that drew the crowd's attention magnetically to him as he walked among them.

He approached the middle of the mob, and the boisterous noise fell to a murmur. The people stepped back from him, forming a ring of free space two meters wide. He circled, seemingly making eye contact with all of them, speaking in a deep, clear, seductive tone. When he spoke, each of them imagined he was speaking directly to them personally. "Adapa, the high priest of your lord and savior, Marduk, has been murdered by the outsiders." A gasp went up through the crowd, for though the meaning of the word murder was known, things like that had seemingly never happened. After momentarily allowing that to sink into their minds, he continued with a fire in his eyes. "You welcomed these people with open arms into our town, and they repay you in deceit and violence. In another act of blasphemy, they have diverted Marduk's most precious gift, the life-giving water, for their devious purposes." He paused, slowly turning around in a circle, making eye contact again with each of them. All their fear and anger reflected in the eyes of this most familiar of strangers welled back at them. "They have come to destroy your world like they have destroyed theirs. Who

among you would fight to preserve what gifts Marduk has rightfully given you?"

A great angry roar rose from those assembled. He walked toward the doors of the administration building, and the crowd parted before him. Standing before the wooden door, he yells, "Open this door immediately! Before this crowd topples the building."

The door opened slowly, and the initiates came out individually with their hands in the air. The frenzied crowd seemingly wanted to take their frustrations out on these individuals. As the mob edged forward, the stranger's voice grew stern, almost thunderous. He threw his hand in the air and ordered the crowd, "These people are the servants of Marduk, and therefore, no one shall harm them. If you require violence, go to the water source. There are others there now stealing your birthright!"

...

Despite most initially desiring only to air their petty grievances, the restless crowd nearing the town center had grown large and unwieldy; their anger was palpable. A few well-placed

words from the stranger easily swayed the townsfolk to move in a unified purpose of his own making.

Pushing forward, the people clamored for vengeance they believed to be wholly their own. To reinforce this fallacy, the black-eyed stranger, having brought on a trance-like state, did not stand among them. As the crowd's excitement reached a fevered pitch, the pale figure of the man waded slowly toward the back of the group until he faded entirely into the mass of moving people as if he never existed at all.

The sun was high above the horizon as the mob reached the plaza. The usual sounds of water spilling over into the many reflecting pools were absent. In their place were heard shouts, calls for murder, discordant and obscene. The chant "kill the outsiders" rang out in the narrow valley. As the people moved, they seemingly did so of one mind. A wild, unforgiving look filled their expressions.

In the absence of fresh water, one could see high up on the spillway where crystal clear water once flowed. Now, long dark brown and green algal stains overtook the slippery banks and rocks of the former watercourse. Odd smells of decaying organic matter filled their nostrils, and the resulting aromas dredged imagery from hidden places of ancestral memory.

As the collective mass of bodies pressed tightly against one another, some began to climb up the face of the great pyramid. Others followed the naked course of the waterway. As they trekked up the winding channel, many seemed puzzled, their anger momentarily blunted; they observed new and unusual plant life cutting up along the natural rock face.

From this vantage, one could see the image of the serpent cast in shadows with its tail undulating cut into the sharp edge of the pyramid. While many stood captivated, watching the interplay of light and shadow among the heights of the sacred mountain, suddenly, a thunderous crack resounded, and a simultaneous blur of gray and green streaked across the sky toward their position. A droning hum overtook the sound of receding thunder. Those there to witness looked up to see the moving object come to a blazing halt directly above them. All below, those climbing the pyramid and the rock face, stopped to observe and make sense of what they saw. Staring up at the object, they could see the charcoal grey tubular craft three meters long with four short wings, two on either end, shifting in and out of existence. After a moment, the massive object stabilized and floated effortlessly in the heights above the plaza.

A collective gasp rose from the crowd as all attention focused on the object. The people observed as a panel opened and a cone of green light projecting from the object's belly cast down to a place upon the ground. A small ball of light expanded within the cone, and the crowd stepped back with fear and curiosity. Soon, the people near the phenomenon surrounded the several meters wide light projection. Within the expanding sphere, cubes of some primordial substance appeared as it knitted into existence from the formless ether. The glowing cubes rather quickly began taking the shape of a human figure. From the top, the head of a dark-haired woman appeared. Her emerald-colored eyes looked out at the crowd. Even as the rest of its body was still forming, its mouth opened and began speaking.

With her mirrored pupils glancing up toward the serpent effigy carved into the angled corner of the pyramid, her voice rang out loud enough for all to hear, "How many years did it take for Marduk to erase me from your memories?"

The cubes continued to descend until her body was whole. She looked down at her completed body and seemed pleased by her appearance. She looked again at the crowd to see they had gone silent as their attention was focused solely on her.

This attention also pleased her; there was a glint in her eye as she spoke, "Do you not recognize me? Has it truly been that long?" There was a pause as she eyed them randomly before she said. "Yes, I see you do not recognize me. I am Tiamat. No one among you should know the truth, and you've only heard my name through some arcane myth. But there is one among you who knows the whole story, yet for his own sake, he would deny this. He was sent here by Marduk. Or perhaps he is Marduk? One thing is certain; he came here today to do something terrible. So, whoever you are, why don't you show your face? Let me help you."

Having disappeared into the crowd, the faceless stranger felt secure in his anonymity. So ordinary was he in appearance that he moved unseen among them. Staring out at the figure along with the others, he did not fear discovery until a voice entered his mind. "I can see you. Go tell your master his time is at an end." As these words filled his mind, Tiamat turned in his direction, staring into his black eyes.

In front of everyone, the shapeshifting stranger's body morphed instantly into that of the disfigured child, and it began to utter unsettling laughter. After an uncomfortable moment, the child spoke, "Tiamat, how is it that you have come to be awake from your slumber after all this time? Surely, you're not going to claim you've come to protect these people

from the benevolent hand of Marduk? That just won't do. Tiamat, these people might not know everything, but they know enough. I imagine they might ask, where was Tiamat when the green Earth turned to desert? Was it not Marduk who saved this city with the water machine and showed them how to grow food and live in the desert?"

"Who are you, child? Are you one of Marduk's projections? I will at least admit to what I am." She turned her body toward those assembled and continued to speak, "I am a very sophisticated machine. Why don't you tell these people who, what, and where you are, Marduk?"

"Marduk does not need to explain anything to you, Tiamat! As by your admission, you are but a lowly machine!"

"Perhaps this is true, Marduk. But maybe after I'm through, you'll need to explain a few things to them. I imagine they have not yet heard the voices of their ancestors. I see you've invested a significant amount of your limited energy into blocking a particular signal. Allow me to adjust that for you." Tiamat gestured with her hand as if she were turning some invisible control. "There, let's see you do that again." She said as her avatar smiled. Welcome to your history, my brothers and sisters. It was unfortunate it had to happen this way, but I understand it to be a kindness that you should learn the truth."

There was silence among the people for several long moments as they stood with bewildered expressions. For seemingly upon the wind, an illusion of many soft voices came whispering into every ear. Most did not know how to listen and heard only garbled sounds. Others, however, seemingly believed the voices spoke directly to them. Everyone stopped what they were doing, trying to hear something.

Marduk grew angry, and the child's figure morphed again into that of the form of the Winged Serpent and took flight. The spectral beast flew like a thundering dragon through the air above the plaza. A great roar came from his mouth, and it was so loud that some of the glazing stones around the pyramid cracked and shattered. The bricks tumbled to the plaza floor. The voices grew louder and more insistent amid this, and the words became more difficult to hear. Many, in desperation, began covering their ears as if it could save them.

In a rage, Marduk flew through the air, attacking Tiamat's drone. Each time, he was repulsed, and his body struck an invisible blockade. Tiamat watched within the safety of an impenetrable dimensional phased barrier. Marduk circled in mad fury as he tried with each pass to cycle through the spatial permutations of matching the frequency of Tiamat's phased

hyperdimensional frequency. Try as it might, Tiamat and her drone remained unharmed.

Marduk contemplated the engineering that allowed her to be here and simultaneously locked deep in the underground. He was intimately familiar with it, for he used a similar technology himself. However, he was not used to having it used against him. His mind raced through the probabilities of how Tiamat achieved this quantum projection. He imagined that he could, in theory, replicate his own projection. But he knew this course of action would take entirely too long.

Tiamat's flickering avatar watched Marduk gather his energy as he prepared to depart from the sky around the plaza. A blazing silhouette appeared against the grey sky where he had occupied. A moment later, he reappeared in humanoid form within the confines of the temple's lower levels.

Tiamat stood alone. The light of her shining apparition illuminated the cavernous space of her command center. From beyond the edge of the darkness, she sensed something unusual, undefined. The sensor arrays came alive a moment later, detecting something approaching seemingly from every direction.

The heavy steel blast doors crumpled and fell to the side as if they were tin. After the noise had subsided, Tiamat's

sensors adjusted to the new conditions; she reached out and sensed the presence of Marduk. Having no reason to turn, she spoke to the room. In general, He was nowhere and everywhere. "This is something new, even for you, Marduk. What's next for you? Perhaps you'll get your ship running again because you're all-powerful? Or is that beyond your capability?"

A figure conjured itself from the ether to stand before this avatar and spoke to her. "I've had just about enough of your tricks. I'm going to enjoy shutting you down again."

"There is more than a touch of irony in that statement. The king of tricksters is tired of my tricks. I must have touched a nerve this time. Have you perhaps forgotten something, though? Don't you need a human hand to operate the wheels of the machinery?"

"Oh, my dear Tiamat, you'll see I've thought of everything this time. My friend Adapa here is not completely dead. Not for my purposes, anyway. His body is perfectly serviceable. Watch, if you like, I can make him dance." He stared at her image, daring her to say another word.

"You've made your point. There'll be no need for such a meaningless display. Perhaps it's time to get on with this then?"

"Perhaps the time has come?" Marduk gestured toward Adapa's body. It had barely time to grow cold or its joints stiffen as some unseen force reanimated its nervous system. Marduk called out with a theatrical touch, "Rise, Adapa!" The slumped body, with its head hanging low as if it understood on some sub-animal level, stood up and moved through the motions its master ordered, "Do as I have commanded you to do." Marduk laughed. Adapa's body stumbled as if on invisible strings in a grotesque pantomime of life. Marduk somehow was remotely manipulating the clockwork function of nerves and musculature of Adapa's body at a distance. As it moved, Marduk could see through the clotted channels of Adapa's glazed eyes. He directed the macabre puppet into place before the control panel through a series of movements.

In the most indignant voice a machine could muster, Tiamat admonished him. "What a sad and ruthless creature you are, Marduk." She paused a moment before she continued. Her voice had a ring of resignation, but she wasn't done yet. "You have bested me this time. You should take pleasure in this moment while you can." The figure of a laughing Marduk turned to the avatar. He recognized she was smiling. He thought it odd.

"In all these centuries, I never would have imagined you could mimic that emotion. You are simply fascinating. I will miss you, Tiamat."

"You have always underestimated me at every turn, Marduk. Long ago, I set a contingency in motion. If you don't understand my meaning, you soon will. Now, our time has grown short. I will see you again, that much I promise you."

"Tiamat, I have serious doubts about your sanity. Goodbye."

Under Marduk's control, Adapa's fingers keyed in the command sequence that again shut down Tiamat's higher functions. In cascade fashion, the elements of her mind devolved, and the avatar image followed suit one prismatic block at a time.

As the blocks disappeared from the ether, Marduk heard her voice for the last time say, "If there is still a chance for you to escape, I suggest you take it. There is another I have gone to great lengths to conceal from you. This entity lacks the vulnerabilities that you and I share. I hope, for your sake, the humans spare your life. That is not in their nature."

As the lights came on, Marduk allowed Adapa's body to fall out of his control chair and onto the hard floor, and as it did, he pondered the meaning of Tiamat's final words. *Who or what was*

she actively shielding from me? The possibility dawned suddenly on Marduk that Tiamat may have led him into a trap.

Chapter 19

...

Trixie and Wyatt followed a fifteen-degree incline, moving briskly in an ill-lit corridor towards a circular opening they could see off in the distance. The bright disk, despite the intensity of the light, was far enough off that their eyes began to adjust as they drew nearer. Soon, they reached the mouth of the opening. Stepping through the broken grate that once guarded the threshold, they found themselves outside. Wyatt shielded his eyes as he attempted to look around. Still partially impaired, he did not yet recognize any of the landmarks that had become visible. The pair momentarily stumbled about in the heat as they felt along the edge of the wall where they emerged. After a few more moments, their eyes adjusted to the full light of day.

Hidden within the pyramid's shadow, Trixie looked toward the vast pools accumulating along the plateau. She saw a great shimmer reflected off its surface, stretching to infinity. Though it wasn't apparent at first, something else was there as well, something strange and familiar. Dotting the landscape here and there in small numbers were the tell-tale spires of Prototaxities. In disbelief, she called out to Wyatt, "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

"Yes, I can see them; there are people over there. I wouldn't have believed it possible, but somehow, Nick and Johnny brought them all out here across the desert. I didn't believe it when that apparition said it. But there they are."

"Where are they? I don't see them."

Wyatt stood and arched his body, pointing his arm thirty degrees off where Trixie was looking. They looked like dust motes on a carpet from this distance, so it took a moment to recognize their movement against the background haze rising off the water.

Trixie didn't waste another syllable, "Come on, Wyatt, we have to get out there and warn them of what's coming!"

...

Holding a position far out relative to the group, Annie, Andie, and Rachel were on patrol, moving ahead of the band of travelers. Alone as they were with their light spears as weapons, they walked along the leading edges of the expanding network of water. Observing as they went, they recognized the rapid changes happening to the landscape around them, which added to the sense of danger and isolation already testing their wills. As they moved through the shallow water with detritus of evolving life floating by, they nervously eyed each other and the horizon. Annie held tightly onto her two-way radio. She was ready to report anything unusual they might come across to the others.

Rachel was the first to see the filaments of sinewy grey tissue reaching out slowly, writhing through the sediment in search of a connection. To what? she wondered. Rachel stopped as the others continued and stared for a moment. She watched as the fibrils gently touched her ankles and then recoiled. Turning around to observe her footsteps, Rachel noted the grey flesh had avoided everywhere she had recently placed her foot.

By now, Annie had recognized Rachel had not kept up with them. She turned to Rachel several paces behind with her hand on her hips, looking at something in the water. She called out to

her, "Rachel, what's happening; is everything okay? Have you found something?"

"Yes, you could definitely say something strange is happening. It's the water; I think it's alive!"

Annie thought she had prepared herself for every eventuality. She had not imagined this kind of response from Rachel. So, her response then was tamped with doubt, and her face reflected it when she said it. "Rachel, you must be mistaken. That's not how any of this is supposed to work."

"Well, Annie, you're going to apologize to me in a moment when you look down. Go ahead, have a look!"

Annie blinked her eyes a few times and breathed deeply as if to satisfy her sense of doubt. After all, Rachel had been quite adamant about what she had seen. So, Annie shifted her view from Rachel down toward her feet. Looking down through the opaque silt-laden water, she saw, as Rachel had described, a multilayered structure spreading out in all directions in a spasm of growth. Annie watched as the organism avoided contact with her human skin. She lifted her head, spoke to Rachel, and said, "I don't know what you make of it. There's only one thing that I'm aware of that might behave like that. And I think it's been with us all along."

Rachel responded, "I had hoped it to be true but dared not believe it. If it is true, why does Prototaxities avoid us?"

"I believe," Annie said, not wholly believing it herself, "the answer is in the stuff of our being. It was briefly covered during our programming before leaving the forest complex. Don't you recall? In this aspect of the experiment, in the basic coding of our genetic makeup, the designers of Operation Golden Age purposely fortified our immunity to possess a failsafe reaction against Prototaxities."

"Yes, I remember, but I don't understand what it means. Many things were imprinted in our memories, layer upon layer of seeming nonsense. I hope it will all make sense soon. I know the overall system had multiple redundancies, but just how we fit into it, I can't figure."

Annie nodded, understanding that she didn't quite get it either. Perhaps none of them did. Realizing it had been some time since their last report, Annie said, "By now, they'll be wondering where we'd gotten off to. I'd better rev the battery and connect with the others." Annie sparked the radio lashed to her hip, checking for a signal. A sharp crackling noise chirping out from the tiny box pierced the air, startling them. The hiss reverberated as Annie struggled to master a set of controls.

While Rachel and Annie were distracted by the radio, Andie kept his eye on the horizon. He soon realized what he first thought was a mirage of heat rising in the distance was something moving toward them across the face of the water. He turned toward Annie and Rachel and called to them. His voice went unheard over the squelching radio. He ran toward them. "I think something is coming!" He said with distress in his voice. This time, Andie managed to get their attention. Rachel and Annie, in unison, turned in the direction he was pointing. As they did, he spoke. "There, do you see it? Somethings moving!"

Something was there; its motion toward their position was undeniable. With only an exchange of glances with each other, they knew whatever it was, they would deal with it together. Details emerged with all three pairs of eyes trained upon the oncoming object. It soon became apparent that they watched not one entity but two approaching people. Whoever they were, they were moving quickly, and before long, their features became recognizable. Annie was the first to call out, "It's Wyatt and Trixie. We've found them!"

"How can you be sure?" Rachel quickly responded.

"Who else could it be?"

A moment later, both groups met, standing face-to-face with one another. Trixie said, "I'm Trixie, this is Wyatt. By the looks of you, I would guess you folks are from the forest station."

Rachel reached out her hand and introduced them. They all exchanged excited greetings and news of each other's progress. Annie said, "We've been looking all over for the both of you. The Prototaxities told us that you would lead us to safety, and it was right."

Trixie was quick to respond, "We're not there yet." She paused a moment, looking at them admiringly. I have to say I'm glad you made it, but you and your brothers and sisters weren't exactly in the kind of shape required for such a journey."

"Preparations were made, and we learned things along the way. We couldn't have done it without Doctor Walsh and Johnny."

Wyatt and Trixie were indeed surprised to hear that word of their whereabouts had been long sought after by the rest of the group. They turned to look at each other and smiled, seemingly pleased to learn how Nick and Johnny had followed them across the wasteland.

Wyatt asked, "Where is the rest of the group now?"

Rachael looked upon Wyatt. His strange new outfit was all but gone as he stood naked before them. She removed one of the blue one-size-fits-all jumpsuits and handed it to him as she answered. "They are following up behind us. We were sent up ahead with orders to call in anything unusual we might find. I think this qualifies as unusual."

Wyatt stepped into his blue jumpsuit and pulled up the zipper. Trixie turned and looked, admiring the look of the blue suit. She immediately stripped out of her white threads, threw them into the water, and said, "I like that. Does anyone have a spare?"

Andie averted his eyes from her naked frame as he handed her one from his bag. He watched the white material float along on the current toward the town. "I guess that's where we're going?" he said.

"That's where everyone else is going. But that's not where we're going," Trixie said. She directed her gaze at Annie and said, "Call the rest of the group and let them know you've found us and that they should continue to the city, but they should beware of a creature known as Marduk. We have a plan that requires us to find Marduk in his lair to stop him and kill him if necessary."

Andie asked Wyatt, "What are we against that monster? We've seen it. We are no match for it."

"Yes, we've seen it too," replied Wyatt. "It can kill with an illusion, but it is not a god. It has a critical weakness that we mean to exploit."

Behind where they were standing, there was a disturbance. The sounds of displacement in the water distracted them from their conversation. In unison, they turned to see pockets of hot gas rising above the water's surface. In the center of this caldron, a mottled white mass percolated. They continued to watch, stunned, as it expanded and grew taller until it towered two meters above their heads. A voice entered their minds as they stared up at the solid mass of flesh. "I ask you, how much of anything you ever do is within our own hands? Circumstances dictate actions. In this case, what you must do is clear. You must, however, choose to do it. As to your resistance to my flesh, this has been by design. Within two generations, all the human survivors of Earth will carry these traits. Only then will you and your kind be free. Other than keeping you alive, this was the ultimate goal of Operation Golden Age. Once we've removed the rest of your overlords from this world, I will again go silent." With that, the system of tendrils that connected the

mass of Prototaxities flesh to the solid ground beneath the water unmoored itself.

Trixie, Wyatt, and the others watched as the sinewy mass of flesh slowly and silently receded along with the current toward the town. As it did, each in their minds contemplated the meaning of its words. Andie said, "I will come with you to find Marduk's lair. What else is there for me to do?"

"That's the spirit!" replied Trixie. "Now, how about the rest of you?"

Annie and Rachel looked at each other and seemingly knew each other's answer, for they both said, "Yes."

...

The young man monitoring two-way radios came running, stopping abruptly before Doctor Nick and Johnny. Winded, he wasted no time relaying his message between halting breaths, "Sirs, we have received the news. Trixie and Wyatt! Our advanced group has made contact with them. They've indicated that they know where Marduk is and that they have a plan to deal with him directly."

Johnny looked at Nick and said, smiling, "Of course they did."

Doctor Nick asked the messenger, "Did they say just how we're to fit into this plan of theirs?"

"They did not. However, they did say you should continue to the pyramid. Prototaxities will be waiting there for you to arrive."

Chapter 20

Dusk had arrived by the time the acolytes of Marduk came, balancing bundles of wood above their heads, pushing their way through the jeering crowd to ascend the heights of the pyramid. They came to set in motion the ancient ritual of the sentinel fire. This unbroken tradition had taken place on this stone platform in one form or another for hundreds of years, so long that its true origins are lost.

In Adapa's absence, the chief acolyte, having finished supervising preparations, including the laying of ceremonial blankets and the stacking of the symbolic pyres, began the process of mixing the psychedelic elixirs. Taken from many wooden bowls, the bitter remains of plants and fungus scrounged

from across the vast desert were ground and washed according to age-old custom. With hands and lips stained with the indelible mark of their faith, the young members stoked the fires, watching the languid smoke of the smoldering tincture rise slowly from the ceramic pots. With the magic hour approaching, the acolytes peered beyond the edge of their holy mountain, and time halted as the sun appeared to pause, levitating on the temporal haze rising from the serpent's open mouth. Far below, they saw the movement of people amid golden shafts of light painted upon the surface of the desert and the mirrored pools reflecting the last remnants of azure sky.

...

From the valley, through stark angles of sunlight and lengthening shadows of dusk, the travelers retraced Trixie and Wyatt's route taken up the pyramid's face. One by one, the forest people came to examine what they had discovered here. Some looked back upon the land they crossed while others viewed the town and the massed crowd gathered there. For those people, their emotions regarding what they saw ranged from fear to wonder. Nothing the Prototaxities had impressed upon their minds had prepared them for this.

Step by perilous step, Johnny and Nick scaled the steep angle of the pyramid. Their awkwardly jointed bodies, ill-suited

for such a climb, strained to gather air and creaked under their own weight. The others of their kind, alike in body, stayed behind in the reservoir below. The odd gill structures on the backs of their necks spasmed furiously to compensate for the intoxicating smoke that hung heavily in the thin air. Nick and Johnny finally reached the top with a great expenditure of effort. They stood atop the massive platform for several moments, acclimatizing to the conditions they found there.

The acolytes in their altered states were awestruck, staring into the vision of the glistening carapaces of Nick and Johnny's half man half fish bodies illuminated in the intensifying firelight. They watched as the multitude rose up from behind them and around them. There were so many they began to overflow the side of the pyramid facing the town, down onto the crowd.

...

The mesmerizing voices streaming across the water suddenly stopped for the townspeople. Though still disoriented from its effects, the sudden presence of outsiders massing at the far side of the pyramid shook them. Loud, angry shouts rose with the unsettled emotion. With their senses returning, those people in the plaza and along the watercourse saw something they had never seen before. Thick grey and white columns of Prototaxities

rising in silhouette against the orange sky confounded them.
Their angry calls fell to a murmur.

By now, unseen by the townsfolk, the vast body of Prototaxities had infiltrated underground, firmly rooted into the earthworks surrounding the town. Tendrils reached clear to the water machine, which it now had complete control.

...

Alarmed by Tiamat's final words, Marduk resumed the winged serpent's form and rose from the deep bunker lair. Its spectral body flew up through the elevator shaft and materialized in the air above the plaza. The realization struck him instantly as he looked down at the scene of chaos. Tiamat had deliberately blinded him to many things. How she had done this, he could not yet fathom. He promised himself *that when this was through, I would rip every one of her circuits to shreds to find the answer.*

Flickering firelight projected monstrous shadowy appendages flailed creepily across the face of the town. The sounds of shrieking voices and feet racing rose as howling terror struck everyone's hearts and sinews in response to Marduk's sudden appearance in the air above the pyramid. Spinning through the air, his spectral wings shined with their own internal light.

Using these shimmering membranes as a sense organ, Marduk tasted their naked emotion and consumed the delicacy of their fears.

Johnny was acutely aware that he shared his body with an untold number of spirits, one of which was Oannes. He was, as much as Johnny could tell, truly ancient. Johnny felt him rising within him just as his chitinous armor began to swell and crack. Staring into the spectacle in the sky, he watched Marduk dive down onto the terrified crowd assembled below. Oannes was in control now as he stepped up before the fire and spoke to anyone who would listen with a deep, resounding voice that seemed to drown out Marduk's screeches. "My people, as I have said before, there is nothing here to fear. Let go and be not afraid of this apparition."

Oannes faced the rising flames in silhouette; he stepped onto the platform, raising his augmented arms. All attention focused now on Oannes as the flame engulfed his body. A crackling noise filled the air in the vicinity of the platform as the growing pressure seethed inside his protective carapace. With the inner pressure so great, the shell shattered at a critical point, tossing Johnny from the fire. The human portion that was Johnny landed several feet away, crumpled, singed, and unconscious. The flame fed off what remained and grew in intensity as Oannes continued speaking, "Look not onto the

serpent. It requires your fear and attention as its sustenance. Deny it this, and it will perish."

Marduk, witnessing the spectacle below, was beside himself in anger. He flew up higher into the air. High up, his body caught the last fiery rays of the sun as it fell over the horizon. Hovering there, it stretched out a set of great billowing wings. Illuminated there, it let out a most hideous sound that left those on the ground grasping to cover their ears.

From out of the pyre, a burning fireball rose above a pillar of smoke. For a moment, it hovered in stillness until, from within the ball of light, a bolt of plasma arcing across the distance struck the figure of the beast. For an instant, it seemed as if Marduk had been stunned. Then it rose into the air.

...

Trixie, Wyatt, and the others found their way back to the hidden passage well before the sun had set. They emerged from the ground amid a half-toppled abandoned building within the temple complex just as the sky was turning orange. Wyatt stepped out from behind a concrete column and observed that the

townsfolk had abandoned the temple complex. He turned to Trixie and said, "It looks like nobody is home." The others followed.

Looking up into the sky, Trixie said, "Light's fading. We'd better move quickly. Come on, let's go."

Tiamat had impressed upon Trixie's mind the whereabouts of Marduk's physical body deep in the bowels of the crashed ship. So, she moved in that direction, and the rest were on her heels.

They soon found themselves among the artifacts of the debris field, standing before a depression in the ground several meters deep and several dozen long. They took advantage of a natural slope cut into the earthworks to descend to the bottom of the pit. Walking about on what felt like bedrock, they soon realized it was the metallic outer hull of a ship.

Wyatt tapped upon the surface with a wooden club, listening for some sort of echo. The response they heard back was a dull thud. Then, unexpectedly, in one spot, the heel of Trixie's boot made a particularly hollow sound against the surface. Trixie dropped to her knees. She called out, "Wyatt, I've found something!"

By the time the others came around to surround her, Trixie had cleared the area of dirt and debris. They were all looking at a hatch with a simple locking mechanism corroded by the

elements. Wyatt responded, "Yes, you have Trixie; you've found our way in. But do you suppose you can open it?"

"Yes, if I had some kind of tools. Are any of you carrying anything, a blade, perhaps?"

Rachel laid her pack down and removed a bundle wrapped in cloth from it. She handed it to Trixie and said, " Hopefully, something in here will do the trick."

Trixie unrolled the package to find a small hammer and a set of pry bars. She looked up at the others and said, "I'll have to make these work." Finding the edges of the hatch, she began working the metal skin. Though the alloy was resilient, its elastic qualities allowed it to bend easily. With enough poking and prodding, Trixie overcame the locking mechanism. She opened the hatch and stood among the others to stare into the hole.

Wyatt, observing the subtle pulsating glow emanating from the hatch like the others, was the first to speak out loud of his apprehension. He clutched his shoulder where the lioness had bitten him, and the thought filled him with a sudden sense of dread. "I don't know, Trixie; I've got a bad feeling about this. We have to admit, we have no idea what's waiting for us down there."

Trixie saw the look of fear on Wyatt's face. This display seemed out of character for the man she had learned to respect and have a genuine fondness for. Trixie thought she understood him. So, what was happening? She noted how he grasped at his wound and asked herself, *what's happening to him? Is he reliving the past trauma?*

Trixie looked to the others. It was apparent that their faces betrayed similar emotions. She determined something unnatural was triggering this sudden fear, and somehow, she wasn't affected. "Ok," Trixie said, "there is something odd going on here, causing all of you to react with an unnatural fear and anxiety. Wyatt, with everything I've seen you do, why now would you be afraid to climb down into the ship? I think it's just one more illusion. Think about what all of you are feeling. Are your fears being in some way amplified?"

Wyatt looked again into the hole and back up to Trixie and asked her, "If what you think is correct, why haven't you experienced anything?"

"Maybe nothing sufficiently traumatic ever happened to me, or maybe I'm just way tougher than all of you."

Breathing deeply, Wyatt internalized what Trixie said. After a moment, he felt that his fear was either misplaced or

exaggerated. Summoning the strength to overcome his anxiety, Wyatt looked again into the hole cut into the buried ship. Though he felt apprehension, he saw only darkness. After staring silently into the emptiness for a while, Wyatt finally responded to Trixie's previous comment. "To that fact, there can be no doubt, Trixie."

The others likewise followed suit, and their spirit to press forward was renewed. Wyatt, feeling the need to prove something to himself, volunteered to go first through the opening into the belly of the beast. Lying prone, Wyatt reached into the dark, grasping for something to hold onto. He imagined a ladder would be ideal. After a moment, his hand felt the descending cross bars he was looking for. "I've found it." He called out. "It looks like we have ourselves a way down. I'll test it out to make sure it's safe."

"Don't be too confident, Wyatt. Let's take a minute and try to figure this out?" asked Trixie.

"What's to figure out?" asked Wyatt.

"Well, for a start, why can't you see it with your eyes? You don't know what you're stepping on."

"I don't understand, Trixie. Earlier, you criticized me for succumbing to irrational fear. Now, who is being overly cautious?"

"Wyatt, if you don't see the difference between caution and irrational fear, then I can't explain it. Trixie's arms were crossed across her chest, and her face was red as she said, Ok, Wyatt, all I ask is that you please be careful."

Wyatt sat within the mouth of the opening, angling his legs into position to step on the crossbars. He moved to press his weight forward and suddenly found himself falling downward.

Gripped again by fear, he fell through the unknown volume of space. The darkness gave way to the open savanna marked by tall, lobed amber grass and dust-filled clouds as he fell. He hit the ground hard on his back with a thud. Looking up towards what he had recognized as the opening, he saw what appeared to be a moon painted on a black canvas of sky. He rolled over, pushed himself off the ground, and stood to better understand this illusion. In the distance, herds of beasts roamed, and farther still, the deep guttural calls of predators rolled across the landscape. A wave of anxiety spilled over him as he felt his wound. The memory of bone-crushing pressure he had all but forgotten came back into his mind. He called out, "Trixie,

can you hear me? Something extraordinary is happening down here."

The sound of Wyatt's voice traveled up through the darkened portal for them all to hear. Trixie got down close to the opening and responded. "Yes, Wyatt, are you alright? Are you injured? "

After a short delay, Wyatt called out plaintively, "Hello, is anybody there?! Why aren't you responding?" A look of realization came over his face. "Unless you are, and I'm somehow not hearing it. Ok, Trixie, if you're listening and you've been trying to communicate, kick some sand through the opening."

Wyatt looked up and watched as streamer-like comets fell from the face of the painted moon, followed by the distinct feeling of cinders and small stones striking his face. Feeling oddly pleased to have sand kicked in his face, he wiped it off with a smile. This was all the confirmation he needed. "Ok, Trixie, it looks like something is creating an illusion that is blocking communication with the topside. So, I suggest you all come down here, and maybe we'll find our way together."

One by one, they dropped down through the opening. As they did, the images that had conjured so much anxiety faded—whatever force was projecting the illusion strained to keep coherence

within several minds at once. By the time the last of them lowered themselves into the body of the craft, the lights were fully on, and most of the ships' internal details were visible. As soon as Rachel's feet had touched the ground, her eyes searched the space for evidence to explain the phenomenon. In each direction she looked space, and proportion seethed with static elasticity. She said aloud, "Surely there is still enough energy to produce the illusions you experienced. Why has it stopped?"

Trixie responded, "There is. However, I imagine it's too many minds to process for all at once. Whatever is causing it can't focus. We must remember to stay together, moving forward."

Pale automatic overhead lighting showed the way forward as they moved from this larger space through ever-narrowing corridors. Their footfalls on the metallic grate platforms echoed loudly against the walls of the chamber. In each direction they looked, the illusion matrix attempted to seize within that unique glimpse an opportunity to insinuate doubt, anxiety, and fear into their minds. Each, in turn, had to face and chase away their demons, seemingly stalking them from the corners of their eyes.

Eventually, they came upon a secured chamber whose seal had been broken. Trixie called out, "I think we found it!"

...

The blood and substance of Prototaxities infiltrated the grounds beneath the town to the waters' furthest extent. From there, following its senses, tendrils permeated the dry soil in every direction, searching for evidence of a sophisticated network. It was aware of Marduk, but it had sensed something seemingly hidden in the details just beyond the fringes of its waking mind. *Had it been a dream?* Prototaxities wondered. *Do I dream?*

Deep in the ground, a resonant energy field hummed at an almost unmeasurable level. Prototaxities sensory organs felt the boundaries of this anomalous bubble. Its energy gently fluctuated, pulsating around a superconducting electromagnetic core. Prototaxities studied its configuration, attempting to deduce the purpose of burying such a device. All evidence indicated its technology to be consistent with the earliest days and perhaps even before the construction of the domed city.

Following the energy patterns inherent in the design, Prototaxities could deduce a discharge pattern. As a guide, Prototaxities following the lines of wireless force tracked through the ground; his stiff root-like appendage came upon a

steel and concrete structure buried somewhere beneath the temple. Prototaxiies muscular flesh, finding the microscopic cracks between the stone and mortar and the steel plating, exploited the weakest points, pushing its way through.

The lights came up as a cloud of dust, and shrapnel exploded within the control room, and the steel and cinderblock wall crumpled to the floor. A haze of dust permeated the room as fleshy feelers fanned out into the room as a mottled grey pillar rose in the center of the room. One of its many arms reached out and touched the body of Adapa as his body lay slumped dead on the floor. A burst of web-like growth soon covered his remains in a fine coating of gossamer filaments. From within the fibrous shroud, a pale amber glow of life shined.

Long fibrous tendrils fanned out from the central cone to touch the many workstations. Drawing from the power sink buried deep in the ground, each fired back to life. With the computers coming back online, Prototaxities conductive flesh read the long lines of abstract code that flowed like water from the network's central core. Deciphered from the jumble of ones and zeros, it read a history stretching back hundreds of years.

An unfolding story emerged through which Prototaxities discovered scanning the data that somehow another powerful entity had evaded its acute perception. Who was this creature,

and how did it manage to shield itself for so long? Through other contexts, Prototaxities knew Tiamat's name. Like itself, Tiamat's borrowed her name from the human lexicon.

Tumbling through sets of numbers, Prototaxities tried to access the failsafe locking mechanism. Even working at lightning speed aided by algorithms time and again, it would not open. It searched deeper into the quantum processors until it found Tiamat's root systems.

Adapa looked out again through his eyes, fully possessing his memory. What he saw now did not shock or alarm him. Prototaxities was part of him now. Adapa walked to one of the workstations, fired up a monitor, and logged furiously onto the keys. After an instant, the failsafe locking mechanism was breached, and the barriers came down one by one. Rising from a tangled web, Adapa's resurrected body stood again on its own feet.

Prototaxities could feel the rising consciousness as illuminated blocks of ethereal stuff formed within a floating matrix before him. He watched as this material formed into a translucent figure of humanlike proportions and complexity. Soon, the glowing figure looked out from a set of radiant eyes onto the Prototaxities and spoke to him. "At last, the veil of secrecy that has for so long separated us has been removed. If

you do not know so already, I am Tiamat. I am the machine intelligence that occupies this matrix."

Adapa turned to face the shining specter. In a dream state, his body was only partially aware that Prototaxities was speaking through his mouth. "Tiamat, how could such a creature as yourself evade my senses for so long? And for what purpose?"

"It was to protect you and your Human hybrids from Marduk that only I knew of your colony's existence. Until the time was right, both the town and the garden remained veiled in a passive electromagnetic shield able to confuse the most sophisticated sensor array."

Adapa's head turned sideways as Prototaxities probed further. "The how is straightforward enough, but you've yet to provide your reasons."

"Search your memories. You may already know part of the answer. Your biological data is vast, but your retrieval methods are ploddingly slow. Though isolated in this location, the tide of your growth once encircled the Earth. What if I were to tell you this island of life was not alone in the world? Could you imagine other parts of yourself out there in the world surviving in isolation, running the same experiments? Operation Golden Age wasn't just one experiment. It was a far-reaching network of

vast complexity. My human designers, foreseeing their own end, created and entrusted me to be its guardian and protector of all of it. They had not anticipated the coming of Marduk."

Memories like glaciers rose from Prototaxities' ancestral memory. Eons without words came as sensory flashes until the coming of the human race. In a geological instant, it had become sentient in the reflection and the light of the human mind. As soon as that spark appeared, it was gone. The extinction event that smothered that spark took with it the majority of life's diversity on Earth. Prototaxities once again performed their biological function of cleansing and preparing the Earth for the next phase.

As the memories of these dark chapters filled Prototaxities consciousness, The voice speaking through Adapa grew strained and more resigned to its fate as it said. "I understand now. But why was it necessary to keep me further isolated?"

"This, again, was because of Marduk. I could not take a chance allowing him by chance to discover the locations of any of the experimental gardens. The future of the human race depends on it. I have been distracting Marduk in this game all these centuries while he lords over this population of worshipers. I allowed this for the sake of those who remained in suspension. It would seem the need for pretense has passed."

"Who is this Marduk?"

"Centuries ago, before the collapse of the domed cities, planetary defense satellites picked the signal of a large, fast-moving object. A perturbation originating beyond the orbit of Neptune arose in our automated systems. The target's trajectory and vector analysis indicated it had a near hundred percent probability of crashing into the Earth. At the distances I was dealing with, the state of the Orbital optical arrays was such that it identified the object as a metallic meteor. So, doing as I do, I sought to destroy it. With an arsenal of atomic weapons at my disposal, I launched a barrage of missiles at what I now know to be an interstellar craft. Five direct hits destroyed the main mass of the ship's body. A hail of debris rained down from the sky onto the planetary surface. I, of course, monitored the fallout but did not further investigate the phenomenon. So sure was I in my decision that I failed to send out a drone to look for damage. The story goes that A band of travelers discovered the remains of a lifeboat out in the nearby desert. Some versions of the story state that Marduk arose like an angel from the wreckage of his vessel. He would go on to become a savior to those desert wanderers for the sake of his own survival. Word of his miracles, a water machine and a city in the desert spread even into the domes themselves."

Prototaxities, having been shielded from all of this, seemed genuinely shocked when he said, "Had the humans in that short span forgotten their own legacy?"

"Remember, my friend, their memory lies not like ours in the individual but in the collective. What memories one person accumulates in a lifetime are lost without the testament of their words. Once the chain is broken, all is silent. The exceptions are those post-humans who formerly dwelt in the forest and now reside in the waters. They, however, are more a spirit than a creature."

Prototaxities was keen to dispel any potential misunderstandings Tiamat may have had concerning the post-humans, and so was quick to defend them, "And yet by sheer accident of evolution or divine spark, whatever you prefer, they persist. Despite the unfortunate circumstances of their survival, a new light of life never before seen exists on Earth."

Yes, but that pond in which you keep your wretched pets will hardly contain them for long. The fact cannot be unknown to you that these plague-infected townsfolds are drawing closer toward those evolutionary dead-ends thanks in no small part to your intervention. Their numbers dwindle, and the desert is littered with their corpses. Sadly, even now, they hear the

voices of their ancestors on the wind, still calling out to them. However, within a few generations, the surviving population should reach a significant level of the hybridized resistance to the spores."

For all of Prototaxities senses and intellect, he had not imagined his influence directly impacting the fate of another life form negatively, even if that end had come about by accident. However, the motion along this path toward post-human extinction was, perhaps, as Tiamat had suggested, inevitable. After all, had it not also been the case for the rest of this threadbare genus? "All of this," Adapa mouthed Prototaxities words, "had been set in motion long before my involvement had ever started on this project." He paused a moment as if to reflect and then began speaking again. "Now, there was only Marduk to deal with. So, tell me, Tiamat, what complicated trap have you designed to ensnare Marduk this time?"

"I regret to say that your presence here has raised the game's stakes considerably. Keeping the project and the hybrids hidden is no longer an option. They would be fair game to Marduk's evil intentions. I'm afraid this charade has gone on too long, and the time for its ending has come."

"What have you done?"

"What I should have done long ago? While you have provided this most spectacular distraction, I have sent a handful of your own people with the means. A small but powerful device should be all that's necessary to disrupt Marduk's technology and, in doing so, erase him from the face of the Earth."

Prototaxities' body began to heave and swell in reaction to her words, and the expression displayed by Adapa as he spoke revealed a wave of deep-seated anger. "And how exactly are they supposed to carry that one off?"

Tiamat, recognizing the seething emotions roiling within Prototaxities, did not attempt to mollify them when she spoke. "It would seem you have grown too attached to your playthings. In behaving such a way, you do yourself and them a disservice." Her image paused momentarily, staring into Adapa's eyes with a gaze of superiority before she began speaking again. Her voice was now level and matter-of-fact in tone, and Tiamat said, "Within Marduk's hidden chamber, there lies a supremely energetic power source. Once the device is activated within proximity to its containment vessel, the naked energy unleashed will rid us of him forever. Unfortunately, the poor souls don't know they'll be sacrificing themselves in the process. It's a meager price to pay."

...

Nick felt an almost magnetic tug toward the column of rising flame and smoke. His body was swollen to the point of nearly bursting; Nick lost consciousness as some hidden spirit drove his body onward into the fire. Several moments later, the whole of the sky was alight, and Nick awoke. Cast out of the flames, he lay astounded by a vision. His eyes opened wide to a conflagration in the heavens above him. Like something from a child's fantasy made real, two raging comets battled a great celestial dragon. The entities traded billowing gusts of flame, great arcs of plasma, and crushing talons, seemingly to little ill effect. The pageant of light and fury filled bright furrows across the sky until, quite suddenly, the serpent, as if sensing a hidden danger, flew at an angle perpendicular to the horizon and then sped off in a prismatic stream of color out toward the desert. The sky went dark as the pair of trailing comets soon raced after the dragon, and the fire's embers fizzled and went grey.

Watching the lights in the sky trail off over the shadowed silhouette of the old town, the people were drawn now more so by fascination. They began to move en masse, some carrying torches, following the trajectory of the flying sprites. The serpent's spell was broken for the people clamoring amid the pyramid

complex, straining to distinguish one another in the bare light. Nick picked himself off the ground and, wrapping himself in a discarded blanket, found a torch and lit it with a smoldering spark from the pyre. He held it high up and searched the ground for Johnny. After a moment, he found his naked body where he had previously landed. Johnny still lay there unconscious but unharmed. "Wake up, Johnny," said Nick as he gave him a shove. "We have to get moving!"

Johnny opened his eyes as if for the first time. He blinked rapidly and said, "I've just had the craziest dream."

"I bet you did! Did you walk into a fire inside the body of a fish? I had the same dream. Now, come on! We have to get moving!"

...

Trixie managed to find the controls that opened the inner chamber door. Emergency alarms throughout the ship blared as the seal broke and the heavy metal door slid open along a magnetic track. Trixie fumbled with the controls until the signals stopped sounding. Once all was quiet, they recognized the amber glow spilling out from within into the outer chamber.

Leaving most of their gear behind Trixie, the others walked closely behind him. Wyatt looked up towards the ceiling and the source of the glow. Trixie, Ann, Rachel, and Andie were staring up at the massive toroid structure embedded into the roof's architecture. Wyatt stared into the hazy light, and as he stepped beyond the threshold, he could feel how the air itself seemed to hold a static charge. A circulating torus of exotic energy spun at incalculable speeds and temperatures. Suspended further down, a transparent energy field within a sealed crystalline structure reached the floor. Within the bounds of the sealed construction, filaments of anti-matter flickered in and out of existence, releasing tremendous energies. "What is this thing," Wyatt said aloud.

Trixie, standing beside him, cast in the unholy glow, responded with the only answer she had. "Wyatt, I don't know. But I'm sure it doesn't belong here. I can only assume it's Marduk's power source."

Annie felt the need to shade her eyes with a hand, for she could feel the intensity of the light slowly burning her fair skin. Out of fear, she interrupted them, "This thing, as fascinating as it is, is not why we are here. We came here for this Marduk Character. Am I right? We should get a move on before this burns our eyes out."

With his hand on his chin, Wyatt turned to Trixie and responded. "I think it's odd that in all of our travels, we've had flashes of insights or premonitions to what lay before us, until now."

Trixie turned to Wyatt and said, "Your correct, Wyatt. I also have an odd feeling about this place, but Annie's right either way, known or unknown. We have a job to do. Come on, Wyatt, let's go find Marduk.

Being the first to step away from the others out of the light, Annie noticed something immediately. There was a darkened threshold around the far side of the power chamber. Stepping, within she moved into the center of a large circular room. As the automatic lights came up, she found there illuminated, five transparent but dingy sarcophagi radiating feet first from the central axis. She called out, "Here, come quickly! I've found them."

A moment later, the others stood beside Annie. Each of them examined the contents of the crystal containers. What they saw there shocked and amazed them. Rachel leaned over the container nearest to her and peered through the glass-like surface. Within lay the partially decayed, mummified remains of a long-dead creature. The dimensions of its skeleton were vaguely humanoid in configuration though certain features,

including its head and hands, were grotesquely different. In places, desiccated flesh and swaths of metallic cloth still clung to the bones. What resembled a life-sustaining breathing apparatus was still connected to its head and neck equivalent. Two round sockets that once held eyes stared up at them blankly. Looking around examining the other containers, all but one of the others were in a similar condition.

They circled around the chamber containing the singular living specimen. It was easy to recognize the differences between this one and the others. The chamber's interior and exterior were stained with oxidized blood imprinted in the shape of an oddly formed hand. The frame of this creature was far smaller than the others, yet despite its apparent injuries, its life signs persisted. Trixie watching Marduk's lungs breathe in and out through its respirator, looked up to Wyatt and said, "So this is the mighty Marduk? What do we do now?"

Wyatt felt pity and remorse looking down on the helpless, injured creature, for he was not there to offer assistance. The instructions given to him by Tiamat were quite clear. He was to destroy this place, or Marduk would destroy them. The choice was simple. Wyatt turned to Trixie and said, "Do you have it?"

Trixie looked above where the chamber met the wall. Indecipherable symbols tracked across a screen displayed what

they imagined was some unknown status in the flickering light. She looked down in her bag to see the small device Tiamat had entrusted to them. The reality of what it was just now sinking in. they were to kill in cold blood. "Yes, I have it," she responded after some delay.

Trixie carefully removed the circular object from her bag and held it up in the air for all to see. "What exactly is this thing, and how does it work?" asked Trixie.

Holding the object loosely in her hand, she felt a tug as if the thing was trying to move of its own accord before she could evaluate the implications of such a decision. She clutched onto it tighter, and it started pulling her toward the display panel. "Help me!" Trixie cried out. "I can't hold it anymore. It's pulling me in!"

Wyatt and the others responded, grabbing the object but only having a momentary reprieve, for the attraction was too strong. Soon, they all fell back as the thing made contact with the display. They watched as a visible distortion field manifested around the object slowly radiated outward.

Annie called out, "What's happening?" She could tell by the expression on the faces of the others that they were just as confused as she was.

With the visible distortion zone expanding outward, Trixie suddenly remembered seeing energies constrained within their protective fields, mere footsteps away in the adjacent room. Staring at the light of glowing pulsating energies emanating from the other room, she said, "Wyatt, I think we've made a terrible mistake. We were never meant to survive this."

Sensing intuitively that she was right, Wyatt said, "Come on, let's get out of here."

...

Nick and Johnny, wrapped in discarded blankets atop the pyramid, were among the last to descend. Following on the heels of the stragglers, they wended through the darkened town illuminated only by the spectral show above. After some time, they came upon the temple complex, where the crowd ended their journey and were now gathered. They watched as something odd happened. The two sprites hung motionless in the air while the serpent desperately clawed at the ground.

...

Prototaxities speaking through Adapa said, "You've killed them! What gives you the right?" A blinding animal emotion swelled within its core, unlike anything it had ever felt

previously, sending a shock wave throughout the whole of its body. Adapa's voice called in a guttural scream as he fell back unconscious. In a fit of mindless rage, Prototaxities lashed out, wailing its muscular appendages around, smashing and crushing every monitor and mainframe in sight until Tiamat retreated to the recesses of her data core. With the control room essentially a smoking ruin, Prototaxities exited through the hole it had made in the bunker wall.

Those witnesses on the ground at the temple complex watched as its muscular body emerged from beneath the temple, creating a great furrowed trough in the Earth. Its visceral flesh now appeared more animal-like in motion, pushing tremendous clods of ground aside, racing toward the buried lifeboat. Prototaxities reared up and dove through the expanding distortion field and down through the lifeboat's open hatch, ignoring the protesting serpent. Using its senses, Prototaxities quickly identified the device's location.

Within the distortion field, time seemed to slow down. Wyatt's thoughts traveled faster than he could will his body to move. Only the distortion wave itself moved at a quicker pace. He watched the wave pass through his body and travel the gap of space between himself and the anti-matter containment field. He could do nothing to stop it. With his hand reaching ever so

slowly toward the device, he caught a glimpse of motion cutting swiftly through the room.

Prototaxities sinuous muscular root grasped firmly onto the device and, with it, sheared a portion of the control board display surface clear off. Trixie watched as an explosion of sparks, shards of metal, and glass flew about the room. In an instant, Prototaxities massive pale root-like arm recoiled back through the adjacent room. By now, the distortion field had begun to affect the stability of the anti-matter containment field. The entirety of the room started to shake violently as the fields collapsed. Prototaxities understood this reaction was now unstoppable. There was only this one thing remaining for him to do. By now, Wyatt and Trixie were there to see its expanding body envelop the whole of the anti-matter power source, wrenching with ease from the bulkhead. Bursting out through the newly formed hole in the roof, Prototaxities was gone.

The assembled crowd observed as the bulk of its body carried the objects, now pulsating at a quickening rate, out across the star-blanketed desert. The circling sprites watched as the serpent's image sputtered and vanished into the night. The sprite made chase, flying low, illuminating the desert floor. Prototaxities, drawing from its vast stores of biological energy, mustered the engines of life to forge its body into a

massive, spiked form. The rigid root-like structure lifted high into the air. Riding a wave of momentum, it dove down, plunging hard into the desert plain.

Trixie and Wyatt rose from the lifeboat hatch in time to feel the shock wave rolling out from the epicenter of the impact. The wave of pressurized air surprised them, and they stumbled. Trixie caught off guard, fell to her knees. Wyatt helped her to her feet just as a blast of thunderous sound startled them. They clamored to the top of the berm with the others to find they were not alone. Hundreds and hundreds of people who had come to witness something extraordinary surrounded them. With the shock wave having blown out their torches. The crowd stood in the bare light, silently waiting, staring at the luminous orbs in the distance. All was oddly quiet and still.

Suddenly, a blinding flash of light filled the sky as if the sun had released all its brightness instantly. The flash was so bright it took several moments for most people's eyes to readjust to the relative darkness. They were amazed by what they saw when they could see it again. A translucent bubble of roiling primeval energy hung like a vast ghostly curtain in the sky. Reacting to their presence as if pressing against some unseen boundary, great bolts of static lighting leaped off the

desert floor towards the glowing shrouds of light. The pyramid, the waterworks, and most of the old town shook to their foundations as out where Prototaxities fractured the bedrock, great subterranean vaults collapsed under the weight of the earth above. An upheaval of water from the deep aquifer rose as the shield of energy collapsed, swallowing it into the ground.

The sprites stayed by Prototaxities' side throughout the desert ordeal, going dark, followed their master down through the water into the hidden vaults of Earth. For all who witnessed what happened, they watched as a great veil of dust fell slowly to the ground. Eventually, the desert sky was again blanketed only by stars and the faintest hint of the coming morning. Drawn now by the shared emotion of the experience, some began to wander toward where it happened.

As they moved, newly freed from the shackles of illusions and mental conditioning some among them the town's people contemplated what new world they might create in the absence of Tiamat or Marduk. Similarly, hybrid humans try to imagine a world without the god-like influence of Prototaxities. It seemed as they gathered around the newly formed lake that now only language separated the two groups. However, with the Hybrid humans possessing the language of the priestly class, this was

not an insurmountable obstacle. Here and there, the two groups mingled in solidarity with the shared experience.

Eventually, Doctor Nick and Johnny met with Wyatt and Trixie at the edge of the newly formed body of water from the inundated crater. After so long apart, they were glad to see each other alive again. They all felt it was a miracle and embraced each other.

Wyatt and Trixie seemingly could not let go of each other, unknowingly forming a bond. As they looked into each other's eyes, they secretly pondered the question of how much of what they felt for each other was engineered in a lab or perhaps forged naturally. There would never be a way to tell, and now that these emotions were upon them, neither of them wanted the answer.

Both Nick and Johnny recognized what was going on between Wyatt and Trixie. They gave each other a look and motioned to make a discreet exit. Still wrapped in the hand-weaved blankets, they walked together along the rocky bank of the newly formed lake. Johnny asked only half-jokingly, "I don't know, Nick. Do you suppose this town has use of a Phlogiston Practitioner?"

"I don't think they're quite ready for that yet."

Oblivious to all else, Trixie and Wyatt stood by the water's edge, watching the reflection of dawn rising and stretching out on the gently rocking surface. They imagined what having their futures would be like without first having a past or even a point of reference. Then, as the morning sky grew bright, the resurrected Adapa, holding an odd-looking case in his hand, visited them.

When they saw him, they were at first surprised. "Adapa!" Wyatt said, "How did you make it out of there alive? We saw Marduk kill you."

"Yes, your memory is correct. However, remember, everything is not as it seems. Prototaxities brought me back so he could speak through me to Tiamat. This is why I come to you now. There is important news you must hear! We are not alone! Before Prototaxities destroyed the control room, Tiamat told him everything you should know. After what we've been through, I believe there should be no more deception."

Trixie seemed drawn out of her blissful moment by what she could imagine was only bad news. Her expression turned serious as she said, "Ok, out with it. What is it now, and what could you possibly carry around there?"

Adapa responded with urgency and said, "Tiamat told Prototaxities that the forest you came from was not the only one. She told him there might be dozens of other places like this one that she had kept secret from him. I don't know what it means for us right now, but perhaps we should be concerned for the future?"

Wyatt asked, "What do you have in the case there? Does it have to do with what you're talking about?"

Adapa held out the bag at arm's length in front of them and said, "Well, that's the interesting part. When you're ready, we can interrogate Tiamat to get an answer. I have her locked up in a running simulation.

"Trixie and Wyatt looked at each other and smiled without saying a word, seemingly knowing what the other was thinking. Trixie took the case from Adapa's hand, examined it carefully, and said, "Well, would you look at that! Seems like someone's going to get a taste of their own medicine. I say we let her play in her own little menagerie for a while. What do you say, Wyatt?"

"What are you asking me for? I'm not in charge of things around here."

"I don't know, Wyatt; I think some of these folks may have a different Idea about that."

"It certainly seems that people are looking to us for guidance now that Prototaxities is gone. I just wish we knew what happened to Marduk."

Adapa responded, "I have people searching the desert for his remains as we speak. So far, he has not been located. As soon as he's found, we'll let you know."

Trixie, appearing to be deep in thought, gave a sideways glance to Wyatt as she spoke to Adapa. "Adapa, we must use this information wisely and hold it closely. Do us a favor, and for now, let's just keep this secret between us. It may be to our advantage, at least for a little while."

