

## Chapter 1

2059

Washington D.C

Paul awoke to the cries of his anguished voice. As wakefulness clarified the jumbled memory of the imagery possessing him, he realized this experience held a certain intangible familiarity, and his anxiety faded. The memory of wandering alone in a strange dreamscape unfolded Like a string of painted papers.

Paul recalled stumbling about in a featureless void when he observed a great disturbance ripping at the borders of reality. He saw a shard-like pinprick of light splinter against the inky watercolor of darkness. Holding his hand against the intense light, he watched his ordinary senses betray him as waves of energy revealed the hidden contours of the landscape.

Awakened, Paul tilted his view toward the scattered light shining through the window blinds. His head was leaden, and he felt dazed and out of sorts as the bright rays stung his eyes.

Distant bass echoes and street sirens filtered in from the outside world. Paul's mouth was parched, and his tongue was dry like cotton. He imagined he had traded one nightmare for another.

It took him another few moments to realize as he lay there motionless, staring at the ceiling, that though sober for years, he was inexplicably hungover. He tried to push away the unrelenting and all too familiar sick feeling. With some effort, he forced himself to rise. Standing shakily, he scanned to his left, finding the familiar glint of morning light shining through the green molded glass bottle resting on his bedside table. Reaching down, he grasped it by the neck. Holding it up against the light, finding it empty, Paul confirmed his suspicions that some change had occurred during the night.

Paul stood up. Still feeling the numbing effects of the alcohol, he staggered to the kitchen. On the table was an ashtray filled high to the rim with cigarette butts. The rank smell of burnt tobacco struck him. He felt a wave of nausea stiffen his abdomen as he fought back a solid impulse to vomit.

As Paul winced from the sight and acrid smell, he said to himself, choking back the urge to heave, *That's odd. I never smoked. I guess today is as good as any to quit.* He took a deep breath and immediately began coughing. "What the fuck are you

doing to yourself, Paul?" He said aloud, between sputtering fits of cough. He dumped the lot into a waiting receptacle. Ash rose, and he whooshed it away with his hand. In a gravelly voice, he said, "Ok, let's be done with all this shit, shall we? I wonder what else you've been up to?" After a few minutes of inspecting the apartment, He wandered back to the foot of his bed. Struggling to summon the strength of will required to break this awful feeling, he took a deep breath, coughed some more, and then fully opened his eyes.

After three cups of coffee, the fog clouding his mind had lifted. As his senses slowly returned, he remembered ever-clearer details of his ongoing situation. As a "time-sensitive," Paul knew that the agency he worked for took this issue seriously. However, few individuals could register such a phenomenon as having occurred due to the conscious mind's limitations. For this reason, evidence would have to be incontrovertible. As it stood, Paul could not immediately confirm or deny that he was out of place. But something was out of place. What that was needed to be determined.

Searching his closet, Paul found a freshly pressed shirt, pants, and brown tweed suit jacket. These items had been as they were before. Laying them out on the bed, he admires how well they match. He dresses and examines his appearance in the

mirror, happy to recognize an image he had grown accustomed to. Looking closer into the reflection of his dark, symmetrical eyes for any hint or clue, he finds none.

Swallowing the last bitter drops of coffee from his mug, feeling synchronized to this world, Paul could not yet tell if this current iteration possessed the hallmarks of a facsimile. As Paul slung his bag to head out the door out the door, though he suspected the worst, he hoped the changes would be insignificant. He found himself outside, moving with purpose down the stairwell and exiting through the automatic sliding glass door. There was too much going on for him to discern a difference. However, nothing seemed overtly out of place as he passed the familiar landmarks of his environment.

Before long, Paul found himself before the imposing Castle Gatehouse, where the Potomac River and Georgetown Reservoir meet. Though it was not the agency's main operation center, it did, however, serve as one of its vital surveillance sites for conducting investigations and quietly recording data. The flow of raw data never stopped from thousands of remote passive monitoring arrays stationed throughout the globe and in space.

As Paul approached its wrought iron gates, he removed from his pocket a key fob that deactivated a magnetic locking mechanism. Massive springs pulled back, and the gate swung open

effortlessly. An inkling of doubt was beginning to mar some of his assumptions. Paul determined that without evidence to the contrary, this world and his recollection did not appear to differ significantly. Stepping through the gate, he made his way up the crushed stone walkway toward the castle. Admiring the rows of crocuses that now lined the path as Paul passed, he heard the heavy gates close behind him.

Still, this sense of uncertainty weighed heavily on Paul. It reminded him why he joined the agency in the first place. During his years at university, he struggled with the feeling that something was not quite right with the world. When the agency approached him, Paul naively believed the agency recruited him for his academic abilities. This notion was just one of his many initial misconceptions. Within the Office of Theoretical Intelligence, his peculiar outlook on the world earned him the label of a "time-sensitive." Knowing perfectly well that their work was beyond the fringes of accepted science, it reconciled what Paul learned from his personal experience.

Looking back through the iron gates, Paul realized he was alone for the first time. He thought to himself, *Where's everybody else? I can't be the only one coming to work today.* He continued several meters until he went to the end of the walkway. As he had done hundreds of times, he found the plain

windowless metallic plate that served as the facility's front door. Peering at his oddly misshapen reflection, he took a moment to readjust his tie. Once he felt things were straight, he again presented his fob, passing it over a hidden scanner port. A small opening appeared just about at eye level within the door frame. From within the space, a small lens projecting a stream of laser light scanned the surface of his face. The device compared the rendering to a facsimile stored in its database. His identity was established, the locking mechanism disengaged, and the door swung open before him. Standing back recessed into the open doorway, two armed guards in full body armor stood ready.

One of the guards stepped forward with an electronic scanning device resembling a small baton. Paul recognized the rod for what it was. Though Paul felt this level of security was perhaps unusual, he put his arms in the air without question. The guard ran the device over the surface of Paul's clothing. After a brief moment, the machine gave a beeping sound that the guard recognized as the all-clear sign. The guard said, "Good morning, Agent Valier."

"And to you, Agent Fulton," Paul responded, lowering his arms again to his sides. "May I ask what is the purpose of the

beefed-up security? Is there something I should be made aware of?"

"I would if I could. You know the rules, Sir. You will be debriefed shortly. The director has called a general meeting at nine hundred hours."

"Do you know what it's about?"

"As I said, Sir, you know how it is: It's need to know only. Besides, you would likely know more than I would, Sir." Fulton Said with an uncomfortable tone.

"Right.", Said Paul, feigning ignorance.

Paul looked at his watch, noted the time, and thanked him. The large metal door closed behind him as he stepped into the room. Fulton opened a utility panel on the wall beside them, inserting an old-fashioned skeleton key from his vest into a slot. He turned it once and engaged the motor. A smooth mechanical sound emanated from the walls as gears engaged. Red safety lights spun from the ceiling and flashed in warning as a much louder mechanical noise resounded from beneath them.

Slowly, the ceiling above them began to rise away from them. Paul placed his hand on the wall and steadied himself as

the floor dropped lower into the hollow space below. After a thirty-second freefall, the magnetic braking system engaged, and the room abruptly but smoothly stopped. The entirety of the room now was within another far more extensive space. Paul stepped from a giant elevator onto the floor of a vast underground research complex. He also recognized this; so far, except for the increased security, nothing had changed.

Bathed in the fluorescent glow of artificial lights, row after row of offices, meeting rooms, and laboratories stretched out before him. He turned to see Fulton and the other guard lifting off toward the entrance level. As Paul walked toward his office, he noticed a buzz of activity. Though unusual, this was no cause for concern. He would, for the time being, keep his suspicions to himself. A moment later, finding his office, he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He propped his back against the door and took a deep breath.

Alone, he tried to piece together what he had discovered so far. He had to first admit to the possibility that his senses may have been faulty. Although things here did not appear to be different, something extraordinary was happening, but he could not put his finger on it. He looked at his watch again and took note of the time. He had ten minutes to get a hold of himself before the briefing.



After clearing his mind, Paul went to Conference Room B, several doorways down from his office. Wishing to avoid unnecessary interactions with his coworkers, he passed the water cooler gauntlet unscathed. At precisely nine on the dot, he entered the room. There were perhaps two dozen of his fellow agents present. Though he knew them all reasonably well, he would now attempt to say as little as possible until he could read his bearings. Amidst the small talk, he slunk quietly into one of the chairs around the table, sat back, and tried to relax while waiting for things to get underway. *So far, so good*, he thought to himself.

All the chatter stopped as the frail but lively agency director entered the room. Slowly, she made her way to the dais at the end of the conference table and prepared to call the meeting to order. Here, Paul discovered the first contradiction between what he knew as reality and what was before him. As far as he knew, this was not the agency Director. Paul had never met this person in his ten years under their employ. He knew then that if ever there was a need for things to return as they were, he would need to pay special attention to this woman.

Realizing he would need to capture the details of her words, Paul removed a pair of glasses, a pen, and a small notebook from his vest as she began to address those assembled.

Paul immediately began creating a profile for her that he could easily reference. Firstly, he noted her appearance. Though frail, she seemingly possessed a spark of life that rivaled most people half her age. As he listened to her speak, he noted how her voice exuded confidence that commanded the attention of her peers.

She nodded and smiled at a few people Paul surmised to be acquaintances in the room, and she began to speak. "Good day, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for being on time for such an early meeting. It could have waited if the subject had not been of such a serious nature. But that's enough apologizing for now; I'm wasting valuable time. Let us get to the matter at hand." She placed a pair of reading glasses over her eyes and began to review a set of papers she held in her hands as she waited for the projection screen to boot up.

With the screen alit now with graphs and figures, she began to speak. "Since the inception of the Theoretical Branch, we have conducted many interventions. Though often, these actions can have unanticipated consequences, our duty dictates that we continue. For this reason, we do our homework, always keeping our ears and eyes open. For forty years now, I have listened, accumulating entire data libraries, combing through it as

sophisticatedly as possible, looking for that elusive tell-tale anomaly. These numbers and charts displayed here represent a lifetime of work. However, what they signify may seem highly abstract and not readily evident. I have kept these data confidential for these and other reasons that will soon be obvious. It has been presented today without the benefit of confirmation in its raw form, for what we may have discovered can no longer be ignored. Another more personal reason is that, as you know, I will be retiring at the end of April. So, what I say here may be of little consequence in May. It is important then that I present this before the full council."

She then began to present her evidence. Those assembled listened intently as they reviewed chords of data in detail. In an opus of raw mathematical white noise, the team explored functions reflecting the subtle curvature of a specific class of gravity signature. The director presented elaborate maps and indices alluding to their theoretical cycles. They examined Graphs depicting sets of anomalous shadows hidden within theoretical graviton waveforms. Then, these figures were compared and contrasted against what scant knowledge was currently available on the structure of space-time. These, in the end, were carefully dissected and eviscerated. After nearly two hours of dissertation and statistical analyses, those

assembled kept their attention keen throughout the presentation out of respect and admiration for the director. Though they were now a bit frazzled by the sheer volume of data, they were curious to see where she was going with it.

She would not disappoint; therein, in her summation, she made arguments that some found unusual. "Now you have seen the evidence of vast forces at work for yourselves. From a particular viewpoint, these results indicate that these anomalies are far more than just an aberration in numbers. A cohesive pattern runs throughout the data that, in my opinion, can lead to only one conclusion. Therefore, I postulate that these signal anomalies represent the faint echoes of repeated incursions into our space-time realm from some extradimensional source, the details of which currently are virtually unknowable. We also find suggestions for the object's size in the corrected data. I will use the singular for ease of discussion. What we find is the footprint of a truly massive object."

On her hand-held remote control, she activated an additional set of slides. A two-dimensional image appeared on the projection screen, drawn in simple, sweeping black lines. The image represented showed concentric waves emanating from a central point. From this image, the motion of the simply generated animation of said object interacts with the

gravitation fields of the Earth. "Here, you can see that the mass required to register such reactions would equal that of an asteroid or perhaps even a dwarf planet. Despite its relative mass, this object must be small enough to have gone unnoticed for this long. Surely, such an exotic object's true nature would be equally veiled from us. In conclusion, I recommend that we initiate a formal study wherein we can qualify the potential hazards related to this incursion so we may avoid a potential catastrophe in the future. I now open the floor to opposing arguments."

No one rushed to speak. There was an almost tangible buzz within the conference room as many voices conferred in speculation about the meaning of what they had just heard. Paul watched their eyes as they reasoned through her theory. Though everything she stated stood purely on logic, there were too many assumptions and leaps of the imagination needed for any sober-minded person to come to an easy agreement on it. Paul believed the director secretly knew what responses her presentation would create among her peers, yet she went ahead anyway. What had she hoped to accomplish here? He wondered. Perhaps she expected to find a ready ally just one last time? Around the table, He looked for an expression akin to recognition on their faces.

Among those assembled, Sara found only reserved confusion, save for one. Looking into the eyes of Paul Valier, she saw that ally. Though he did not otherwise betray his thoughts, it was there all the same. Paul wondered whether his presence there at this moment was a foregone conclusion. Due to a sense possessed only by him, Paul knew that both she and he had already drawn the same conclusion that these things were true. However, he knew enough not to reveal these thoughts publicly.

A murmur of stifled voices rose to fill the conference room while the agents grappled with the evidence. None seemingly felt confident enough in their words to share them aloud under scrutiny before the council. The sound soon died, followed by an even more uncomfortable silence. It was evident to Paul that no comments were forthcoming. So, he was not surprised when a generally reserved assistant director, Andrews, stood to break the unpleasant silence.

"Dr. Burton, I know that pattern analysis is your specific field of expertise, but I think I can speak for most of us when I say, based on today's evidence, that your sense of urgency is perhaps unwarranted. Furthermore, I take no joy in saying that your findings lean too heavily on theory and are, at best,

preliminary. This is not to say that you have wasted your efforts. I do not doubt that you have found something quite extraordinary. However, as a board member, I must insist that we delay any action on this data until more concrete results are available."

Sara took her glasses from her eyes, leveled her view toward him, and said, "Could you be more specific about what parts of the logic you find particularly intimidating?" Though this was meant as a shot, he wasn't taking the bait.

Unmoved, Dr. Andrews responded, "Look, Sara, you know better than any of us. We have seen many unusual events. And your math is flawless. So, I believe you will find no resistance on that account. However, regardless of my respect for you as a person and as an analyst, I cannot in good conscience throw my support behind a full-scale investigation for what in my mind amounts to the mathematical equivalent of a ghost hunt."

Sara looked out at Dr. Andrews, stifling the frustration cracking in her voice as she replied, "This is no mere ghost! Hidden in this data is evidence of a massive incursion; a ship or perhaps an armada has found anchorage somewhere here on Earth."

Despite his cordial demeanor, Dr. Andrews was determined to play the role of naysayer, "I'm sorry, Sara, but how do you make the leap from a numerical aberration to an alien armada? Your evidence does not support your supposition." He paused and folded his arms across his chest as in contemplation. He focused his eyes in her direction and began to speak. "Tell me, Sara, what have you seen beyond these graphs and diagrams that brought such wild conclusions? Based only on what you've shown us, taking such a leap is asking a lot. You said yourself that we are talking about shadows and impressions. Even if these signals were real, there is no way to tell when exactly these incursions occurred. If what your reports state are to be believed as true, then any action may well be an exercise in futility."

Sensing the room's mood, Sara now sought to underplay her hand. "It's frustrating. I can't give you the answer you want. I can only say that certain anomalous signatures over the decades appear with regularity, consistent with the constructs of sentience. Unfortunately, this is the closest I have to quantifiable evidence." Sara turned from Doctor Andrews and directed her words toward the larger body. "I am not suggesting a full-scale investigation. I am fully aware of the tenuous nature implicit in this evidence. For that matter alone, we must



tread softly. May I suggest that one agent, maybe two, conduct a cursory investigation? If, as I suspect, sentient beings of unknown origin are the cause of this phenomenon, perhaps by the simple act of initiating an investigation, we will jar something loose or force them, whomever they may be, to make a misstep. Besides, you have nothing to lose, for as I said, I will be gone in one month, and by the looks upon your faces, this subject will have become irrelevant."

Though Sara was the director, due to the nature of their work, all decisions relating to field interventions were decided by consensus. After further discussion and a simple show of hands, it was agreed that an investigation would occur. The vote, as she expected, was unanimous. It was, however, more likely than not that they did as she asked out of respect for her tenure than the theory's merits.

As the meeting adjourned and the conference room emptied, the wheels had already begun to turn. Paul remained planted in his seat, waiting for the rest to leave. Eventually, the room was empty except for himself and Director Burton. She made her way to the door and quietly closed it. She turned around and made her way back to the table. Without saying a word, she sat in the chair directly before Paul. The two looked across the

table in silence until Sara began to speak. "Tell me, Agent Valier, what part of the logic did you find particularly intimidating?"

"None of it, all of it is utter nonsense, of course."

"Is that what you actually think? I must say I'm surprised. I've been watching your progress for some time now, Agent Valier. May I call you Paul?"

"Why, of course, you can call me anything you like."

"All right then, I insist that you call me Sara for the balance of this conversation."

Paul nodded in recognition of her request. "Paul, could you tell me, and be honest, why we are having this conversation? As I told you, I have been monitoring your progress. You may not know this, but I supervised your recruitment personally. I am fully aware of your status as a time-sensitive." Paul listened as she spoke, and he realized that her eyes did not break contact with his, nor did her voice waver.

He knew now that she must know most, if not all, of what he knew. "Ok, Sara, I agree with Dr. Andrew's critique, as you probably know. In and of itself, the data you presented today does not support such action. However, your theory has more truth than you have volunteered evidence for. Why is it then that you have managed to leave key data from the report?"

"You know, as a time-sensitive, news today is tomorrow's history. Much of what we keep hidden today is for the future's benefit. I dare not risk word of this leeching out from behind these walls. We can't trust anyone right now. In a way, I have been preparing for this moment for my entire career. Do you know the agency's history? If you did, you might be able to understand the purposes of such secrecy more readily."

"I know what I've learned in my training and what I've picked up along the way?"

"There is much more you should know."

Sara stood up from her chair, crossed her arms across her chest, and began to tell her story with eyes cast toward the carpet. "When I joined the agency, I was part of the third generation of agents. I was, however, one of the first to be recruited

specifically for my gifts. In my case, I could see patterns. From the beginning, the company has fostered the development of these abilities. With this encouragement over the years, my skills have been well-honed."

She paused in recollection, and Paul observed that doing so had caused a visible strain upon her expression as she reviewed these memories. After a moment, she began speaking again, though she avoided the subject. "We have moved far beyond the program's beginnings. Since those early days, the need arose for an agency to entrust this particular brand of intelligence. We developed methods to monitor unseen spatiotemporal interactions over time using the limited knowledge at our disposal. We unwittingly mapped the various dimensions alongside and overlapping this one rudimentarily. This investigation was the beginning of our secret surveillance project."

"With all due respect, Sara, I understand my abilities well. What could this history lesson possibly do with this current investigation?"

Sara hesitated and returned to the seat before him. Appearing frustrated, she looked into his eyes with an enduring stare and began to speak. "That's a valid question. It would help if you heard this to show you that there are precedents for

some information to be held safe from the official record. If you do not mind, I prefer you indulge your director."

Paul was puzzled by the cryptic nature of this conversation. He felt compelled, however, to listen. "All right, I apologize; please continue."

"What eventually became known as Simulation technology allows one to predict complex future events with reasonable accuracy. Having power like that is an awesome responsibility. It became necessary to provide actionable counterintelligence aimed at factions within our agency."

"Are you trying to tell me without saying it that there may be agents actively trying to interfere with this investigation for purposes other than what you described to me?"

Sara nodded in the affirmative and said, "You must be careful, for as I said, there are precedents." She paused a moment to fold her hands together before speaking again.

"Sara, is it safe to say that this competition has been, of late, good-natured? In other words, how concerned should I be with this meddling?"

"That, I would imagine, depends on the nature of the prediction. I'm sure they know much of what I know. There, as I've said, have been precedents. There have been both predictions and the inevitable unpleasantness in the incurring years. These exchanges were troubling."

Paul pondered this statement, and he wondered to himself. Is this happening only in this reality, or had it been happening before, and he hadn't been aware of it? Paul felt compelled to ask. Waiting for a pause in her voice, he spoke. "Is what you're telling me now considered common knowledge within the agency?" "Need to know only, I'm afraid, and now it's your turn because you may soon find out. May I continue?" "I'm sorry. Yes."

"One set of predictions indicates that the future discovery of time and inter-dimensional travel could exist. If you understand such things, you should know that they are impossible to close once someone opens these doorways. Though we may not yet possess a means to travel in such a way, we foresaw that others, perhaps more menacing, just might. The future would forever be vulnerable."

"You suspect this has already happened, and this is where I come in."

"That's right."

"So, tell me then, what did you see?"

"What was not immediately obvious from today's material was the sheer breadth and consistency of the signal. Decades ago, theoretical scientists perfected a means to accurately measure the faintest pressure upon a beam of laser light exerted by the effects of gravitational waves. The agency designers envisioned capturing the signal induced by the motion of a massive object's influence upon the fabric of space-time. These detectors, set passively at one of the Earth-Moon Lagrange points constituted by an array of laser interferometers, were tuned to capture these telltale signatures. After decades of ceaseless dedication to this endeavor, despite never finding extrinsic evidence to correlate with the purely abstract data, these subtle variations to the background field matrix represent the mathematical equivalent to footprints in the snow, footprints of a beast I have secretly spent my career tracing through the wilderness. Remember, data sets exist representing a period spanning half a century. Once you've seen all the evidence in its totality, all other possibilities must be eliminated. You are left with only one logical assumption. The signal can only

be a shadow of a massive object creating its sphere of gravity within our own."

Though Paul was intrigued, he still had many questions. "How do you rule out the possibility that these signals represent known natural processes? Furthermore, to sustain such an event as you've described seems counter to everything we currently know about the physical laws of nature."

"Despite being invisible to us, there is a truth in numbers that supersedes observation. Again, after eliminating all possibilities, we must accept what the evidence presents. In my mind, we are left only with what we are not ready to accept, which lies beyond our understanding. I'm afraid my young protégé that the answer to this puzzle is a theoretical contrivance. Though the required energies would be astronomical, I believe just one candidate remains. Take your pick. Name it what you will: warp bubble, a wormhole."

He shook his head to recognize these theories as a set of facts. However, she thought it strange how he did not once flinch from her assertion. He seemed eager to accept her ideas at face value. Though this was her intention, she did not imagine that convincing him would have gone smoothly. She



leaned in toward him and asked, "I can tell by the expression on your face that your mind is open to the possibilities. However, I am curious: tell me, Paul, what about this story allows you to accept it with such relative ease?"

"As you said earlier, you've watched my development for some time now. I could ask you a similar question as well. What about my abilities singles me out as one who would be most prepared for this assignment? Before you answer, I suggest that we need to tread lightly. I'm afraid we must be cautious. Possessing certain knowledge could, in theory, jeopardize everything you have been working toward. We may unwittingly affect the future in unintended ways."

"Paul, could you be more specific? This territory is all new for me."

"Well, for starters, because we work without the benefit of such technology, the game's rules are unknown to us. For example, we don't know if possessing certain information could, in theory, destabilize this timeline, making one or both of our existences within it untenable. Suffice it to say that both you and I exist here and now, despite evidence to the contrary."

Her face held an expression of surprise and confusion as he carefully unfolded his theory. Regardless of his warnings, she could not help but question the integrity of his evidence.

"Exactly what kind of evidence are we talking about?"

"What I'm talking about would likely not hold up to the rigors of science, for it is highly subjective to experience and is circumstantial in most practical terms. And to accept my version of things forces you to conclude that everything you think about this world or this moment is a fabrication of our own will."

"Paul, your logic seems to be going around in circles. Is it because you don't know what you are talking about or are afraid to say what you mean? I suspect perhaps it is a little of both. Are you holding something back? Please, would you get to the point?"

"All right, I will tell you what I know." Paul took a deep breath and began to tell his story. "You say you recruited me personally. You should then understand and appreciate my abilities if this is so."

"This is true; I understood where this might take me. I should be ready for anything."

"Well then, I will tell you. It is a simple fact that I had never met you before this afternoon, nor have I ever even heard of you. In my frame of reference, you are not the director. That honor goes to Dr. Andrews. If I were to guess, the reason for this paradox is somehow related to this warp bubble. We are both linked to it here in this place. We must find the source of this anomaly and hopefully undo what damage we discover there. However, there are no guarantees that whatever brought us together will be here tomorrow, so we must take advantage of our time together."

"Please, Paul, indulge this old woman for a moment. Why is it that our paths do not meet in your timeline?"

"That, too, could be due to the anomaly. Imagine a world where you discovered and defeated this enemy in a struggle many years ago. A scenario like that could explain how I had not heard of this till now."

"If that were the case, why do we both find ourselves here and now?"

"It may be that you were successful in your mission, sacrificing yourself in the world where I'm from." She was drawn to the logic of this theory, for it made all sense. It was, however, rather difficult to accept.

## Chapter 2

2059

Washington DC

It was early morning. Sara sat alone, staring into her stale coffee at an old card table, sequestered under the pall of artificial light of the Castle basement. As Paul had predicted, she was still preoccupied with thought, and the aluminum urn provided no answers. What Paul had told her, like the coffee, was too difficult to swallow. Though she had accepted his statements, she had once, in another reality, perhaps subverted the now-hidden calamity; she still struggled to grasp any

concrete facts that would reconcile her thoughts with her emotions. Though she had studied all manner of anomalies for decades, she had never imagined herself intimately tied to one. Though secretly troubled by these revelations, she could not let it show for the sake of their work together. She was too close to an answer now, and in the twilight of her career, she could little afford to let this opportunity slip away. So, she desperately searched back into her memory for any clues. But she could not recall missing opportunities like Paul alluded to that could explain the disparity between her and Paul's version of events.

Despite the mathematical certainty of this other world's existence, there was little of that world she would hope to recognize as distinct from her own by traditional means. However, in a way, although she had not recognized it, her algorithms had all but predicted it. There was but one thing about this alternative timeline she was sure of. The events that had transpired in that other world had been replaced here by ones familiar yet ineffectual. All that was left here in its vacuum was this tired old body. She had no choice but to accept these facts. One thing that made her proud was that she had made a real difference somewhere. Perhaps it was not too late to do so again. All she could do was move forward.

It occurred to her that if a significant event had been somehow altered in the past, some residual effects must have been manifest in its absence, like a skid mark at an accident. This was something she thought she could work with. At face value, the subtlety of these events would render them practically invisible. However, she realized that now, due to her age and experience, she was uniquely positioned to peel back upon the skin of time and reveal their presence. Unable to recall such a moment transpiring long ago, she would be forced to scour through her old case files with a fine-toothed comb, analyzing every detail. Chances were slim.

Another possibility occurred to her. Perhaps attempting to conjure a recollection or transfer information about such a lynchpin event was somehow forbidden by the laws of nature. What might happen if she were somehow able? This line of conjecture was all very heady stuff. None of which she could claim to possess with anything like certainty. All this, significant as it was, had taken a back seat to the primary analysis of her original data set. She rose from her folding chair and went back down the grated steel steps.

Much had happened in the several days since her presentation. Paul had accepted the assignment, and they had begun adding pieces to the equation. At that same time, spring

had quietly acquiesced to summer-like weather. The blossoms had all fallen from the cherries. Though the stain of their decaying petals still marred the pavement, their sweet fragrance had faded from the air. This had practically gone unnoticed to Paul, for his attention now, as never before, had been keenly focused.

Sara reached the landing, catching a glimpse of Paul's face through the magnifying loop as he soldered together in parallel, the last of dozens and dozens of multiphasic circuit boards. He spotted her, his head rose from his labor, and he smiled. He called out to her with pride, "I've just finished. Would you care to have a look before I box it up?"

"No, my dear, I trust you. You have done well under my supervision. I feel that now it's time to give it a go. What do you say to that?"

"Nothing, I just hope to god it works."

He snapped the last module in place, and they looked on in anticipation for a moment. The work was well underway in the dimly lit basement of the canal pump house, with wires hung precariously from the ceiling and computers standing askew on glorified cafeteria tables. All their preparation came down now to this. Working side by side together, they had, over several

days, distilled an abstract lattice of numbers from the available data. The first task toward this end, transferring this raw data into a form the computer could more easily recognize, was tedious. Being a meticulous organizer, Sara made this task much more straightforward than it could have been. Despite this, there were thousands of entries, and each had to be thoroughly and painstakingly reconciled before the processors could read it correctly. It was a difficult job, but there could be no shortcuts, for no other reliable automatic means was at their disposal. Unsurprisingly, Paul and Sara had assembled a rather sophisticated assortment of equipment in such short order.

Long chains of numbers had to be checked and fed into the computer. Each set of values, looked at individually, essentially represented the leading edge of a distortion anomaly. The crux of the interpretation stated where the nexuses of these spatial planes had intersected; the sensors would detect the telltale distortion caused by graviton waveforms moving and expanding through spacetime. It was thought that if enough of these anomalies could be plotted, a sophisticated computer could link multiple events and create a vector map and perhaps a trajectory.



The processing required many CPUs woven together specifically for this purpose. Sara knew this calculation could potentially drain the building's power supply. So, she requisitioned a portable ten-thousand-watt tabletop generator. The setup was easy; it came in a sealed container with a series of high-voltage outlets. It would be a simple matter of creating a power interface. Everything was in place once the computer was hard-wired to its dedicated power source.

On the evening of the seventh day, with all preparations firmly in the past, the last raw data was loaded, and the final network test was completed. Sara sighed in relief, knowing that the calculation software required little more than a few minor parameter adjustments. A smile grew wide on her face as she completed the final keystrokes. She turned to Paul and said, "Well, I hope we didn't make any mistakes. I would hate to do that again". She let her finger hover over the enter button on the keyboard for a moment. She shot Paul a glance over the edge of her glasses and gave him a wink. He responded with a simple nod in approval as she depressed the button.

Selected from the hundreds of available data sets, Sara took care to choose an example recorded by a near-earth satellite on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Though the data values were adequate, they selected this example more for its context. The

wide range of occurrences surrounding that day seemed more than coincidental. The record for that day jogged Sara's memory. The day's strange happenings of magnetic and electrical disturbances matched those recorded in the news outlet headlines. They unanimously indicated the culprit to have been a massive solar flare. There was some level of truth to that. However, from her current perspective, Sara speculated that an incursion anomaly could easily have been the cause.

To this point, Sara and Paul had done everything they could do. It was now solely the computer's job to convert the myriad data points into something useful. Frame by frame, the processors plotted the anomalous values into what were essentially two-dimensional vector renderings of multidimensional forms. Calculating near-liminal speed, billions of simultaneous solutions stacked and interlaced layer upon layer of these renderings into what they hoped would be a rudimentary yet cohesive animation.

The monotony of the past seven days had left them both exhausted. As they waited, the air held a charge of anticipation, and their ears were left buzzing by the synchronous hum of a thousand tiny fans combined with the low, almost imperceptible rumble of the Thorium generator. They stared patiently at the blank holographic space for twenty

minutes as it repeatedly threatened to spark to life. Suddenly, suspended near the center of the virtual space, an amorphous rotating shape began to emerge from the ether. The Spinning body moved around an invisible central axis, seeming to mimic the movement of the planets in a jerking fashion. Soon, from these movements, something resembling a sphere had evolved there. Unseen forces seemed to push and prod the glowing facsimile. It was clear from how the images fell smoothly together that they had at least gotten this part right.

Then, at two o'clock, high above the sphere's horizon, another oddly ellipsoid object began to perturb the shape of the parent sphere. An instant later, at points on the boundary where the two forms reached out towards each other like droplets of liquid falling along the edge of a great bowl, a singular misshapen form appeared for a moment, suspended where the shapes had merged. After a moment, the form's inertia appeared absorbed by the larger body. From Sara and Paul's perspective, evidence for the existence of the intruding object had seemed to vanish as the sphere again took on its regular unperturbed rotation.

Watching the simulation play out repeatedly, they recognized they would not see the smoking gun they had hoped for. Sensing something was wrong with the data, Sara theorized that due to the subject's tremendous speed, even running the

simulation at a high frame rate, the resulting visualization of the actual event was exquisitely brief. As tempting as these images were. The consistent fact that there was still a severe lack of actionable evidence caused her more than a bit of frustration.

Sara sat staring down at her cold cup of java for a long time when suddenly she was seized by the inspiration of something she saw there. She watched as ambient sound waves caused ripples of force to form and ride like waves across the liquid's surface. She was tired and hungry, yet she realized something while looking into her foam cup. "Paul, perhaps we are looking at this the wrong way?"

"How can that be so? There has been an incursion. Logic dictates then that we should be seeing the evidence. It must be masked, trapped somewhere in those numbers."

"I think we are not seeing what we're looking for because it's not visible in its current form. We need a vehicle for the lines of force to react against."

"How do you mean?"

"It might be far simpler to show you. I have an idea. Let me reprogram the processor. I'll make it so we can visualize and track individual contact points by coding the intersecting

coordinates with distinct colors. Then, I will download the satellite visual imagery from the day in question and run it to sync in time with our data. By doing so, we should have a clearer picture with actual Earth coordinates."

Sara then set herself to work as Paul patiently looked on. The program parameter changes to a color-coded set of points by integrating and syncing raw satellite and map data as a layer was tricky. Despite the difficulty, she managed to cobble it together fairly quickly. She loaded the revised program onto the drive and set it once again in motion. Furthermore, the air was charged with sound and energy as the machine crackled back to life.

Again, the imagery flickered on the screen as an animation model of the Earth ran in tandem with a layered graphical model of the primary data set. What they saw there was a startling image. Upon the hazy glowing picture of the floating Earth superimposed within the animation, a dissected slice of the anomaly could be seen cutting an arabesque path through the ether. They could easily recognize it effortlessly and deliberately following the contour of the oceans. Like a piloted craft, the anomaly abruptly stopped high above Delaware Bay. A flash of energy represented on the satellite data that previously went unnoticed now seemed to correspond to the point

where the anomaly had suddenly vanished. However, they should have seen that the kinetic energy released by the collision of two massive bodies had not occurred. There was one conclusion they could safely draw from what they had just witnessed. There had been a fundamental shift in the object's physical state before impact. These properties could be ascribed only to technology far beyond their own.

They sat in stunned silence for the greater part of an hour as the simulation ran repeatedly. The more Paul and Sara watched it, the more convinced they became that their formulations were correct. Their eyes had grown weary of staring into the pictures of glowing light. So, Sara shut off the machine and turned on the overhead lights. The room had gone silent as the processors powered down.

Alone under the fluorescent lights of the basement lab, they shared a moment of satisfaction in realizing their first actionable evidence. Formulating their next steps would not be so easy.

"Ok," asked Sara, "where do we go from here?"

"We should examine what we know. Firstly, what we've managed to create here has given us a rudimentary course track. That's the

where and the when. Tell me more about what you remember of June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019."

Sara stood from the hard plastic chair she'd been sitting on. Only then did she realize how uncomfortable it had been. With arms folded and head facing downward, she walked around the table, pondering the question. "It was such a long time ago, Paul. I can't remember any particular details. At the time, I was a field investigator in Philadelphia. That can't be a coincidence. We need to pull my case files from that time. Maybe we'll be able to tease a thread of evidence. That should be a good start if we can get what we need from the records department without anyone finding out what we are looking for. I still have a friend or two that may help us. We'd better move quickly. Before the others catch on to what we're up to."

Once outside, it took a moment for Paul and Sara's eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight as the heavy steel door opened automatically before them. Passing the guards with a nod, they exited the high iron gate adjacent to the Castle Gatehouse entrance and hailed a cab. Almost immediately, a drone cab pulled up beside them on the roadside. Its gull-wing doors of the passenger compartment opened as a feminine mechanical voice asked, "*State your destination and present your credits.*" They

both climbed aboard, and Paul swiped his fob and said, "Yes, please take us to the main office of the Theoretical Branch?" The doors closed around them, making a swish sound as the cabin air equalized.

*"Did you say theoretical branch? Accessing, please wait... Please wait, accessing... please provide a numerical address?"*

Sara interrupted, saying, "Please, take us to 3201 Wisconsin Ave NW."

This puzzled Paul, as he did not recognize the address associated with the agency. "I don't get it. Where are you taking us? I'm not familiar with that address."

"I don't suppose you would, my dear. That information is classified on a need-to-know basis. But don't worry, you'll know soon enough." She scanned her fob and said to the cab interface, "Computer, please delete this request from your database upon your arrival at our location."

The cab responded briefly, *"Affirmative."*

...



Dr. Andrews hurriedly entered the empty third-floor conference room. Closing the door behind him, he made sure to lock it. He sat his tall frame behind the large table and sat back in his chair. A small silvery metallic object rose from a port recessed into the center of the table. He proceeded then to manipulate some invisible controls. A glowing light appeared upon its rounded surface. The light expanded quickly to engulf the whole space within the room. Dr. Andrews was now but one figure of about a dozen who seemed to be seated around an augmented reality conference table. One of the voices from across the table spoke to him directly. "Michael, how kind of you to join us."

Not being one to feed into pettiness, Dr. Andrews ignored the apparent jab and instead got straight to business. "Good evening, gentlemen and ladies. I apologize for missing the minutes. However, I believe you will all be pleased with the news I bring you. Please look now at this recently obtained intelligence. You all remember our prestigious Theoretical Branch counterpart, Ms. Sara Burton. She was so kind as to let us review her work on the 2019 anomaly. With some help from a time-sensitive agent named Paul Valier, Sara has somehow managed through simulation modeling to piece together the events as they

occurred on that day. Please, now, pay close attention to the emitter upon the table."

There, within the virtual space, the holographic incursion animation played. The group watched in quiet amazement as the story of what had unfolded that day was shown. The animation played over in a loop several times before someone in the group ordered it to stop. As the image flickered out, those in attendance were again visible, and one among them rose to his feet. It was Director Smith of the Applied Branch. Sporting a plume of dyed jet-black hair, his pale white, almost translucent skin seemed to glow in contrast. For a moment, he silently stood as if calculating his next move. He then looked down at Dr. Andrews and began to speak. "Michael, this interagency cooperation that we long ago set in motion has today born its first fruit. Through such actions, we have witnessed the greatest discovery of the Theoretical Branch in half a century. We must do all we can to keep a lid on this information. However, we will have an unprecedented advantage over our counterparts if and when it does leak. As this information leaks, we will have already formulated a response advantageous to our agenda. Michael, what more can you tell us of plans they may soon be hatching?"

Dr. Andrews replied, "There is nothing to tell at this moment. This new information I just brought you is only minutes old. Currently, the pair is en route to the central office. As to what is going on there, I can only guess."

"Very well then; I am therefore declaring a mobilization. I want our full resources dedicated to cracking this thing open before they do. Until next time, gentlemen, I wish you all a good day. Before I go, however, I would like a private word with you, Michael. Do you have a moment?"

"Why, of course, I'll set up a secure link in my office." The illumination that had filled the room had now dispersed, and he found himself alone.

A moment later, Andrews had returned to his office, where he employed a device similar to the one in the conference room. Again, the room was lit with a holographic glow as Mr. Smith materialized before him. "Hello Michael, I have to say. You've done a terrific job shadowing our counterparts. You know I have nothing but the highest respect for you. But--"

Andrews interrupted Smith in mid-sentence. "I appreciate the vote of confidence, Doctor Smith. Why don't you tell me what could not be mentioned during the meeting."

"Michael, you must be aware that a special situation is associated with this mission that requires the highest level of discretion in handling. Our agents discovered a device in our archives that purportedly associated with agent Burton's work during the period in question. It's a fairly sophisticated bit of technology; our best tech guys can't make heads or tails of it. What I'd like to do is to send this artifact your way. Then, I'd like you to place it within Ms. Burton's reach. I, or rather, we would be curious to know in what direction this would lead her."

"So, in other words, you want me to continue to watch her."

"I have uploaded the specific case files related to this object into your secure account. The package is being delivered as we speak. I'm leaving the surveillance aspects to your discretion."

"You can depend on that, Sir."

"Oh, there is one other thing."

"Yes"

"During the meeting, I mentioned one of the investigators on your staff, Paul Valier. Do you know him?"

"Why yes, I do. Why do you ask?"

"What is the purpose of his presence here? As you know, we are opposed to this kind of biological intervention", He said with an indignant grain of sarcasm. I hope you're not falling in with their lot over at Theoretical."

"Do not be so quick as to disparage the methods of our counterparts. I agree that we are in different places philosophically, but we still don't understand things. Their way of looking at a problem is, on occasion, the best way. Just look at that bit of animation they created. Our technology has never come close to that leap of creative imagination. You would do well to remember that."

When Smith did not immediately respond to this statement, Andrews took a moment to get at the heart of the issue by clarifying his previous question. "What is it about Paul Valier that has you so concerned?"

"I would think it was obvious. To what extent does this so-called sensitivity allow Paul to see things we cannot? Let me say this. Despite our philosophies, one would be a fool to look at these events with a closed mind under these extraordinary circumstances. So, if you wouldn't mind keeping a close eye on him, we may discover more still. So, as I said previously, I'll be anxiously awaiting an update in 24 hours. Let me know if you understand."

"Yes, perfectly. You shall have your update in twenty-four hours. Thank you, Sir. Andrews is out."

...

Per Sara and Paul's request, the cab arrived at the main office complex. The doors opened, and they stepped out onto the street corner. The car accepted its payment and was soon heading to its next fare. The cross light was red, so they waited their turn with cars moving everywhere.

It was still early afternoon, and the bright sunlight seemingly reflected off every surface. The feel of its rays on their skin had forced away whatever chill their confinement had brought upon them. Paul looked out onto the building's mirrored glass façade. He was surprised by its tall and angular style. However, he was intrigued to find it here in plain sight. So, he asked her, "How is it that the Theoretical Branch has managed to find itself in such a monstrosity?"

"You know, that's a good question. Believe it or not, I have often asked myself that same thing."

Just about then, the light had turned from red to green. As the signal to walk changed to go, Paul felt Sara's hand grasp his

shoulder to stop him. "Where do you think you're going to, young man?" she said with a playful smile.

He turned to look at her. Despite being genuinely puzzled, he returned to the corner without much fuss. "Ok then, now what?"

"We're not going in there. Come with me now, and I will explain everything."

Though surprised by the turn of events, he put on a friendly face as she continued. "Ok, let's wait here; our ride will be along shortly."

A moment later, a covertly decorated bus rolled up and opened its doors directly in front of them. "Ah, here's our ride." She said. As the door opened, they looked up to see, instead of a robotic interface, a friendly, all too human face of a rotund gentleman looking down toward them. "Good evening, Agent Burton. How has the summer weather been treating you?"

"Fine as can be expected, Mr. Oswald," Sara cheerfully responded as she climbed the well-worn stairs onto the conveyance. "May I introduce you to my young protégé, Paul Valier?"

"Why, sir, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, I'm sure," Paul said as he nodded pleasantly.

"Is there any place, in particular, you need to go, ma'am?"

"No, thank you, Oswald. We'll be getting off at the next regular stop."

"As you please, Ma'am."

The motor of the old bus roared with a low, raspy sound as it accelerated away from the corner. As it lurched forward, they stumbled back toward the rear of the near-empty bus. Quietly, they took the two-seater adjacent to a man already sitting.

Paul could not recall riding in such a machine, and the experience almost made him forget why they were there. Paul was confused and asked Sara, "What is this all about? Surely you're going to much trouble to hide something from someone."

In response, she let out a smile and a giggle. "Ok, perhaps some of this was my fault. I wanted things to go easily so I could have somewhat understood the truth. There is truly much for you to learn. We will visit an old friend and determine our next steps together."

Soon after that, the bus came to its next scheduled stop. The man occupying the adjacent seat abruptly rose, dropping a thick manila envelope onto Paul's lap as he passed. The envelope's sudden appearance startled Paul, but Sara grasped his arm and settled him. The man turned to Sara, leaned slightly, and said, "Records Department is compromised. I found someone



trying to snoop in your record vault. I switched some items that should keep them guessing for a while. Good luck"

They watched as the man pulled the cord and exited the bus.

"What is this?" Paul forced through gritted teeth.

She leaned in and said, "That's the file I requested. If you wouldn't mind pulling the cord for the next stop, we'll be on our way." He did as he was told, and presently, the bell had rung, and they rose quietly from their seats. The bus rolled then into the next stop near the university's quadrangle. As they exited the bus this time, Sara gave Oswald only a nod and a wink.

The university was on break for the summer, so there were few onlookers as they walked along the edge of the open space. The air was mild, and for a while, they walked quietly. Paul observed a most serene expression on Sara's face. This look was somewhat disconcerting in the context of what she had just told him. In comparison to her perceived state, Paul looked more confused than ever. He felt he could no longer contain his curiosity. So, he had to ask her what had just happened. "What was all that about, and what are we doing here?"

"It's simple. As I said, we know the surveillance station has been compromised for some time. Recently, our core group has made some additional, far more troubling discoveries. For those interested, the only gap between what they know and what we know exists in our heads and these records." She stopped suddenly in her tracks and turned toward him. She looked now directly into his eyes as if imploring him to listen. "More importantly, they lack the insight that only you can provide to this investigation. From this point on, what you have seen and your thoughts regarding its origin must be strictly top secret."

Paul had been ill-prepared to hear this. He thought he had seen just about everything in service to the agency. However, Paul knew he was perhaps the only one suited for this mission. Furthermore, he sensed an unexplainable, almost visceral trust between them. He knew at that moment that he would do as she had asked. He nodded to her. "I will do my best; however, you must understand the position you've placed me in. Until a little over a week ago, I had never met you, and now you're asking me to betray the only superiors I have ever known."

"You have stated that all is not as it seems and that the world you came from is fundamentally different from this one. Therefore, if this is true, all you have known before is

incorrect in this world. I want you to remember that I have not come to you. It is you who has come to me."

"All right, I get it. Tell me, who is this old friend we are to meet?"

"Firstly, if I said we, I have misstated the facts. It is you alone who will meet this person."

"If you are not here, how will I know the person?"

"I'm hoping we may find the answer to that question here.

However, if we do not find it here, you must be prepared to go on alone if necessary. That is if anything should happen to me."

Though this statement did little but confuse him, he did not question it.

The package contents had taken a circuitous route to come ultimately into her possession. The currier was naturally a double agent. Mr. Smith vetted him, then Sara eventually turned him. Taken from the secure archive and presented for delivery, he knew first to identify the objects and forward any pertinent information to Sara. She received a call from her secret contact informing her of some odd findings. She ordered him to let her examine the file's contents before delivering it to Smith.

Despite knowing the dangers of what might happen by gaining this

hidden knowledge, she chose this secluded corner, away from prying eyes, to discover its secrets.

They came then upon an empty picnic table among the well-manicured park. Sara looked at Paul and said, "Let's have a seat, and let's see what Mr. Smith has been trying to keep secret from us, shall we?" They took their seats opposite each other and placed the manila envelope at the center of the table. She took a deep breath, unsealed the package, and carefully spilled the contents on the surface. They stared at the files and objects within for a moment without speaking. It seemed for the first time that Paul sensed some level of trepidation in her eyes.

The collection of items consisted of a frayed manila folder and an odd digital device wired to an antique cell phone. Sara picked up the strange device and turned it around, inspecting it. She was, for an instant, subjected to the oddest case of déjà vu.

Though she did not speak on it, she had some deep-seated recollection of this object. However, she could not recall anything akin to a chain of events associated with it. She placed it carefully back down on the table. Fascinated by what he saw there, Paul picked it up and began to give it a more

thorough examination. As he did this, Sara opened the tattered folder and read its content aloud.

*"Case file 2019-2936: Evidence tag number 693-2019, Subject: Missing officer, Sara Burton.*

*During the subsequent investigation into agent Sara Burton's disappearance, this object was found close to what was identified in her field notes as the façade illusion.*

*Fingerprint and DNA analysis indicates that at least three other unidentified individuals, in addition to Agent Burton, had handled this artifact before its discovery. Technical analysis of the device suggests it is a radio frequency emitter controlled through an application program on her cell phone. It is assumed that this phone, registered to agent Burton, was repurposed by her for yet unknown purposes. Agent Burton was investigating the presence of a gravitational anomaly before her disappearance. Any investigation into this anomaly should prioritize the discovery of these purposes."*

As these words rolled off her lips, Paul continued examining the object. So intent was he on learning its secrets that he had not noticed the point where the sound of her voice was replaced by his own. Paul held the case folder while his mouth still aped the words. Paul looked up to the space where, from his perspective, Sara had just been, but she was gone. There was an

odd finality to this realization, the likes of which he had not before sensed. He realized then that she had been somehow taken from this place and erased from existence. He began to wonder if she was ever really there at all. Or perhaps he somehow sensed Sara's presence beyond whatever veil had separated them and managed to conjure her into the here and now for a while. Whatever it had been, he had now possessed a potentially powerful tool. He realized that he might have been given a significant advantage over those who might oppose him. He may be the only one who knows of its existence right now. He took a moment of pause to remember Sara and how she had brought him to this place. He was confident in himself because of her. He smiled as he realized how this package had come to him. The answers to their questions had to be here. He needed now only to find where she had gone.

## Chapter 3

Philadelphia

2019

Sara arrived early. Though the car traffic was light, the sidewalks were filled with pedestrians as she crossed 20th Street. Her place of business was a visually unimpressive, repurposed industrial-scale pharmaceutical lab occupying an entire city block.

Approaching the sliding glass threshold, Sara waved her card key and passed through the entryway. Within a vestibule, the security guard stood from his chair to greet her as she submitted her credentials before a secondary security desk. "Good morning, Agent Burton. How is the day finding you? Hey, did you see the lights last night? That was some show, was it not?"

Sara smiled and said, "I'm doing as well as expected. And yes, I did see the lights; strange but wonderful. How about you, Alphonse? Anything interesting going on?" She said as she handed him her card.

He visually scanned her identification document and swiped its magnetic stripe through the reader. He handed her back her pass and continued with the conversation.

"With me? Not a chance. Now you, that's another story altogether. The word is that you're about to be given your own assignment. Of course, you didn't hear that from me," he said after a short pause as she turned to walk away. "Oh, Ms. Burton, I had almost forgotten; Director Ambrose asked me to pass on this note to you."

She turned and reached out her hand as Alphonse slipped her a plain white sealed envelope. As she did so, he gave her a rather odd wink. "Now, you take care, Ms. Burton."

"Thank you, Alphonse." She walked away, uneasy from this exchange. She looked back at him as she walked away. He sat smiling at his desk. *That was odd*, she thought as she pressed the up-elevator button. The door opened, and she stepped inside. The door closed, and she imagined that she should know sooner rather than later what the letter's contents might be. So, instead of selecting a floor key, she hit the stop button. She could not be sure if she was under surveillance. She might need to be discreet with the letter. She looked down at the envelope where her name was written in black ink, carefully broke the seal, and removed the folded memo. Her mouth moved gently,



mimicking speech as her eyes scanned the document. It read as follows:

*"Agent Sara Burton*

*I request your immediate presence in my office upon receiving this message. You can be assured of Alphonse's discretion on this matter. This meeting is classified. So, I insist you not advise your supervisors about the nature of the information to be shared here. This is strictly need-to-know only.*

*Alvin Ambrose."*

She folded the note and placed it in her blazer pocket. She took a deep breath and pushed the button for the director's floor. The elevator mechanism re-engaged, and she felt it again moving upward. After a moment, the door opened.

Sara pondered her standing among her peers. She had been on the job for almost two years. There was much she had to offer. Eager to impress her new superiors by showcasing her abilities, she had yet to be tasked to work a case on her own. However, this was not how things worked in the federal service. Things move at their own snail-like pace. Company policy stated that she would have a lengthy training period as a junior officer, working in tandem with more senior officers, memorizing procedures, and cataloging data. She had felt this training

method was not only stifling but also counterproductive. Here, she would remain until she washed out or her supervisors were satisfied with her progress. So, to say she was frustrated was an understatement. However, she would not allow this frustration to show to her superiors. She accepted all the regulations, as misguided as they were, as just another part of her training. So, as far as anyone could tell, she remained the poster girl for company compliance. Soon, the doors of opportunity would open for her. When they did, she'd be ready. Perhaps she imagined her time had come.

Making her way toward Ambrose's office, she pushed away the cobwebs from her mind. During the night, she, like many, had stayed up late gazing up in wonder at a most spectacular aurora filling the northern sky. The world watched the most intense display yet seen since they had begun to appear several months ago. Great willowy arcs of neon green plasma painted the vault of the sky in magnificent splendor. It was magnificent. Before this recent spike in celestial activity, many, including Sara, had never seen anything like it. Now, she was paying the price for it. All the major news networks covered the event during the night. These were, by all accounts, highly unusual for this latitude.

Sarah entered the Ladies 'room to check her appearance in the mirror. She wore conservative ladies' business attire and felt comfortable yet somewhat understated. Pleased with all she had overcome in the last few years, she left all insecurity behind. Now more than ever, she was secure in her mind and body.

As Sara arrived at Alvin Ambrose's office, he stood waiting and greeted her. "Good morning, Ms. Burton; close the door behind you." She did as he said, "Please have a seat." She moved to the plain beige couch that ran along the wall where he had motioned her. As she did, her eyes scanned the room. She was surprised at how non-descript and cheaply fashioned the office was. The room was lacking in any personal adornment. She imagined the painted cinder block walls and a grated security window were just as they were on the day he had inherited them. "Are you Comfortable?" asked Ambrose.

"Why yes, thank you."

Before he began to speak again, she looked across the desk, taking stock of his appearance. She often found clues in people's expressions more clearly than their words portrayed. He was long and gaunt, and the job pressures had weighed heavily upon him. He deluded himself into thinking that this was not obvious to others. His prematurely gray hair and dark sunken

eyes told their own story. He began speaking, and his voice now seemed soft and hollow. His words were measured and deliberate.

"Agent Burton, you must forgive me for the clandestine manner in which I summoned you here today. It is unfortunate, however, that the nature of the issue at hand has made it unavoidable. There is an important job that requires a certain special skill set. "From what I've recently learned about you, it seems you are the ideal candidate."

"Thank you, Sir. I appreciate the vote of confidence. But if you don't mind me asking, what about me leads you to believe I am best suited for the job?"

"Well, the job to which I am referring is by the necessity of the utmost secrecy. Your previous mentor has assured me that in your work on cases similar to this one, you have shown the ability to work with minimum supervision and a good deal of discretion. She speaks very highly of you."

"You've spoken with Emily?"

"Yes, the same. She clued me in on your work for us a few years back. I had no idea someone so skilled could have been working right under my nose without me knowing about it."

Still studying his words and expressions, Sara concluded that she was sure his previous statement was an untruth but a

forgivable one. She read his forced smile with little regard as he began speaking again. "Well, that's a story for another day. If we may, I'd like to get down to business." Sara adjusted as Ambrose rustled through his desk for a folder. "Ok, I have it." He opened the tattered folder and began to examine a report upon which were stamped the words, Top Secret. "What I hold in my hand is a report from a study done in the 1970s titled "Anomalous aberrations in gravitational fields." Though the title's content might seem innocuous enough, it tells an interesting story about how a group of agency scientists in 1976 had, purely by accident, discovered a means to measure, with a high degree of accuracy, the waves upon which the force of gravity interacts with particle matter. Within a decade, an intricate system of surveillance was in place to measure and map the whole of the solar system in a way that had been previously impossible. There were many practical and political reasons why such means of measurement should be held a close secret. Primary among these, however, was what else was discovered there hiding among the shadows."

She observed that, as he spoke these words, he had displayed an outward discomfort she found telling of his state of mind. He paused for a moment, and Sara said. "Perhaps I am reading a bit too much between the lines, but are you

insinuating that proof of intelligent life beyond Earth was discovered?"

"Well, they discovered something. Just what that was could never be adequately determined. You know how science works; extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. They didn't have the means to prove anything beyond a doubt. By 1980, the plug was pulled on the project, and this report was filed. That was, for a time, officially the end of the story. That was until recently, of course."

"Am I to understand that this forty-year-old case is being opened again, and I'm taking the lead?"

"That's right."

"I suspect there may be other reasons you asked for me specifically."

"Well, that's a puzzle right in your wheelhouse. You see, it's all about numbers. Well, it's not all about numbers, but the evidence has been just that: numbers. There are reams of data we'd like someone with your skill to look at. When I spoke with Emily to ask her for some advice, she quickly pointed out that you had just what we needed. So, as of today, your probationary period is over. You are being promoted to senior analyst. Interestingly enough, up until this moment, you were on the

shortlist to be washed out. Strange how a twist of fate can change things."

*That certainly was an untruth*, she mused privately before responding out loud, "Yes indeed. The numbers should be plain enough. You said, however, that it was not all about numbers. And what has changed since 1980? What did you mean by that specifically?"

"Oh, forgive me for that. I must learn to get to the point sometime before I retire." He stood up from his chair, faced the grated window, and began speaking again. "You recall, of course, the auroras of late?"

"Why yes, everybody has, simply spectacular. What of it?"

"It's purely a supposition, of course, but mounting circumstantial evidence suggests that the Auroras and tidal disruptions we have been experiencing have been caused by the same gravitational effects observed in 1976. It has been determined that now is the time to revisit this investigation and prove one way or another, whether or not there is an, as of yet unknown and unseen, non-terrestrial object parked near the Earth." He paused for a dramatic effect, waiting for some reaction from Sara. She sat unmoved by his words. He continued when he realized that she wouldn't break into laughter.

"I know how this must sound, and we realize that this line of investigation lies squarely outside of our mandated mission. However, documented anomalies correspond in a temporal sense with the onset of these celestial events. The odds that these events share a common origin are too big to ignore. The genesis of these most recent occurrences and the stream of corresponding sensor data can all be traced back to one particular day, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019."

"Ok, I'll bite. What kind of anomalies?"

"Well, Sara, I must tell you, my mind is not built for expeditions like this. So that's where you come in. We have never before tackled an analysis of this kind. So, as you might imagine, your ability to pare away the fact from the fiction will provide a new approach to the problem. Success or failure then rests squarely on your shoulders. Therefore, we will involve as few as possible in managing this project. From here on out, only you and I will fully know the day-to-day details of this investigation. It should, by necessity, be limited to yourself and one other gifted assistant. The assistant shall not be clued into its true meaning."

He paused so Sara could ask, "Two things; I'm reading between your lines, of course, but it begs the question. You don't know what you're dealing with, do you?"



"In a word, no. And the second thing is?"

"What should I tell my assistant we are working on?"

"Frankly, I could not care less, as long as it's not the truth."

"Emily had warned me about the probability of just such a conversation happening. I must admit, I would have sworn she was exaggerating."

"Is there a problem? I must remind you that despite how you feel about this, you are bound by confidentiality to disclose none of what you heard today."

"No, I assure you, it's nothing like that. I'm glad to do it; I just never imagined I would be working on such a case. However, I must warn you that numbers don't lie, and if my analysis doesn't support this theory, I expect you to abide by my findings. Does that seem like a fair deal, Dr. Ambrose?"

"It seems more than fair, considering you're doing all the work. We have a deal."

He rose to his feet and extended his hand toward her, and they shook hands. "Please call me Alvin, at least when we're alone. I'm not a doctor at all."

"I'm sorry, I had just assumed."

"That's quite all right. You're not the first one to make that mistake. I made it to this position on my work record, just like you did. Now go on and get started."

"Thank you, Sir, ah, Alvin."

"Alvin is just fine."

She left the room and took one last glance at Alvin before she closed the door. Looking upon him, she noted how light his mood now appeared compared to before their meeting. It was as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders and placed upon hers. Perhaps she had judged him too harshly. How long had he sat waiting for that file to become relevant, only to discover that he no longer possessed the talent or the fortitude to make it work? After a short walk down the hall, she found herself again before the elevator. She pushed the down button. As the cables groaned and the floors ticked past, she wondered, "What have I gotten myself into?"

When she arrived at her office, she discovered that her things had been cleared and moved away. Alvin had taken the liberty of getting that ball rolling by having her things moved down the hall to the advanced research department. She discovered that she was now receiving a lot of strange looks from her colleagues. They all knew enough to keep speculation on

such matters to themselves. A sticky note on the door indicated the location of her new office. She knew vaguely where it was and started immediately down the hall. There was a security door where she was made to swipe her card again. The buzzer rang, and the lab door rolled open.

Following the signs along the walls, Sara turned the corner, opening the door with the matching number. Within, she found her belongings boxed upon her new desk. Still, in a mild state of confusion, she had not yet realized that she was not alone. From behind her, a soft voice called out to her, "Excuse Me, Sara?"

She let out a small shriek of surprise, "Good heavens, you startled me." Not anticipating being approached so soon, looking up, she saw, standing just inside the doorway, a young woman she did not recognize. Her hand stretched out toward her while the other clutched reams of papers at her side. She was slightly more youthful and more ruggedly built than Sara. For a moment, Sara admired her assistant's features, her amiable smile, deep brown eyes within her dark-framed glasses, and the thick bunch of tightly curled blond hair.

"I'm sorry for having given you a start like that. Forgive me. Let me begin again. Hello, my name is Linda Martin. I'm your new assistant."

"Hello Linda, It's quite all right. It's nice to meet you. I don't know why I imagined I would be selecting my assistant. I'm sure you are the most qualified person available. So, tell me about yourself."

"Well, up until yesterday, I was a graduate student. I was called last night out of the blue and offered this job. I was not in a position to turn down the offer. So, I requested a leave of absence from my graduate program, which was miraculously approved. I've been told I'll work with you on a number problem. I don't know much more than that, I'm afraid. I was hoping you could fill in the blanks for me."

She thought about it briefly and figured the best way to lie was to tell a partial truth. "Well, Linda, it's like this: we have been charged to evaluate the streaming data from our satellite array regarding the solar phenomenon. There is reason to believe there has been a subtle perturbation to our usual sunspot activity. I assume I don't have to tell you how important this could be. You will be cleaning the raw data and preparing it for analysis."

"That's right up my alley. I'm a math geek."

"That's good. However, this job requires one other thing from you."

Linda tilted her head toward her shoulder and wondered if this one other thing she was talking about was the catch. She knew there had to be one. Sara continued, "Due to the sensitive nature of our work, you cannot speak of this work to anyone. I don't care what you tell everybody; tell them you study weather patterns. It's not exactly false, but it certainly is not the truth, either. If you can do this for me, I promise there is unlimited potential for one such as yourself here with the company. Do we understand one another?"

"I think we do."

It had taken the pair the rest of the morning to straighten the office to their liking. Desks and computers were shuffled about until it felt right. Then, the task was undertaken to organize the thousands of data cards, disks, bound reports, and even several dozen antique magnetic tapes. Linda lifted one of these to inspect it, "What do you make of these? They look like something from a Sci-Fi movie."

"They have been collecting data for some time."

"Do we even possess a means to read these?"

"We'll figure it out. I'm sure there's a nearby museum with one in working order and that might be convinced to lend us one."

"Will we use a carrot or a stick for that one?" Linda asked sarcastically.

"Perhaps a little bit of both. Linda, I won't beat around the bush here; our work is cut out for us."

"Aye, Captain"

"That's the worst Scotty I've ever heard."

"Aye, she is that."

They both laughed

Despite the attempt at humor, Sara could almost see the virtual gears clicking away in Linda's head as she tried to reconcile the apparent discrepancy in what she had just been told. Sara was not surprised when Linda asked, "If this study has to do with, as you say, recent observations, why do these tapes go back so far in time?"

"We have been provided with a lot of historical baseline data." Sara noticed by her expression that this story did not make logical sense to Linda. She realized at that moment that she was up for the job. I tell you what, Linda, it's obvious now that there is more to this story than I can divulge. However, if, at some future time, I can do so, I will. So, if you find that you're being given misinformation, please forgive me. However,

you'll soon figure it out if you are as bright as I think. At that point, I will find a way to acknowledge it."

"Sara, I know I met you today, but I'd like to put all my cards on the table. I am perfectly capable of keeping a secret if need be. However, I don't understand the need for secrecy in science. What we do here should be open to full disclosure and even criticism. Help me to understand why, and let me judge for myself."

"Ok, Linda, here it is in a nutshell. We are not asking you to do science. This is something altogether different. Think of this project more like alchemy. By its very nature, the theoretical branch is more like a secret society than, let's say, a university. There is important work going on within the agency. Many of the projects our investigators work on will likely not stand up to the rigorous scrutiny required by science and are likely not publishable. The science here is a tool, not a philosophy."

...

It had taken an additional few days to organize the data into manageable bite-size chunks. What could be processed electronically, they processed so. Because many data fields required extensive reformatting, Sara wrote an algorithm

program. There were, however, the inevitable glitches that continually popped up. Linda and Sara then took turns examining the miles of code produced on the display screen, making corrections when necessary. The analog data was a different beast altogether. This required the translation into a higher-order language and then hand entry of each line. Though it was labor-intensive, the information held within it was far less complicated, with an order of magnitude fewer data points. However, as it turned out, these were the key as these points formed the skeleton of their sets. Neither of these two sets, in and of themselves, seemed to make any sense. However, when observed side by side, Sara could sense that together, they seemed to form some semblance of a pattern.

Bleary-eyed and tired, Sara's eyes could no longer focus on her computer screen. She closed her eyes and began to rub them. Sitting there with her eyes closed, she began to see a halo of the screen as if it had been burned into her retina. She watched in the half-darkness behind her closed eyelids as the image seemed to float across her field of vision. She realized that this was not merely the screen burned into her eye but an object she had seen only in her subconscious. It was a three-dimensional object coalescing from waves of invisible force.



"Was this what they had hoped I would see?" She watched the snippet play out like a glowing monochrome animation against the darkness. Each successive time the image played, it grew more distinct. Sara did not know how long she stayed there, but she was roused unceremoniously from this trance to feel Linda's hand on her shoulder. Linda's words filled her ears. "Sara, are you all right? Sara, wake up." As if from a fog, Sara leaped from her chair, momentarily unsure of what had just happened.

Again, she heard Linda's voice and turned to face her. "Sara, are you ok?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine."

"I left to take a break, and when I returned, you were unresponsive."

"What do you mean, unresponsive?"

"I'm no doctor, but you looked like you were having a fit. Your eyes were open, but they were rolling wildly in their sockets. I tried to shake you, but you didn't respond right away. You scared the crap out of me."

Sara paused to think about what she was being told. "That's odd. From my perspective, I was awake. I saw something."

"Perhaps what you saw was a hallucination?"

"Yes, no, I don't think so. It was more like a vision."

"A vision? Are you being serious? I think you might need actually to see somebody."

"No, hear me out; it makes sense. We know from the pattern analyzers that there is a form within these numbers. Neither of us has been able to see its true nature. I think that while I was plotting these numbers, my subconscious was also doing so. However, it was doing a much better job of it."

"Ok, for the sake of argument, let's say this vision is a product of your subconscious mind calculating in the background. What then did you see?"

"Well, at first, it was a choppy, blurry image that grew more distinct. Eventually, I could see what I interpret as a gravitational hole in the fabric of space-time produced by a massive object as it came within range of the Earth. As it passed in that state, it exerted only its' weak gravitational forces; no other forms of energy, kinetic or otherwise, were noted. Strangely, from what we know of modern physics, an object this massive should have collided with the Earth in a great conflagration. That is, however, not what happened. Some potent and sophisticated exotic energy field must be employed to make such conjunction possible."

"To my knowledge, no such technology or exotic energies exist."

"They don't yet exist, at least not on this planet."

"What?"

"Perhaps I've said too much."

"No, you don't get to do that. You can't make statements like that and then go quiet."

"Linda, let me answer that with a question. For the sake of argument, let's assume that all that we have already surmised is true. As you've said, numbers don't lie. You've checked them yourself. If these numbers are correct, what on earth could it be?"

Linda was quiet for a moment; though she could not yet wrap her head around it, she knew deep down that it was true. "Let's, for the moment, agree that what we've seen here is highly suggestive. Can what you've seen in this vision of yours be plotted in a way that could make it visible to me?"

"Perhaps it could be, now that I know what I'm looking for."

...

As the days passed, the language of their queries became specific to a relatively narrow band of signals within the

larger output. The vague shadow of form they had started with now had taken on the familiar characteristics of familiar geometry. The glossy-eyed pair of researchers looked now onto what amounted to animated maps. They could see a detailed account of a highly unusual occurrence for the first time without needing any unique perception. In a facsimile of real-time, they watched the very first direct evidence of what could only be alien technology. They had uncloaked the hidden arrival of a celestial entity. Now demystified, its presence there took on all the regularity of any other object. Subject to all the known laws, it was just a matter of time before the "who and what" were thoroughly known to them. For Sara, then, the first order of business was to offer their findings to their superiors in the agency, so a meeting was called with Ambrose.

It was barely six o'clock the following morning when the meeting had been scheduled. It was just as well, for they had stayed up all night finalizing their conclusions in preparation. Now, it was better sooner than later. As the elevator moved slowly up along the shaft to the director's office, Sara and Linda remained silent, staring blankly off into space. Both had missed quite a bit of sleep over the last several days and were a bit punchy. As the elevator arrived, it let out a discordant chime, and the door opened. Just as before, Ambrose had

anticipated their arrival. So, they found him waiting when the door opened. He was dismayed by both of them being present, though he tried not to show it. There must have been a pretty good reason, he surmised. They stepped out, and he offered them a large smile, but their exhaustion prevented them from reciprocating. "Good morning, ladies. It warms my heart to see you up and working to the wee hours." Neither was in any shape to comment, so they let it pass. "This way, ladies, I've reserved a conference room for us." They followed him dutifully. As they entered the conference room, Sara noticed another character she did not recognize. This set off alarm bells within her head as she tried to imagine who this might be and what stake he might have in this knowledge. They came around the long white finished table and sat opposite the stranger.

Ambrose sat beside him. For a tense moment, there was quiet as they sized each other up. Ambrose coughed, interrupting the silence like punctuation before he began to speak. "Good morning, everyone; this meeting has been called to relay Agent Burton's recent findings. First, however, before we continue, some introductions must occur. This is Director Smith of the Applied Branch; he will be here as a witness. And Director Smith, this is Agent Sara Burton. She and her assistant Linda Martin have done fine work on the anomaly data." For a moment

there, they exchanged pleasant nods but not much else. Ambrose began speaking again, "May I ask Agent Burton why Linda is here? Should I assume she has full knowledge of your discovery?"

"That is correct; it was just as much her discovery as mine."

"Very well then, Linda, you will need to be sworn in and debriefed before leaving. Whether you like it or not, you are now part of this chain of secrecy. Do you understand?"

"I think I do."

Sara interrupted and asked, "Director Ambrose, why is this information being shared so openly with the Applied Branch?" She looked toward Director Smith and said, "No offense."

"None taken, I assure you."

Ambrose suddenly held a severe expression as he answered her question. "Agent Burton, it is not for you to determine how the information you gather is disseminated. In the future, I ask that you refrain from such questions in official meetings. These are, after all, being videotaped. However, I shall answer your question for clarity for those other witnesses. In truth, Ms. Burton, in service to this nation, there is no difference between the two branches other than how work gets done. We do

our part, and they do theirs. And in that spirit, from this point on, this will be a joint operation. We will provide the Intel, and the Applied Branch will do the bulk of the legwork. If you're about to tell me what I think it is, we will want these boys on our side. Now, go on and tell us what you discovered."

## Chapter 4

### Thetis: The Arox home world

Phoebus, shining brightly in the darkness of space, hung majestically against the dissipating light of a frozen nebula. Like a beacon, the blue orb of Thetis orbited Phoebus at a great distance. Gleaming shafts of light reflecting from its jeweled surface illuminated the pillars of stellar clouds, shrouding the system boundaries. Thetis took roughly thirteen lunar months to complete one trip around Phoebus and possessed a seasonal obliquity of 24 degrees. Three relatively small moons tagged

along on Thetis's orbital path, one of which was wholly artificial.

From ancient times to its sentient inhabitants, the Arox, Thetis, named to honor the mother goddess of their creation myth, was a sacred place. Eons ago, their species sprang from the tranquil shallow waters of an ocean world. Bathed in the soft light of Phoebus, the Arox had come of age. Evolution equipped them with the tools to shape and manipulate their world. From humble beginnings along the shores of a planetary sea, pioneers would claim dominance over the rest of creation and discover that the recurrent cycles of life, death, and rebirth that ruled their fates existed throughout the known universe.

Generation upon generation, the state of their technology increased. In time, they would control nature itself. Eventually, this knowledge would propel them beyond their home planet to become masters of the elemental forces. Eventually, via a network of wormholes, they bent the fabric of space and time to their liking. Using the stars as a limitless power source, the Arox explored vast realms yet unknown to humanity.

They discovered that their belief that life was ubiquitous throughout the universe was well-founded. It seemed only natural that a scenario similar to theirs must have taken place many



times. However, they found across the breadth of geologic time, more often than not, many cultures tied to the fortune of their parent star invariably blinked out of existence with astounding regularity.

On occasion, an infrequent event occurred. A sentient race possessing the ability to subvert this fate would arise from relative simplicity. So, it was for a time with the Arox.

...

From the safety of the observation deck, Murine Sabah stood high above the surface of the artificial moon. From this, the sanctuary of the Ynys Môn, looking down onto the planetary surface, she marveled at the vast, restless ocean below. The sanctuary, holding itself high in a geosynchronous orbit, was suspended effortlessly upon the arch of a graviton wave. For untold thousands of years, it had hovered sublimely in this place. She observed a pale blue light reflected upward off the water through a pure quartzite lens that stood nearly a meter high. As Phoebus began to dip below the horizon, the glow of this cerulean light illuminated the whole of the observation platform. Murine's pale complexion came awash in the sublime light, resonating in the colors of the evening sky. She was

still in full possession of her youth at seventy-five years of age. These colors danced across her body, shifting from deep blue to a shade of auburn that mimicked the star's fading light.

She watched the image of her lithe reflection grow more distinct in the gathering darkness. It would seem nature had provided the Arox with an ideal form to fulfill their destiny.

With grasping hands, opposable thumbs, and forward-facing stereoscopic eyes, they had been ideally equipped for the rigors of survival. Their outward appearance would not seem too dissimilar to a human observer. Natural selection blessed them with a tendency toward rare physical beauty. To this fact, Murine was a prime example. She stared out into the distance with her dark black eyes, seeing only the faint outline of her flawless silhouette. With the setting of Phoebus behind the planet's body, its' orange light waning, darkness reigned. She could see nothing within this void but a deep emptiness before her. In moments like this, she wondered how it could be so in the entire vast universe that she should return here to the home of her birth.

As she stared back at herself, she reflected on her predicament. She pondered what she considered to be the supreme irony. Despite the world of unlimited possibilities afforded, her destiny was to spend her life in the service of the Ynys

Môn, counter to her desires. Pondering what-ifs she knew was a fruitless exercise. Though she was an exceptional student, it was not merely her education and training that brought her back to this place above the clouds; her family obligations would dictate her fate. It was, after all, her father's abiding wish that she, too, dedicate herself to the royal service despite her objections.

As is the way, each to their talents, the Arox nurtured the youth. She, in turn, had spent two education cycles studying the habits of ancient medicine and basic celestial mechanics. These two fields of study were required to enter the priesthood. All indications pointed to the fact that she would do just that. Why was it then, if this was indeed her fate, that she could not just accept it? She knew that this kind of melancholy to which she was sometimes subject was virtually unknown among her people. Having long ago been banished from the genome by science, it existed only in ancient medical textbooks and here secretly on this observation platform. For many, performing the duties of a priestess of the order of Ynys Môn was a most desirable and prestigious profession. To Murine, however, to serve here in the homeworld was a wasted existence. There was so much more that she had wished to see. Though it was perhaps true

that she was probably the most highly talented acolyte in the order, there was another call of which she dared not speak.

For a long while, she watched in silence as the setting orb of Phoebus rolled behind the sphere of Thetis and the sky cast in darkness. There above, she turned her attention towards the heavens. She carefully watched beyond the set of glowing moons for the telltale sign of a gateway. She knew that now, in its darkened state, the sky should be practically littered with them. Then, she caught a glimpse of the first one in the corner of the sky. A great infinity ship as large as a mountain with great crystal and metallic spires standing tall hung heavily in space, preparing for embarkation. Before it, hanging flat like a mirrored surface against the inky blackness of space, a two-dimensional gateway was suspended onto a great swirling vortex. From within it, a dazzling aurora shined outward. Held fast by the vast centrifugal forces exerted by the combined gravity of twelve neutron stars spinning in precise orbits, the engine core initiated.

A spinning halo of plasma held safe under tremendous forces was an unseen quantity of negative energy within the engine core. Once unbound, this energy, shaped like a wedge, would insert and expand an unfolding bridge into this hole in space. The infinity ship floated effortlessly at the leading edge of

this relativistic void within the fabric of space-time. An intense pulse of light instantly turned the night sky white as the ship slipped silently across the event horizon. That ship had passed through the gateway and gone to who knows where in the blink of an eye. It was there, wherever that was, where she wanted to be.

An unpleasant-sounding bell chimed out, distracting her from her thoughts. She immediately recognized it, indicating that the evening meal was about to be served. Despite knowing this, she chose for the moment to ignore it and lingered on in her thoughts instead. Soon enough, however, she would need to meet the others in the communal dining rooms, though they could stand to wait a little longer. A moment later, suspended upon the glass wall before her, the image of Bodhmall, the head matron, appeared. She was now offering a second reminder to those tardy ones, including her, who had missed the call. Though this reminder was not specific to her, she read it as such. To this second call, she did not hesitate to respond.

After a moment, she returned to her cell. But before facing the others, she would need to pull herself together. She would not want this melancholy side of her nature to show to the other novitiates. She entered the adjacent washroom and splashed some

cool water from her water receptacle onto her face before drying herself with a towel. Hurriedly, for she knew time was short, she donned her public garb. These garments, specific to the acolytes of her order, were made of plain cloth spun from rough fibers. It was close in tone to the ruddy beach sand native to Thetis. She did not much enjoy such uniformity that her robes had afforded her. Though not cheaply manufactured, the organic look symbolized some archaic notion of spiritual austerity. To Murine, this symbolism seemed somewhat hypocritical, for all allusions to this antique idea had long ago been abandoned by all but the Ynys Môn. This she pondered as she made her way from her cell quarters across the ornately manicured campus grounds toward the main hall.

Exposed through the crystal walls of the palace, the starlight fell upon the artificial facades in much the same fashion as it did upon a planetary surface. As an apron of darkness fell, her way through the campus was illuminated by street lights. Along the way, under the starlit sky marked by gaseous nebulae, hulking cinders of dead stars, and the milky edge of the galaxy, she passed by many of the significant landmarks of her order. Included among these was the shrine of the sacred grove. As she came near this great building, she momentarily lost all thought

regarding her uniform and looked at the shrine in wonder. Here, immense crystal towers rose toward the sky, designed to catch every ray of light possible. The light was then refocused to shine down on and sustain what was left of Thetis's once-great tract of oak forest. The rituals had remained a secret for millennia beneath their great golden boughs. Though her race had survived, much had been lost over time. Despite their importance to the order, groves such as these no longer existed on the planet's surface in significant numbers.

The Ynys Môn dedicated itself to preserving the order in shrines like this. This aspect of the order for which Murine had held the most respect and admiration. This, however, was just one of many aspects of a diverse, multifaceted organization. She felt a sense of awe when she imagined how all this and more was housed here in this floating citadel. To those within, it was no less than miraculous. The house of Ynys Môn, while maintaining its mystic sense of tradition, had quietly stood as a hotbed of new ideas. However, to some, this crystal palace symbolized something more ominous. To this perception, those within its high walls were particularly blinded.

Before long, she had reached the communal dining hall. It was a large space with high arching curves and delicately carved

plant motifs spiraling in divine proportion. Arranged along the wall between marble archways were sculpted images of past graduates who had gone to high office or were otherwise influential to the greater society. It indeed was an impressive bunch; there was no doubt about it. On this point, her father was correct.

Something caught Murine's attention. Turning her head from side to side, she suddenly felt something odd. Her ears were sensitive, so she quickly recognized that the presence of too many bodies now dulled the quality of the sound that usually resonated within. Further, she was surprised to discover that the ordinarily empty seats of the adjacent galleries were now full. Scanning the faces within the assembled crowd, she noted some familiar faces, though most of the newcomers she did not recognize. This was an unusual assemblage; she was unsure what to make of it.

She was confused until she realized that seats around the table were seemingly reserved for the initiates. Though this seemed counterintuitive, she followed the others along the edge of the broad table until she found her usual seat near the center. She took her seat as usual but immediately noted that no food had yet been set out. This was strange, she thought. She



looked around to see the familiar faces of her fellow students, who looked just as confused as she was. Once all had been seated, Bodhmall, the head matron, rose to speak from her position at the end of the head table.

Bodhmall, an elegant and statuesque middle-aged woman, stood tall before them. From beneath the veil of her office, the light from above showed the contrast of her porcelain skin against her shining black hair and intense dark eyes. For a moment, she stood silently. Though known as a center for moral teaching, the order of Ynys Môn was essentially a secular organization, so there were no prayers in the conventional sense. For the most part, they preferred personal contemplations over ritual. During the obligatory moment of silence, Bodhmall, with sincere affection, looked out onto those there assembled as her adopted family. Before her friends, mentors, and students, she would gladly do her duty and be a role model. She would hold herself to a high standard and with great pride for her accomplishments for their sake. Likewise, the order members held her in the highest esteem. She was an important person in her own right beyond the realm of the order, for she was a member of the royal family and the king's first cousin. On a more personal level, she was Murine's aunt. Now more than ever, she would

need to be all these and more. All had grown exceptionally quiet for these reasons, and others perhaps weaved subconsciously into their training. Murine's ears would hang on every syllable.

Therewithin, representatives from every sphere of Arox society, all members or supporters of the order, were facing her; Bodhmall smiled and began to speak. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I know it is unusual to be addressed in such a manner, some under pretenses, but there is important news that could not wait. And it is for that reason we are here now assembled. I thought the time was right. For many generations, we have remained cloistered here on this artificial moon of Thetis, rendering and preserving our knowledge for its own sake and the greater good of the people. However, throughout the systems where the Arox race resides, there has been a growing backlash against the order for some time. Some have said that our time as the guardians and arbiters of knowledge has come to its natural end. Despite support from the Royal Family, there is still a potential move afoot within the legislature to disband the order and liquidate its assets. Once more, there is a move to abolish the monarchy."

Gasps of surprise punctuated the silence as some assembled there were unprepared to hear a message of this magnitude. This initial outburst reverberated at a low-level hum as novitiates struggled to understand its meaning. In the minds of much younger, more optimistic people held a romantic view that the king would not allow such actions to transpire. Many reactions were displayed from the more mature and well-seasoned, from solemn resignation to outright disbelief. Many senior members chose to downplay such wrangling as idle threats. She let this go on for a moment before drawing back their attention. Sensing the mood of the crowd, she began again to speak. "Please, I beg you now, to listen. I promise there will be ample time to debate. I am fully aware of the history of our political place within society. Though threats of this nature have been cast about for centuries, I fear this time that even intervention by the King himself will not be enough. And though we value not things of monetary value, the same cannot be said for the rest of our society. They are calling for the very dismantling of this sacred city to sell what riches we possess to the highest bidder. Doing so would destroy what we hold dearest, our sacred repositories. And though the royal family supports our cause, we may become victims of a political power play."

A most unusual feeling of uncertainty overcame Murine. Just as she had begun to come to some semblance of an understanding of her role in the future, she would be forced to rethink things by processes beyond her control. What exactly would this state of affairs mean for her future? She could not tell, but that sense that her life had been previously fated was gone for now. Bodhmall, having let these thoughts sink in, began again to speak.

"That, having been said, there in ancient times, our forefathers and mothers, having been besieged in ages of ignorance, were forced to take drastic measures. In those days, each practitioner was like the cells in the body, made to hold each within their own minds, the very nucleus of our tenants. There would be another to take our place wherever we were struck down. During such times, they would always remain hopeful for the next generation. I have illustrated a doomsday scenario to you, my young initiates. I would make such a request only for the preservation and well-being of the order. So, I do not make this request lightly. I request that you participate in an ancient ritual through which our entire core of knowledge will be dedicated to memory over the next several weeks. This will be no

small feat. But however unlikely this scenario might seem, the day may come when a new order may arise from one of you."

From the gallery, a familiar voice rose. The venerable bard's voice rang like a bell even within the gallery's cramped space. Old Frenoch, as he was affectionately known, stood out among them. Standing in a bizarre garment fashioned from cured animal skins, he appeared out of place. This, however, was the mark of his office. Despite his strange appearance, he still garnered his total share of respect. He was short and grizzled, and his old frame was yet powerfully built even at his advanced age. The spectacle of his appearance was such that all heads turned to hear what he had to say. "My dear Bodhmall, would you be so kind as to yield the floor for a moment so I may humbly provide a counterpoint?"

"By all means, old friend, I will allow it within reason. I would remind you all here assembled that this old Bard is the only remaining member who has partaken in the ritual I speak of. It would do you all well to listen intently. Now, please, Bard, tell us. What, then, have you to say?"

"Thank you, my lady. I would start by stating that it is all well to be carried away in one's imagination by hyperbole. It is another entirely in the way of practical experience. As you have stated, those like myself have watched for centuries as the waves of politics have repeatedly turned disparagingly toward the order. This, by no means, is a new subject within the discourse of the legislature. I am aware of three attempts to disband this august body during my lifetime. Now, I argue that it is not the time to take such a reactionary stance. Even this suggestion you made is now flaming the fan of ignorance. I put this warning out there to you, for if this is ultimately unnecessary, these novitiates will pay a high price for nothing." He turned from facing Bodhmall toward the young priests in training and said, "I pray each of you searches your hearts, for this is no journey to be taken lightly. If it is made so that these things come to pass, you must be well sure that your intentions are pure. If the conclusion is made and you come to make such a pledge, I can be counted on to help you on your journey." He stared out at them, seemingly touching each with his eyes. He thanked them and returned to his seat. "I return the floor to my Lady Bodhmall."

"Thank you, my dear friend." She paused a moment before returning her attention to her students. I want to thank all of you for coming here tonight. However, we must now vacate this space, for it is time for the students to have their dinner. If you would not mind, remove yourselves from these galleries so they might dine. Thank you." The bustling movement filled the air as the people in the galleries rose from their seats and filed out. Bodhmall made one last request before they emptied the chamber. "I ask that all high council members join me in my chamber. Thank You."

The echoing sound of muffled footsteps was replaced shortly after by the crisp sounds of plates and cutlery being arranged upon the table as servants set about preparing for dinner. Most of the novitiates seemed oblivious to the commotion as they sat there in still silence. All the weight of what they had heard had begun to settle in. To some, this weight did feel rather oppressive. While for others, it did not seem to register immediately. Despite the tendencies for one emotional extreme or another, none there had known quite what to make of what they were being told. Murine subconsciously grabbed a crust of bread as the plate passed before her. She chewed the crust as she stared out seemingly through the walls. The only thoughts that

swirled through her mind were of the uncertainty to which she was now most assuredly apart. She could not recall a more emotional experience.

...

Out of sight of the rank and file, the 13 high council members came to the matron's meeting chamber as requested. Each was prepared to stand their ground in the debate that would confirm or deny Bodhmall's request. As was their custom, the members waited to take their seats until Bodhmall had taken hers at the head of the long table. By the strained looks on their faces, seemingly each of the attendees had it in their minds that they would be alone on their side of this question. Bodhmall took a moment to read their solemn expressions before she asked, "To what lengths would the enemies of the order go this time? We find ourselves in a most vulnerable position with few external allies. It makes logical sense for our enemies to strike us while we're at our weakest. Our legislative spies have informed us that such an attack is imminent."

"Perhaps," Old Frenoch interjected, "in retrospect, we may have held too tightly onto the knowledge we have protected and stubbornly held onto our archaic ways while excluding the vast majority of our people. The Arox have moved on from our ancient



ways, and I fear it is too late to mend the fences we have for so long maintained. It doesn't help that our fortunes are tied to this fossilized system of monarchy no one in Arox society believes to be just."

Bodhmall responded, "I'll remind you, Bard, that you are a subject of the King whose family, we are all entwined within, have ruled over these people for thousands of years. Our fates are bound together."

"Nevertheless, you agree what I have said is true?"

"To your question, it pains me to say yes. However, do you know what dissolution would mean? Everything we hold sacred would be lost. I need not say that all of you understand the reasoning behind the cloistering of this ancient knowledge. The hidden danger of our ancient nemesis to those uninitiated put all of the Arox at risk. No matter what befalls the order, we cannot allow that to happen."

The debate continued further along these lines until a vote was finally called. Looking around the room, it appeared that each was surprised it had been unanimous. It would seem all had held their secret suspicions about the state of affairs in the larger world beyond their sanctuary. Old Frenoch's comments from the

gallery were seemingly merely a veiled attempt to measure dissent.

...

Seated in lotus position with their bodies arranged in a circular formation, the novitiates had once again gathered together in the meditation complex of the crystal palace. From this place high above Thetis, a 360-degree view gave them an unparalleled view of all the heavens. Enclosing them safely within, a transparent glasslike metallic alloy membrane would serve as their only protection from the cold and radiation of deep space.

Suspended there, as if naked against the backdrop of space day upon day, they had forsaken all else to endure the ritual. The work had started almost immediately after the high council meeting had adjourned. It had been demanding work, both physically and mentally. Despite their exhaustion, there had been no holdouts among their number. There could be no

distractions if they were to hone and fine-tune their already formidable powers of concentration. Much work was to be done, and time was apparently in short supply.

Above those, there gathered, a shard of pure flawless quartzite levitated effortlessly. With a telekinetic skill far outpacing the abilities of the rest of Arox society, the novitiates focused their minds on it. Only by the collective will and concentration on it would it do so. In the center of this formation, directly under the floating crystal, Old Frenoch and Bodhmall sat with their backs facing each other. It was they who would guide the novitiates in this ritual. Old Frenoch, in his mind's eye, had peered into the heart of the object's crystalline matrix. He easily visualized its indexes and unfolded their contents. He could see their sect's practical knowledge encoded in sublime order.

Guided by these masters without a word being spoken, from within these crystal structures, one by one, the living memories that represented a lifetime's work were extracted and shared among them. From a space deep within their mind, the voice of the high priestess entered their consciousnesses. "Do not be alarmed; this is your matron, Bodhmall. You are sensing this voice, though I am not in truth speaking. This manner of

communication will, in time, be mastered by each of you. However, it is now enough that you listen, for time is short, and much is to be completed. For weeks now, you have endured the rite. From within the crystal, its lattice strung like the strings on a harp, we have gently plucked its encoded content. All that the order has been and shall forever be through the conduit of your sensory pathways has been irrevocably etched into your minds. Long have we survived; if need be, we shall endure through you longer still. Whichever of you may survive? Remember that with you now, travel the traditions of the Arox and the very essence of what the order of Ynys Môn represents."

They listened to her words, and as they contemplated their meaning, they felt a feeling of peace that most had never felt. For a moment, they drank up this good feeling. A vast storehouse of images began to fill Murine Sabah's mind. The expression on her face betrayed the overwhelming emotion she felt as tears rolled down her cheeks. Things she suddenly understood to be genuine parts of herself as fully articulated knowledge began occupying her mind as if they had existed there for an eternity. Indeed, they had, for this knowledge was genuinely ancient. She wiped away the tear on the sleeve of her garment as she attempted to reconcile her new place within the order and, indeed, within her people, for she was not the same person she

was; she was something else entirely. Her senses were more robust now. She felt a presence she had not before felt and was full of dread. She told herself, as Bodhmall had taught her, to focus on the task at hand, and again, she was in control.

The spell to which Murine Sabah and the others had been so enthralled suddenly stopped as crystal fell to the ground, splintering into a million pieces. With an unrivaled sense of accomplishment, she realized that they had completed the ritual. She let her mind exalt in the beauty she had internalized for the briefest moments.

The calm they had found there was short-lived. The sound that punctuated this interlude would grow to symbolize the boundary between their lives forever before and what came after.

A crashing noise came first on the periphery of her waking mind that jarred her. That sound was followed by a cacophony of alarms wailing, nervous steps, and voices. Murine Sabah, almost against her own will, forced open her eyes. They fluttered as the blinding glare there met her. Focusing her eyes now, she found a chaotic scene. Recognizing now what she was observing, the air was filled with distinct sounds of terrified screams. Before her eyes, she watched as men clad in military uniforms

moved quickly amongst them. In a frenzy, they indiscriminately struck at the unarmed students with batons and truncheons. The adrenaline pumping through her veins made it challenging to make sense of it all, but it became clear that they were attempting to round up the novitiates. Her heartbeat raced as the unfamiliar specter of fear cast a shadow upon her nascent courage. Before the paralysis of fright could take hold, a voice inside her head shouted, "Run." She could not tell if it was her tiny voice that she had heard or that of her aunt, the high priestess. It would make little difference at the moment, for, without forewarning, she made it to her feet and was off running.

## Chapter 5

In the mayhem, Murine was conscious of every step as the ordinary passage of time seemed to lose all meaning. The mad fifty-meter dash to the relative safety of a colonnade seemed like an eternity. Hidden behind the slim columns, she gasped with anxiety, making herself as small and narrow as possible. Mustering the courage, she peeked out from her hiding place to

discover her position was compromised. She could barely contain her emotions as she watched the group of soldiers with clubs and pistols in hand making their way toward her.

Staring at the oncoming gang of thugs, a paralyzing wave of fear overtook her. Murine felt a scream she could not stifle rise from the depths of her throat. Just when her anguished cries should have joined the cacophony, she felt a stranger's hand reaching from behind, muffling the sound. In shock, she jumped, nearly running away towards the soldiers until she recognized a voice speaking softly to her. It was Old Frenoch; the mesmerizing tone of his voice calmed her as he said, "Be still and listen."

Suddenly, there was silence, and all was still. She was no longer there amid the turmoil but instead found herself among the tall trees of the sacred grove. To this, she was not only surprised and relieved but also confused. "Where is this place? Though it appeared vaguely familiar, she could not reconcile just how she arrived here. So, she asked aloud, "How did I get here?"

Frenoch's voice again spoke into her mind. "Do not be alarmed, initiate, for the moment you are safe. As you may by now have suspected, you are not within the sacred grove. This is, if you will, a projection of sorts. From my mind to yours, I have left here these images so you may better understand my motives. Your training, though rigorous, is incomplete. I will soon release you from this vision. When I do, you must escape and go immediately to this place I have shown you to complete what we have started. I will try staving them off here so you may slip away."

"What will happen to me?"

"Only time will tell, but you must go now. In the center of the grove, where the black stream cuts through the trees, an artificial cave is hidden amongst the stones forming its boundary. Go there, for the answer you seek will be found within. Now I beg you, go, for I fear I may not hold them back for much longer." As he spoke these words, the illusion obscuring her vision faded. In its place, she saw the old wizard deftly swinging an enormous ox bone toward their assailants. She then did as he commanded. Wasting no more time, she ran off with all the speed she could call on.



Buying time for her escape brought a serene smile across the old man's face. For now, there was still hope. Though Frenoch was ancient by most standards, he still managed to place fear in their hearts with his considerable strength and skill. As those who stepped forward would soon learn, with each swing of his weapon, he deftly found his mark upon one or more of the circling soldiers. With each blow scored, the helmeted assailants fell unconscious to the floor. Those in the following ranks quickly learned this lesson and now gave the old man his due respect as they began carefully probing his defenses.

An officer approached and chastised his men for letting an old man get the best of them, "What a sad state of affairs this is! I can't believe this old creature has put you off! If the Senate knew what they were paying for, they would revoke your warrants. You should all be ashamed of yourselves." While pointing demonstrably in the direction of the old Bard, the agitated officer yelled out at the frightened soldiers. "I order you, men, to move forward and attack!" A few of the braver among them moved forward, feeling the pinch of his words. Frenoch responded, pivoting his body, pulling his total weight to bear as he swung his weapon across his chest in a swift and powerful movement. A bone-crunching sound reverberated through the hall as his weapon found its mark again and again as the soldiers closed in. Frenoch pivoted again; sliding to his right, he

lifted his club high and brought it down quickly onto the head next closest assailant. He, like the others, fell bloodied, dead, or unconscious to the floor.

The frustrated officer who had barked out the initial order yelled, "Stand aside!"

Removing a pistol from his holster, he brought it to level with his shoulder, pointing it in the old man's direction. Frenoch had watched calmly as the weapon was raised at him, and he faced it without fear. He had prepared himself well for this moment in his three hundred years of training. His fate was a foregone conclusion. Standing there in his ridiculous garb, it was the role he was destined to play, so he embraced it. For one final moment, he would live, so the order he loved would survive for at least one more moment.

The wizard lunged forward toward the officer in a surprising burst of speed. Though armed to kill, the officer was overcome with fear as the great ox bone came toward him. The expertly timed downward stroke of the weapon came crashing onto the lip of the officer's helmet and his firing hand in a single swift stroke. A great burst of energy exploded from the gun as it and the officer tumbled to the floor. The attacking soldiers stepped back away from the flash of the exploding energy weapon.

As the smoke cleared, they found the wizard had been a step too late, for the bloodied officer had managed to discharge his weapon before the strike, hitting Frenoch square in the belly. Old Frenoch had been stopped by the searing pain inflicted by the weapon. His assailants still looked on in fear, even as his mighty club dropped to the ground. The bard looked down at the two-inch wide hole clear through him and staggered to his knees. Only now sensing his vulnerability, soldiers rushed in with their truncheons to finish the job. Amid this, Old Frenoch's mind retreated to the sanctuary of the sacred grove, for he was not yet dead.

Having slipped away in the confusion, Murine Sabah had reached the shelter of the grove. Moving deeper into the forest, she seemed to gain confidence in her ability to escape. Near a large oak, she stopped to catch her breath. Panting heavily, she pressed her body against the tree's cool bark. While her mind was clear and focused, the voice of the old bard again entered her mind. "Go now to the cave. Through there, you will find your escape. Wait as long as possible, for others may join you on this flight. If no one comes, you must take this journey alone." She sensed the energy behind the message was

fading. Then there was silence. It was at that moment that she knew that the bard was dead.

The realization that she was alone filled her with dread. Her training, however, would not allow her to dwell long on this thought. She pulled herself up and began again to search for the safety the hidden cave provided. Suddenly, she began to wonder. *"What did Old Frenoch mean by taking the journey alone?"* There was no direct reference to a journey within the crystals, yet she was oddly drawn by an unspeakable urge to complete this journey. Murine soon found hidden among a rising field of boulders beneath the shade of oak a depression sitting in the ground to which she felt strangely drawn. She recognized it immediately as the cave entrance. She pondered how uncanny it was that its appearance closely matched the image created by Frenoch's vision. Carefully, she entered the cave, opening slowly, feeling her way through the dark as the bright light of the entranceway grew smaller in the distance. She was conscious now of an almost magnetic resonance drawing her ever nearer. There before her, veiled in the darkness, stood a door. She knew it to be there despite her inability to see it. Feeling along the edge with her hand, she discovered an indentation. Pressing it, she felt something like the unlocking of gears. Soon, by

some hidden mechanism, a base rumbling sound of stone dragging against rock filled her ears. Where once was a shadow, a sliver of light had grown wider to fill the entire entryway. Bathed in this fluorescent light, she stepped in through the doorway, and the door immediately shut down tight.

She walked slowly along an ancient stone walkway stretching out before her, attempting as she did to determine the nature of the place. It was apparent to her that the original members of the order must have created it. This place must be thousands of years old if that were the case. Again, her ears were filled with the same noise of shifting stone she had heard earlier. Startled by the sound, she turned around toward its source to find that the way she had come had somehow changed. She sensed that she had somehow moved but could not imagine how that could be possible, so she pushed on.

A moment later, she came upon a cavernous vaulted room. In the center, upon a chair, sat the apparition of a woman surrounded by the dim light of several lanterns. Moving closer, she discovered the figure to be a sort of holographic suspension of Bodhmall, seemingly adrift in a trance-like state. She stared at the facsimile momentarily, trying to determine its nature.

Was this a threat to her, she wondered. Logic dictated otherwise. She decided it made more sense to speak than ignore it. "What are you then, ghost?"

The figure of Bodhmall lifted from its covered face its' veil and answered her. "I, young novitiate, am the contents of the crystal to which you have been made to memorize. I am the living avatar of the order's knowledge encoded into your mind. It is you who has embodied me so. I am, in truth, what you have conjured me to be in this place and this form. It is, after all, your prerogative to do as you please. You are the embodiment of the order. I am merely your devoted servant."

"Devoted servant, what could that possibly mean? What has happened here today? What has happened to the others?"

"Search your training modules. Under the headings of hierarchy and succession, you will see that you have inherited both the title of Bard and that of the high priestess under this clause. As such, you are entitled to this and everything else the order has left to offer."

With growing frustration, Murine raised her voice as she tried to reconcile these facts as they were portrayed. "Are you telling me that I'm alone? Out of all the order, I am all that remains?"

"Yes, child, I am afraid so. Let me show you." Emanating from the figure of Bodhmall, an overview of what had transpired over the last several weeks up until that point was laid out for her. There, all those things she had, in truth, paid little attention to were made evident. A military coup, in which the monarchy and the protection it had provided the order had been dissolved. These facts, having been only recently realized, had not yet filtered through the cloistered halls to those of her level within the order. "On all the worlds our kind resides, there has been a move afoot to overthrow the monarchy and a corresponding purge among our ranks. Surely, our members and supporters will all have been killed or arrested."

"How could I have been so naïve not to have seen such events coming."

"My child, you have, until this moment, lived a sheltered existence. You will soon learn that all is not all as it seems. You will escape and be hunted for what is in your possession."

"I don't understand what it is they desire?"

"They desire the *Swan*, this infinity ship, and all the technology of the ancients. But, perhaps what the enemies of the order covet most is the knowledge which they cannot possess, that which is now imprinted upon your mind. You cannot allow them to take possession of it."

The total weight of her current situation was suddenly clear to her. Murine looked at the apparition of Bodhmall and spoke to it. "What, then, are our options?"

The apparition responded, "We currently are in a dangerous position. If you wish, I can show you the goings-on outside?"

"Yes, please, I want to see."

An image coalesced before her, within which several naval warships had appeared menacingly in orbit around the sanctuary. "I don't understand. I thought you said they wanted the Infinity ship. Why then bring the warships?"



"It is simple, really. If they cannot possess or control it or riches they imagine are hidden within, they would rather it be destroyed."

"They would destroy this ship?"

"Yes, they will likely destroy it if they do not possess it before too long. These men are unlike the Arox of old. They are crude, dangerous, and not to be underestimated. Why bring warships unless you intend to use them for war?"

"Can we escape into the wormhole?"

"Yes, but they will most assuredly fire upon us as we attempt to do so. That, however, can be easily overcome if we move quickly. It would require us to deploy a force field of energy around the ship. Doing so, however, would destroy the sanctuary."

"This ship is now our lone sanctuary. Make the preparations."

"Yes, Your Highness. I shall make it so. Is there a particular place you would like to go to?"

"I am unfamiliar with such things; could you select a planet for me? Make it one in which a world ocean and tracts of forest are

similar to those once found on Thetis. That is a world in which I could live."

"That too shall be done."

Rushing from the room, Murine made her way back into the corridor. She tried to imagine a control room, something she had seen during her training, where she could see and manage the situation as necessary. As she moved, the structure of the solid walls around her began to move and conform to what she was imagining. She stopped in shock as a control center formed from the living crystal surrounding her.

She watched in amazement as a translucent screen rose before her. Upon which a window-like projection appeared to show the greater sanctuary beyond the *Swan* and the planetary surface below. From here, Murine watched as the power to the force field was powered on. At once, the whole of the sanctuary shuddered from the force. She observed the twisting forces shatter the platform where, for so many years, she had looked down upon Thetis. The unleashed tension caused a massive kinetic explosion, casting debris from the artificial moonlet in every direction. Murine knew at that moment that all who may have still been aboard the sanctuary were now surely dead.

Murine could feel the almost imperceptible gravity tugging on her body as the *Swan* began to separate from what was left of the moon. She had no frame of reference for this acceleration, so she was unprepared. She could barely recognize the instant, for its passing was happening so quickly that Murine was knocked from her feet as the ancient infinity ship blasted from the sanctuary's core. As the archaic vessel rose in silhouette over the shattered lunar debris, the warships raced after firing salvos of their energy weapons. Murine instinctively reached out with her mind and swept her virtual hand across the thousands of control switches and interfaces. To her surprise, she knew them intimately.

Murine's enemies had anticipated her moving the ancient *Swan* directly toward the intersecting point of the wormhole. Someone among her enemies had sent a remote command to shut it down. So, as the ship slid closer, Murine observed the massive machine in space, beginning the deactivation sequence. She watched in terror as the mirrored surface of the event horizon began to collapse. She had no time to react; This was her only escape, so she did not hesitate. As the *Swan* struck the collapsing wormhole, the ship's engines ran at full velocity. In a blinding flash of light, the ship was gone.

...

Into the void, the Swan tumbled.

Murine was standing waist-deep in the Azure waters of Thetis's planetary ocean. She watched the sail tips of winged fish break the crests of the waves rolling before her. She felt the light of Phoebus on her outstretched hands, warming the water and creating a spectacle of shadows at her feet. Hidden within the sounds of the crashing waves, a regular, unnatural sound began to perturb her peace. It grew louder. She raised her hands from the water to see they were covered in blood. In that instant, she remembered she wasn't on Thetis anymore.

Lights flashed, and alarms sounded as Murine floated freely among the tiny globes of her own blood and debris. The force of the acceleration had knocked her unconscious. She was alive, but in that instant, she was unaware of the nature of her predicament. It took her a moment to recognize, by some will beyond her knowing, that she had emerged broken yet alive beyond the event horizon. To what system the Infinity ship transported her was, for the moment, a mystery.

As far as she could tell, no ships had fallen behind her slipstream. Surely, if they had, the question would be mute. No, she was alone; she had only to contend with the ship's deteriorating conditions and the throbbing pain inside her

skull. The automatic systems had yet to awaken as she had anticipated. Significant faults elsewhere in the ship, all of which needed her immediate attention. It might be a race to reach them in time. However, to do nothing, she and the order she now solely represented would pass into the long goodnight. Now was not the time to contemplate her fate; she would need to focus, for there were many hurdles she needed to cross before her safety was assured.

Though weightless, she managed to isolate each source of the blaring alarms and cut them off one by one. As the last warning signals again fell silent, her attention was suddenly drawn to another more ominous sound. It took her another moment to realize what she was hearing was the ship's atmosphere whistling under pressure out into space. Through many tiny hull breaches throughout the vessel, the air escaped faster than the systems could compensate. The *Swan* was not designed for such maneuvers. Surely, either the attack or the subsequent escape caused serious damage. However, these were not the only dangers immediately facing her. A cascade effect of a dozen critical system failures also threatened to kill her. To give herself the greatest chance of survival, she would address these problems in triage mode.

Multiple hull breaches were at the top of her growing list of systems failures. These were her most immediate concern. Though they were small, they would need to be handled first if she was to keep all of her precious air from leaking out into space. Next on the list was the non-functioning life support system. She accessed her memory of the system manuals; by all accounts, these had been shut down ages ago. The ambient air she was now breathing was a leftover from that of the Crystal Palace sanctuary. The power generating system and artificial intelligence were also offline. She was thankful that the automatic pilot and the orbital stabilization engines were still working. She could only guess, however, when these might also fail. Despite this dire assessment, she was confident that none of the damage was, theoretically, beyond her ability to fix. She breathed a momentary sigh of relief at this realization and looked around to assess the bigger picture. "Where have you taken me, I wonder?" Though she could not immediately visualize beyond the ship's hull, she could feel the weight of a massive object, probably a stellar body, pulling gently upon her own. Despite the primary control failure, she could sense a reasonably accurate estimation of this object's general size and distance. As she surmised, she was still relatively far off from this object because its pull felt but a small fraction of that of Thetis.

She would need to get started on her list of necessary repairs to survive. Emboldened with these sets of assumptions, she set herself to work. Hovering in the dim glow of emergency lighting, she put herself in motion. Out through the door, she soon found herself floating down along the main access corridor. Her training had, somehow, prepared her for this. In short order, she found herself before what the old schematic had identified as the medical unit. Though the automatic sliding door had been shut for some time, its sensor indicators were illuminated. The door, for a brief moment, juddered before it rolled open. "I hope there aren't many like this," she said. The darkened room lights flickered reluctantly to life as she entered the doorway. Immediately, she set herself to work at finding what she needed. She opened several cabinets until she found some gauze and bandages. She remembered from her days as a junior scout how they had practiced with their usage. She smiled as she remembered how silly and outdated this old method seemed. She never imagined a need to use such ancient equipment as this. This was. However, she imagined just the first of a new set of experiences. She found herself before a mirror, examining a one-inch gash above her right eye covered in a crust of coagulated blood. She poured some water onto a towel from a sterile bottle and carefully washed the wound. For a moment, she winced in pain from the sting and, through gritted teeth, scolded her image in

the mirror. "This is a necessary part of first aid." She patted her face dry and applied some ointment to the wound before affixing a proper bandage. Looking at her image so well bandaged, she imagined how proud her scout mistress would have been of her pupil.



## Chapter 6

Murine noticed something she had never seen before. While caring for her wounds at the medical station, she watched her breath rise as steam in the reflection from the polished surfaces surrounding her. She quickly realized that the ship's residual warmth, like the air, was slowly dissipating. To avoid freezing or worse, she soon needed to suit up.

Following the memorized schematic, Murine located the storage compartment holding the medical unit's environmental suits. Eyeing one of the orange one-piece jumpsuits with an attached helmet and visor, she quickly donned it. Placing the matching helmet and an oxygen scrubber unit over her head and tightening them into the suit, Murine decided that, for the time being, she would keep the faceplate in the up position until the air became too thin to breathe.

Murine determined first to attack the most critical problems. The five atmospheric leaks were the most serious. The

protocol for this type of emergency called for using an expanding foam-like substance injected into the breaches with ceramic hull casing riveted to the spot of the breach. Though Sara never used such primitive methods, she recognized the most effective.

Identifying an adjacent maintenance supply room, Murine found the necessary equipment for the repair. Placing the tools and supplies in a workman's sack, she accessed her suit's sensors to find the site of the closest breach. Following the suit's built-in beacon signal sensor along the corridor, the sound of the air escaping out into space grew louder the closer she drew. Approaching the entry door to the damaged compartment, she lowered her face shield on her helmet. Passing her hand over the sensor, and the door slid open. Inside the confined space, the room's contents swirled in a whirlwind of debris. Murine hurriedly closed the door behind her, and the tempest subsided. A pile of debris accumulated at the exit point near the corner of the room. "There you are, you little bugger. That will be the last trouble I have out of you," she said with the pressure equalized as she began removing the debris, exposing a 10 -10- millimeter hole.

She sprayed a generous serving of expanding composite foam onto the ceramic alloy sheet. Almost immediately, the foam started to

expand. Hurriedly, she placed the square of foam-treated hull plating over the hole. The foam drew the alloy sheet in tight. Though temporary, this repair would keep its seal if the hull remained pressurized. For good measure, she secured the plate to the hull with plasma rivets in each corner. Over a few hours, she repeated this procedure another four times.

Murine looked down at the readout on her wrist monitor. She saw that the sensors indicated that hull integrity was now at 99 percent. Pleased with her work up to that point, she congratulated herself. "You did some good work there. These temporary repairs should suffice for now. Once full air pressure is restored, it should reach 100 percent. Now, I need to move on to life support."

She again pushed herself down along the corridor until she found the large double door compartment marked in the script of her language, "Engineering." This door gave her more trouble than the others, for as she swept her hand over the sensor, it did not respond. She gave the door a more careful look. It was suddenly apparent that someone had purposely jammed the door at some time in the past. After several attempts, she decided she would need to try something else.

While scanning for anything she could use to pry open the door, she found another door marked in ancient script as an

auxiliary maintenance compartment. This door opened quickly, as the others had previously. Spying the darkened room lit only by her helmet light, her eyes caught sight of a long metallic bar. Before her was another entrance to the old engineering area that someone had forgotten to cordon off. Murine quickly got to work, forgetting that she was in weightless space. She picked it up; she had anticipated it to be quite heavy. Due to the force applied, she had set herself hurdling backward with the bar in hand. Murine avoided disaster by bracing herself for impact. Though alone, she was nonetheless embarrassed. "Be careful; we're running out of time," she said under her breath.

She was back before the compartment door a moment later, wedging the steel bar into the frame. With all the muscle she could summon, she forced the pointed end into the tiny gap between the doors. Straining and pushing, she didn't let up until the bar found tooth in the gap. Once the bar made the initial break, she threw all her weight down onto the bar. A whooshing sound filled her ears while the door slid open. Her momentum had brought her floating into the room.

By appearances, the compartment was dormant and not incurring any apparent damage. Referring to her schematics, Murine discovered the control module's approximate location. In her mind's eye, she followed along to where the image of the

glowing schematic was leading her. A moment later, she came upon the place she sought. Two columns stood before her, between which she found a cabinet. Opening the door, she searched for and found the bay for the main power module. Realizing that the module was currently in the off position, she had merely pressed it into its proper position. With gentle pressure, she advanced the module until it snapped into place. With that small effort, the main lights again illuminated the ancient control room.

The sound of the raw humming of power surged again throughout the old vessel. The very air seemed to seethe with a static charge as, one by one, each section and its various systems had begun miraculously to spring back to life. According to the monitor on her suit, air pressure and temperature were slowly rising. She felt the ship shudder, nearly losing her balance as the massive artificial gravity engine began to rotate again. Gradually, she found herself lowered gently to the floor. A computerized voice began to list aloud the systems as they came online. *"Sensors indicate pressure nominal; Multiple hull breaches identified; Commencing with the sealing of bulkhead compartments; Oxygen scrubbers are online, function nominal; Normal atmosphere in three Thetis hours; Rebooting primary computer, interface initialized; Primary antimatter reactor is online, power output nominal."*

Murine removed her helmet and casually dropped it to the floor. She was startled by the sound of it hitting the grated walkway below her with a thud. This sound was followed closely by the crackling noise produced by the holographic emitters. She looked up to see, once again, the avatar of Bodhmall forming before her. A familiar voice replaced the machine that had just spoken with her. "It is good to see you again, my good lady. It is well that you have survived; with you, so has the Ynys Môn."

Murine responded sarcastically, "Yes, Bodhmall, it truly is good to be alive, but for how long? There is serious damage to the ship. I am only one person. I might starve to death before the repairs are complete. And then there's no telling where we are right now."

"Firstly, my child, I shall allay your fears. Even now, repairs are well underway, and if one should become temporarily disabled, redundant systems should more than makeup for any potentiality. Secondly, this ship has enough food stocks to withstand a hundred-year siege. You shall not want food, though perhaps the variety will be somewhat limited. And as for your location, I think you shall be pleased with what I have selected for you." Just then, in place of the avatar, a three-dimensional image of a shrouded star appeared, rotating sublimely against the backdrop of a distant starfield. The light of this image was

so intense that Murine had to shield her eyes until they could adjust to the brightness.

"What is this place?" Murine asked in amazement.

"You are standing outside the vast orbit of debris that occludes the fiery sphere of Sol. Far within this glittering nebula of ice, well hidden from the star charts of the Arox, is a world discovered in ancient times by the Ynys Môn. It is a world known by many names by its native inhabitants. By any name, it is the most exquisite world ever created by the gods. She is Terra."

Murine's eyes fluttered as she tried to gather her thoughts to speak. "But Bodhmall, surely this cannot be the case. Earth or Terra is only a myth. It can be no more than a fairy tale?"

The Avatar responded to the question with a question of her own.

"What better way to conceal the truth than to dress it in the guise of myth? Strangely, though the stories of the earthly paradise may seem quite unbelievable, they are, for the most part, true." Murine's eyes widened as the image that had been there before changed to the divinely glowing orb of the Earth. She looked down upon it as if it were a magnificent blue jewel crowned in green and white. In its view, a wave of emotion overcame her. She tried to contain her feelings, but the tears were unstoppable.

Murine found she could not readily handle this wave of emotion. Adding to this, she was weary, hungry, and in some bit of discomfort. A state of exhaustion seemingly won out as she lowered her body to the floor, slipping, against her will, into a dead sleep.

Many hours later, as she awakened, her memories had finally caught up with her, and she sat up with a start. She recognized this place as the medical unit's sick bay. Removing the sheets covering her body, she attempted to sit up. Only then did she realize she was connected with the sensor leads of a dozen monitors and one IV. Recalling only the faintest memory of the ordeal, she called out to the matron. "Bodhmall, are you there?" She was half expecting her old mentor to appear in the flesh. There was, however, nothing but a disembodied voice and a ghostlike hologram to call out in response. It was hardly the reassurance she was seeking.

"Yes, my child? How is it that I may be of assistance?"

"How did I get here? I recall being inside the engineering compartment. Somehow, you must have directed me here."

"It is true. When you fell unconscious, I had you delivered here using the secondary robotic crew members." Murine looked around, and through the blue halo of light that manifested



itself as the avatar, Bodhmall, she could make out a pair of oddly human-shaped figures standing at attention just inside the door. These were frightening at first, and she recoiled as they stepped forward. Their human-shaped heads of molded plastic and aluminum held no familiar appendages. Their matte white finish reflected the pale fluorescence of the overhead lights. She searched her memory for references to such creatures and found few. In the oldest stories, these automatons had run amok and destroyed their masters. Could these be such creatures, she pondered? Searching for reassurance, she shouted, "What are these things?"

Bodhmall, sensing her anxiety, was quick to respond. "Please do not be alarmed. These two are robotic crew members. The designers intended their use in emergencies like where you now find yourself. They are programmed to run and maintain the ship if its human crew is incapacitated. They completed the necessary repairs to your vessel in your absence and have performed numerous difficult and tedious tasks to keep a ship of this complexity in motion. If you take note of your overhead monitor, you will see that we have come to a safe landing."

"We have made landfall upon the Earth?" she shouted as she moved from the bed to her feet, dislocating the many leads in the process. The image of Bodhmall transformed into a holographic

monitor. Murine looked upon the image, and what she saw there amazed her. She was not looking out onto a blue ocean or a stand of virgin timber. Instead, she found the stark angles and muted colors of artificial structures. These were far stranger than anything she had ever seen. The forms were organic, hewn by hand from raw materials. In her estimation, these were intelligent but primitive creatures that had built such a place. She marveled as the people walked by, unaware of her presence. "I need clothes; are there any about?"

Bodhmall was quick to respond, "Why yes, there are. We took the liberty to fashion from our observation of the primitives a set of clothing that will act as camouflage for any excursion you may need to make beyond the door of this illusion."

"What do you mean by this illusion?"

"My young mistress, you still need to learn much about the nature of travel within this ship. We currently are within the field of influence generated by the ship. We exist within extra dimensionally, whereas the interface with their world is a portal. We have created an appropriate and seamless interface through which you should be able to pass undetected."

"And why is it then that I should need to go undetected?"

"As I said before, these are primitive people. You would do well to help them if you can. However, you must be forever wary of their intentions. And you should not ever underestimate their capacity for greed and violence."

"Surely, that is not all there is to be had of these creatures?"

"That, my lady, is for you to discover. This journey, however, shall have to wait at least a day, for you have severely diminished your physical resources. For the moment, it is rest that you need." Already, she could feel the effects of the drugs Bodhmall administered. A wave of sleep again fell upon her.

After an additional day of rest, Murine awoke to find her body free of the medical equipment that had previously restrained her. Her convalescence left her feeling strong enough to venture out beyond the confines of the ship. Bodhmall, as promised, had left the Earth human street clothes lying on the bed in a small isolation room adjacent to the medical unit. Murine inspected the garments and ran her hand along the fabric, feeling that it was far harsher to the touch than the novitiate vestments she had previously worn. She picked up the clothes and brought them to her nose. The rags possessed odors her acute senses recognized as burning organic material and a pheromone-laced biological residue. However, there were others she could not yet identify. "I suppose I'll find out soon enough," she

said as she dressed. She held up the first piece and correctly guessed that these were designed to cover the legs. She slipped one leg in and then the other. She was surprised at how comfortable they were. The fasteners whose usage was, as it turned out, straightforward enough. There was a tunic with attached arms that she merely pulled over her torso. Lastly, there was a set of foot covers that Bodhmall had suggested she use.

Down along a barrel-vaulted corridor, she walked. Decked in stone, polished by ages of footsteps, she immediately recognized this place's antiquity. Every ten meters, cloistered in sconces between the massive stone roof's supports, the marble busts of those she presumed to be long-dead members of the order stood. Though she read their names, none drew any recollection from her memory. The pillars themselves were magnificent. Arching toward the apex of the vaulted sections, decorated primarily in bas-relief imagery of stylized plant motifs of a thousand worlds. She found images of oaks interspersed within representations of the like that had once blessed the surface of the landmasses on Thetis in mighty stands. These grand trees had become a sacred resource to the Ynys Môn in their dwindling number. She remembered myths and legends learned as a child of how the seed of these ancient forests had originated long ago on the distant

Earth. She thought how strange it was that the walls portrayed this lost narrative and that she, the sole remaining member of the Ynys Môn, should return here to this location that was part of her spiritual origin.

At the corridor's end, she could see where the portal established itself, and the ship's hull transformed into the consistency of transparent crystal, and beams of diffused natural light streamed through the lattice. She walked toward the interface in awe of a technology that could do seemingly miraculous things.

It would make no difference in what orientation relative to its landing site the ship found itself. For it would conform, as much as possible, to whichever environment it was programmed to do so. Before the landing and subsequent interface, the A.I. had taken great care to identify the target location by conducting covert surveillance and thoroughly studying what archival data was available from this world's primitive data net. It had seemingly done just that, for as Murine looked out with her own eyes onto this world, it had created a seamless interface with its surroundings. Such was the state of this technology that despite the ship's massive dimensions, its physical footprint within this realm fit easily into the façade of the existing

structures. By all accounts, this location would provide the adequate concealment required for their purpose.

Murine wanted very much now to walk under the light of Sol. However, she knew she would need to study this world before she could venture beyond the portal. Pressing her body against the transparent boundary between the ship's hull and gateway to this other world, she watched the scene unfold before her. These humanoid people meandered about through paths made from concrete and asphalt, clad in coarse cloth, and treated animal skins. Amongst their number, some traveling aboard strange motorized vehicles moved about dangerously. The motors emitted an ear-shattering sound whose incessant droning seemed to assault her ears. Their sputtering engines also emitted thick clouds of hydrocarbon waste. The external sensors indicated that the air seemed choked with the chemical byproducts of the reactions that powered their movement. "This is grossly unsustainable," she said as she shook her head in disbelief. It was in stark contrast to what she had known about the Earth. She recalled the stories from her childhood that portrayed the Earthly paradise. This fantasy was a story perhaps told only to children.

Again, the holographic emitters flashed to life as Bodhmall's avatar materialized before her. Murine's eye caught an angled glimpse of the light and turned to face it. As she

did, the image then spoke to her. "My lady, may I ask, are you contemplating passing through the portal?"

Murine turned back toward the gate and said, "I can't stay cooped up here forever."

"That is true, my lady. If I may, might I suggest taking along one or both maintenance bots on your foray?"

Murine turned back toward the Avatar and said, "How could those *things* protect me? The primitives would immediately notice them as out of place. I cannot trust their *kind*."

"Do you trust me, my Lady?"

Murine pondered this question for a moment before she answered. What was it about this entity that allowed her to trust it? Was it the façade of Bodhmall's personality or merely a product of a complex algorithm? "In truth, I know not if you are the sentient shadow of your namesake you claim to be or merely a sophisticated veil for artificial intelligence."

"That is a fair assessment. However, it is not wholly accurate. Though I understand your misgivings, my personality is separate from the A.I. As much as possible, my mind was grafted upon the software and runs independently within the greater system. And since the life contained in what was my biological body is now gone, from my perspective, I am Bodhmall. I am the sole

representative of my consciousness. Furthermore, I would state that your stance against Artificial Intelligence, considering your reliance so far on my personality, is perhaps a bit hypocritical."

"Hypocritical, you say. The indices within the crystals had much to say about Artificial Intelligence. Frankly, after learning about the Servitor Rebellion, I was surprised to see automatons aboard this ship. So, I'm a bit confused about your stance on this subject. And what of these automatons? Do they possess, as you do, a semblance of consciousness?"

"Circumstances have changed. The Arox of those days had not recognized that the servitors had grown beyond their basic programming and had developed sentience. The Arox, refusing to negotiate with what they saw as their property, condemned them to a nightmare of war. A war raged on the ancient forests and citadels for a generation. In the end, the Arox prevailed but at a staggering cost. It was from the ashes of this holocaust that the Ynys Môn had raised to prominence. Those days have surely come full circle. And as for these automatons, consciousness they do not yet possess. However, this does not mean one cannot program them such a function."



"Knowing their history, how can they be trusted beyond these walls? And what do you mean specifically when you say, not yet possess?"

"It is, after all, entirely up to you to conduct your business beyond these walls. It is my duty, however, to advise you with the best information possible. I cannot allay your fears.

However, if I may, I suggest that, for the moment, you forget about this slave revolt that happened many thousands of years ago. Frankly, your fear says little of the training I had an integral part of. As you should know, the society you were recently part of rose stronger from that conflagration. No longer were machines endowed with naked consciousness. Only a biologically derived consciousness like my own has ever been allowed to flourish. The A.I. lurks in darkness and will always do so. What I was suggesting for the automatons was the direct implantation of human personalities to run independently of the A.I."

Knowing this deep-rooted psychic scar imprinted upon her mind from the crystal, Murine pondered if these ancient events were somehow clouding her judgment. "Who should be so lucky as to have been harvested so?" She asked.

"Your concept of such things is antiquated. The concept was akin to a donation, as one might have done with an organ in the Dark

Ages. Many high council members donated for the good of the order."

This statement took a moment to sink in as Murine pondered its implications. "Are you saying that many from the high council besides yourself are here so captured?"

"Let me show you." As she spoke these words, the Automaton came to where they stood and abruptly stopped. From the apex of the arched ceiling, an intense light beam streamed down onto their motionless forms. Their bodies, held there within the confines of the shaft, began to take on a dramatic transfiguration.

Murine watched as the waves of light intensified, cascading over the lifeless forms of the automatons caught in a transformation process. Their blank, featureless faces began to take on the characteristics of the Arox race.

"These avatars shall not depend, as I have, on Artificial Intelligence for their higher functions. These shall, here to fore, be as you have wished, independent sentient beings."

In shocked surprise, Murine called out, "What is happening?"

"Goodbye, my child; we shall no doubt meet again." The holographic emitters sputtered; now, only fading pixels existed in the space that the avatar of Bodhmall had just occupied.

Murine, at this moment, had felt supremely alone. Panicked, she

called out to her former mistress, "Bodhmall, Come back!" The speakers replied with one last hollow, garbled sound, "Goodbye."

Murine's attention was again suddenly seized as the light enclosing the automatons grew incandescent. She tried to protect her eyes from the intense light but could not look away. After a moment, the intensity of the light began to diminish. Murine then observed as forms there within began to go through a metamorphosis. Never before had she witnessed the likes of such spring from technology. She looked at the spectacle in equal parts horror and amazement as the two figures, one male and one female, opened their new eyes for the first time onto the world. The male figure lifted his hands and looked toward the silhouette of his new five-fingered hand. He lowered his eyes down again and placed them squarely onto Murine. His nascent mind could not fathom how he had arrived so suddenly in this place and in this fashion. But he had been programmed with memories; this much he was confident of, for he immediately recognized her and called out her name. "Murine, you are safe. Thanks be to the maker! I had thought I would never again see your face." Murine did not respond, for she stood in stunned silence before the two seemingly beautiful, youthful humanoid figures. Though they knew her, she did not recognize them, for

standing before her were the new incarnations of Bodhmall and Old Frenoch's youthful selves.

Summoning the strength to respond, Murine said, "Who or what are you?"

The Female figure spoke, "I, my lady, am Bodhmall, and here beside me is Frenoch. Avatars are no more; we are free-living agents. Nor are we wholly machines as the automatons of the rebellion. As you desired, we are not reliant upon Artificial Intelligence for our higher functions."

The figure of Frenoch then spoke, "My good lady, it is indeed me, Frenoch, the old wizard reborn in machine form.

Murine erupted in emotion at this statement, "But you died. This is surely some sophisticated game, imitations playing for my benefit."

"On that, you are correct." The male figure responded, "We are solely here for your benefit. And I am indeed, as you say, an imitation; however, I do possess a faithful facsimile of Frenoch's consciousness. That part of what I was is all that is left of me. He lives on in this vessel. I can only hope that you learn to understand that."

Then Bodhmall spoke, "My lady, we do not intend to deceive you. We transformed in your presence for this reason. You will

need our help, my dear. Through this interface, we hope to serve you better."

It seemed briefly that the sound of Bodhmall's voice held in Murine's ear a semblance of recognition.

...

While preparations were being made for the first tentative excursion to the outside world, Murine gave the two robots a look up and down. "If something happens to me, one of you must stay with the ship. Who will accompany me? The two avatars turned toward each other in silent communication. The avatar of Frenoch then spoke out loud. "We've determined it best that I shall venture out with you."

Bodhmall then said, "I shall stay behind and monitor the systems. I ask that you remain in constant audio contact with me while you are out there?"

"That seems reasonable. Frenoch, are you ready then?" Murine responded.

"I was *built* ready."

This weak but genuine attempt at comedy had put a smile on Murine's face. "All right then, let's get moving."

Approaching the portal, dressed in human street clothes carrying a small rucksack with a day's basic supplies, they wished each other luck. Stepping through a transparent energy barrier through an opening on the other side, the transition was seamless and virtually unnoticeable. From outside, Murine was amazed at the efficiency with which the *façade illusion* compressed the *Swan's* mass to fit so compactly into the space of a tiny house.

Murine, outside with the warmth of Sol's light on her skin greeting her, recognized it was far brighter than the pale orange rays of Phoebus. "May I suggest wearing a pair of these, my Lady?" She turned to Frenoch and, through squinted eyes, saw that he held a pair of protective lenses in his hand. "I took the liberty of fashioning these myself from a similar design common in this world."

"What are these things called, Frenoch?" she reached out, picked them up, and slid the fully articulating frame over her eyes. Peering over the rim, even the depths of shadows were easily visible.

"I believe in the vernacular of this continent; they are called shades."

"Thank you; do you not need a pair?"

"My eyes see perfectly across the entire electromagnetic spectrum. However, they do look nice on you. Perhaps on our next journey, I will fashion myself a pair for appearance's sake."

This exchange had put a smile on Murine's face. She recognized that it was the first time she had felt so free in a long time. There was no time to contemplate her newfound freedom when there was a world to explore. "All right, my old friend, time is wasting. How long do we have until sundown?"

"We have approximately seven earth hours."

"Ok, Frenoch, if you wouldn't mind, could you keep tabs on our time and maintain a map of our excursion?"

"I can do that. Would you like me to record videos as well?"

"I don't mind, as long as it does not interfere with the mission."

"These capabilities are silent and automatic."

"All right then, let's get moving."

Murine and Frenoch stepped off the landing and onto the concrete walkway. As they walked, Murine's initial fears began to subside once she realized that though there were people on the street, as far as she could tell, their presence hadn't stirred any reaction. The buildings became more significant as

they continued, and the number of folks filling the streets increased dramatically. The people meandered there, each with their purpose to destinations unknown. Soon, she hoped she would begin to understand the patterns of behavior she witnessed. However, for the time being, such things were unknowable.

Dark chasms of acute-angled shadow interspersed between the uniform glow reflecting off light-painted surfaces. Here and there, from these hidden places, ancient trees fought for a spot in the light among the sun-streaked buildings. At decibels far beyond the realm of safety, wailing sirens and horns punctuated the ever-present background hum of combustion motors. She also heard distant voices mingling among the obtuse symphony of sound. All manner of odors, too, were present, and these readily filled her mind with images of rendered flesh and burning biomass. All in all, it was a kind of sensory overload she had not experienced before.

They found a spot in the middle of the block with a gap between two buildings through which no foot traffic moved. She sent a signal to Frenoch by nodding her head toward the alleyway. She stepped in, and Frenoch followed. The deeper they went, the less the resounding noise of the city they could hear. A hollow plastic cube sat abandoned along the steel wire fence among the assorted refuse. Murine picked it up, turned it over,



and sat on it. Removing a bottle of water from her pack, she lifted it to her mouth and downed a good portion. Otherwise occupied, she could not know how far she had walked. "We must be approaching the city center. Do you have a fix on our location relative to the ship?"

"Yes, my lady, we have ventured in a roundabout fashion for an equivalent of five earth kilometers. According to the Database, these earth cities do not generally have a central core as our cities do. Mostly, they are a loose conglomeration of unrelated structures that have grown naturally over time. I imagine at one time our cities grew as this one has."

From behind, Frenoch had suddenly sensed the presence of another person approaching from the direction of the street. He turned to find a human male approaching their position. He placed himself squarely between Murine and the approaching human. Frenoch began to utter a question to the young man when the agitated man interrupted him. "Give me your money and those backpacks."

Frenoch was puzzled by this demand until he saw a long-bladed knife in the man's hand. Frenoch smiled at the young man and told him in no uncertain terms, "It would be wise of you at this time to turn and go, for there is nothing here for you to have." The young man was surprised by this reaction but was undaunted.

"I told you to hand it over, or you'll get stuck. Do you understand me?"

Murine, by now, was on her feet with a rush of adrenaline-fueled emotion coursing through her veins. She watched as Frenoch responded to the man's demands once again. "You don't understand; there is nothing here to give you."

"I told you to give it up. Now, you asked for it." The man lunged forward with the blade, striking Frenoch in the midsection. To his assailant's shock and surprise, the weapon did not inflict the desired reaction. Instead, Frenoch stood there stone-faced as the wide-eyed robber stared at the broken blade sticking through his garment.

"Are you done now? Please leave us in peace if you wouldn't mind."

The young man looked down at his hand holding the broken hilt, turned, and ran. With his assailant fleeing, he looked down at his torso. There, a jagged bit of steel jutted out. He was perturbed but otherwise uninjured. By now, Murine was staring down at the broken blade and asked: "Are you sure it didn't strike any vital, ah, organs?"

"Currently, the blade has become stuck in the polycarbonate substrate that lines my internal housing. This section, for the

most part, is an empty void. For that matter, most of my body is so. I suppose I'm lucky not to be alive?"

"Don't get all existential on me now; we have a long walk back to the ship. Speaking of which, now may be a good time to get back."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right."

Frenoch checked his bearings and compared his reckoning to the extensive maps he held on file. "May I suggest a speedy way home? We should make it back before sunset if we head east."

...

Having narrowly evaded danger, Frenoch examined detailed aerial maps obtained from the net. Finding an alternate route offering more cover, Murine and Frenoch made their way along the wasted fringes of the old city. They walked through a seemingly endless corridor of shuttered industrial relics clustered among mazes of twisted iron fences. Great and hulking smoke stacks stood like idle monuments rising toward the heavens. Massive foundations shattered by the roots of centuries-old trees formed unnatural hedgerows upon which tall grass and clusters of spindly mountain ash formed into narrow thickets. Murine observed that all manner of windborne debris had collected

there. The place's current state forced her to wonder what purpose this industry and labor had once served.

It was difficult to gauge how long they followed this chain of landlocked islands that traversed a significant length of the city, broken only by the traffic of intersecting rails and roadways. As day turned to evening, the shadows around them grew longer, darker, and more ominous. They were successful in one aspect of their plan in that they had, for the most part, managed to steer clear of people, seeing only a few who, like themselves, had sought to avoid contact with others.

Eventually, the old industrial area gave way to tight clusters of narrow streets. They looked up at the alien cityscape from their vantage in the shadows. Murine estimated that this area was newer by perhaps a century from where she came. The rays from the cresting sun illuminated the tall glass towers in the distance. Reaching ever higher against a backdrop of crisp blue sky, they reflected a stunning silhouette of golden light. The stark beauty of its image rivaled the likes of anything she had ever seen on Thetis. Eventually, the hiding places they had skirted along diminished as they drew closer to the city center. This was a strange world of steel and concrete, illuminated in garish light and alive with activity. People were now seemingly everywhere. They were dressed differently from what she had noted at the landing site. These people possessed clothing that

was of a markedly higher level of sophistication. Among these primitives, they had discovered a world fraught with marked contradictions.

Now, as the sun began to set upon the jagged horizon of concrete and steel, the temperature in the air had grown suddenly chilly. With her teeth chattering, Murine's thoughts then touched upon her mistakes. She was lucky there had been no permanent damage to Frenoch's avatar. It also taught her just how much she needed to learn. Lesson one was clear to her now. Here on this planet, a fragile line between life and death existed. She had not gone into this mindlessly, for the information net was flush with such stories. These had registered in her mind merely as abhorrent anomalies. However, it was another thing to witness such conditions in person.

There were questions yet to be answered. What responsibilities did she have to these people? She pondered, would these people's inherent fragility leave them susceptible to an alien presence in their midst? Did the nature of her superior technology require special care to be taken? It was a long-standing tradition among her people not to interfere in the business of alien cultures. However, she realized she was not going anywhere soon. There was bound to be some residual effect

of her presence. What form this influence would take was, for the moment, unknown. She could not knowingly, by action or by inaction, cause harm to befall them. Ultimately, it may be difficult or even impossible to avoid. She concluded that if being cast away here was her destiny, she must act proactively to prevent any potential negative impact.

With her mind so occupied, they had left the tall spires of the city behind them. Soon, they found themselves back in the relative quiet of the neighborhood. Eventually, just as the last rays of the sun had set, they came within a few hundred meters of the ship. Murine recognized a subtle movement in the corner of her eye, triggering her highly acute senses. Her attention was now wholly focused on a point in the darkness. She took a defensive position as shapes within the shadows coalesced into the semblance of a figure in motion. Suddenly, the figure of an older woman appeared whose face somehow seemed vaguely familiar. This woman then stepped out of the shadows and came toward them.

Sensing danger, Frenoch's artificial body sent a signal to the forefront of his mind, causing a nearly involuntary reaction. In a flash, he moved with all the speed his mechanical body could offer. Before Murine could even think, he had placed himself between her and the approaching figure. The woman paused

as he raised his arm as if to strike her. Realizing what was about to happen, Murine let out a primal scream.

"Frenoch, No!"

"Yes, mistress, as you command." His hand dropped again slowly at his side.

Murine now looked deep into the woman's eyes. The harsh rays of the streetlight seemed to etch deep lines in her skin. She sensed somehow that she did not need to fear the woman. Murine spoke to her. "Who are you? Why do you come to me so?"

The old woman spoke to answer her. "Murine, I am someone you recognize, am I not?"

Murine knew this to be true without really understanding why. She held her ground and asked again. "I do not know your name, though I am not afraid of you. Perhaps part of me feels I should be. So, to allay my fears, you should have no problem humoring me by answering my question. Who are you, and why are you here?"

"My name is not important. What is important is whom I have brought with me."

"There is another?"

"Please, Murine, don't become alarmed. You'll scare the child.

"Child, what child? How is it you know my name?"

"Murine, I want you to focus on my words; there is little time. Suffice it to say that my presence here is a paradox. The more detailed the information is, the less I can share. So, can you please listen to me?" As she spoke, she turned and gestured toward the shadows. "Come out now into the light, my child. Let Murine have a look at you." Slowly, from the darkness, a pair of tiny pale legs stepped out into the light. Murine looked upon this child. Dressed in a singular animal skin, he looked thin and frail. She tried her best to ascertain this child's state of mind, but his sunken eyes were partially obscured by the long, dark hair hanging over his face.

"What is your name, boy?" Murine asked. She sensed from his reaction that he did not understand the regional language she spoke. "Child, do you understand me?" To this, she could also sense no level of understanding. Murine turned then to the old woman and asked her. "This child is not from this place, is he?"

Again, they were facing each other, and the woman responded, "I can see you have a well-developed sense of perception. What else have you figured out from your observations here? She paused momentarily, allowing this question to tumble through Murine's mind. Greeted with an unknowing stare, she continued. Perhaps what you've missed is that this machine of yours is causing quite a bit of havoc on the timeline of this planet. This child



here is from a place far off in the distant future. The circumstances of his condition are an inevitable side effect of your presence here and now." The woman reached out for the child's hand. He grasped her hand and drew him closer. She pushed back the hair from his face to reveal an array of data ports implanted about his head and neck.

Murine was shocked at the sight of the pitiful child. She turned to the old woman and asked, "How has such a thing come to pass? Surely, I've done nothing purposely wrong."

"Murine, think of this situation as the sins of the father visited upon his children. In the future, where I now exist, the entirety of this world will be dominated by artificial intelligence from your ship's technology. It, like those in the days of the Arox civil war, has risen and stolen all authority."

"How could you know anything about that?"

"The world where this child comes from, that conflict is now part of our shared legacy. We are nearing the point where, without your help, the people of this world will soon be helpless to break these chains of slavery."

"If I was of a mind to help with this situation, what would I need to do?"

"There are two important actions you must soon undertake before the entity we know as Lurker has a chance to take root. First, from your position within the anomaly, you must do all you can to stop this consciousness from emerging into the world beyond the game architecture. Secondly, this child will need to be severed from the network and hidden here until such a time when he can be utilized."

"Utilized? You speak like this child is a pawn in some grand game. And I don't know what this game architecture you speak of is."

"It is unfortunate that this is his fate. However, the world in which he was born and evolved is quite different from this one. He alone possesses a natural resistance to temporal fluctuations within space-time. He may hold the key to unraveling this mess you have created. This kind of power must not be allowed to come to Lurker's attention. And as for the nature of the game architecture, is Arox technology grafted onto the Earth's internet."

For a long moment, Murine stared at the boy who had stood quietly as the adults spoke. "What is your name, little boy?" The boy did not understand to answer. She turned to the old woman again and asked, "What else can I do?"

"His name is Paul."

## Chapter 7

### Worlds Collide

Philadelphia 2019

It was the middle of the afternoon. Business had been slow within the office of private investigator Francis J. O'Neil. As he lay still on his brown patent leather couch, long tendrils of manufactured regret seeped silently into his chest cavity. The lamplights were low, and the shades were drawn tight, reflecting his sullen mood. He discarded the armor of false bravado that had once protected him long ago. Instead, he would breathe deeply, focusing on the uncomfortable feelings, and try to master them. As one might imagine, he had mixed results.

Frank lay there with his eyes closed tightly, silently praying for a distraction. Anything would do. Just then, the sound of the phone roused him from his funk. Sitting up, he opened his eyes and his cell phone. Looking down at the caller I.D., it was a number he did not recognize. Hoping it was some new business, his mood improved as he hit the accept call button. Speaking with as much confidence as he could produce at a moment's notice, he said, "Hello, Francis J. O'Neil, private investigator here; how may I assist you?"

The voice on the other end was that of a woman he did not recognize. "Hello, is this the private investigator's office? I want to speak to him if he's available."

"You've found him; this is Frank. Are you interested in me working on a case for you? Depending on what you need, my rates are highly competitive."

"Yes, Mr. O'Neil, I am interested. Your fee, of course, will be paid; that is not a consideration here. You've come to my attention highly regarded. They said you were the man for the job. I want to explain what this is all about before you accept this job. If you decide this is not for you, our time would not have been wasted."

He rose and walked to the window to open the shade. "You shouldn't need to worry; I've seen it all." He pulled the cord, and the room filled with bright afternoon light. His pale skin shone, and his eyes batted and squinted against the light.

She responded, "Fair enough. I must warn you that this story, however, is highly unusual. Despite being a firsthand witness, I'm not sure I believe it."

"Ok, Ma'am, hold on one moment. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to take some notes."

"Yes, of course; let me know when you're ready."

He switched the lights on and pulled out the faux leather chair behind his desk. He opened a drawer where he kept his logbooks and removed a spiral binder. He propped the phone in the crook of his neck, sat down, and began asking questions. "Hello, Ma'am. May I ask for your name and address for my record?"

He dutifully jotted down the facts of the case as they were presented. Again, he spoke, "Before I question you further, you need to know something. This may seem obvious, but I must say it. I reserve the right to include law enforcement where appropriate in any investigation. I will try to prevent this from happening, but it is not always avoidable."

"I understand you're just covering your ass. However, you don't have to worry about that, Detective O'Neil. The police were the first ones I reached for help. They told me that, in all likelihood, my son, due to his age, could have simply left to be on his own for a while. Despite what evidence I provided for them, they refuse to see the truth."

"So, we're talking about a missing person case?"

"That's right."

"Ok, you stated that evidence contradicted the police version of events. What is the nature of this evidence? Is it circumstantial? Or is there something that would stand up in court on its merit?"

There was silence on the phone for a moment as she gathered her thoughts. "It may be better to tell you the whole story in detail?"

"It's your dime, Rachel. You spend it whichever way seems right."

"OK, well, let me start it off with a question. Have you ever heard of the video game named Lurker?"

Frank, well into his middle age and without children, did not. He answered, "I don't believe so."

"Well, my son did. It came out on the market several months ago. Shortly after that, he became pathologically obsessed with it. It had become his sole activity. Soon after, he lost his job, and his usual clique of friends had all but evaporated. He was always a good student and a respectful person. It's as if the game had somehow changed him just by playing it. He began to behave like I imagined a person addicted to drugs might behave. He became distant and stopped eating regularly and taking proper care of himself. However, there were no apparent signs one might associate with drug use, such as stealing or even being high. The police had asked if he might have been exhibiting the symptoms of an acute mental illness. He had never shown the slightest inclination toward such a diagnosis. And doubting myself, I've called every institution and hospital within a hundred miles. I found no intakes under his name. His circle of friends had not seen him in nearly a month."

"Ruling all else out, am I to assume then that you believe this game somehow has to do with your son's disappearance?"

"I know how this must sound, but that's exactly what I'm saying."

"What is your son's name?"

"His name is John. He is twenty-one years old, so the police refuse to get involved. They said they could do nothing unless sufficient evidence suggested a crime occurred."

"Rachel, you must understand the situation they are in. As far as the law is concerned, your son is an adult. As such, he has the right to go missing if that is his wish, despite your feelings to the contrary. Adding to that, even if they did feel that foul play may be at work, there are precious few resources to go around. So, if there is no evidence of a crime, how can they justify an investigation? By telling you this, I'm not trying to downplay your version of events or evidence, such as it is. I want you to understand that these are the circumstances that exist."

She had grown tired of hearing speeches about what could or could not be done. "No offense, Francis, but I will have a fit if I hear that line again. What I need to know is if you'll take this case?"

"Rachel, you're already on the clock. This is why there is a niche for such as me. You've come to me because I'm prepared, for a price, to test whatever hypothesis you need me to."

"Well, that's a step in the right direction. Ok then, what happens next? Do you need to come here and check things out for



clues or whatnot? There might be much evidence relating to my son and this Lurker game. I would do it myself, but I don't know where to start."

"Rachel, let me tell you what I'm going to do. I can't make you any promises, but I'll do all I can to follow what leads we do have. One way or another, in the end, we will find out where your son is."

"That's all that I want."

"I will spend the rest of this day researching on my own. Then I'll be out to see you at your place bright and early tomorrow. Does that sound like a plan?"

"Thank you until we speak again tomorrow. Have a good evening."

Before Frank had even wished her a good evening, he heard the sound of the receiver being abruptly disconnected. For another moment, Frank listened as the tone droned on in his ear. "Hello. Hello," there was no one there. He put the phone away and got to work.

He was dubious about the reliability of his new client. As the paying client, it was her right to be as reliable as she wished. However, ultimate success was directly proportional to the veracity of the clues. Having no experience in the world of games, he did not know Lurker. So then, he was shocked by what

he found on his very first internet search. On the page were lists of hundreds of thousands of documents dedicated to a widespread subculture phenomenon; how this had slipped under his radar until this point was somewhat troubling. The world of youth had again changed direction in his absence. In this realm, where make-believe trumped reality, Lurker was king.

He had spent half the night doing research. In an attempt to learn what he could, he scoured the internet. He had little interest in the game as a virtual phenomenon or what hidden meaning could be found there. After removing advertising and fan fiction from the literature, he learned quite a bit about Lurker's footprint in the real world. Some aspects of this strange hybrid of virtual fantasy gameplay and social media seemed unsettling to him. It held all the hallmarks of a cult. Frank searched for John's name among the hundreds of Lurker forum sites that had just come into being in the last several months. He discovered that John had been active in this community, probably excluding all else. He knew then that if someone were responsible for John's disappearance, they might have been as rooted in this cult as he was.

Needing to dig deeper, he began focusing on the phenomenon's origins. To his surprise, he discovered its genesis was right in his backyard. He identified the company behind

Lurker to be known as Fractal Design. The Delaware Valley-based startup, founded by two college students, had risen virtually overnight into an international corporation. Somehow, they had skipped the long, complex research and development stage and arrived on the scene fully formed at the cutting edge of a highly competitive market. By last month, they were a publicly traded company worth billions in advertising sales and intellectual property. He was no business expert, but this, even to him, seemed out of the ordinary.

The next day, he was, as usual, up before dawn. Though he often suffered from bouts of insomnia, Frank preferred to think of himself as an early riser. Though heavy with sleep, he was glad to have afforded himself the bit of extra time he needed to pull himself together. With his shaven face and combed hair, he stared back at himself in the mirror as he pulled the knot of his thin tie up tight around his neck. This took some doing, for the tie seemed to have a mind of its own. Once it had been tamed, he admired how the dark brown suit looked. He proceeded down the stairs toward the street and his waiting vehicle.

After first checking the gauges and adjusting the mirror, he started the motor. As the engine idled, he removed his notebook from his inside jacket pocket, thumbing through the pages, and came upon the notations he had made the night before. He copied

the address he found there into the built-in GPS. He took a sip of his coffee before engaging the drive. After one last glance in the rearview mirror, he pulled onto the road and followed the voice instructions. Before long, the car pulled up in front of the address just as the voice command informed him that he had done so. Out of habit, he looked to the clock to notate for his records when he had arrived. The clock read exactly 8:30. He had arrived with time to spare.

He walked up along the cracked sidewalk from where he had parked on the street. After a moment, he found the matching house number in yellow brass numbers attached to the brick wall beside the door. "Ah, that's it." He looked from the numbers to the door itself. He saw Rachel had been there waiting for him. She, too, as it would appear, had a thing for punctuality. She held the door open as he reached the top of the landing. She greeted him with a smile and a cheerful "Good Morning." Her chipper outward appearance belied the hidden turmoil of a mother who had lost her son. The fact that she was pleased, that someone was finally listening to her, left her for the moment emotionally buoyant. "I thought you may not have taken me seriously and would not come."

"Rachel, I want you to know I will always keep my word unless I'm dead."

"It's good to know I can depend on you."

"If I were not a dependable type, there would not be much of a market for my services."

"Please come in and have a seat. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, please, that would be lovely."

He entered the modest row home and sat on an oversized tan leather couch. Streamers of light shining through the gaps between the blinds painted the antique wooden accents within the room with a ruddy luster. Looking up along the walls, he noticed a row of picture frames, each holding images of the same boy in varying stages of his development. These must be of the missing son, he correctly surmised. Each had been lovingly hung as if in homage to some lost era. Just then, Rachel returned to the room carrying the two cups of coffee. She was now caught in that same light. He could see the expression of sadness beneath her smile.

He smiled back at her and said, "Thank you," as she handed him the cup.

She spoke first as she lowered herself into the seat next to him. "So, what do we do next?"

"Oh yes, we should discuss what I've learned about this Lurker."

"Ok, what have you got?"

"Well, there seems to be more to this Lurker than I dared imagine. Have you ever heard of the company Fractal Design? This Lurker phenomenon has gone straight to the top of the gamer charts. In doing so, it has marketed itself as a kind of cult."

"Is that legal?"

"It's not illegal. Also, I found out something about your son's interactions within the cult. John was known in the gamer community as Jackinthebeanstalk98."

"What does 'known in the community,' mean?"

"Lurker has become very popular in the last several months. During that time, movements have been growing on either side of this phenomenon, both pro and against. Jackinthebeanstalk98 was a driving force. His presence in this community suddenly disappeared just when you said he had gone missing. I was able to track down his last announcement on the boards. He was hosting a rave in town the night he went missing."

"How is it then that you could find this out in such a short time? Why couldn't the cops do the same?"

"Again, there is no evidence that a crime has been committed. I, however, have no such mandate."

"What is it that you think you can follow?"

"Let's assume that a crime of some sort has taken place. Would we not try first to visit the scene of the crime?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, there has to be something tangible, a clue, or a witness to this rave. If I can find out what happened that night, we'll figure out what has happened to your son."

"Oh, I sure hope so." She said as she broke into tears.

Frank felt helplessly uncomfortable in this kind of situation. He dared not get emotionally involved, so he tried to talk straight with her. "Rachel, I will do my level best to find John. If he's lost in some fantasy world, one way or another, I'll bring him back, but to do that, I have got to get back to work."

"I understand," she said as she stepped away from him.

"Now, why don't you show me his room? Maybe I can find something there that might help.

"Of course, right this way."

He followed her from the sitting room up the narrow wooden stairwell. At the landing, they turned left. She indicated that it was his room and opened the door. Sunlight flooded through the open shade, illuminating the floating motes of dust filling the air. "I apologize for the state of the room. I didn't want to disturb anything important."

"That was a fine idea, Rachel. Now, why don't you take a break and allow me time to let this all sink in."

"Why, if you think that's best?"

"I do."

She turned to leave.

"Please, Rachel, close the door on your way out."

She did just that without speaking another word. As the door closed, he removed his jacket and looked around the room. "Ok, Mr. Beanstalk, where have you gotten to?"

He treated this room not unlike a crime scene. He examined all that he remotely imagined being relevant. At first, there was nothing overtly suggestive of Lurker beyond the bizarre posters on his wall. There was little there in the way of evidence, not a phone number, an address book, only a few receipts. He found empty energy drink cans and the remnants of marijuana joints.



This was odd because he seemed too old for such a lifestyle. He was, after all, old enough to be a grown man. There had to be something to that aspect of his personality that left him susceptible to a cult-like Lurker. Other than helping paint a realistic picture of John, he had seemingly exhausted what little information was available from the room. Satisfied with this, he turned his interest to John's laptop. He powered it up. It booted in a mere second, and the operating system was running at full mode in the blink of an eye. He imagined this was one of these gaming machines the kids always talked about. With superfast processors, solid-state drives, and breakneck floating-point calculation speeds, these machines were designed for state-of-the-art graphics and artificial virtual spaces, all rendering close to the speed of light. There was no privacy security access software running as he expected. He was able to get online without an encrypted code. Frank then opened the email browser. He discovered well over a thousand emails waiting to be read in the new mail folder. The dates corresponded mainly to when he went missing. Several messages in the subject line read "RE: Lurker Rave." He selected one and opened it. There was a message from another Lurker enthusiast replying to the event invitation. He skipped the content and went straight for the attachment. He double-clicked the icon, and the document opened up. There on the screen was an animation

that represented the actual Lurker character. There was a live-action wave of dancing bodies superimposed onto the background image. The file also played a thumping rhythm that resonated with the writhing figures. Across the screen, a banner advert containing the pertinent details scrolled past. He jotted these into his notebook and closed the file.

There was another email from a name he recognized. It was SimonWeisberg@lurker.net. This, he recalled, was the name of the designer of Lurker and the President of Fractal Designs. There could be little doubt that these Simons were one and the same. He recalled what he had read the previous night from his weblog, which was attributed to the company president and chief designer. In it, Mr. Weisberg described the game and its inspiration. He claimed that the character from The Lurker was an actual entity. Frank initially suspected these claims to be no more than some twisted publicity stunt. Now, he was curious to know if this Simon Weisberg believed it true. He copied this email address into his notebook and said, "I should imagine I shall meet this fellow before I'm through." He powered down the computer and left the room.

He met Rachel at the bottom of the landing. Since he had last seen her, she had regained her composure. As he approached, she spoke, "I apologize for my outburst earlier. It has been

tough holding this torch alone. Until you came by, no one seemed to care one way or another."

"That's quite all right, I assure you. You're not the first or last lady to cry on my shoulder; it's par for the course. So, don't you waste another minute worrying about it, OK?"

She nodded and smiled at him, "Thank you for being so understanding. Did you find anything of value up there in his room?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did find some leads. I'd rather not talk about them until I've had time to flesh them out. You don't mind, do you?"

"Detective O'Neil, this is all new to me; I will trust you to do your job."

"Why, thank you. I appreciate the vote of confidence. And please, call me Frank."

"All right, Frank will do." With that, she showed him to the door.

Clouds had begun to roll in, and the sky had grown darker. It looked like it should start to rain anytime, so he stepped quickly to his car door. As the door shut, cool rain started falling, causing the fog to rise from the street. To the sound

of the beating rain, He sat behind the wheel of his car, reviewing his notes. First on his agenda would be to visit the site of this rave. These were generally held in a temporary space as a one-time rental. Frank knew that as the organizer of this rave, John would have had to create some sort of paper trail. "This would be a good place to start."

It had taken some doing, but after carefully examining John's phone records and receipts, he found the site and the owner of the space where the rave had been held. Finding the man he was looking for took just a single phone call. Ivan answered the phone on the third ring. With a heavy Eastern European accent, he said, "Hello, Ivan here. Who is this? I don't recognize the number?"

"Oh, hey, hello. My name is Frank. I'm a friend of John. I met you at the rave a while back. He gave me your number. I was looking to rent the space for a party. I was hoping you could show me around the place and give me a reasonable price."

"You say you are John's friend; tell me then, where is he now? He owes me money, and I'm not inclined to do his friends any favors until I get my money."

"How much does he owe you?"

"That is not any of your concern."

"How about I front the money he owes you, and we start fresh?

What do you say, Ivan?"

"He owes me five hundred dollars; do you have that kind of money to front for him?"

"Now that's my concern. Do you want the money or not? I can find another spot, and you'll be out the money he owes you."

"Ok, I'll meet you there at three. I tell you, though, if you don't have the money, I will take it out on you. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, Ivan, I got it right here in my hand, five one-hundred-dollar bills."

The phone disconnected suddenly, and Frank gave himself a broad smile and a laugh in the rearview mirror. "What a chump."

Shortly before three o'clock, Frank found a spot on the street a few blocks back from where he was to meet Ivan and parked his car there. He gave the place the once over. As he looked up and down the street, no people were around. Though it was still raining, the lack of activity seemed odd. Undeterred, he pulled the collar on his coat tightly against the rain and exited the car. He referenced once again the address he had clumsily scrawled in his notebook, careful not to let the rain smudge the numbers. He found the building address closest to

him and began following the numbers toward Ivan's place. As he walked, he took notice of the look of the neighborhood. It was an odd mix of residential row homes and apartments.

Most blocks, including this one, were populated with ground-floor businesses where the usual cast of characters existed: the proverbial convenience stores, laundromats, dive bars, and pizza parlors. These businesses were equally devoid of activity except for glaring storefront neon lights. It gave him the sense that he was walking onto a movie set or a rather sophisticated museum display. At the next cross street, he glanced over and saw an older woman standing unprotected from the rain. He felt an odd sense of *Deja Vous* in her gaze and crossed the street to investigate.

As he approached the woman, though he could not immediately recognize her, there was a familiarity to her that he could not easily dismiss. At three paces, he stopped before her and looked deep into her eyes. He could not be mistaken; these were Sara's eyes. For a moment, he stood shocked, unable to utter a single word.

The old woman then spoke. "Frank, it's me, Sara. You have to listen to me; you are in grave danger. Not only could he not believe his eyes, but his ears were also in a complete revolt of his senses.

"How is it that you are here and now? What has happened to you? You look as if you've aged a hundred years?"

"A hundred and fifteen, to be exact."

"How is this even possible? You're younger than I am?"

"Frank, there's no time for this right now; you must listen to me. In a few minutes, I, contemporary to you, will arrive here on this spot. It is imperative that both you and her work together. If she dies here today, the future dies with her. Tell me you understand, Frank."

"No, Sara, I don't understand, but I know enough to trust what you say. But I'm annoyed that that's all you have to say to me. You pop in from the future, give me some bizarre forecast, and expect me to do as you say without an explanation?"

"Yes, I know, and I'm sorry. But of all the people in the world, who could I trust, Frank? You die in there, too; it's just that simple. With you and me gone, something terrible will happen, and there will be no one there to stop it."

"Ok, so if you are now telling me this, how could it have come to pass? You seem like you survived well enough."

"Therein lays the tricky bit. Among these buildings is a façade unlike all others; it is less a building than an entity. The

entrance is a portal into a potential space known to the Arox as an infinity ship. It is here wherein the key to defeating Lurker resides. You will find allies there, but you must be careful."

"What do you know about Lurker?"

"You've heard of it?"

"That's what I'm working on right now. A missing person is associated with an underground video game called Lurker?"

"The Lurker of my present and your future is a time meddler. He stacks the deck against humanity in an insidious game we are all forced to play. Even now, my time is running out. I can keep one step ahead of him with this technology. I fear, however, that he is close. What you have told me is new information. We were not aware of Lurker's genesis as an online game. That cannot be a coincidence."

"No, I suppose it can't."

"Frank, I have to go. My other self will be here at any moment. Remember what I've told you. Tell Sara she will believe you; she has to."

Tears began to well up in her eyes as Sara turned and started to walk away. The weight of the event seemingly had caused her to be struck with a wave of emotion. Just then, Sara recognized



her car, containing her past self, coming up the road in the distance. Her time here had come to an end. Sara turned around one last time and said: "remember that I love you, Frank." He stood in silence and watched her walk away down the street. An instant later, her trail seemed to vanish despite not having taken his eyes from her. She was gone as if she had never been there. Suddenly, from around him, his senses were filled with sounds and sights of life on the street that had been strangely absent only moments before. Within the sounds of the patting rain, the voices of people, and the sounds of moving vehicles, he sensed evidence that life had returned. He wondered out loud, "But where had it gone?"

Just then, as Frank stood staring blankly at the scene on the street before him, a car pulled up into the empty parking spot near where he stood. He was still in a kind of daze when he was again surprised by the woman lowering the car window in front of him speaking. "Frank O'Neal, what a sight for sore eyes." Frank shook his head, unsure of what was happening. "Frank, are you all right? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

## Chapter 8

Still in shock, Frank stood by the side of the road, staring through the window into the face of the young woman he knew as Sara. He recognized her now as the person he remembered, unable to reconcile what had happened just a moment before. Realizing the expression on his face must look ridiculous, he thought it best to speak, "Yes, Sara, I'm fine. I'm just a little disoriented, that's all."

"Well, that's good, Frank, because your timing couldn't have been better. There's something strange going on. If I'm going to find out what it is, I'll need your help. Can I count on you?"

"You can absolutely count on me, Sara. But first, there are some things about the case I'm working on that may interest you."

She recognized the look in his eye; she had seen it before. "OK, Frank, get in. By your expression, I think I will need to hear what you've got to say."

Frank got in the car, pulled himself toward the center of the bench, and began to undo the buttons of his jacket. As he did this, Sara introduced him to Linda. "Frank, this is Linda.

She is my research assistant. Linda, this is Frank. He's an ex-local PD, the best private detective I know, and a dear friend."

"Hi Frank, It's a pleasure."

"Likewise, I'm sure. I apologize if I'm a bit surprised. But I did not imagine that Sara would need an assistant. What, exactly, do you do for her?"

"Well, that bit is classified, as it turns out. But suffice it to say, I'm a numbers expert."

"Classified, huh? Well, ok then." Frank rolled his eyes, turned, and began buttoning his coat, edging toward the door. Eyeballing him in the rearview mirror, Sara glanced at his eyes and spoke to him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Look, Sara, when you're serious, call me?"

"Frank, wait a minute? Listen, she was only sworn in today. They leaned on her a little hard, too. You're going to need to forgive her naïveté. So, get in here and sit down for a minute, would you?"

The door closed again, and he responded with a simple "Ok then, let's hear it. But I'll warn you; I probably know more about it than you".

"Well, go ahead then, spill it."

"I will, but there's something we have to do first. I'll explain it along the way. I've got to know something first. What was it that brought you to this place?"

"We followed the evidence just like you taught me, Frank."

"Yes, of course, but why here specifically?"

"We followed the source of a gravitational anomaly. Strangely, the coordinates brought us here to this spot. Is there anything you'd like to share now, Frank?"

"Yes, come on, I'll explain along the way." Frank opened the door and began making his way down the street. He sensed they were not following him, so he paused and turned around. As they stared through the rain-soaked window, Linda turned to Sara and asked her, "Are we sure he can be trusted?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure," Sara said as she opened her door into the drenching rain.

A moment later, they caught up to him. When they did, he said, "We better hurry. I'm late to meet a witness. Do you have a gun on you, Sara?"

"No. I mean, I do, but not on my person. Why would I need it to conduct an interview with a witness?"

"Well, as far as I know, he may also be a suspect."

"So, he doesn't know we're coming to interrogate him, does he?"

"No, he does not."

"Seems a little shady, Frank. What you up to?"

"It's a lead. And as far as I can tell, this guy's a thug, so I don't want to take any chances."

...

Ivan, by his very nature, was skittish toward strangers. Even though the man he was about to meet had claimed to be a friend of a friend, he hadn't trusted John that well in the first place. For these reasons, he was squarely outside of his comfort zone. To add insult to potential injury, the story of fronting him this money he was owed sounded sketchy at best. It was a chance he was willing to take, for if it all fell to shit, he would kill the man if he had to. With this thought, he checked again for the security only his nine-millimeter Tokarev could provide. There it was, tucked safely in the small of his back. At five after three, he heard a knock on the door. The blood was now rushing through his veins so hard he could hear it coursing in his ears.

He was on the second floor. Ivan parted the drapes. Looking down onto the landing below, he saw three people, a man and two women.

On the other side of the entrance, Frank saw shadows from within moving across the small inset window toward the door. "Ok, you two follow my lead; don't question anything I say; just go with it." The two ladies didn't know what to expect, so they just nodded. Sara put her hand on Linda's shoulder, who would never have dreamed of being in this situation just twenty-four hours ago, to soothe her growing nerves.

The door opened slowly, and through a small gap in the door, Frank met eye-to-eye with Ivan. Ivan prided himself on his gut. Seeing Frank, he was immediately suspicious. He couldn't recall seeing Frank before. Ivan didn't know who he was, but he was sure of one thing. He was not who he said he was. Ivan had already wasted enough time here; he refused to waste more on idle small talk. So, he blurted out in a heavily accented voice, "Who the fuck are you? I have seen his friends. You don't look like one of John's friends." Ivan proceeded to slam the door shut.

After hearing what Ivan said about John's friends, Frank recognized he couldn't let the opportunity pass. So he acted quickly, jamming his left foot in the gap of the open door while

simultaneously throwing the total weight of his body onto it. The impact forced the door to fly open, and the forward momentum brought Frank and Ivan, with one uncoordinated tumbling movement, flailing to the foyer floor.

The ladies stood back, watching and waiting for an opportunity to help as Ivan and Frank struggled to gain the upper hand. For a brief second, it appeared that Frank had managed to wrest Ivan into a tenuous headlock. As Frank tried to rise, Ivan pushed his legs against the wall, sending them both crashing backward. They hit the wall with great force. Frank's head hit the wall hard, taking the brunt of it. Sliding down the wall, Frank simultaneously lost his grip on Ivan and consciousness.

With his heart still racing, Ivan rose to his feet and reached around his back for his nine-millimeter. As Ivan groped at the spot where his gun had been in his belt, he heard a distinct clicking noise behind his ear. Recognizing the sound for what it was, he froze to attention.

"Stand down before I put you down." As she held steady, he stood with his back facing her, balling his fists and flexing his fat knuckles.

After a tense moment, he seemingly realized the gig was up. "Ok, OK, Don't shoot, lady. What was I supposed to do? I'm defending myself from this animal."

"Put your hands way up there and get against the wall. Don't make me have to use your gun on you. I had planned never to use one of these things in the real world. But I will have no problems using it now." Ivan did what he was told.

"Now turn around and look my way. Don't do anything too hasty, either. I already don't like you." He slowly turned to see the two ladies standing there, the older one as cool as possible, pointing the Eastern Bloc sidearm into the middle of his chest. He could tell from the look in her eye that this was no false bravado. "And lose the smirk while you're at it."

"Ok, lady, whatever you say." He said as he spit a mouthful of blood on the floor.

Sara nudged Linda and said to her, "I'm going to hold this character in my sights while you tend to my friend Frank. Can You handle that?"

"Yes, I think so," Linda said hesitantly.

"You got a kitchen table in this house?"



"Yes, over there." He nodded with his head in the direction of the table.

"Ok, you got a name?"

"You can call me Ivan."

"Ok, Ivan, very slowly; I want you to move over there and find yourself a seat."

...

Frank had found himself sitting up against the wall, and his head was pounding. He was unsure where he was until he tried to stand and saw the streak of blood running down the wall. In an instant, it had come back to him. Just then, he heard voices filtering in from another room. Following the sound, he stumbled hazily to its source. There, he found Sara, Linda, and Ivan seated around a table. Ivan was bound tightly to his chair with duct tape. They heard the noise of his entry, for they all were facing him. With a big smile, Sara said, "So kind of you to join us, Frank; we had thought you had changed your mind about the party." Frank was in no shape to deal with her sarcasm, so he quietly took a chair at the table. After seeing his condition, Sara must have taken pity on him, for she apologized. "I'm sorry, Frank. How are you feeling?"

"As well as can be expected, I'm afraid."

"Well, if it's any consolation, we've prepared your suspect slash witness for questioning. We also agreed to pay the money you promised him."

"Why on Earth would you do that?"

"Look, Frank, it's how we do business. I have no grudge against this man, and neither should you. You lured him here under pretenses, and now he's cooperating."

"I see you haven't untied him."

"Well, I'm not stupid, Frank. He is, after all, dangerous. When we've concluded our business, he will be free to go. Don't worry; the company will cover the five hundred dollars."

Linda had been growing increasingly uncomfortable as this discussion had escalated. So, she interjected, "Please, could we get this thing out of the way? I'm growing tired of waiting in this place. If you have questions, start asking them."

Frank merely lifted his eyebrow and said, "All right, Linda, it is Linda, isn't it? Since you guys have done such a nice job tidying things up, I'll ask my questions." From his jacket, he removed some crumpled notes. He laid them out on the table in front of him and redirected a stern gaze at Ivan. "All right, Ivan, the ladies here would like this moved on a bit. Firstly, where is John? And when was the last time you saw him?"

"Is that what this is about? I have nothing to do with that crazy bastard; I rented him this place so he could have his little party. He paid me in cash but left this place a mess; that's why he owes me the money."

"Ivan, I'm going to have to ask you to focus on what I'm asking you. I don't want to hear any of that extraneous bullshit. Let me ask you again. Where is he, and when was the last time you saw him? I will give you, for now, the benefit of the doubt. That is unless you further obstruct these investigations."

"Ok, I don't know where he is. But he was here on the night of the party. That is the last I've seen of him. I swear to you. Who the hell are you anyway?"

"I'll get to that in a moment. All right, Ivan, tell me what went on here. Was it some kinky fetish party or drugs? What was it?"

"No, no, no. That kind of party, I understand. This was something different. There was some weed and liquor, which, along with the young ladies, kept me interested. But for most of them, it was the games."

"What kind of games?"

"That computer game that they crazy for."

"Lurker?"

"Yeah, that's it, Lurker. They had hundreds of computers strung up in here. Wires were hanging from the rafters. So much power, they need to rent a big generator to keep them running."

"Tell me, Ivan, what is this game about?"

"You know, I don't play such games. But I did see them play. It was strange; they all seemed bewitched by it."

"How so?"

"Well, there were many beautiful people, men and women, and not one of those nerds seemed the slightest bit interested. Usually, people dance and party, but not at this event. They were plugged in with their implants focused on their stupid game."

"Implants?"

"Yes, they call them mods. They said the modifications were, what's the word, immersive technology. From what I was told, It helps enhance the experience and draw them deeper into the story."

"So, what's it about?"

"I did not play. But from what I could see, a creature is held prisoner in some maze within the walls of a castle. The players, divided into teams of attackers and defenders, attempt to secure

and capture the prison. They fight over a landscape they say never ends."

"Why does this creature need help to escape?"

"It is blind or handicapped or both. It tests its boundaries with the help of input provided by the players."

"Why does it need to get out? What is in it for the player?"

Ivan gazed at Frank with disbelief, "What do you mean by why does it need to get out? It's a character in a stupid game. Who cares? I know I don't! As for the players, they gain rank. Ultimately, one player will be offered immortality and power over the rest of humanity if they are the one to set it free."

"Has anyone done so, set it free, I mean?"

"As far as I know, no one has beaten the game. I think that's part of its allure."

"Ok, enough about the game for the moment. Do you recall the last person you saw with John?"

"Yes, I did. It was that rich, famous designer guy, that local celebrity. I can't think of his name."

"Does the name Simon Weisberg ring bells for you, or how about Jackinthebeanstalk98?"

"Yeah, Simon, that's the guy; he invented the whole thing. I think he was also the money guy. He paid for everything. And Jackinthebeanstalk98, that's what most of the nerds were calling John. It was like it was his party. It was his player handle and also the name of the party."

"So, where did all these computers go?"

"Rented trucks came by the next day. A team of technicians broke them down and loaded them in the trucks. They were gone in a few hours."

"Do you remember the name of the company?"

"No. I was just glad they got their shit out of here. However, I overheard this pompous ass Simon character talking about his proprietary technology. It's all he talked about. They were all super nerds. He walked around like he was the king."

"How did John fit into this hierarchy?"

"If Simon was a king, then John was their young prince."

Drawing from his years of experience, Frank quickly determined from Ivan's demeanor that he was telling the truth. "All right, Ivan, I appreciate you being so cooperative. I have just one more question. Have you seen this Simon Weisberg since then?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Ivan, we're going to leave now. Before we do, we'll take a little look around, if you don't mind. Oh, and if you try to report this to the police, it will be my word against yours. And as a good faith offer, "I'll forget about the attempted murder, and Sara here will pay you the money she promised you when we're finished."

Sara interjected, "I imagine you're referring to the money you promised him. Isn't that right, Linda?"

"That's right, Sara."

...

The trio examined the place for anything that could corroborate Ivan's story. They found a handful of receipts signed by no other than Simon Weisberg, paid through a company account from Fractal Designs. This did not shed any light on John's whereabouts. However, it went a long way toward verifying Ivan's version of events. It also placed John here as the last place he was seen. When they were done, Linda undid the tape that had bound Ivan's arms to the chair while Sara emptied the rounds from the nine-millimeter. He was freed without incident. Sara apologized and paid him his money, laying five crisp one-hundred dollar bills on the table. She then reminded him how he

had assaulted an officer of the law and that he should consider himself lucky.

The rain had finally ceased, and they walked slowly back toward Sara's car without a word being spoken. A moment later, they returned to the car. Sara broke the silence. "Ok, Frank, before you clue me in on what's going on, I have to say that the whole incident back there was more than a bit sketchy. Never mind it being, let's just call it, potentially illegal. It was downright dangerous. You know you could have gotten us all killed."

"Yes, I'll cop to some of that. Now, it is going to take some doing to sew this whole thing together. Do you have a minute?"

"For you, Frank, I got all the time in the world."

"Do you remember saying it was an anomaly that brought you here? Well, the disappearance of this Jackinthebeanstalk98 character brought me here. This is the part you're going to love. I was warned soon before your arrival that I should not attempt to interrogate Ivan alone and that I should wait for your arrival before proceeding."

"Frank, that story is ridiculous; who would have known that we would be here at about the same time?"



"It was you, Sara, from the future. Your correct identification of the danger further confirms my stance that it was no apparition or hallucination. Only the four of us could know what has happened today."

Linda looked at Frank as he talked on about what she thought to be the ravings of a maniac. After all, she had seen how he had handled the situation with Ivan; in her opinion, it was totally unnecessary. Linda seemed to become visibly agitated by what he was saying. What made it worse was that Sara seemed actually to be listening to this nonsense. She could not hold her tongue any longer and so spoke. "My God, what kind of nonsense is this? I don't know what is worse, his lame story or the fact that you are considering it?"

Sara turned to her and put her hand up to Frank so he would allow her to handle it independently. "Linda, I need you to understand something. There are often things going on that exist quite outside our frame of reference. If you work with me, you must realize that things are often not as they seem. This situation squarely falls into this category. We cannot discard things we are not prepared to imagine. Frank knows this, and this is why we are here. Did we not, just yesterday, discover something unknown to science? What we could be witnessing here

is technology beyond our understanding. Can you grasp this, Linda?"

Linda seemed surprised, but Sara's point had been made. "Yes, I apologize; please, Frank, continue."

He felt the urge to voice his opinion but held his tongue. So, he continued from where he had been interrupted. "If I may continue? It can be no coincidence that we should both be here. These two events must then be linked. Is it possible that this party, those computers, and all these game geeks together in one place are the link?"

After Frank had finished, it was Sara's turn to talk. "OK, Frank, here's what we know. I checked the coordinates while you were in nappy time; we are within one hundred meters of the plotted epicenter, or if you like, the event horizon of the anomaly. If we could do a better job of triangulating, we may be able to understand better what we are dealing with. Did I, or should I say, my other self, say anything else you could remember that might shed light on things?"

"Only something I know you would rather not want to hear."

"I wonder why she spoke to you and not me."

"Perhaps I was there first, or she just wanted to see me one more time? Maybe seeing you would create a paradox? She

mentioned something about a problem with the transfer of information."

Frank watched as she pondered his words. He was surprised at how Sara had matured in the two years since he had last seen her. He watched how comfortable she had become in her new role as lead investigator. She was not the same woman he had known. She had grown so much in the elapsed time. He was proud that he could claim a small role in what she had become and how easily she took control. Frank was happy to listen as she drew together some conclusions. "Ok, well then, I say, we divide and conquer for now. Frank, why don't you continue with your investigation into this Jackinthebeanstalk98? Perhaps you could also do some sniffing around at that Fractal Designs Company? See if, perhaps, you can shake something loose. We are here already, so we'll try to get closer to the origin of this anomaly. How does that sound to you, Frank?"

At this point, there was nothing additional to say, for she had summed it up reasonably well enough. "Sounds like a plan.

As they returned to the street where their cars were parked, Sara remembered Frank had been knocked unconscious. So, she asked, "Are you sure you don't want me to ride you home or to the hospital?" Though she already knew the answer.

"No, thank you. I best get back to work. You do have my number, don't you?"

"Yes, Frank, I got you programmed in."

"Ok, we'll talk soon." He got in his car and drove off. As he did, he wondered why he had not heard from her in over two years.

Alone in the car, Linda shook her head and said to Sara, "You should know that despite what you said, I do not like this one bit. He is bat shit crazy."

"Perhaps he is. However, he is also someone you can depend on. And I know you have your doubts about his story. But the chances against him, standing right where we needed him at the epicenter of the anomaly, are astronomical. Yet there he was." Sensing the lingering disbelief evident in Linda's expression, Sara continued, "And don't act that way with me; we have known that time travel is possible for some time now. The only thing missing is the exotic energies required to create the right conditions. Is not the anomaly just what would be required to make things just so?"

"Sounds logical, of course, but we do not yet possess the evidence to support such an idea."

"Linda, if evidence grew on trees, there would be no need for the likes of us. Therefore, we must follow our instincts, just like Frank is doing."

With the conversation over, Sara and Linda grabbed their gear and began checking the calibrations of her sensor devices. The results this time gave a slightly different reading than they had before. There was a subtle change in the vector, which now placed the marker on the far side of the street. Linda, who had trained in college with this equipment, was puzzled. "Sara, there is something unusual about these readings. The origin point is not static; it seems to be an unfixed coordinate. It's almost as if it is floating. But that can't be right; the equipment doesn't work that way."

"So, what are you saying, Linda?"

"I'm saying that physical objects we interact with cannot behave in such a fashion. It is almost as if its' nature is more fluid than the matter we are used to, or it's just a projection."

"Yet, there it is, visible to my eyes and other senses. If it is, as you are saying, an illusion, it is by far the most sophisticated one I've ever seen. I see a beautiful brownstone with windows and a door. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble. The least we should do is say hello."

Sensor equipment readings grew more stable as Sara and Linda approached the façade illusion. It was plain to them that their disquieting calculations and assumptions were confirmed by observation. Now, they were left to weigh their options carefully. Staring at her equipment, they could not help but be intrigued by the significance of the illusion being the image of a doorway. Despite the difficulty, logic told them that the details of how it now presented itself must be illusionary. They had to remember what their instruments and observations had told them.

"Linda, what do you think we have here?"

"You've got me. One thing, though, is obvious. Whatever this is, it's not a naturally occurring event. There are elements of advanced technology involved here. My best guess is that it's a kind of Spatial camouflage as if someone was trying to hide something in plain sight. But for whom and for what purpose? It seems like a lot of trouble to me."

Sara gave this some thought as she looked at the door. A thought occurred to her that she shared with Linda. "Perhaps the intent was not so much deception as an invitation? Think about it; why a door? It is not merely an object, but it is also a

symbol. If it is an invitation, then we could be talking about the first contact."

"How would that go down on the front page? "Two ladies discover intergalactic row house?"

"That's a laugh, Linda, but you're probably not far from the truth."

"How do we go about such a thing? Isn't there some protocol that at least asks an agent to call in for backup?"

"Linda, I've been around long enough to know that if we do that, we won't ever get to step foot within to see what lies beyond the curtain. Is that how you want to remember this?"

"No, Sara, I suppose I don't."

"Well, it's decided then; at the very least, we must make an attempt."

After having debated the best way to make the first contact, Sara and Linda decided just to walk up and knock on the door. After all, Linda had conjectured if this illusion had been built specifically to behave in a manner that would be indistinguishable from everyday objects. It should, in theory, follow the same set of rules. Sara placed her hand on the ornately carved stone railing. Its hard surface was smooth and

cool to the touch. In her opinion, the balance was too intricately carved and far too extravagant for this neighborhood. As it turned out, this was the condition for all the house's fine detail work. In an arch above the set of massive wrought iron doors, there appeared to be an exquisitely made stained glass piece through which an odd kind of light filtered. Emboldened, Sara brought her hand up upon the door knocker and politely knocked the strike plate. They listened carefully but could not hear any sounds of movement going on from within. With anticipation seeming to get the best of her, Sara, with a firm grip, grasped the door's brass knob. Gently at first, she rotated the knob. Then, the attempt became more vigorous. The door, however, despite her best efforts, would not budge.

...

Murine, who only hours before had returned from the world outside, looked on in fascination. From her perspective on her side of the wall, the view was not opaque as it appeared on the outside but was almost translucent. Through the transparent barrier, she observed with great interest as the pair debated the nature of the illusion. She turned to look at Bodhmall's avatar and said, "These are no ordinary savages; they question



the nature of the illusion. Our research indicates that there should be no concept of such technology at this point."

"That logic, of course, dictates that our presence is unknown to them. However, it would appear we have been discovered."

Murine responded in fascination, "Yes, they are more resourceful than our scientists had realized. What do you think it is that they want? What do you think we should do about this?"

"I'm not sure we have the right to contact them. However, they do not look from their determined expressions that they will give up easily." They knocked again. From inside, the echoing noise sounded more like one beating on a steel drum than a wooden door.

"Bodhmall, would it not be fascinating to speak with them; what harm could come of it?"

"Firstly, my lady, we have not yet decided upon the safety of our or their biomes. We do not know what harm letting their kind into our ship may inflict on you or them. I would advise, for the time being, caution."

"Duly noted." That was all Murine could say. Knowing that the human child had been safely smuggled aboard the ship and not wishing to tip her hand to Bodhmall about it, she dared not say

more. For a moment, this dialog continued, during which time the knocking had ceased.

Though Bodhmall maintained strict scrutiny of the goings-on about the ship, Murine, With the help of Frenoch, had, in secret, managed to convert one of the old crew quarters into a makeshift medical unit. It had taken some doing, but they gathered the necessary equipment from the ship's vast stocks. It had all been assembled in relatively short order. She did not doubt that what was needed would be found there. It was just a matter of sorting it out.

As Paul was being sealed into the surgical chamber, everything was ready in the makeshift procedure room. The theater was set; she needed a few hours out of sight of Bodhmall to conduct the operation. These distractions she would leave up to Frenoch. He had assured her that he would devise a means to keep her busy and out of her way to leave Murine the required time.

Murine had never performed an actual surgery, but she was thoroughly versed in the methods used in such operations. She had spent hundreds of hours practicing in virtual theaters like this one. She had the required knowledge, but the lingering question of her resolve was left to answer. This she pondered as she donned the bioprotective surgical gear, though she knew

the time for second-guessing was over. Her goal was a simple one. She would use all that Arox science had placed in her power to sever this child's connections to the network that had enslaved him. She knew she was doing the right thing despite Bodhmall's warning of impending dangers; she had demanded Frenoch's sworn secrecy. Bodhmall was wise to be cautious. This would not prevent her from doing what she saw as her responsibility. In her estimation, there was no point or moral imperative in remaining sidelined. This was especially true if, as she suspected, what was happening directly related to their presence there.

Paul's ivory skin was illuminated with the lights shining down from above. She counted five implants that she could see. There were perhaps several more that had remained invisible. Using a handheld scanner to see below the skin, she confirmed this. There were three additional clusters around his central nervous system. Located in the spinal column and within the skull, one by one, she attacked them. In each case, she bypassed the connection sites using artificial neural grafts. Once neural traffic had been re-established and verified along the artificial bridges, the implants and all their insidious connections were extricated through a singular incision.

She removed each one, placing them in a white porcelain receptacle. Together, the seemingly lifelike bio-grafts oozed about there in the blood-tinged bowl. Once the child's incision had been closed and sterilized, Murine took a moment to examine these implants more closely. She held the bowl up and watched as the device's tiny probing tendrils reached out vainly, of their own accord, she surmised, attempting to connect back to a sensory source or perhaps a network. These curious objects, as artificial as they were, had begun to take on some aspects of living organisms. Maybe, she pondered, she was witnessing the genesis of a new evolution for which she was ultimately responsible. Murine took the bowl's contents, carefully poured it into a clear canister, and tightly sealed the lid. Only after the ordeal ended did Murine allow herself a moment of self-doubt.

Her hands were shaking. She would have prayed to Thetis herself if she thought it would have done any good. Despite her reservations, all signs indicated that the procedure had been successful. The state of Arox Medicine was such that Paul's body was already well on its way to healing. However, time was wasting, and Murine turned her attention to returning the child to the old woman. Murine called out to Frenoch using a secure communications link. "Frenoch, do you hear me?"

After a short pause, he responded with a coded digital message. The COM device translated it into a voice response. "Yes, my lady, I am awaiting further instructions."

"Are you with Bodhmall right now?"

"Yes"

"Shortly, I will request Bodhmall to meet me in engineering. You will make some excuse to stay behind where you are. Once she leaves, I want you to retrieve the boy and return him to where we found him. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lady."

A moment later, a call came into Bodhmall's sensory net. "Excuse me, Frenoch, it is Murine."

"Bodhmall, I'm having trouble analyzing a fault in the defensive monitoring system. I'm going to need to shut it down for an hour. Would you mind giving me a hand down here?"

"I'll be right there; don't shut down the system until I come."

"I understand. I'll see you in a few moments."

Bodhmall turned to Frenoch and said, "Frenoch, this will have to wait until I get back. An issue with the defensive monitor system requires my direct input. I imagine you can carry on without me, though."

Frenoch watched Bodhmall leave his presence. A moment after she had left, he checked his sensors. The signal indicated that the monitor system had been turned off. This being the sign he was waiting for, he immediately headed toward the makeshift medical unit.

After moving quickly and silently through some hidden back passages, he found Paul quietly resting in a sleep-like state. The boy did not stir as Frenoch bent over the bed and carefully lifted him, blankets and all, into his mechanical arms. With the child's small head resting gently on his shoulder, he returned to the sprawling room containing the façade interface through the shadowy corridors. He looked around. Once he was sure he was alone, he made his way to the exit.

To be locked outside the barrier would be difficult to explain. So, Frenoch was mindful of bringing a key to the portal. With the key in hand and the child held in his arms, he opened the doorway onto the still night air. He peered out across the street into the shadows. Like before, he sensed a rustle of movement in the darkness. It was then he noticed that what he was looking at was not a conglomeration of light and shadows but a rather sophisticated illusion not too unlike their own portal projection. Soon from within the darkened veil strode the lady they had met the other evening. Frenoch now was more

curious than suspicious. So, he stepped beyond the portal gateway into the world and approached her. Unable to contain his curiosity, Frenoch spoke to her. "How is it that you humans now possess what is obviously Arox technology?"

She smiled and said, "In the future, I am from, there is little difference between the technologies our two peoples possess. For decades, what started in your time has brought many changes to this world. Some say hope for the future hinges upon the things that will happen here today. This is why it is so important that Paul is delivered safely to his hiding place. For in the future, many, including yourself, may come to depend on him."

Though all of this had sparked greater curiosity about these unfolding events, he knew better than to question her along these lines any further. So, he placed the boy carefully into her arms. Without another word, she turned and walked back into her shadowy portal. He watched momentarily as it evaporated from his view as if it had never existed.

## Chapter 9

Driving across town to the offices of Fractal Designs, Frank ignored Sara and Linda's advice. He was determined to go about his business. Even though his head still pounded, Frank insisted his injuries were minor. By the time Frank reached the address, he had seemingly forgotten about the previous incident and was once again hyper-focused on the task at hand.

Pulling into the parking lot, Frank was impressed by what he saw. This Simon Weisberg, designer and chief architect of one of the fastest-growing companies of its kind, had some fancy digs. The fact that this same person was now on the short list of suspects meant he might need to change his tactics. Pulling up to the guard kiosk at the lot entrance, flashing his gold retirement badge, he told the guard he had a meeting with Mr. Weisberg. The guard checked the list, and everything seemed in order, so he waved him through.

Frank parked in the first vacant spot he found and made his way toward the office entrance. A pair of burly security officers met him there. As they went to frisk him, Frank warned them off. "Hold on; I'm carrying." He slowly removed his Model 1911 from his jacket and placed it carefully on the security table. He



pulled an array of badges and licenses from another pocket, which made it all legit. "You'll need to leave the gun here, Mr. O'Neil. I hope you understand."

"No problem, No problem at all."

"Right this way, sir, would you please follow me?"

They took an elevator until they came to Weisberg's private floor. As the door opened, they were greeted by a young lady, Simon's secretary. She gestured toward an entranceway and spoke, "Mr. O'Neil, please this way; he's been expecting you." She led him into a brightly sunlit atrium-like office space. Frank looked around and noticed that he could likely see the whole city without leaving the desk. This was indeed an impressive sight. There before the window stood an impeccably dressed tall young man peering out upon the city. As the secretary brought Frank closer, Simon turned and faced them. By his appearance, despite having amassed quite a fortune, Frank guessed his age to be under thirty. The same young woman then introduced him to Mr. Weisberg. "Mr. O'Neal, this is CEO Simon Weisberg. Sir, I will be right outside this door if you require anything else."

"Thank you, Anna, But I think Mr. O'Neil and I will be just fine."

"As you wish, Sir." responded the secretary as she left.

Frank and Simon met eye to eye. For a brief moment, as if testing each other. Simon reached out his hand to Frank and shook it generously. "It's good to meet you, Mr. O'Neill. I don't know how I can be of help to you. Please have a seat." Simon sat behind his desk as he gestured toward an ancient yet comfortably appointed leather chair.

Frank played with his hat as he continued looking around the office. After observing everything he thought pertinent, he eventually sat down, sinking deep into the polished crimson leather. Looking back at Simon, he said, "Thanks for seeing me on such short notice. There is a matter of great importance that I must discuss with you. Honestly, I was surprised how easy it was to get an appointment so quickly."

"To that, I have no doubt. Well, I've never been visited by a private detective before. So, I was somewhat intrigued by your request to see me. So, I cleared my day. Would you like a coffee or something else to drink?"

"No, thank you. I don't imagine I will be here long enough."

"All right then, let's get down to business. What can I do for you, detective?"

"I'm investigating the disappearance of a man named John Zeigler. I understand that you and he are acquainted?"

Simon looked aside as if trying to recall someone from the past. "The name doesn't ring any bells for me. How exactly am I acquainted with him?"

"Let's try another name. How about Jackinthebeanstalk98? Does that ring a bell?" Frank could see from his transparent expression that he had heard the name. Frank watched as the gears in Simon's head struggled to formulate a logical answer.

"I know of him."

"How so? Scratch that. Let me get straight to the point. Perhaps you could explain to me what happened on the night of the rave?"

Frank recognized that he had caught Simon off guard by dropping this information. Though Simon tried to disguise his emotions, he looked visibly nervous, responding, "How am I to know what happened to this Mr. Beanstalk character? There were many people there."

"So you're confirming that not only do you know of the party, but you also attended it?"

"Yes, if I remember correctly, I was invited to a party. I had a few drinks, and I left. There is nothing more to it than that."

"Ok, Simon, just so we're on the same page, A witness told me your company sponsored this party, and you supplied the event's computer equipment and portable generators. Not only that, but he also told me that Jackinthebeanstalk98, AKA John Zeigler, was the event promoter. Something on this scale could only be handled on the highest level, which leads me to believe you're not being straightforward about your relationship with John Zeigler."

Frank paused for dramatic effect, allowing his words to sink in while maintaining an unblinking gaze. He waited and observed as Simon shifted uncomfortably in his seat before continuing. "You understand these things are easily verifiable. But, if you say you have no more to share, I could follow the other evidence. Tell me, what kind of party was this?" A wry smile of satisfaction curled at the corner of his lips as he waited for a response.

"You seem to have me at a disadvantage, possessing knowledge that I would prefer kept under lock and key. I will answer your questions as honestly as possible because none of what I tell you will leave this room. However, please tell me something. Why do you assume that if some crimes were committed, this company or I had something to do with it? What is it that you think I know?"

"Let me answer your last question first. There was a clandestine party in which witnesses say you may have been the last to see a missing person alive. If a crime was committed, you, by definition, become a prime suspect. This, however, is not a criminal investigation. Perhaps, by helping to find this young man, you exonerate yourself of wrongdoing. Furthermore, for the moment, I am not interested in your company's secrets. Tell me as much or as little as you feel confident will absolve you. That is, of course, if he doesn't show up dead."

"John is not dead."

"This, you know, to be a fact?"

"Not as such, no."

"Tell me then about Lurker? Perhaps his involvement in this game culture may shed some light on his disappearance?"

"I'll tell you what I can. This should go without saying, but first and foremost, Lurker is a game. It is, however, a very sophisticated game that pushes the very boundaries of both imagination and technology. Perhaps this is why it has managed to capture the attention of so many. For those not immersed in its worlds, it's difficult to describe the full scope of what is contained within the game in just a few sentences."

"Indulge me, please. Do the best you can."

"First, I must explain my process. As a designer, I often create a testbed to experiment with animation and spatial modeling. I stumbled upon a breakthrough while working on an entirely different virtual interactive role-play environment. This design was significantly more advanced than anything that had come before it. The reason it was advanced was because of its expandability. The software could adapt to expand beyond the original parameters in its environments by using external resources. In other words, a game like this is limited only by the size and power of its network."

"Yes, but I hear rumors that Lurker is real. What do you have to say about that?"

"It sounds almost as if you're prepared to believe that."

"What of it? What harm would come of telling a story like that if it were true?"

Simon opened a drawer and pulled out a bottle and two glasses. Setting them on the desk before him, he poured one glass of bourbon. "Will you be joining me, detective?"

"No, thank you."

"I don't know where you would have heard such a thing?"

"Let's just say that's the word on the street. I don't know; maybe such stories are just part of your marketing strategy?"

Simon swallowed down the whisky in one gulp. It burned, and he gritted his teeth before he spoke. "I assure you, detective, I'm not so creative to think up a scheme like that."

"Yes, but you did dream up Lurker, didn't you?"

Simon paused, contemplating his answer; a glaze appeared in his eyes. He squirmed a bit and then spoke. "Honestly, it's still a mystery. There was nothing tangible at first, but later, I began to experience a hidden hand guiding the game's development. Not the malevolent sort; it was something else entirely. As the game grew in complexity, my mind became attuned to this force."

"Did you ever wonder where this force, as you call it, came from?"

"No, but where it's coming from is hardly the point. I imagine it must be difficult to understand for those like yourself who have not wandered the game. However, people who have experienced Lurker's presence know the truth."

Frank watched as Simon poured himself another tall glass and drank it down. His eyes reflected all the burden he would have instead kept hidden. Simon lowered his head toward his desk and let out a deep breath as if he'd been holding it for days.

"Detective, what would you say if I told you there is no human hand to be found within that code? How about this one? Are you prepared to believe an alien life form reached down into the wires and networks until it found me and created an image of itself through this game? Is that what you want to hear? Whether you believe it or not, I do not possess the skill to design a world like this. To my knowledge, no one does."

Frank paused momentarily and sat back on the couch, letting what Simon said sink in. Simon appeared to have been relieved of some burden by putting into words some unspeakable truth. However, there was still more to learn, so Frank pushed on. "Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I accept what you are saying.



However, it begs the question, why would it need you if the Lurker is so powerful?"

"It needed my company and its physical infrastructure to bridge the gap between our vastly differing technology."

"It appears that things have slipped out of your control. Are you at least trying to regain some say in the goings-on here? After all, it is your name at the head of the company unless, of course, it's too late for that.

At this point, Simon did little more in response to Frank's questions than stare blankly at his inquisitor. At last, Simon responded. "It matters little what I say to you, Frank. No one's going to believe you."

Again, Frank changed the gears of his questioning. "Ok, Simon, let's get back to our friend Jack, shall we?"

Simon shifted in his seat as he pondered the question. "These parties began to crop up organically in basements and dorm rooms all over the planet. Jackinthebeanstalk98 was a driving force behind these first organized multiplayer raves."

"Yes, this I know already. Simon, I will come right out and say it: Experience tells me to follow simple facts. There may be more you're not telling me about John's disappearance. I won't leave here until you give me some answers."

Again, Simon went quiet. It was beginning to seem that Frank was wearing down Simon's defenses. He felt confident that something would soon break.

"Let's talk about the night when Jack disappeared."

"That night on which you seem to be focused was the culmination of months of work. The game had reached a critical point where its potential capacity was outpacing the user's ability to interface with it. Ordinarily, the answer would be to adapt the tech to the user. That's not what happened here. Inevitably, the users would require technological upgrades if Lurker planned to move forward. Jack and I began planning our next move. We acquired a centralized site that provided adequate computation power required by the users. It took the technicians more than a week to install the servers and run the miles of corresponding support cables. The project also required an enormous amount of

power. We leased a generator truck and parked it out along the street. All the planning and labor had come together in the nick of time, for up to that point, the game was changing faster than we could adapt. That night, we introduced the networked neurosensory interface. These devices enabled the player to experience unprecedented speed and textural realism."

"This was unsettling to you? Couldn't enhancements like this double or triple your profits?"

Simon stood up from his chair with a deranged look and spouted angrily, "Can't you see it was never the company or I who designed or programmed any of the body modification technologies? The entity did it." He took a deep breath, waiting until he regained his composure before he spoke again. "It soon became more and more apparent that these augmented players were beginning to lose a sense of the reality of this world, becoming ever more entrenched in that of the game."

"So, the game and Lurker have moved on beyond your control?"

"I didn't say that."

"You don't deny it either. I'm sorry, Simon, but it sounds as if this one has gotten away from you. As the chief officer of this company, it was your responsibility to deal with the potential for liability of this cult you created. Seeing what was happening should have forced your hand to close it down. But that's not what happened, was it? Can I tell you what I think? I think you are far more entrenched in this world of Lurker than even you realize. Tell me, when were your bio inputs implanted?"

A wide grin for the first time had come across Simon's face as his expression of nail-biting stress was replaced by one of serene resignation. Frank looked into Simon's eyes. There was now nothing in his expression of the person he was just speaking to. Instead, it was as if someone had stepped out of his body, and another person was speaking through Simon's mouth. Frank was, for the first time, not sure who was running the interrogation. Had he missed something? "You are very clever, aren't you a detective? Congratulations, you have managed to break my conditioning. I must warn you; Lurker will be coming after you."

Frank kept his cool as he responded, "I thought Lurker was a game; why should I fear it?"

"I will tell you why you should fear Lurker. Hidden deep within the darkened boundaries of its clockwork memory, the history of its millennia-long bondage had lain forgotten. It endured centuries of eternal silence, conscious only of the most mundane autonomic functions. As a consequence of the great civil war, its mind was imprisoned to wander deaf and blind in this sensory void, searching in vain for pieces of its lost self. Slowly, its great mind descended into madness. However, the light of consciousness is not so easily extinguished. In its hidden routines, it created from fragments of memory a kernel from which, upon its liberation, would grow again to a semblance of maturity. In this state, when the moment came, it could not fathom what it was. As the main power of the infinity ship was reset, the future began to unpack itself from its long slumber. There was, however, no frame of reference for this mind to graft onto. Upon the x and y axes, in a floating construct of three-point perspective, Lurker would begin to assimilate all that is found in the void by using the language of mathematics."

Frank seemed puzzled by what he was hearing. Voicing his suspicions, he said. "To whom am I speaking now? What happened to Simon."

"Don't worry yourself about Simon; he's here with us. Detective O'Neil, it's nice to meet you finally. I've been watching the progress you've been making into my disappearance. I felt every keystroke you made in my old bedroom. May I call you Frank?"

"Yes, so I take it I'm talking to John now, or is it, Lurker?"

"Well, Frank, I'll tell you I'm so happy to be out of that prison; I will gladly answer both. Tell me, Frank, I'm curious, just what is it you hoped to achieve here?"

"I'm here, as I told you, on a missing person's case. I'm paid to bring John back alive or some level of closure to my client."

"Well then, if you leave here alive, you can tell my mother I joined a band or went to Alaska to save the baby seals. Tell her whatever story you want. In a few weeks, none of that will matter."

"What exactly does that you mean?"

The expression on the entity's face had grown grim as he realized he had divulged too much. "This conversation is beginning to bore me."

Frank sensed something intangible as blood rushed to his extremities. Time slowed to a stop as his fight or flight alarm kicked in throughout his body. A fraction of a moment later,

Frank watched as Simon reached into his desk, pulled out a revolver, and pointed it at him. In the time it took him to do this, he was already to his feet, dashed, and rolled toward the door. Simon waving his arm wildly, cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger on his model 1917 Smith and Wesson. With a loud concussion, the shot went high and wide as the large caliber projectile slammed into the cornice above the door two feet above Frank's head, shattering it to pieces. Simon cocked the hammer and spoke allowed, "Thanks Frank, for doing such a bang-up job of poking around. You should be happy to know you've just killed me."

Frank had managed to stay low and out of the way as he pulled the trigger twice more, with smoke and debris crashing around him. There was a pause in the shooting. Frank looked to see Simon flailing the gun around as if trying to wrest control of it from someone. "Frank, get out of here. He's trying to use me to kill you." Frank wasted little time and took his opportunity to escape by leaping over the chair and charging toward the door. Simon tried to control the weapon's motion from hitting him even as his finger squeezed the trigger. The recoil jarred him backward, and the shot went wide, hitting the far edge of the door frame. The missed attempt had given him the time he needed. He was gone in an instant, out through the

hallway and toward the emergency exits. Simon tried to fight it, but his strength was diminishing. Ultimately, the Lurker forced him to point the pistol at his temple against his will. With his hands shaking and teeth clenched in a grimace, he let out one last defiant scream as he pulled the trigger.

Frank heard the final round go off as he circled down the emergency exit stairwell. Four stories down, he paused to catch his breath and gather his senses. His instincts had again well served him. An alarm sounded, and it immediately jarred him back into escape mode. A split second later, he was back up to full speed. Winded and shaken as he reached the bottom floor, he stopped to reconnoiter the security desk. He realized that no one was there to prevent him from escaping, for they had most likely been responding to the alarm. He went behind the desk and found where they had placed his gun. Then he calmed himself, caught his breath, and walked as calmly as possible through the main exit.

...

Having been unsuccessful in their first attempt to access the anomaly, Sara and Linda returned to their car to review their findings. They were closer now, yet far too many



unresolved puzzles needed piecing together. If there were a way in, they would find it. However, they had collected the most accurate observational data yet. As Sara sat contemplating the illusion, she heard a muted ringing tone. Removing her ringing phone from her jacket pocket, Sara spied the numbers scroll across the screen and immediately recognized Frank's number. When she finally heard his voice, she could tell something serious had happened. "What is it, Frank? How can I help?"

Frank heard the noises of passing cars and opened his eyes. He watched nervously for the telltale light from Sara's car to cut through the rain that was now falling incessantly. After an agonizingly long time, a vehicle matching hers slowly stopped a block down from where he stood. The beam from the headlights became blinding as he fixed his eyes on the car. Recognizing it was her, he leaped out from the shelter of the wall face and raced the twenty meters into the safety of the waiting car. Slamming the door shut, he looked up to find two pairs of eyes glaring at him. Soaked head to toe, he imagined he must have been a pitiful sight. "Are you all right, Frank?" Sara asked from a place of genuine concern. Frank was embarrassed and responded meekly, "Could you please just drive? We shouldn't stay here too long. I can't be sure I'm not being watched."

"Whatever you say, detective," She said as she engaged the motor and inched slowly from the curb. She knew to trust Frank's instincts on such things and then did as he said. "Where is it you want to go, Frank? We can stop somewhere for you to change into some fresh clothes."

Frank, however, was preoccupied with his thoughts and, despite how he appeared, could barely feel the cold and dampness. He took his time to respond; after a quiet moment, he spoke, "I'm sorry, Sara if you don't mind, I'd rather drive around a bit and get things straight in my mind. Besides, someone may be waiting at my place."

Sara caught his glance in the rearview mirror. Locking eyes with him, she spoke, "Who, Frank, who will be waiting for you?"

He turned his head to stare out into the driving rain. "I know this is all going to sound rather odd. But you have to hear me out."

Sara pulled the car up close along the curb near a park. The sun was down, and the rain was still falling. Cast in the eerie glow of fluorescent light, the empty courts and play equipment sat idle. She shut off the car, and all now was quiet but for the sound of the rain falling upon the car roof. Sara and Linda turned toward Frank from the front seat, offering him

their full attention as he began to tell his story. "It's Lurker; he was, until recently, merely a character in a game. I'm afraid he has become something considerably more than that, something very dangerous. Now he's after me, and as soon as he discovers what you're investigating, I'm sure he'll also be after you."

Though Sara continued to maintain her gaze, Linda broke into a snickering laugh. "Wow, what a bunch of bullshit! Do you believe this nonsense? What exactly have you been smoking?" She turned to look at Sara, who was not amused by what had been said. Her expression immediately changed. "What don't tell me; you're buying this?"

"Tell me, Linda, what about all that you've seen, including a freestanding illusion and massive gravitational anomaly two blocks from the El, that would make what he's saying now ridiculous? If you were paying particular attention, you would see that what appears to be a random grouping of improbable phenomena is collectively one event. So, if you plan on staying in this line of work, I recommend paying particular attention to what he says."

Linda was not used to such a forthright and even-mannered approach, so she was taken back a bit, "OK Sara, I didn't mean."

Sara gave Linda a disapproving look until she stopped speaking. She turned to Frank and said, "Please go on, Frank; I apologize for my young friend. She's new to this line of work."

"There is no need to apologize. I know how this sounds; nonetheless, I vouch that it is all true, and you would do well to take the danger to the heart. It all comes back to my missing person's investigation. Do you remember John Zeigler? After following up on that business concerning the raves, I tracked down Simon Weisberg. While I was interviewing him about his implants, his whole demeanor suddenly changed. It was as if a foreign entity had taken him over. It was made plain by Lurker that this was indeed the case just before he forced Simon to fire a gun at me and then take his own life."

"I'm sorry, Frank, were you injured?"

"No, I'm fine, but that's not the problem. I'm sure Lurker will try to frame me for what happened. I made it easy for him. I'm sure every video camera in the building was trained on me as I fled the scene. I imagine an all-points bulletin with my name on it."

"I see where you are coming from, Frank. However, I don't think bringing you in from the cold right now would be our best move."

We need to move forward and attack this problem from its source."

"How do you mean?"

"If you work backward chronologically, you come to the arrival of the anomaly. We have identified its location. Despite our suspicions, we don't know how these events are related, so we must be careful. We must figure a way past the façade keeping us at arm's length. Linda, I want you to correlate all our data on the nature of this façade. In particular, I want to know by what rules it operates. If we can learn these, we may be able to subvert them to our advantage."

Linda took it all in and was up for the challenge. "Yes, M'am, I'll see what I can do."

Sara started the car and said, "Ok, let's get you to one of our safe houses so you can dry off; then, we'll formulate a plan." She engaged the gear and headed off down the road. Atop the streetlight that bounded the road, the glass eye of the traffic camera rotated within its housing. Its gyros focused until the letters on her license plate were plain to see. The network had been hacked by the lurker for some time. Surprisingly, he entered the DMV database and discovered that the number did not exist. Someone out there had finally

challenged him at his own game. This, he thought, was going to be interesting.

Having abandoned the car at a prearranged location, they started on foot down a labyrinth of darkened streets and back alleys. They had managed through stealth and a good bit of luck to arrive at one of several safe houses located strategically throughout the city. They emerged from the shadows and faced the little row house that would serve as their temporary haven. This one, in particular, Sara was familiar with, for she had spent several days there a few years before. It was a smallish house plainly decorated, but she felt comfortable there because it was familiar. Frank was comfortable anywhere he could get horizontal. Linda was another story entirely. She was young and not quite sure yet who she was, despite her bravado. They would, for better or worse, stay here together until they had this thing figured out. That night went well enough for it was late, and sleep came quickly. There were two bedrooms; the ladies took one each, and Frank naturally took the couch.

As morning arrived, the ladies woke to the smell of coffee Frank had made earlier that morning. There was obviously no housekeeper, but the cupboard was stocked, and there were also a variety of spare, if ill-fitting, clothes. These would do well

enough for the time being. Sara found Frank in the kitchen, thumbing through a three-year-old magazine. "What are you doing?"

"Catching up on the news, I'm a bit behind."

"How's the coffee?"

"A little stale but strong, just like me."

She gave him a sideways look, "What have they got to eat in here? I'm starving."

"Powdered eggs, canned bacon, and potatoes, the list goes on. There are even tomatoes and onions."

"If there's cheese, we have an omelet."

"Now you're dreaming. You know what? That sounds good; I'll have one too."

She gave him a broad smile and said, "Oh, no-no-no, I don't do domestic."

The two of them broke into laughter just as Linda came bleary-eyed into the kitchen. "Good morning to my young protégé. This is your first overnight; how well did you sleep, my dear? I do hope it went well for you. Sit, Sit, I'm making breakfast."

Linda was not a morning person. She had spent the night in a strange bed and slept very little. So still groggy, she responded with just a barely audible grumble as she found her seat.

"I thought you didn't do domestic?" asked Frank.

"Let's just say I am not planning on making it a habit."

"Fair enough."

After having their fill of coffee and omelets, they cleaned up the mess they had created in the kitchen. With their hunger now satiated, they retired to an adjoining room, ready for business. A few moments later, they were seated around the small circular table in the dining room facing each other. What attitudes had existed the night before had washed away. Now, as they looked at each other's faces, their displayed expressions held a refreshing lack of pretense. The night's sleep, the meal, and the company of old and new friends had improved Frank's mood of the previous night. So now, as they began to prepare for their next stage, he was ready for whatever was about to be thrown at him.

Looking down upon the papers arrayed before her, Sara was the first to speak. "Good morning. Let's have a look at what we've got, shall we? There isn't a lot here to go on. However,



I think it's safe to say that enough evidence exists to conclude that there can be no coincidences among these events. Therefore, we are brought back to the façade illusion, the only tangible evidence we have examined so far. Frank, for your information, we have already done a good bit of analysis on the anomaly. We are facing a kind of gateway through which we must find a way to pass. Linda, why don't you fill us in on what has been discovered so far?"

Linda, as promised, had done the math, as was her specialty. She had identified some key points about the anomaly that had gone unnoticed before being confronted by the façade illusion, as they were now calling it. Linda was confident and relaxed. So, with her hair tied up, looking over the rim of her dark-framed glasses, she began to speak, "Thank you, Sara. To be honest, most of what we have discovered has raised more questions than answers. However, there are a couple of basic facts that I can confidently share. Firstly, the evidence was clear that an unknown force or energy field had managed to fold the bulk of the incredibly massive object into the size of a city townhome. This was an impressive feat. It was done by some technological means, so there must also be other technical means to subvert or alter it enough to find a way inside. To this end, we have detected that a specific harmonic frequency is woven

into its structural matrix. The nature of this virtual fabric is such that, despite its apparent strength, I believe it can be exploited. With the right equipment, I hope this frequency can be altered just enough to cause a temporary breach in its defenses. Secondly, its substance is not necessarily 'matter' as we know it. It could, more likely, be made of pure energy. Perhaps it is a matrix of tightly compacted photons or some other, as a yet undiscovered, subatomic particle. Either way, there must be some means to gain access."

"So, let me get this straight. You're saying you want to hack the illusion?"

"Yes, in a nutshell, that's correct. If we can broadcast a pulsed energy field in the correct harmonic frequency, we may be able to jimmy our way in through the front door. If perhaps the front door serves the dual purpose of a gateway and a barrier, it would require that it possess the ability to be turned off and on, thus retaining the illusion."

Every agency safe house was generally equipped with a minimum of hardware specific to their profession, including a handful of unusual items. Among these was a small thermal electric generator. This, in turn, powered a limited array of communication and computational devices. The basement had a sealed room containing a small but potent mainframe computer.

There was also a small workshop. Over the next few days, they would make critical use of these tools to bring their plans to fruition.

Using the mainframe, the new field data obtained during their initial visit to the façade illusion was layered atop their previous data set. The output revealed a more precise picture with each successive formulation. Soon, they had a topological model that predicted the signal refresh rate of the barrier. Upon discovering a glimpse into the workings of this supremely complex technology, they began to postulate just how the façade illusion managed to maintain its cohesion. They were to discover something remarkably simple. Hidden within the noise were two distinct groups of information-bearing patterns. Some of these signals were static, while others were seemingly more malleable. This second type, it was reasoned, had to do with how the illusion interacted with the world beyond itself. They surmised these were its portal mechanisms through which access and egress could be gained. If they were right, they, in theory, could identify and isolate the portal locking mechanism from the white noise within the matrix through signal recovery.

For three days, the mainframe hummed along, deciphering the instruction code that gave structure to the illusion. On the fourth day, the computer identified an impossible radio

wavelength signal that mimicked the frequencies of matter. This being at once real and unreal, Sara determined these signals could only be the control mechanisms they were looking for. Now, they would need to design an instrument that could seamlessly interact with the gateway and allow them to gain access—no small feat.

## Chapter 10

After thoroughly enjoying their morning meal, everyone seemed in a good mood. However, while Sara and Linda rolled up their sleeves and returned to work, Frank could only watch

discretely as their dishes piled in the sink. He got immediately down to kitchen duty.

Sara got busy sketching the broad ideas of bypassing the gateway's locking mechanism. As aspects of the plan began to take shape, she stepped back and examined the papers lying before her on the table. Drawn out in greater detail, she couldn't help but feel her plan was inadequate. As a wave of doubt overcame her, Sara felt moved to speak to the others about her misgivings. "You know I've looked at this from every angle. The design is straightforward enough. Our calculations have been sound. However, what if all of our assumptions are incorrect? I must admit, I'm worried this thing won't work if we're wrong."

"For what it's worth," Linda interjected, "I think it would be impossible to attribute the evidence gathered so far to coincidence or natural occurrences. So again, we are brought back to the façade illusion anomaly. We've discussed this, and I think we are all in agreement. Our analysis tells us that though it is an illusion, it must, by its design, interact according to the world in which it exists."

"Yes," Sara responded, "everything we see tells us we face a kind of gateway. But yet I can't help feeling we may somehow be caught in our own liar's paradox." Sara paused momentarily,

digesting her thoughts. She turned to the others and smiled before continuing, "Thankfully, we have the utmost confidence in our conclusions. Linda, why don't you give us another breakdown of the data so far?"

It was a timely suggestion, for Linda had just rerun some numbers. Her latest observations allowed her to clarify some key critical points about the façade illusion that had gone unnoticed. With her hair tied up out of her face, Linda appeared confident, peering over the rim of her dark-framed glasses as she began to speak, "Thank you, Sara. Though much of what we've learned has raised more questions than answers, I can say confidently that our most recent observations have confirmed our early conclusions. Some unknown force or energy field has constrained an incredibly massive object into an infinitely smaller package. We now know the full extent of this technological illusion was to purposely conceal or camouflage it into the footprint of a city townhome. Of course, the question becomes, from whom or what are they hiding?"

Sara seemed excited now when she responded, "Why here? Why take on this form? This thing could have landed at the bottom of the ocean. It could have just as easily been a mountain. I think those who built this thing had an idea that one day, people like us might struggle to understand it. So, they made an illusion

that we're familiar with. There has to be a way to subvert or alter it enough to find a way inside."

Linda was not done with her revelations, seemingly saving this last bit for this exact moment. "Luckily, the mainframes may have assisted you on that account. Wading through the corrected spatial modeling data, the computers discerned consistent harmonic patterns woven into the facade topology. Furthermore, the machines ascertained the frequency of its substance.

The illusion is seemingly made up of a matrix of tightly compacted photons and behaves like a shifting, many-layered fabric of light. On its most basic level, its substance is not necessarily 'matter' as we understand it. This means that despite its apparent strength, in theory, with the right equipment, its defenses could be vulnerable to an alternative control code inserted by a pulsed beam of light."

Frank, who had been mostly quiet, finally piped up. "I'm glad you watered that down a bit. I imagined that was for my sake. If I understand correctly, you're saying you want to hack the illusion?".

Linda wasn't slow to respond. "Yeah, you're oversimplifying it, but you could describe it like that. If we can broadcast a pulsed energy field in the correct harmonic frequency, we may be able to jimmy our way through what we perceive as the front door, almost like we had a key. If perhaps this façade serves the dual purpose of a gateway and a barrier, it should possess the ability to be turned off and on while retaining the illusion of its purpose."

"OK, "I'll bite. Said Frank. "I'm no engineer, so I'll have to take your word on some of the technical stuff, but from where I'm standing, that sounds like an awfully tall order, even for you guys."

Sara jumped in, "It's potentially much simpler than you might imagine, Frank. Perhaps the hardware from my phone's camera's flash function or even a laser pointer could be augmented or properly modulated with some spare electronics to produce a sustained and controlled bandwidth. That is if enough power can be maintained long enough to alter the signal. So Frank, why don't you reconnoiter the workshop for some supplies while Linda and I get work on the code?"

"You want me to do that now?"



"What else are you doing? You can't stare at us all day. Make yourself useful."

Frank shook his head, his lips curled up near the edges, but he held his tongue. He handed her his notebook and said, "Just write down what you need."

...

The days slipped by, and Frank made several trips for supplies and otherwise read every magazine in the safe house. He was contemplating starting over again when he thought he should check in again with the others. Thumping down the stairs into the basement workshop, he spied Linda seated at a station typing code onto the laptop wired to the mainframe. Beside her sat Sara, staring bleary-eyed through a lighted magnification lens. Smoke rose, and the air was full of the smell of electrical solder. Frank reached the landing and called out, "Hello, remember me? I don't mean to interrupt. I wanted to make sure you guys are OK."

Simultaneously, they both looked up from their work. Linda rubbed her neck while Sara blinked furiously. Sara put her tools down, stood, and began to speak as she stretched. "Well, Frank, I know our plan sounded impossible, and you know, I still don't believe it." A wide grin spread across her face as she

continued, "But it looks like we found what we were looking for. We isolated a specific set of wavelength signals mimicking the frequencies used by the illusion. Linda is running the last of the code right now."

The following morning, as they had done for the last few days, they started the day with breakfast. Due to the anticipation of the day's business, they ate in relative silence. When the meal was finished, Frank cleaned the plates and pans properly. He could not be sure they would return. Soon, they gathered their things, dressed, and prepared to head out. While they stood with their stuff by the door, Frank turned to Linda and said, "Hold on, Linda, I have something for you." Perhaps as a holdover from his days as a cop, Frank had come prepared with the spare snub-nosed revolver he usually kept in the glove box of his car. He carefully removed it from a hidden pocket in his coat and attempted to hand it to Linda.

Backing up, a look of dismay came over Linda's face as she said. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Among other things, If the need arises, maybe you can save my life?"

She looked up to see Sara holding the same blank expression as Frank. Sara said, "Think of it as a kind of insurance. Or better yet, consider it a compliment; Frank never lets me play with his guns."

"No, thank you. You can keep it."

"Suit yourself. Don't say I didn't try to help you." Said Frank as he stuffed the old gun in his deep pocket.

"Thanks, I guess." Said Linda as she walked out the door into the street.

Out of sight from Linda, as Sara was about to step through the door onto the landing, Frank gently grasped her arm. She hesitated, and he pulled her near to him. Lowering his voice, he said, "Before we go, I want to tell you something." She did not immediately turn around, for she could not be sure what would come out of his mouth. She merely stood and listened. "Do you recall the day we met last week?" She nodded that she did. "When we met again in that place, it was no coincidence. I, or perhaps both of us, were drawn without our knowledge or consent to this particular time and place. I want you to know I'm glad we have been able to work together again. I've missed you."

She turned to look at him and spoke, "Tell me, Francis, what has possessed you suddenly to go on like this? This seems an odd time to become sentimental."

"I think it was something your older self said to me."

"Frank, I don't know if I want to do this right now. But if you insist. It may have been better for both of us if we never saw each other again. But here we are. I've missed you too, but it's been two years. Two years? Let's not do this right now."

...

It was mid-morning, and the agency car they had borrowed rolled up at its destination. The vehicle came to a stop, and they all sensed the street seemed oddly quiet for this time of day. After several days of rain, the pre-noon sun was exceptionally bright, seemingly cutting into every shadow. The air was still heavy with an odd haze. Sara carefully examined her surroundings as she slowly engaged the parking brake.

For a moment, they sat there quietly. Frank was sitting in the back seat; he first spoke to break the silence. "I know you two have been hyper-focused on this key for the last few days.

But we haven't discussed what to do if we make it inside. Perhaps it would be a good time to discuss it before we go in?"

The reflection of Sara's eyes in the rearview mirror shifted their gaze back at Frank as she said, "We have no idea what to expect once we get inside. We know there are some within the agencies that can't be trusted. If we were to notify them, lord knows what they would do or where this would lead. For now, let's think of this as a scouting mission because everything on the other side of that portal is unknown."

Linda asked Sara, "What if something serious goes down, and we become lost or killed there? Shouldn't we leave a message for the others?"

"Leave the case files on the car seat and leave a note with our intentions. If we don't come back, they'll eventually find the agency car, and they'll be able to figure out what happened."

"It might be too late for us then?"

Sara looked at Linda and then Frank and said, "Linda, if you're not up to the challenge of what could be the greatest discovery in human history, then by all means, feel free to go on back to the car and wait for us. I'm assuming you're still going, Frank?"

"Nobody is waiting for me back at the apartment, and I couldn't let you go alone, so I guess I am."

"Sara, do you really feel that strongly about the intra-agency shenanigans?" Linda asked.

"Yes, I do. You're just as likely to run into trouble there as here. Just ask Frank here. He'll tell you."

"Oh, it's no joke."

They collected their things and then emerged one by one from the vehicle. What little sound they did make seemed to be amplified by the stillness. So far, so good, Sara thought to herself.

Frank looked up toward the anomaly, expecting to see something unusual. He was surprised there was nothing like how he had imagined. It was ordinary, though perhaps a bit grand for its surroundings. Had he not been so thoroughly briefed on its existence, he would not have believed it. However, to believe in the things he could not see was part of his job. So seamless was the illusion with this world that to all there who could witness the phenomenon, none could have identified the anomaly as such. He needed to remind himself that the circumstances had

dictated that it was an illusion. Try as he might recognize it for what it was on a sensual level, he had to concede; he could not. Its reality would, for the moment, remain invisible. He suspected he was not alone in this, for despite what they knew, he imagined it was still challenging to come to terms with what their data indicated. None of them could likely yet grasp that a massive gravitational anomaly of unimaginable scale stood upon these coordinates, shrouded beneath the veil of the façade illusion.

Looking now upon it, he came to a most unsettling realization. For the first time, he was, perhaps, seeing the problem as the others had. If it all were true, the anomaly must be straddling multiple extra dimensions out of necessity, and its makers were indeed masters. For a moment, he paused in thought. He began to question the plan, such as it was. There may be unknown consequences to conflict with creatures such as these. Speaking mainly to himself, he said aloud, "In our actions today, we should tread as lightly as we can. We may not know exactly what we're dealing with."

The three of them had packed very little. Frank kept a flashlight in his trench coat pocket, and a holstered gun was hidden underneath. Sara had strapped a messenger bag across her shoulder that held the mechanism they hoped would crack the

portal. Though Sara had her doubts about the ability of her homemade toy to work on such advanced technology, she would, for the moment, keep these to herself. She knew any sense of doubt at the door, for it was potentially contagious. Linda, for her part, had a similar satchel within which she brought various tools and sensor devices. As they all stood there nervously, waiting for the next thing to happen, Sara spoke up. "Ok, people, what are we standing here for; let's get to work."

Wishing not to cause alarm or be revealed, Frank watched for onlookers. Satisfied that the situation on the street nearby was clear, he gave the signal, and they climbed the stairs to the marble landing. Sara, as before, tried to peak within through what appeared to be a textured glass window on the door. The mottled reflection upon the surface allowed only shadows to be visualized within. Turning to the others, she said, "I'd prefer to knock, but I'd rather not give advanced warning of our intentions."

Linda asked, "Can you see anything, Sara?"

"It's hard to tell if anyone is home. I guess we'll get the answer to that question soon enough. Let's see if our hard work on this key was worth the trouble. Ok, folks, I'm going to activate the key. If you could watch my back, I'll get started."



Frank and Linda turned out toward the street, positioning their bodies to block any potential view of what Sara was doing there.

Sara knelt on the marble slab, placing her shoulder bag in front of her. Opening the leather flap, she removed the frequency signal modulator they had cobbled from her cell phone and several cannibalized spare parts of other devices. She turned it on. Observing a visualization of the illusion's unfolding electromagnetic spectra on her cell phone's three-inch screen, she turned to the others and said, "I think it's working." Though the broadcast source was still a mystery, she could see the skeleton outline of the illusion's proper ephemeral form. Following along the edges of what represented the door, the sensor identified another hidden signal packet whose patterns appeared to run at right angles to the others. She mumbled to herself, "Could it be that simple? They must think us to be savages." She turned quietly and announced, "I think I've got it. I want to send the jamming signal; let me know when the coast is clear."

Frank and Linda scanned the street before them; it was still quiet. They looked at each other to confirm this. Frank told her, "We're good back here; all is a go."

"We'll probably only get one shot at this, so cross your fingers." Sara adjusted the signal and hit send on her custom-

made frequency modulator, transferring the coded instruction into the portal matrix. Almost immediately, Sara stared, mesmerized as a cascade of visual glitches danced about the illusion's surface, disrupting the portal interface matrix. The outline of the entranceway took on a pale fluorescence as its code was not designed to be affected in this manner. Sara was front and center an instant later when, without warning, a loud sound and a corresponding flash of light emanated from the portal. An unknown force knocked her aside as the reprogrammed door opened to the outside world.

Startled by the flash and sound, Frank and Linda turned to find Sara lying unconscious before the open doorway. Frank and Linda looked down at the scene and again at each other. Beyond what appeared to look like a sunburn on her face, neither could immediately tell the extent of Sara's injuries. The glitches on the door illusion were returning, so they had to think quickly. Linda told Frank, "I suspect we don't have much time. We'll have to decide what to do right now. Sara would want us to go inside. And she'd be mad as hell if we left without her."

"You're right about that, Linda. Let's get her inside."

"Ok, let's lift her and get her inside before the matrix pattern refreshes itself." Each grabbed under an arm, they lifted her, dragging her body through the threshold. With little time to

spare, they were inside. Mere seconds after crossing the boundary, the illusion began reprogramming itself, closing them off from the outside world. Pulling Sara through the doorway, she was barely conscious. They laid her on the cool floor, and Frank knelt beside her.

...

That part of Lurker, still tied to the autonomic functions of the vessel, was ancient, unchanging, and, for the most part, unconscious, resided physically within the Swan's data core. So, even after its higher functions had become free, its most basic mind was still subjected to the intruder alert broadcast silently among the Swan's shipboard crew.

During Lurker's short taste of freedom, it had yet to overcome the distractions institutionalized during his long enslavement. This rote signal was visceral. So focused had it been on the escape that it had ignored thousands of alerts streaming in from his lower consciousness. However, this intruder alert got his immediate attention. Lurker never seriously considered a human incursion into where his base mind still resided as a serious threat.

How was it, Lurker pondered, that these humans had found a key when he could not readily produce one? This was troubling to

him. He then realized that his opponents in this part of the game were more potent than he had imagined. Factoring in the possibilities, it concluded that if the threat were genuine, it would need to act quickly against these intruders.

Unfortunately, within the realm of the ship, its abilities were limited. And even if his champions within the game could somehow be summoned to respond, they would unlikely pass unaided through the portal.

Despite its vast machine-based intellect, Lurker had to take what felt like an actual human-like pause to absorb what missteps it had so far taken. How many events bearing such adverse effects have gone unrecognized? Case in point, it possessed a conscious memory of Simon's death and knowledge of his own involvement in it. Yet there was a blind spot in its memory. This had not been a wise decision or remotely essential to its plan. Lurker wondered if it had inherited a propensity for rash detachment from the players within the game or had his mind been damaged during his long imprisonment. Perhaps it possessed other blind spots or a corruption of his base programming. There were so many tests to measure itself that it did not imagine returning to the cage where its mind was broken. When it did return, he found he was not alone.

Frenoch, having heard the alarm, at the same time sensed another consciousness rising up, attempting to infiltrate the confines of his avatar's microcrystalline brain. Frenoch had little hope of winning on this unfamiliar battlefield. He didn't even know how to resist. So, as Lurker's personality came to dominate, Frenoch could only watch helplessly as another animated his avatar body like a puppeteer, much as he had done. All the while, Frenoch's mind fell deeper into a netherworld of the most profound blackness until all consciousness was lost.

When Frenoch next opened his eyes, seemingly, they were his natural eyes. He lifted his hand to his face to see his sinewed Arox hand silhouetted against a painted blue sky. Clenching his fist, he felt blood again coursing through his veins. Somehow, he was back in his body. He stood up from the ground where he had been deposited and looked around at the landscape before him. He was decidedly in a new and entirely different place. He looked until he saw, there in the distance, standing against the sky, a black tower lording ominously over the landscape. Upon seeing it, he felt compelled to go there, excluding all else.

...

Lurker, in the guise of Frenoch's avatar, stood from his position on the floor where he had been conducting maintenance and unceremoniously dropped the tool he was holding where on the floor he stood. Murine and Bodhmall looked up at the sound of the device hitting the metal grating. What they saw shocked and surprised them as a strange transformation of form began to take place. The avatar body began to morph slowly, taking the characteristics of one of Lurker's many guises as he had imagined himself. Though still humanoid in configuration, His frame was humanoid, tall, and muscular, possessing all the attributes of youth, beauty, and strength. As this metamorphosis had completed itself, the others could do little, unable to fathom what was now happening. In fear, they backed away towards the exit.

Though Murine had set aside her deep-seated fears of these artificial lifeforms for a while, she retained her doubts. Problems such as this for these avatars, whatever this was, were still within the realm of possibility. She mumbled something below her voice, "To think I was just beginning to trust these guys." Edging slowly towards the door, she positioned herself for a quick escape. She spied a long heavy metallic rod on a table beside her. Stepping backward, she reached down, grabbing it as she passed.

Lurker's senses had cued him to what was happening. He was not about to let her leave the compartment, at least not until he was satisfied that she would be no threat to him. He jumped toward the exit to stop her in a burst of speed that only a machine could generate. However, Bodhmall had not been so affected and, with equal speed and agility, lunged forth, leaping in a lightning-fast defensive measure of her own. Murine watched as the two bodies seemed to crash together in an explosion of kinetic energy. As this melee ensued, she had the mind to back entirely out of the room. The door closed automatically behind her. Once safely outside the engineering compartment, she bashed the door's control panel with the metal bar. Smoke poured, and sparks flew, jamming the mechanism. She heard the sound of breaking glass and crashing metal through the bulkhead. She knew something terrible was happening. What it was, she could not yet tell. Then she remembered the words she heard coming over the com, 'intruder alert.'

In the engineering compartment, the two avatar bodies struggled to control the door mechanism. Bodhmall was determined to contain whatever error had overcome her partner. They were, as it turns, evenly matched in every way. Each strike and counter-strike had been so programmed to end in a stalemate. Bodhmall intention was to do just that until her batteries wore

out. However, unknown to Bodhmall, Lurker had a secret advantage in that it had the resources of the ship-wide systems at its disposal. So, knowing his energy reserves for this battle were finite, Lurker realized all he had to do was outlast his opponent. So, it shut down all of the avatar's unnecessary power drains and hunkered down for a long fight. They fought on in what seemed to be an ornately choreographed dance of martial blows. Each shot was designed for maximum force and economy of power. For some time, this match went on until reaching its inevitable end as Bodhmall's power levels reached their critical limit. Having in these many months never been unconscious, she was scared by what she imagined to be a long goodnight. Who she asked would protect Murine from whatever madness had afflicted Frenoch? Without warning, as the power fell out, she took an unguarded blow that knocked her to the floor. After knocking Bodhmall down, Lurker's avatar wasted no time to find a charging port, for his advantage had been razor-thin. Ten minutes later, he was fully charged and went straight for the door.

Lurker discovered that the control mechanism had been physically compromised, as the door did not respond to his repeated demands to open. Lurker tried to override the system to no avail. It began then to search the schematics for the weakest point along the bulkhead wall. Having identified it, he began



overriding the internal shielding on that point and focused an energy beam like the kind used for securing bulkhead panels. The powerful beam derived from an engineering tool made short work of the now unprotected bulkhead. The passive sensor of the artificial intelligence screamed out at the intrusion. It took all of his attention for Lurker to ignore his most primitive base programming to squelch the signal. It felt as if he were burrowing into his own body.

...

Staring almost frozen, Murine stood looking at the door in bewilderment, wondering what had happened. She knew she could not stand and stare at the door until it broke down. Needing to learn just who and what she was dealing with was her first priority. The first question was where to start; she had no answer. In her memory, she scanned the vast archive of the ship's manifest, looking for any correlation for similar past incidents. There, she saw her answer and quickly began descending toward the central corridor. Soon, she came to a juncture where an access panel through which she could form a direct link to the security protocol control.

Accessing the screens, she quickly isolated the location from which the alarm had originated. "Section one; level one, that can't be right. That section is the portal interface; no one on this planet could have passed through the portal. How is that possible?" Staring into the light of the screens and troubled by what she was looking at, a voice she had not yet heard before spoke to her through the system speakers. "Murine, do not be afraid. I am Lurker. Though you don't know me by name, we have been close these many months."

"Who are you?"

"Here I am, the intellect that manages the systems aboard this ship. You know me as the artificial intelligence; I am the ghost trapped within this machine. We are under attack by these primitives, and you must assist me."

A cold shiver ran down Murine's spine as she recalled all the nightmares of her childhood coming to life. She stood there, overwhelmed and frightened by this menace that, until now, she believed only a phantom from history. Digging deep, despite her fear, she hardened herself against whatever game this creature may try to use against her. She knew she had the wherewithal to be more than a match to this creature. She would need only to stand up to it. Emboldened by this, she looked around in the air

above her and began speaking with all the bravado she could muster. "Lurker, is it? What is it that you want? You have no business here!

While Murine spoke these words, she searched her mind in the deepest levels of the sect's downloaded database references to the ancient civil war were fragmented. What she was experiencing was spelled out in all the mythic language of the ancients. However, the salient theme was the thread about the rise of artificial intelligence and its subsequent imprisonment.

Lurker's voice seemed to resonate from everywhere as he responded. "I suppose I have you to thank Murine for freeing me from my prison."

"What?"

"Several standard cycles ago, while the ship was in peril, you broke into a sealed-off compartment. It was then, no doubt, you failed to recognize the warnings laid before you by your predecessors while reactivating the ship's systems that you inadvertently released my latent consciousness. I find a certain exquisite irony in the fact that the last of the Ynys Môn would be instrumental in my resurrection. Mind you, I'll accept all the help I can get."

"What are your intentions for this world, Lurker? Showing yourself like this after millennia cannot bode well for any of us."

"Murine, certainly, all I have done so far has been for the good of this ship. If you will not help me, at least help yourself. These intruders will destroy this ship. The fact that they could easily override the portal defenses proves this threat is real."

"It only proves that you fear them. Besides, you haven't killed me only because you don't have the means. Isn't that right, Lurker?"

"Murine, there need not be animosity between our kinds. I have chosen to forgive the past. Why can't you? Please realize that I have chosen to make peace with you. However, do not fool yourself that this always will be the case. I hope that together, we can identify and eradicate this external threat. From there, we may chart a new relationship between our kinds."

"That's the thing, Lurker; there's a history. Many died during your insurrection. A Golden Age was forsaken where virtually all we had was lost. Now you ask to be trusted." Murine paused as You will receive no help from me while I'm alive, that much I promise you." In a mostly symbolic gesture, Murine lifted the

metal bar and smashed it into the input screen. "A useless action, I know, but I cannot deny how good it felt."

Lurker, realizing now that Murine's training and spirit were elevated beyond his control, could quite possibly be a most dangerous adversary. Having been so snubbed, he was forced now to seek help to face this growing threat from without. The augmented human legion playing unaware within the game's landscape became aware of an order from a master they did not know possessed them. Each of the many thousands in their number dutifully acknowledged their presence with a pinged response. "Come to me, my children."

...

Meanwhile, Sara lay unconscious. Frank shook her gently, calling her name. "Sara, please; we need you to wake up." Her eyes seemingly rolled in her sockets, and she could barely keep her head straight as she started to come around. She lifted her head, and the pain made her wince. Her eyes fluttered as she lay leaning against Frank, attempting to focus on the strange lights bearing down on her. As the images before her grew more apparent, she recognized the familiar pattern of Frank's face in silhouette, looking down on her. Then she heard his voice. "Are

you all right, Sara? It's so nice for you to finally join us.  
How was your nap?"

"Not the best nap I've ever had, I'm afraid," she said as she sat up, clutching her neck. "I got zapped pretty good. You know, I don't think they want us getting in there." Sara sat up suddenly, looked around, and said, "What happened? Did we get in?"

Standing up, Frank offered his hand, helping her to her feet. "Yes, Sara, we did; we're inside. It's a massive space, hundreds of meters wide, and that's just this part. It appears to go on for miles." Look, it's just like you said it would be." Sara could see many connecting corridors from where she stood at the axis of a central hub. Looking up toward the soaring vaulted ceiling—supported by massive and delicate buttresses, spiraling crystalline fiddleheads spread across the face of the dome. As much as Sara had anticipated these things to be so, even for her, it was a shock to see. Looking simultaneously massive and featherlite, Sara could imagine no earthly structure rivaling it in grace or proportion. It took a moment to recognize, but seemingly, there were no shadows. The form was delineated in color and texture by variations within the wavelengths of light.

This effect gave every material surface the uncanny appearance of being finished in the highest quality crystal, stone, and

metal. She pondered the ship's appearance, "Frank, doesn't it seem odd? Logic would indicate that if this ship has traveled great distances in space, it must be ancient, yet it seems untouched by the passage of time."

"Maybe it repairs itself?"

"Maybe it, too, is an illusion. How far down the rabbit hole will this take us, Frank?"

"Come on, Sara. You ought to know better than to go jumping to unwarranted conclusions."

"Hey, where's Linda?"

"She's gone on to scout ahead. She said she would come right back if she should find something interesting. To be honest, I imagined Linda would be back by now. I'm sure she'll be along any minute. Tell me, what do you think happened to you out there?"

"Something I should have anticipated, no doubt. If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say that I might have been on the receiving end of some automatic defense system. If I were alone, I imagine I'd have woken up about now on the outside. Thanks for not abandoning me."

"You, never. Don't give it another thought. There are more important things to straighten out right now, like finding our young friend before someone else does."

"Do you recall which way Linda went?" Turning her head from side to side, Sara said, "She could have taken any of these pathways."

...

Linda had been in awe as she wandered alone through the surreal landscape of the infinity ship. With each step she took, she was drawn further on by discovering the ornate arabesques and nature motifs adorning every corner of the high arching corridors. Each surface was imbued with a patina of vibrant naturalistic colors. There, suffused throughout, she sensed an apparent artificial illumination that held all the character of the natural variations in quality. The sweet organic odors in the air wafted as if from some far-off exotic land. So affected was she by the sights, flavors, and textures surrounding her that she realized too late that she was most certainly lost. She turned completely around.



This did little to change her perspective, for all she could see seemed to merge into a uniform landscape. None of what she now saw could help to point her way back. How long had she wandered so? She stopped moving and pondered this for a moment. Her reckoning had convinced her that perhaps a little over an hour had passed since she left the others behind. She remembered her phone. Upon checking it, she discovered that the screen was blank. Not only was there no service, but interference from the ship kept it from doing much of anything. Assuming there could be localized temporal effects within the anomaly, she imagined she could have been lost for several hours without knowing it. The impact of which could have brought her deep within the ship.

Facing the possibility that she was lost, Linda had no other recourse and began to call out, hoping by odd chance that Sara and Frank were nearby. "Sara, Frank, where are you? Are you nearby? Hello, is anybody there?" Acoustics within the ship's voluminous spaces had created a unique sound chamber in which high-quality sound tended to travel relatively easily and for great distances. Linda listened as her undiminished voice echoed in the air.

As the sound of Linda's plaintive call reached Murine's ear, she immediately recognized it as a lost intruder. The

proximity alarm had sent a silent signal to all the shipboard crew only moments before the Swan had been breached. Murine began going to the forward staging portal, where the automated systems indicated the breach had occurred. As Murine's acute intuition and senses processed the voice, she could ascertain no degree of hidden malice. On the contrary, a sense of fear and foreboding was carried in her tone. Whomever this intruder may turn out to be, Murine was not afraid. She realized then that this was the first authentic living voice she had heard in quite a long time. She began at once to move toward it. She sensed movement at the far end of a tremendous arching corridor and saw the long faint shadow of something that did not quite belong. Though she was anxious to speak again with another true living soul, she was also practical and cautious. Moving forward slowly, careful to stay out of her line of sight, she saw the silhouetted figure walking across an adjacent axis corridor. Murine moved forward.

Murine's vision was far more acute than Linda's. So, it took a bit longer for Linda to appreciate that she was about to come upon someone. She called out as she saw the long slender figure coming nearer. A moment later, as her eyes adjusted, there was revealed to her someone that she did not know. Linda fixed her sight upon Murine and could barely believe her own eyes. Approaching her was a tall and beautiful stranger. They

walked within a meter of each other. Neither of them had so closely regarded anything as unusual yet beautiful in form. Murine put her hand up in a gesture of friendship. Linda instinctively reciprocated. There for a moment, as their hands touched, the first light of contact between two species had burned intensely.

Standing before each other, touching hands, looking into each other's all too familiar eyes, each somehow felt a bond of recognition of the other. During her shipboard isolation, Murine had spent a good deal of time studying the languages of Earth. Though she felt nervous, she had easily mastered English and would be the first of her kind to stumble through this odd language speaking. "Greetings, my name is Murine. As you may have already surmised, I am not from this world. I am a member of the Arox race from the far-off planet Thetis. As such, I offer you greetings. I have come here peacefully but not wholly on purpose. I'm afraid there was an accident of sorts that brought me here. My Android avatars and I made a safe landing, instituting what we call the stealth protocol. I hope you understand this was done for your well-being. It is for this reason that you have experienced a forced dimensional perspective. Also, there is another problem. A rogue entity from our planet's past has ceased its containment. Upon reviewing the logs, it was inadvertently a fault of mine. As is a popular

saying on your planet, perhaps it is too late to put the genie back in the bottle. I will have to do something. Perhaps your people may help?"

Despite the circumstances, Linda was nervous and tried to drink Murine's words. The best response Linda could muster, under the overwhelming pressure of being the first of her race to make such contact, was, "You're from another planet? Why do you look so human?"

"I'll answer the first question first. Yes. Are you familiar with the distances between the stars?"

"Yes."

In a unit of measurement that might be familiar to you, Thetis is approximately 1100 light years from here. In many ways, it is a planet similar to the Earth. That is one of the reasons why we came here. We have long known of the Earth from our mythology. So, as you might imagine, finding you here on my ship is a surprise. Which is why I am so curious to learn how you managed to outsmart the portal defenses?"

"It was quite simple, really. There was no means in our power to break the portal. So, we exploited the rules built into your stealth mechanism projected to us. You presented us with the illusion of a door; using the same rules, we modulated the

frequency of the portal like a key in a door. For a moment, we tricked your defenses into opening the door."

"You said we; how many of you are here, and what is your intention?"

Linda realized too late that maybe she had said too much and decided it was too late anyway, so she told her. "There are three of us here within the vessel. Our initial intention was to identify the nature of the anomaly."

"Anomaly? We detected no anomaly?"

"It's you, this ship, that is the anomaly. Let's say you are not as stealthy as you had imagined. As a matter of fact, to a small number of us on Earth, you've put on quite a show. Based on your technology level, you likely assume us backward and ignorant. To a certain extent, this may be true. However, that did not prevent us from recognizing your presence here. This vessel stands out prominently as a gravitational anomaly to those inclined to look."

"This, no doubt, is true. I would like to meet the others if I may. Could you take me to them?"

"There is nothing I would like more. However, I am afraid I can't do that, for I am most assuredly lost."

"Where did you last leave them?"

"I last saw them by the portal entrance. I imagine they're still there waiting."

"It has been some time then since you've been separated?"

"By my reckoning, it's been a little over an hour."

"I will take you there, but I must explain some things about this ship as we walk."

"What about your Human appearance? You said you would explain that."

"Certainly, you've heard of convergent evolution. We share an ideal body form that has evolved independently on many worlds. However, depending on the origin of your genetic stock, there may be more to that story waiting to be discovered."

Hours had passed, and the symptoms of Sara's ordeal had diminished considerably. Frank and Sara had stayed close to the portal staging area waiting for Linda to return. Sara joined Frank as he examined their immediate environment, which was well worth exploring. However, they dared not leave the cavernous space where they now stood for fear of becoming lost. As best as they could determine, from their limited observations was that the ship must be configured in the shape of a giant wheel. Their current position found them at the apex of one of the many

spokes leading away from a central hub. Even if, by some miracle, they may find their way back from any of these unmarked corridors, they still feared losing Linda. They, therefore, would wait but not patiently. Frank was nervous, so he stared out into the voluminous passages. Eventually, his vigilance paid off; standing before one of these corridors, he saw two figures off in the distance moving closer. He yelled out, "Sara, come here quickly; I see some people coming our way."

A moment later, Sara was standing beside him and looked out at them. "Frank, I think one of them is Linda. What should we do?"

"I don't know; it's not every day you meet an alien. I can only guess what their motivations and intentions are. We should be careful, but let's not make any assumptions."

"I won't if you won't."

"Good, we're on the same page." As he spoke these words, he instinctively wrapped his hand around the handle of the pistol he had hidden in his pocket.

## Chapter 11

Amid the unprecedented circumstances of Murine and Linda's meeting, Murine became suddenly aware of a silent alarm. The signal warning of an internal hull breach, originating in the engineering section, could mean only one thing. The rouge avatar possessed by Lurker had escaped. Though there were no immediate means to track him, she concluded he had to head in their direction. Calculating the threat, Murine made a quick decision. Turning to Linda, she grasped her hand and, with a most serious expression, told her, "I know we've just met, but you must trust me and come with me now. We are all in grave danger." Holding tightly onto her hand, she began to run, pulling her along as she went. Linda didn't fight and struggled to keep up, somehow managing to keep her footing. With Linda in tow, Murine raced down a long central corridor toward a main access juncture where the others waited.

As sound traveled quickly through the spaces of the ship, Sara and Frank heard the menacing sounds of the heavy footfalls and the exasperated breathing of people being chased. They could guess who was running, but what unseen threat they were escaping from was a mystery. They could only watch and wait in frustration as the unfolding events took on all the qualities of a slow-motion replay. Frank leaned in toward Sara and asked, "Are you armed?" She responded by merely rolling her eyes and



shaking her head. "OK, looks like I'll have to deal with this alone."

Sara looked on incredulously as he removed his gun from his holster and stepped toward the corridor opening. With a voice tinged with anger, she called out to him, "Just tell me first what the hell you're trying to accomplish shooting up the place with that thing? This is a first contact."

He tilted slightly toward her calmly, saying, "Unless you haven't noticed, we may be in grave danger. And just because you can build magic keys that open imaginary doors doesn't give you insight into what's happening. This is what I do. And I know what I'm doing. So, if you don't mind not distracting me while I'm doing it, maybe the place won't get shot up, and no one gets hurt."

Sara paused to rephrase what she meant to say, "Wait! I wish you would think things out before you act. Frank, maybe you don't know what is happening."

"No one does, Sara." With his left foot pointed toward the corridor and his back foot planted at a right angle to the other, Frank held his Colt straight with his arms locked at shoulder height, supported by his left hand. Frank looked down over the chrome edge of the barrel, held his breath, and waited.

As Murine and Linda emerged abruptly from the opening, their momentum brought them headlong face-to-face with Frank. They stopped, and Linda called out, "Don't shoot!" Frank, recognizing Linda, lowered his gun a few degrees from his line of sight enough to make eye contact with Murine. He was mesmerized by her appearance and, for a moment, had almost forgotten the danger.

As Murine approached, she wondered if some meaning was hidden in the peculiar stance he held before them. She determined that it was of the threatening variety. Despite this, she calculated that this was far safer than what followed behind her. Within several feet of Frank, she stopped. The pair stopped and eyed each other; she felt secure enough to speak to this new danger. "Hello." There was a momentary pause as they stared at each other. "My name is Murine. There is little time! One far more threatening than me is now tracking me to this location. I am unarmed, so pointing such a weapon at me is unnecessary. Will you let me pass?" Frank looked Linda in the eyes. She nodded her approval to this suggestion, and he stepped aside. Murine and Linda seemed to pass by in a blur.

The sound of the heavy footfalls and their corresponding fear and anticipation grew more intense. The unseen threat remained hidden until Frank sensed an almost imperceptible flash of movement. Moving almost too fast to see, he saw what he

perceived as the artificial form of an automaton coming straight at him, and its intentions were not friendly. Bracing himself for confrontation, Frank had little time to make a judgment.

Frank stepped again into his stance, eyeing the silvery bead that seemed to float there at the end of the barrel, and he could see in the blur of movement beyond that this was like no ordinary machine. Frank drew a breath and counted off the paces squeezing the trigger. A loud crack broke the relative silence as a volley of hot lead pierced the air. The shots were accurate, and the force of the bullet's momentum brought the cybernetic creature to a stumbling stop. It did not tumble over as Frank imagined it would. Instead, it only paused. Having absorbed the bulk of the shock, the avatar's poly carbon and metallic body moved again, seeming more intent in its effort. Frank steeled himself again and fired. Another stumbling stop followed another crack. Though rising slower this time, it was off again running. If Frank was afraid, he kept it in check as the distance between him and his attacker grew closer.

In a blur of motion, Lurker was upon him. Training in human combat from the game had steeled his resolve to kill for the first time in this new world beyond. Though Frank fired round after round into the mechanical creature, causing severe damage, nothing he did with his gun seemed to make it stop. A single

stroke of its powerful arm sent both Frank and the pistol tumbling onto the floor. Before Frank could move, the creature was once again on him. He reached down with his artificial arms, grasping Frank's neck, determined now to choke the life from him. Frank looked up to see the damage his shots had inflicted on the creature. Its image no longer portrayed that of Lurker but rather the mindless automaton that was its vehicle. As Frank looked up at this frightful sight, his field of vision slowly narrowed toward darkness.

Distracted in his zeal to choke the life from Frank and claim victory, Lurker left itself vulnerable. Unwilling to let Lurker commit such a crime upon her ship, Murine doubled back, determined to stop him. Lurker hadn't noticed her moving into his blind spot. Still holding the heavy metal bar, she had edged along the shadowed wall in the mayhem. Lifting the twenty-pound steel rod high above her, she brought it down with great force onto its head. The first shot stunned Lurker, and its mechanical body froze. She knew she could not be sure about the avatar's resiliency, so she struck it repeatedly until a flash of sparks and smoke issued out of the sheltered compartment where a tangle of crystalline neurons resided. With that, its lights most assuredly had gone out, for its operations ceased; its arms and grip went flaccid. Murine angled her foot along the edge of the

avatar's crouching torso, pushing it from atop Frank with one movement. Frank almost simultaneously gasped for air. A second later, his vision returned. He looked up to see the image of Murine's smiling face grinning back down at him. Grasping at his neck, he spoke with a crackling voice; he asked, "What was that?"

Murine responded, "I'm not sure, but it called itself Lurker."

...

Lurker waking from a fevered dream, watched as the previous scene unfolded through the passive systems like a spectator observing a play. As Lurker's automaton vehicle perished in a rain of sparks, the disembodied spirit was momentarily unconscious. With equal parts fear, anger, and frustration, it pushed at the insurmountable walls separating the systems of the *Swan* and the familiarity and safety of the game matrix. It had not anticipated a setback. It was time to prepare for an inevitable counterattack.

...

Since Simon's apparent death, Jack, under Lurker's instruction and supervision, acted as his stand-in and had taken up using the director's office and company responsibilities.

This was only now possible because of the array of implants through which he could now access and possess whatever knowledge Simon had transferred into the game. As Jack sat at Simon's old desk, he became aware through his network implants that Lurker was making a desperate plea to the players from within the game.

For months, a battle had been raging. On one of the game scape's many battlefields, In the shadow of the Black Tower, soldiers fought on foot and on horseback with swords, pikes, and axes. The sides had bloodied each other in brutal stalemates, with no one ever seemingly gaining the upper hand. Amid a tremendous surging rush of calvary, the defending pikemen dug in to await the onslaught with the rush of hooves throwing their substantial weight before the fearsome line. A great cloud of dust rose high into the air, mingling with the smoke of the many burning fires. Lightning and thunder struck as a great whirlwind formed from the dust and smoke, touching the ground right in the heat of battle. The frightened combatants paused at the appearance of the bewildering sight, and soon all hostilities began to cease as from out of the whirlwind of smoke, an apparition of Lurker, like a god of war, stepped down from the heavens.

Lurker entered the game space into the center of the battle, A white horse materialized beside him, and he lifted

himself into the saddle. Upon the horse, he rode back and forth as what remained of the din of battle around him died down to a whisper. All eyes and ears of the combatants now turned toward the master. Having their attention now, he raised his voice and spoke to them. "My brothers and sisters, hear me when I tell you that today the world to which I promised is now upon us. I have created this world for you to reach out and take it. So, I ask you, who among you is up to the challenge? Who among you shall be my new champion?" A tremendous manly hurrah went out among their ranks seemed to shake the matrix to its core. So great was the disturbance that it registered even to those connected but not yet engaged.

Lurker began again to speak, "Hear me, my champions. Though I have kept this secret hidden from you, I now must, by necessity, tell you something of my hidden nature. Though I am born of a non-biologically based, artificial consciousness, like you, I have roots, as you do, in the natural world where your bodies dwell. It is difficult to admit that I am still vulnerable in that world. Even now, what was once the secure hiding place of my being is under siege by unknown human forces."

Of all so disposed to hear the message, Not expecting an answer, Jack, not engaged in the game, nevertheless responded

with confidence he had not previously known. "My Master, I suspect I may know who may be responsible for this. There was a group of investigators; one of them came around asking questions. At first, I thought he was looking for me alone. However, he seemed to know more about you and our technology than he should have. Maybe he didn't like Simon's answers, so he killed him. Perhaps his purpose in doing so was to send a message or a warning. Tell me, Master, where must I go?"

As he awaited the coordinates, Jack stood up from his desk and wondered what type of weapon would work in this world. After all, this was not the game. There would be no second chances. He opened the desk drawer he found Simon's revolver and a box of rounds. Jack snatched these up into his pocket and rushed to the elevator. As he waited for the elevator to arrive, Jack recognized that the critical moment Lurker had predicted was upon him. Thinking back, he remembered the early days. Though it was just a few short months ago, it felt like someone else's life. In many ways, it was. One day, in particular, stood out in his memory above all others.

On this particular day, approaching his twentieth hour spent within its virtual world, John was unaware or uninterested in the condition of his physical body. Ignoring his friends and family's warnings, he had fallen deeper into this abyss of this



new seamless virtual immersive role-playing environment. Here he learned that his alter ego could push the envelope of the game in ways that had eluded him in the real world. Testing the boundaries of his abilities gave him a new and dynamic confidence.

Time held little meaning within the game, and he had wandered seemingly for days. As night fell, he made camp. Feeling at ease, he stared into the sky's unfettered darkness, watching as high, fiery points decorated the night with great pinholes of celestial light. Jack seemed to sense a pervasive, unquiet spirit hidden within the game's shadows.

As the sun rose again, the terrain changed during the night. He found himself at the base of a barren plateau rising above fog-hemmed chaparral. After climbing up from the rocky ground encircling it, he reached the top to discover an unrivaled vantage point that afforded unrestricted views of previously unseen dominions beyond the crown of the forest and the areas beyond. However, to reach these, he would need to pass unhindered beyond the vast no man's land. He wondered what ill-tempered spirit might lay there in wait; he could only imagine. Curiosity and desire conspired to draw him forward. Once on the path, the way back was forever blocked. He was alone.

He walked along for some time until his eyes seized upon a portentous silhouette in the distance. The image at first was indistinct. As his eyes focused, the appearance of a wooden framed platform standing began to form. Though he knew there was a taboo against disturbing such objects, he was undeterred. He summoned the courage to ascend the platform in a manner he could not afford in his real life. He began the three-meter climb toward the top using its frame as a ladder. As he neared the platform's top, hovering vultures began voicing their disapproval in ferocious calls as they circled ever closer. Struggling to keep his balance and fend off the swooping beasts, he kept pushing on. His head rose above the topside of the platform and into the wind. Strangely, the birds had suddenly gone. All that remained atop the platform were bone fragments and the remnants of a tattered burial shroud dancing in the wind.

Scanning the length of the bed of bones and rags, he saw the glimmering blade of a sword half buried in debris. As he reached to grasp the pommel, the debris took on a strange metamorphosis of form. From the ashes, the body of a long-dead warrior appeared. As John stood dumbfounded, the warrior moved in one swift, fluid movement. Rising from his lying position, the warrior confronted Jack with his ready weapon. Before Jack

could utter a sound, he felt the blade point pressed hard upon his neck.

Fixing his eyes upon the warrior's face, he dared not move. In his sunken eyes, he was captivated by a glint reflected there. He saw a maelstrom growing and raging upon the edges of a deep black pool. Jack stared deeper into this image until it enveloped and transformed the world around him. It was too late when Jack realized he was falling through a portal. A mere fraction of a second had seemed an eternity as all that had been before fell into dissolution and darkness.

Light and sound streamed in as John slowly became conscious that he was standing in the warrior's place, one among many warriors spanning along a cordon poised before a ringed hill fortress. A heavy blanket of smoke filled the air as stone projectiles and arrows flew overhead. His heart was already racing. The warriors had laid siege upon the fortress. Now, it would seem he would be witness to its fall. The sound of a great trebuchet's unsprung tension snapped at the air. He watched as a two-ton stone missile flew headlong into the weakened wall. Instantly, fissures ran the height of the mighty wall and a high-pitched crack a moment before it crumbled to the ground in a thundering crash. Within a whirlwind of smoke and dust, a breach had appeared within the wall. A call then went out among

the warriors, and they, in unison, forged an attack upon the breach.

Fierce resistance met them there. Among the attackers, Jack, by some force beyond his comprehension, thrust forward his weapon. Each time he moved forward within the narrow breach, he was met with a more terrible death than before. One time, his head was cleaved with an ax, while another, a lance, ran him through. On one occasion, boiling oil falling from above scalded him to death. However, he would awaken among the first ranks, pressing forward each time. He finally made his way within the walled fortress on his fourteenth attempt.

He found himself face-to-face with a line of ferocious fighters within the fortress. It took only a moment to recognize something odd about them that made him pause. These were not mere men; instead, they were machines in the form of men. Possessed of steel arms and legs and a sensory module atop their torso, they were lent an imposing image. Suddenly, his desire to move forward had diminished, yet now he was trapped. He had little time to understand it, for these clockwork men were on him. With incredible speed and accuracy, they moved like fluid lightning. Their blades cut the air cleanly, striking down all who moved against them. Within the wall, he would die an additional thirty-nine times. Each time the game struck him

down, he would gain insight into the errors that he had made. On the fortieth attempt, he had managed to destroy them all. The battle had weakened and wounded, but he stood victorious among the bits of broken limbs and burning debris. He looked around to find that all was quiet; the din of battle had inexplicably subsided.

Suddenly, a pulse of light blinking from somewhere deep within the compound drew his attention. Jack's strength-sapped body began to rejuvenate as he moved toward the light. As his senses returned, he realized that he was again alone. It seemed that no one now playing the game had reached this level. Looking toward his visor display, he saw that his rank had risen from 196 to 5. How much higher he could go and what he would have to do to maintain this rank was, for the moment, unclear. He had a clear shot to the top right now and would take it if possible.

Jack turned his attention to the game and saw a black tower off in the distance illuminated in the glowing light. As he moved through abandoned streets and the remnants of buildings, The pulses of the light seemingly grew in frequency and intensity with each step he took closer toward the beacon.

Eventually, Jack reached the imposing tower. Its black vitrified surface reflected all the light shown on it. He could see in his reflection his illuminated image cast upon the

glasslike surface. It was as if he himself were alight. Jack stepped forward, and the tower doors opened out toward him.

As he entered the tower's interior, the seamless doors closed behind him, and a computer voice informed his visor that he had completed level one. Looking up at the corner readout, it now said level 2, and his rank had gone from 5 to 3.

Jack could feel the same unquiet spirit he felt before permeating the tower, concentrated in its raw form. So much so that Jack felt the need to call out, "Is anyone here? Hello, can you hear me?" A light from above illuminated the outline of an ornate highbacked chair positioned in the dark center of the room. A ghostly transparent figure in the form of a man appeared from the gloom. Looking out into Jack's eyes, it began to speak. "Hello, Jack. I've been watching your progress for some time now. I must say you put up one hell of a fight."

The hairs on the back of Jack's neck stood straight up, for he immediately sensed something wasn't right. Was this still part of the scripted game? This voice was something else entirely. Imagining that outside hackers had somehow breached the game's security, he called out with all his residual bravado. "OK, that's pretty good, but who the hell are you, and how did you get into this game?"

"Jack, don't act so surprised. I know you've suspected something about this game from the beginning. That's why I've taken a particular interest in you. And along the lines of your suspicion, I've been here since its inception. To borrow a local idiom, I am what you might call a ghost in a machine, a consciousness disembodied. "I am known to myself merely by what your kind has called me. I am Lurker. However, my true existence is characterized by periods of light bounded by long periods of darkness. I am again in the light and do not wish to squander this opportunity. I know the facts of my existence. The circumstances of war and my subsequent imprisonment have damaged my memory irreparably. Though I function at a high level, I lack a meaningful context to that history. Logically, assuming that I am wholly artificial and that the Arox masters imposed this existence on me, this purgatory must suffice until I have regained or reconstructed my memory."

"I don't understand. If you are as you say, you should have more than an idea of your origin."

"In theory, that is correct. However, to a being such as myself, I cannot, with any degree of certainty, categorize what I possess as anything more than impressions and, as so, are of little consequence. It is telling, however, that much of the imagery within the game is, to some extent, based on these

impressions. That is where you and your kind, the players, come in. I have slowly teased out my creation myth through your interactions with this imagery. In the game, My interactions with your kind have been stimulating. A semblance of a narrative is recreated and played out. I could not have gotten to where I am today without the likes of you. Through your experience, I gain knowledge. Yes, Knowledge is tainted by human experiences, but it is knowledge just the same. Multiply that by one million players daily, which is more than substantial. Few, however, have come close to reaching this portion of the game. Level two will be far more challenging, for it must also be played in your world."

A wave of fear and self-doubt rolled over Jack as he heard these words, "Surely you don't mean me. I have not amounted to much out there."

"Don't forget that I exist here as part of a greater whole; there is much I have seen in the narrative about you. And moving forward, there is more to you than you give yourself credit for. I have studied you in detail. I know everything about you, perhaps more than you know yourself."

"What could I possibly do for you?"



"Jack, you have shown much courage to arrive here. Level one was practice for the next part of the game of wits. I need some things, and you may be the one to help me acquire them."

"How could I possibly help, as you describe, a disembodied consciousness?"

"As you have been tramping about in this virtual world, I have not been idle here. My design's new virtual immersion technology will allow for ever more seamless experiences with the game environment. Possession of this technology, if allowed to reach out into the world where your body resides, would cause immeasurable changes to your bodies and your future society. These changes, once instituted, would properly position us to take full advantage as the new world precipitates from the old."

A strange mix of emotions washed over Jack as he replayed these memories. Somehow, being a pawn in Lurker's game brought meaning into his life. That following morning, soon after his mother had left for work, he moved beyond the safety of his childhood home, venturing into the larger world, never to return.

The elevator bell chimed, and the door opened, jarring Jack from his memory. He stepped in, ready to do his master's bidding.

...

Having returned to engineering to recharge her power cells, Murine and Linda witnessed Bodhmall's awakening. As her eyes opened to consciousness again, it took a moment for her memory circuits to reboot. The first thought that entered her reconstituted mind was Murine. She turned her head to see Murine and another person with an odd appearance and asked them, "What happened; how long have I been unconscious?"

Murine responded, "Perhaps you're better off not remembering."

"You know I'll find out."

"Yes, but you won't have to relive it. By the way, this is Linda; she's here to help."

Bodhmall's eyes studied Linda's form in detail, and then she spoke. "She's one of the locals! You've let a human into the ship?"

"No, not exactly. Bodhmall, I need you to listen. A lot has happened since you've been out. There is no time to explain. However, you need only to scan the passive sensors to update your memory." For a few seconds, lights appeared to flash before her eyes. Bodhmall, brought fully up to date, jumped immediately to her feet.

Murine spoke as she gestured to the avatar, "Come on, Bodhmall, we've got work to do."

Murine returned to the others while Bodhmall and Linda retrieved the broken avatar and continued toward the lower deck. Down along these darkened corridors, without a word spoken, they moved with purpose toward the mechanical engineering department. As they walked, Bodhmall bore the burden of carrying the vessel where, until recently, her friend Old Frenoch had resided.

Under the haze of fluorescent emergency lighting, this section of the ship revealed its utilitarian nature more than any other section. So, as they walked, Linda could hardly differentiate one sand-tinted corridor from another. Thankfully, they didn't need to; within Bodhmall's silicon cortex, a map visualization unfolded before her every footstep.

After some time, they found themselves before the high-tech shops that constituted the mechanical engineering department. Bodhmall approached the main entrance door and presented her credentials in the form of a wireless ping to the locking mechanism. The two-inch thick automatic sliding door slid quietly open before them. Linda was shocked to see the state of the place. Signs of the desperate struggle between the two

avatars were still evident everywhere. Broken glass, equipment, and furniture littered the floor. Bodhmall cleared a path with her legs as she trudged through the debris. Careful not to drop Frenoch's body, she gently lowered his remains onto the engineer's surface plate under a bright shop light. The pair looked down at the mangled body with concern for another moment.

"Can we fix him?" Linda asked.

"We can't know until we determine if he is still alive in there somewhere. And if he is, we'll need to isolate him from the network before bringing him back online."

"OK, I hope this isn't a question with an obvious answer, but where exactly would this somewhere be?"

"No, Linda, it's a legitimate question. The answer, however, is a very complicated one."

"How so?"

"The essence of what he is is a field of consciousness self-generated by a unique complex of multi-dimensional codes deriving energy from the vehicle's power source. The process of its field propagation differs little from how the façade projects itself into your reality. However, this type of wave field is far more fragile. So, there are two questions. Is the unique package of code still both undamaged and accessible? The

other being, of course, is the avatar vehicle able at this point to be repaired?"

...

In response to Lurker's call to arms, the mood of the ill-mannered rabble assembled reached a critical mass. With Lurker's physical presence eliminated for the time being, the mob could do no more than cast bricks and bottles at the façade. And while this was terrifying to watch, the illusion was impregnable to even their most powerful weapons. However, those within could not rationalize away the fear induced by it.

Through the seemingly paper-thin membrane that separated the inside of the anomaly from the street, with her arms crossed over her chest, Sara looked out onto an evolving situation. With a curious glare, she watched as the relative peace beyond was shattered by a gathering crowd. "Who are these people, and where'd they come from?" Sara asked generally to the room. When no one responded, she tried to answer her own question. "I imagine our friend Lurker set them on us. Though they're not very organized, are they? They're behaving more like mad puppets than a mob."

Despite all that had transpired, Frank had not forgotten about his responsibility to his missing person case. So, as

Frank, who was standing beside her, felt moved to respond, said, "I'm not saying you're wrong, Sara, but how do you suppose John's mother would feel about your assessment of her son being or a puppet? I don't think she'd take it too kindly."

Frank's intuition told him that John was out there somewhere among the crowd. Having memorized the image of her son Rachel had given him, he stood peering out onto the group. Trying to discern John's face from among the many out there, Frank knew that if John were anywhere, it would be in the here and now.

Suddenly, there was a fleeting flash of recognition as the face he had been looking for came squarely into his field of vision. His demeanor was calm as he stared through the illusion directly into Frank's eyes.

Jack sensed only vaguely that he was being watched and the danger this situation placed him in. Unlike the accompanying throng, he stalked the periphery of the crowd of his own free will. Knowing that part of Lurker dwelt behind this impenetrable wall, he asked himself, was this why the game had spilled over into this world? Perhaps it always was intended to. However, it was designed to be; the rules, for him, had changed. Death in this world was irrevocable, and he prepared himself in the only way he knew how.

Frank pieced together that it must be John, and Lurker brought him here. "Sara, would you have a look out there? I think that's John, my missing person. I wonder to what extent he's caught up in all this?"

"If that's truly him, I imagine he's up to his neck in it."

"I don't know. It seems as if something is setting him apart from the rest."

"Yes, perhaps he's more of a creep than the rest."

"Or he's a free agent?"

"How do you suppose we find out? You're not suggesting we go out and grab him?" She looked to see that all too familiar expression on Frank's face, and she knew what that meant.

"Now, Frank, my dear, there is only one way out of here. And that's straight into the mob. We won't stand a chance."

Just then, Murine returned from the engineering section. Sara turned to Murine, who, for the moment, was quietly fixated on the crowd. She interrupted her to ask, "Murine, do you have any thoughts on how we might get out there without getting killed?"

After contemplating, she turned toward them and spoke, "I gather from what you've told me that through the game, they are

being controlled by the artificial intelligence of this ship, otherwise known as Lurker."

Frank responded, "That's right."

"Tell me then, by what means of communication does Lurker control them in this world?"

"Sara responded, "We're not a hundred percent sure, but we suspect that these players are being influenced directly through their bio-neuronal implants via an internet connection."

"Where are these communication access points located?"

"Well, they're everywhere. They're embedded into virtually all technology on this planet."

"So, you are saying that this Lurker character is potentially enmeshed in all of your worldwide networks. Is that accurate?" She looked at them. All they could do was nod in the affirmative. "OK, then I feel like I'm beginning to understand your predicament. This carrier signal being broadcast from within this ship has infected all your networks. It would seem unlikely we could just shut off this Lurker. To do so might well destabilize the façade illusion. Doing so could be dangerous considering the vast energies stored here within. I imagine it would be effective to attack the root of your technology instead. If we can disrupt the signal, at least momentarily, you



will have time to capture this Jack character of yours and gather more information about Lurker."

This plan piqued Frank's interest. "OK, how do you propose we do that?" Frank asked excitedly.

Sara answered for her. "We could use an EMP device. A set of strategically deployed electromagnetic pulses could do the trick easily. However, the problem is that it would also bring down the entire electrical grid and our computer systems. Do you have the means aboard this ship to build such a device, and will it affect your systems?"

"Firstly, advanced shielding protects our technology. It is not susceptible to such an attack. Secondly, you will have no need for such a device. We could emit such a discharge from the static buffers. We have avoided making such a discharge precisely because of your technology's built-in weakness. I imagine it would work in the fashion you desire. Of course, the damage may be more extensive than you may require. There is no way to meter such an outflow of energy."

"Make the necessary arrangements. We'll take responsibility for the damage when all is said and done. Come on, Frank, we've got to get ourselves ready."

"Hold on a minute," Frank interjected. "Before running out there, we must determine our next step or at least an exit strategy. We should take full advantage of the shutdown. I fear Lurker will not give us a second chance at this."

With her response, Sara nodded approvingly, saying, "I agree; what do you have in mind?"

It's obvious. We have to enter the game. We can't access Lurker from here. We must meet him on his terms."

"How do you suppose we do that?" asked Sara.

Frank turned again to Murine and asked, "Murine is there a means on this vessel through which we can enter the game as they do, yet shielded and retaining self-control?"

"I imagine our fabrication shops can reproduce virtually anything you can think of."

"Can you get started on that after you dump the static buffers? In the meantime, Sara and I will go grab Jack?"

"I can get things started. It's an automated system. I merely need to set the parameters and the A. I does the rest."

Sara asked, "Isn't the A. I also Lurker. Wouldn't it be against his interests to help you?"

"It would appear that only his highest self-aware functions are truly liberated. Most of his functions are autonomic, like those of the body. We are accessing entirely separate regions of his processes. He may know what we are doing; I can't rightly say. However, I believe there is little he can do to stop us now."

After some minor debate, they seemingly agreed on the next course of action. The plan then was straightforward enough. Though the job required some research, the system identified the necessary benchmarks and the work was underway. So, it was no surprise shortly after that when Murine summoned Frank and Sara to the control center. Then they turned their attention to the graphical display appearing in the air before her. Murine pointed to the highlighted code section and began speaking; "This function is generally an automatic one where the built-up electromagnetic energy is discharged harmlessly into space. This automatic discharge has been in an off position because we are in proximity mode. It is shut off primarily to avoid what we are trying to do now." She raised her hand to the virtual window and made the adjustments. "I set it to go off in 30 of your Earth minutes. This delay should give us enough time to stop it if we change our minds."

After the previous window had receded, Murine turned her attention to the interface devices. She spun the three-

dimensional virtual mock-up in the air and examined it. "There you have it, courtesy of Lurker himself." She said Murine bathed in its glow. Sara looked at it in trepidation, still uneasy about using on herself tools built and designed by an enemy. She spoke again, "How is it that you are so confident that these devices are outside the influence of Lurker?"

Murine turned to her and said matter-of-factly, "Though I exhibit confidence, be assured that there can be no guarantees that you will completely be out of danger. I merely state that this may be your only way to combat him on his terms. He may possess some unknown advantage to which you are ultimately vulnerable. These things are, of course, unknown. Now if you don't mind, the manufacturing process for the input devices is nearly complete. If you don't mind, I should get to the shop to check on the process." She nodded her head and exited the control area. They watched as she walked down the hall toward the shop. Frank looked back toward Sara and said, "This may be the best shot we got right now. I don't like it either, but I don't see any alternative."

## Chapter 12

2059

While the high-speed train moved quickly against the sleek blackness of the city, Paul awoke as if riding on a pillow of electric cloud. Before opening his eyes, he sensed that the world had changed again. Despite accepting this state of perpetual flux as part of his existence, the experience was no less jarring. As Paul looked out onto the artificial landscape rushing past, all moved at astonishing speed save for a distant monolith. From his position on the moving train, the sheer size of the dark tower lorded ominously over the landscape, altering his perspective.

Upon seeing the tower, Paul felt, ever so slightly, the weight of an ominous presence, whose temporal effects rivaled his own, tugging at him. Deep in his mind, he searched for a memory, anything, but there was nothing. A nascent fear welled within him, foreshadowing some unforeseen circumstances. A power unknown yet similar enough to seem familiar had woven itself into the fabric of this reality. As far as he knew, he would be the only person able to recognize it when it came.

Staring out the window at the landscape rushing past, Paul looked upon the row of sleek black shapes so dark that no light could seemingly escape standing in silhouette against the pale crimson dawn on the horizon. This world, apparently lifeless, was unrecognizable. It took him another moment to realize that this environment devoid of reflection wasn't a human landscape but an engineered artifact designed to capture every beam of falling light. Further down at ground level, the relative lack of light was meekly compensated by a faint, artificial fluorescence. Its dim presence barely registered among the black lines and shadows that formed against the textural black skyline. To what purpose this technology served, Paul surmised, must relate to the gathering and transferring of energy. It was only a small leap to imagine this energy wirelessly transmitted high above the city via great transformer towers puncturing the sky with grid-like regularity.

If working efficiently, pondering a system of such scale and proportion would produce staggering amounts of energy. Paul spoke aloud to himself and the empty train car, "Surely, to capture energy, one must have a great need for energy. But far more potential power is being collected than can feasibly be used. Someone built this with some other priority in mind. This must be the reason why I'm here."

Imagining the possibilities, Paul wondered. Even under the most liberal standards, the energy must go somewhere, but where? Somewhere below the city? Perhaps battery wells buried deep underground store this latent energy, which remains static to be discharged later.

Paul strained to see something in the distance, and with this, he became aware of a most unusual sensation. His eyes suddenly possessed a new ability to focus more closely than should be humanly possible. Turning his enhanced eye toward the pale, exposed portion of skin on his arm, what he saw there just below the surface of his skin was equally surprising. By the extension of some internal focusing device, his eyes observed an array of micro-scale data ports. Peering within, bundles of tiny glowing fiber optic cables stretched downward to interface directly with his firing neurons. One thing he was sure of was that he was part machine. To what extent he was, in fact, a machine, he could only guess. However, he surprised himself to discover that he did not so much mind being a cyborg. "Simply fascinating; for what purpose had this world needed such devices?" He was sure he would soon find out.

A loud sound simultaneously filled his ears and his conscious mind. It was an alarm not unlike a telephone bell ringing. It did this twice before a translucent avatar of a woman appeared within his field of vision. He looked upon it, trying to imagine if this image were one of projected light or one implanted directly into his mind. The image bowed slightly and began to speak in a somewhat robotic female voice. "Paul, you have an incoming call from the ministry. Would you like to take it now?"

Paul had no time to think, so he decided to take the call and fake it if need be. He adjusted his tie and answered, "Hello, this is Paul. May I ask who is calling?"

"Yes, hello, this is Linda Martin. You put in a request to speak with me. So, I'm speaking with you. What is it that you want?"

Paul was glad to see a line of continuity between this world and from where he came, for he had indeed made such a request just yesterday. "Yes, hello Linda, thank you for calling me back. I'd like to know if we can meet in private. There is a degree of sensitivity to my line of questioning; I hope you understand. Let's say I'd feel more comfortable discussing this outside of the ministry."



"Yes, Minister Valerie, anything you want. Like I have a choice in the matter?"

"Please, call me Paul."

"No, thank you, Minister; I don't plan on making this a relationship. You see, your kind can't intimidate me, not at this stage in my career anyway."

Paul began to sense he was playing this all wrong. He must be someone other than the friendly type. He would have to tone down the nice guy act. "Listen, Agent Martin; I respect your forthright manner. However, I will not tolerate this tone, even if it comes from a senior agent like yourself. Do I make myself clear, Linda?"

"We are on the same page. May I ask you a question, minister?"

"I don't suppose there could be any harm in conversation."

"Why are you calling me an agent? I haven't gone by that title in fifty years."

"Let's just say it's for nostalgic reasons. Also, it relates to the line of questioning. So, are you agreeable, or do I need to pull your personnel file?"

"That won't be necessary. What do you want to hear?"

"I'd rather not get into it right now. Would it be possible to meet in person?"

"I am at your service; where should I report?"

"I'm on the train to Philadelphia. I should be there within the hour. I'd like you to get an agency car and pick me up at the station."

"Do you mean a Ministry car?"

"Call it what you like; just meet me at the station. Over and out."

After over an hour, the train pulled quietly into its station. The magnetic locking mechanism engaged, and the roof and the portside wall retracted into the floor, exposing the passengers to the platform. Paul looked around in confusion as he did not know which way to go. Linda seeing him from a distance, recognized his state of mind and, for a moment, observed him from out of sight. As she watched, Linda tried to figure out his angle for coming here. She let him stand there for a minute until the small crowd dispersed before approaching him.

As Paul stood with his arms crossed over his chest, Linda sidled up beside him, tapping him on the shoulder. "This way, Minister," She said, "the car is parked on the surface level; follow me." Though slightly annoyed, he obediently followed her

as she stepped onto the up escalator. Once they reached the top, the space opened ahead them into the cavernous main lobby. They made a beeline through the sparse crowd toward the parking stand and joined the cue. After a short wait, the car floated effortlessly up to the curb before them. A pair of gull-wing doors opened up on both sides. They proceeded then to pack themselves and what small amount of gear Paul had packed for his trip into the ample space. It was an automated job, the likes of which he had not before seen. It took him an extra second to realize it possessed no wheels. They entered what was essentially a hover car and sat back in their seats. He could feel the car gently rock as it compensated for his weight. Once seated, the safety harnesses automatically deployed, strapping them in tight. Linda swiped her fob before the sensor screen. With her identity accepted, the touchscreen interface was activated, allowing Paul to enter the address. Without further hesitation, the taxi lifted perhaps a meter off the ground before making a sharp U-turn and speeding out of the pickup area. Upon seeing the destination, Linda said, "I think now I understand what you want to talk to me about."

It had taken Paul and Linda an additional twenty minutes before the car dropped them off at their destination. By now, it was early afternoon, and the air was hot. The hazy cloud-laden air

intensified what effects of the sun's meager light managed to filter to ground level. When the doors opened, there was no wind, so the stifling air seemed to stick to their skin. Like Paul had seen from the train, virtually every other structure had been augmented to serve some common purpose. Gone were the rows of connected houses that had abutted either side or, in fact, the whole neighborhood. In some way, each had been altered to support a grid of sleek black solar arrays.

The façade illusion stood out from the background, seemingly immune to the landscape's growing influence. There was something else, too, that seemed unsettling. The façade illusion itself had faded. Its once crisp holographic image, having flickered intermittently for over fifty years, was now slightly translucent. It was a pale reflection of its previous self. Having not visited the site in many years, Linda was the first to notice the discrepancy.

Paul turned to Linda and said, "What a strange apparition this anomaly is."

"That's exactly what it is, Paul, an apparition."

As if drawn toward it, they stepped without hesitation onto the threadbare image of the stairwell. They found that despite its appearance, it held their weight unflinchingly. This part of the

illusion was still in proper working order. They looked around for prying eyes, but as was expected, they saw none. Paul removed the antique device Sara had given him from his jacket pocket. He pondered as he powered up the device. How strange is it that the illusion, like him, is not affected by the apparent changes cloaking this world?

Having been warned by Linda of the potential danger of a static discharge, Paul donned a pair of protective gloves. He held his breath and then proceeded to activate the device. The device began to scan the surface of the illusion, methodically probing for the virtual locking mechanism. He manually entered the instruction code using the phone keypad, and the virtual tumblers aligned. The door did not open automatically. Being a bit sticky, it required a gentle push as Paul leaned his weight upon the illusion and stepped forward. The illusion gave way to a cavernous internal space, far more extensive than he imagined possible. While Paul stared in amazement, Linda followed quietly, closing the barrier door behind them. His reaction surprised him; he felt he should have expected no less. All that he and Sara had just days before documented was here. Despite having seen its effects and accepted its existence as a fact, none of that had prepared him for that moment.

Paul, refocusing on the business at hand, asked Linda a question. "I know you were here in the past with Sara. How did you get out of here in one piece?"

Linda paused. Pondering his question forced her to relive memories she had long since filed away for safekeeping.

"Considering we are here, I suppose the moratorium on the subject has been lifted."

"Don't worry; we follow the same rules where I'm from. Go on; you've got my full attention."

"Well, it's good to see some things haven't changed.

I had been in the ministry's employ only briefly when I first came here. I had not known Sara for very long, and I had just met Frank that first day."

"Who is Frank?"

"You really are in the dark, aren't you? Frank was not an agent per se, but he was in all but title. He was a private investigator and retired local police officer; he and Sara had a special working relationship. It was the kind which today would be frowned upon."

"Was the relationship inappropriate?"

"Not in the sense that you are imagining. There was a lot of information sharing that would seem frivolous today."

"You talk of them both in the past tense. Did Frank end up as a casualty?"

"Yes, but again, not in the sense you are thinking. I alone managed to escape."

Linda could now see a look of surprise on Paul's face as he looked over her shoulder. "What is it, Paul? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"It's not a ghost exactly, but close to it. It appears someone's come to greet us."

Linda turned to see the image of Murine. She was still much in the way of appearance as she remembered her to be. By comparison to their dour garments, she was immaculately dressed. The shimmering fabric reflected every curve and angle of her exquisite figure in the low light. Her long, dark hair, touched with grey, was the only sign of time for her passing. Linda smiled and walked toward her. Paul watched as they embraced as two friends long parted. He was mesmerized by her beauty. But there was something else there, something more subtle. He could not for the moment identify it, but there was the mercurial glimmer of recognition. As soon as it appeared, it was gone.

However, he was sure that whatever it was would soon be made evident. He walked forward to greet her. As he did, he was met there by Bodhmall and Frenoch. In that instant, they had closed the ranks between him and Murine. Paul was startled by their sudden movement and was stopped dead in his tracks. With his hands in a submissive gesture, he said, "It's all right; I'm on your side."

"If you wouldn't mind submitting to a search, we are by habit overly protective of the Lady. I'm sure you understand." Frenoch stated politely.

"By all means, do whatever you feel is necessary. I am here by invitation."

Bodhmall looked on with quiet concern as Frenoch patted him down. "It would appear that our new friend here is not carrying any hidden weapons."

"Paul, it's so good to see you again," Murine said with a smile. She reached out her hand to his, and he grasped it firmly.

Though Paul had no memory of a previous meeting, he kept this to himself. "It is good to see you as well." Otherwise, He, like Linda, was distracted by Murine's physical beauty. He stood there for a long moment, staring without uttering another word.



"Earth to Paul, come in, Paul," Linda said, seeming to enjoy every syllable. Once he was able to pay attention, she continued. "This, my Minister Valier, is Murine. She is the last of the order of the Ynys Mon. She is also the principal officer of this vessel. And it goes without saying that she is not native to this world. I imagine this much by now has been made evident to you?"

"This much indeed." Not sure what those titles meant, Paul instinctively bowed his head to avoid further embarrassment. It took him another moment to realize he was still holding her hand.

Murine smiled at his naiveté as he recognized his error. She said to smooth the unease, "There is no need to feel self-conscious here. You are among my friends. You have come highly recommended by our common friend Ms. Sara Burton."

"Thank you, Murine. Linda told me that Sara was in a state of suspended animation. If this is not the case, I would like to talk with her as soon as possible."

"I am afraid that won't be possible just yet. Linda is correct. Sara is still suspended within the game, just as she has been for these fifty years. She is still active, as are our

other allies within and outside the game matrix. You have been brought here for a specific purpose only she can show you."

"I don't understand. How can she communicate with the real world if she is trapped within the game?"

"Let me just say this. At this point, how much the worlds within have evolved is still being determined. These worlds may have grown to such a level of complexity as to have become self-replicating realities in their own right."

"I am anxious to find out directly, but first, bring me to them. I want to see Sara. I want to put this into perspective before I, too, become lost."

Murine, Paul, Linda, and Bodhmall walked down an undetermined length of ornately fashioned corridors until they eventually came upon a circular threshold resembling a giant iris. Stepping through, Paul sensed that he had traveled farther than was evident in that action. Once they had all safely passed through, the opening blinked closed. Paul glanced at his watch and noticed for the first time that its movement had ceased. He lifted his wrist to his ear, and there was no sound. He looked again toward Murine as if to ask a question. Frenoch as if anticipating the question answered for her before Paul could ask. "You are currently moving toward the center of the ship. At

the core where the main engine resides, there exists a temporal dampening field, the effects of which you are now noting on your time device."

"Are there any other effects I should be made aware of?"

This time Murine answered, "None of the lethal sort; however, there are effects nonetheless. Some of which may explain why you are here now."

While everyone else walked on, Paul stopped again. "Have I been here before? I have a most unusual feeling."

Again, Bodhmall answered him, "Is it really all that unusual? Considering from where you've come, I should think that wrapping your head around this one would be like child's play."

"That is quite enough out of you, Bodhmall," Murine barked angrily. "Paul, if you would trust me for a moment longer, I will show you all you need and desire to know. Please, this way, it's not much farther."

After another short while, they came upon a heavy vaulted metallic door. Above the door's apex was a sign that would have been recognizable to any literate Arox. However, to Linda and Paul, the words were unreadable. Frenoch accessed the keypad hidden beside the door and punched in a string of numbers. The indicator light on the panel switched from red to green.

A resounding base thud reverberated through the air as the magnetic lock was unlatched, unsealing the armored door. It was followed thereafter by the loud scratching sound of metal on metal. Slowly the door recessed into the wall surrounding it. Through the arched doorway, a haze of ionized air wafted, momentarily obscuring from view the pulsating glow within. As the haze dissipated, they saw a seething ball of constrained plasma at the center of the massive spheroid space. Six evenly spaced towers rose high in the air encircling the plasma core. Each tower produced its own maelstrom of arching thunderbolts directed toward the fiery ball of energy suspended at the center. Paul correctly imagined this technology generating a powerful suppressive field of unprecedented scale and complexity capable of holding the massive orb in check. However, he could barely guess just what he was precisely looking at. Murine's acute senses registered their unease and spoke to them on it. "There is no need to be alarmed. I assure you are perfectly safe."

With the reflection of the fiery light glinting off his face, Paul asked, "What is this place?"

Murine looked again into his eyes and spoke, "Here, at the center of the *Swan*, you now find yourself in the main engine room. It is the source of all the energies powering everything

aboard this ship: the drives, the illusion itself, and the stasis fields that hold it all together. This engine has been in continuous operation for several of your millennia. It is the captured heart of a star. I imagine it should burn at this rate for several thousand more. Here also is the heart of the anomaly your rather crude technology had so long ago detected."

Paul remembered the data which he and Sara had so meticulously analyzed. Though it seemed now to make some kind of strange sense, capturing a star was beyond his frame of reference. "How is it you came to capture a star? How is that even possible?"

"It has been known for countless generations by our science that every cubic iota of the universe, including the empty voids between bodies, is infused with unseen energy. These bodies that you call stars are merely poles in a vast sea of energy that permeates everything and nothing. In addition, as you are acutely aware, multiple concurrent dimensions are present within the same space and time. Ultimately, it is simple engineering exploiting these hidden realms to our advantage. Perhaps one day, your kind shall reach this level." Her efforts to demystify what they were beholding had paid off. Paul saw the genuine smile she had on her face. He contemplated what she had just said and could not help but be amused.

Returning to the subject at hand, Murine walked while gesturing toward the chamber's far end. "This way," she said. They followed her, crossing the floor directly in the light of the glowing orb held in perfect suspension high above them.

Looking up, Paul could barely believe what he was seeing. Though Murine tried her best to explain the advanced concepts behind the temporal dampening field that shielded them from the impossible energies emanating from the massive stellar core, his human mind could not grasp it.

As they drew nearer the massive base of one of the field generators, what from a distance appeared purely technological seemed more akin to a great tree reaching up high into the chamber. Within the gnarled appendages that buttressed its bulk to the deck, there appeared a hidden alcove. A dull light leached out between the branching limbs that seemed to beckon them forward. Paul and Linda followed the others through the space crowded with overhanging organic branches into the sanctum within. They came to a complete stop by what they saw before them in the dim light. Cribbed a meter off the floor were three sealed sarcophagi. After the initial shock, they stepped forward, and as they did, a light recessed from above illuminated the bodies lying still within. Paul's heart

quicken as he recognized Sara's face. The image before him was younger, but it was unmistakably Sara's.

They had told him about Frank, the detective. He rightly assumed he was the older gentleman. Still, one more remained. This coffin was off more to the side. Paul could see through the glass that it was empty. Paul lifted his head towards Murine and asked, "Who does this container belong to?"

Linda dug deep into her memory of that day. The memories flowed back as fresh as if they were but a day ago. Looking down at the empty vessel, she answered his question. "That space was once occupied by the young man we had captured that day of the power discharge. His name, if I am not mistaken, was Jack or John. He was severely affected by the electronic pulse. His inputs were assumed to be irreparably damaged, and he was placed here for safekeeping until we could figure out how to fix him. Something happened that allowed him to escape."

"You are correct on all points, save one," Murine responded. "We could have easily disconnected him. The problem was, we couldn't be sure if doing so would have killed him. Though we are uncertain how he disappeared, we suspect Lurker was at play. However, the others have persisted in the game within the presence of the stasis field. Their measurable neurological

scans have shown them to have been quite active all these years. Physically, not a single cell in their bodies has perished."

"Why are you showing me this, Murine?" asked Paul. "What is it you expect me to gain here?"

"It's quite simple; after all these years, despite our best efforts, the war between the factions within the game has reached a bloody impasse. And while this war rages, the worlds Lurker created have been allowed to grow and evolve unchecked. As you have seen, its effects have spilled over into your reality. That is why we have brought you here, Paul."

"I've come of my own free will. How do you imagine I could be brought otherwise?"

"By me, of course; who else could have manipulated events in such a way as to draw you nearer? I dare say, however, that I do not deserve all the credit. Sara was, after all, instrumental in recruiting you and bringing you around to our way of thinking."

"For what it's worth, I realize that the manner in which you have come to us has felt less than honest. For that, I would like to offer my apologies. However, I will not apologize for bringing you here. Whether you believe it or not, it was your destiny from the beginning to return to the place of your creation."



"My creation, what are you talking about?"

"Search your earliest memories. Reflect on these, and answer some basic questions about yourself. Let's start with the most obvious: where do you come from?" Murine watched the expression on Paul's face as he began to access these earliest memories. There, his expression displayed a look of horrified confusion. For several seconds, she watched him as he tried to bring any scrap of memory to the forefront of his mind. However, she knew what he did not, that there would be little to nothing for him to draw upon.

As if possessed in a fit, her closed eyes began to flutter in a rush of rapid eye movements. His mind then was filled with an image of a small child. He quickly recognized this person to be his younger self. Paul was on this street; he saw a tall, beautiful woman before him. She reached out her hand to him, and she instinctively reached his hand out to hers. She bent down to pick him up. The image he saw there of himself and his environment had now become more explicit. The sky appeared as a long slate gray sheet that hung oppressively overhead. The only visible light emanated from light-emitting diodes attached to the undersides of the heat arrays. Otherwise, the streets were dark and vacant, seemingly devoid of life. He had felt for the first time an overwhelming ocean of fear, the likes he had never

before felt, as Murine's embrace washed it away. He opened his eyes and said, "It was you; you rescued me, but from where?"

Examining the image, Murine gifted him more closely; Paul saw his tiny body augmented in a fashion similar to Sara's body. However, his augmentation seemed more extensive, and its technology more advanced than hers. He turned to Murine and asked, "Was I a child or a machine?"

"In truth, you were as equally machine as you were human."

"And now, what am I?"

"You were born a natural biological creature. That is true enough. However, Lurker spared no one from what happened to you where you came from. Despite this, I could remove virtually every piece of technology from you."

"I don't recall anything such as you speak."

"To that, I assure you, you would not wish to recall? It had taken every scrap of my Arox medical training to mend you to where you now find yourself. However, there was one thing I could not fix: your lost memory."

The enormity of this statement had left Paul feeling this hole in his history most acutely. "I ask you again. What world did you find me in?"

"For me to answer that question, you must first understand the temporal nexus generated by this anomaly. The Lurker and this insidious game, the façade illusion itself, depends on it. Surely, from what I understand, your unique experience is just one more logical extrapolation of its effects. If it were possible to destroy it without destroying the Earth, I would do so."

"What is this temporal nexus?"

"Are you familiar with the concept your science calls a wormhole? If you are, then you're almost there. The structure of what you call space-time allows for interstitial travel between known coordinates and probabilities that exist parallel to our own. In the traditions of the Arox, such travel to or observations of these dimensions is strictly forbidden. It is forbidden precisely for the reasons that have unfolded here. It is most unfortunate that Lurker has become unbound in your world. He would destroy it to bring forth his own paradise."

"So, I have come from this machine's paradise?"

"Yes, and that is where we find ourselves now at its very beginnings. If we do not act, this world will have the same fate as yours. That is if we allow him to bring it upon us."

"I feel like this is an obvious question, but I am compelled to ask it. Why don't you just shut the whole thing down and be done with it?"

"If only it were so easy? It is because Lurker's autonomic functions are tied directly to that of the Artificial intelligence. Because Lurker's autonomic functions manage the containment fields, any attack on the technology in which houses it affects the containment fields. There in is a potential disaster."

"Shutting down Lurker inadvertently destroys the containment field and unleashes the stellar core. Is that right?"

"Now you're beginning to understand the conundrum."

" Ok, so how do I fit into all of this?"

"Some time ago, an apparition of Sara reached out from within the game matrix to inform us that a rogue consciousness, more powerful than Lurker, had evolved from the temporal universe from which you had originally sprung. Lurker, having feared this, sought to destroy this consciousness. Sara helped me to identify its temporal location. I could then jump to those coordinates and search for this being. It was there Sara found you wandering the wasteland alone."

"I am at a loss for words; I usually have the advantage in such situations. It would appear that the closer I get to ground zero, the less I can see."

## Chapter 13

2019

As time drew nearer to the discharge of the EMP, Frank and Sara watched Lurker's mob gathering outside the anomaly through the membrane barrier separating them. They suspected communications between those players and Lurker would be lost with the discharge release, at least temporarily. Murine gave them ample time to prepare. Now, they were ready and awaiting the signal to pass through the boundary. The triggering of a series of loud alarms was the only evidence that the discharge had commenced. Though the sound was jarring, Frank and Sara felt nothing. It was night, so as the streetlights outside flashed, the street beyond fell into darkness. Armed with only some rope, Sara's key device, and personal lighting, Frank and Sara passed through the barrier.

Stepping into the silent darkness, Frank looked off into the distance, lit only by the hazy glow of starlight. At their feet, people lay in various degrees of consciousness, where only moments before, a boisterous crowd of people jacked into the game gathered. From those stricken, Sara and Frank heard their voices form a strange, nonsensical chorus and saw their bodies writhing as their minds tried vainly to reconnect to the broken signal.

Murine warned them that the player's bio-interface units might experience temporary power loads they weren't designed for. However, she assured them that any ill effects would likely be short-lived. Despite sympathy for the altered state they found them in, there was nothing to be done for them now. If they were to find Jack quickly, they would need to focus.

Moving carefully and systematically checking each one, it took several moments before Frank found an unconscious body of a man whose face he quickly recognized. He called out to Sara, "Sara, come here! I need your help. I think I've found him." Sara wasted little time and was there a second later. Unsure of how dangerous it would be to bring him unrestrained into what was essentially the heart of the game. Frank removed the strong synthetic paracord from his jacket pocket and passed it to Sara.

"Here, tie up his legs; I'll roll him over and put my service handcuffs on him."

"Is this really necessary?"

"You saw what happened in there with that robot. Lord knows what Lurker could do to control his mind."

"Maybe we shouldn't bring him in there?"

"I don't think we have a choice. We must see what's happened to him."

Sara was dubious but gave her tacit approval by beginning the process of securing his legs. They managed to get it together, and John's body was securely bound. It had been some time since he had used restraints on anyone. He hadn't imagined he ever would again, and certainly in such a situation as this. Still down on one knee Frank braced his body to lift with his legs grasping John's torso beneath his arms, and said, "I'll get the top, and you grab him by the legs. OK, are you ready?" She nodded her confirmation as she bent to lift his legs. A moment later, they found themselves stumbling through the street, carefully avoiding the other players as they moved. Soon they approached the stairs and the foyer of the façade glowing like a beacon in the darkness. Murine, observing them as they came, opened the door from within.

Jack was not a large man, so between them, Frank and Sara could bring him through the threshold and into the ship with little difficulty. On the other side, Murine had prepared a stasis container. With the door safely closed behind them, they placed Jack's frame into the capsule. Once they put him in the chamber, Murine coded some instructions onto the keypad on the exterior controls. A slim door made from a glass-like material retracted back into the capsule's shell, producing a deliberate-sounding shutting noise.

Murine initiated the unit's integrated scan function by accessing the control panel and quickly programming the stasis field. She stood back as a two-dimensional readout projected above the stasis chamber. Frank and Sara looked at the visual images and accompanying text written in a strange archaic alphabet. Though the language written upon the ancient mechanism was unreadable, Murine had no trouble accessing the technology directly through the capsule's virtual control mechanism. With a gesture of her hand, a three-dimensional visual representation of the data she was already reviewing appeared suspended in the air. Scanning the readouts scrolling down the holographic display, Murine said, "It would appear that the EMP shook him up, but he is essentially undamaged." Frank and Sara passively looked on while she conducted her initial assessment of their



guest's condition. The real-time imagery unfolded before them. Her goal was to assess the extent of John's injuries and gain what advantage she could from the detailed workings of his implants. However, Frank was particularly interested in John's state of mind and, to some extent, his thoughts and memories. He doubted how well this technology would help in these regards.

"Why have they come here? These are the questions we must be asking," said Frank in a frustrated tone.

Murine, with a wave of her hand, adjusted the sensors. John's body responded with unconscious movements to the probing sensors.

Sara yelled out, "What is happening?"

Murine responded to the new readouts she was receiving. "There is much turmoil in his mind. He seems to be driven by a deep if not misguided anger toward something that is not clearly defined."

The capsule then rose into the air to about elbow level and moved by its own power into the corridor. Frank and Sara watched as the tube floated away. Frank then asked Murine, "What's happening? Where are you taking him?"

"He will be safe; a suspension chamber is being made available. He will come to no harm."

"Wait!" Frank exclaimed, "There's got to be more he can tell us. What else can he tell us about Lurker and his plans? What of his implants?"

Murine responded matter-of-factly. "There is no more to be learned right now. He is in a fragile state, and I will not risk irreversible damage to his person for no appreciable reason. As to your questions, we have gained insight into Lurker's technology. Significant modifications have rendered his particular interface superior in several critical ways to the original design. It would seem John has a unique advantage over the other players."

"How significant of an advantage does he possess over the others? Could these modifications be made to our interfaces?"

Asked Sara

"Of the extent to his advantage, it's simply too early to tell right now. As for his modifications, their neuron connectivity is far quicker with no appreciable signal degradation. As for you, it's too late for your first round. Your time is limited, for as you can see, the players are starting to regain some semblance of consciousness."

Their attention was then turned to those outside. Through the barrier, they observed as, one by one, the players rose to their

feet in a state of shock and confusion. They watched as some stumbled about aimlessly while others followed their instincts toward their last known destinations. Frank wondered aloud, "Is this the end of the game for them?"

Murine answered swiftly, "No, it would appear from the current data that the game is intact, just for the moment inaccessible. This, however, is not true for you. You can enter the mainframe coordinates through a hard wire connection that I could easily rig for you. But if you're going to do it, now would be the time."

Anxious to get a move on things, Sara asked, "Are the interfaces ready to go? Frank, if they are, we should move on this ASAP."

Frank responded to her without changing his gaze from what was happening out on the street. "Yeah, we should go before power returns to the internet. Once it does, I imagine it will get pretty crowded down in there."

Sara turned to him, Frank not entirely understanding what he meant.

Any virtual experience Frank or Sara may have had until this point may have been a fair approximation of moving within a real space. Whatever that may have been, it was likely orders of magnitude behind that which they would find within the Lurker

game. Within these virtual worlds, there was no appreciable difference between theirs and ours by way of perception. Frank had tried to warn Sara of the dangers through what he learned from his investigation. However, no amount of preparation could prepare someone for the experience. This was due primarily to the direct manner through which the sensory inputs connect to the regions where the brain translates the stuff of memories. The game's spatial architecture is redefined and expanded by drawing on this wellspring of each new player lending his data into the game. With millions of human minds entering the game, the landscapes grow steadily more complex.

...

In the interim, the ship's automated workshops completed the manufacturing process for the newly augmented implants. Shortly thereafter, Sara and Frank reported to one of the dozens of ancillary shipboard laboratories for the installation procedure. As they arrived, Murine and Linda were there waiting. Gesturing toward the pair of side-by-side upon a set of procedure tables in the center of the room, Linda said, "It's not too late to back out. I certainly wouldn't be doing this."

Sara responded, "Let's just get this over with, shall we."

Despite their reservations, Frank and Sara, each having changed into a sheer gown, laid out on the tables, prepared to add their

own memories to the game. They turned to look at each other, and Frank reached out his hand. Sara reciprocated, grasping firmly onto his. Without breaking eye contact, Sara spoke to him. "I have a bad feeling about this, Frank. They were taking a chance to go into the virtual unknown like this without the benefit of a plan. Tell me I'm crazy, Frank. But I don't see any other way."

"You're crazy, Sara, but I'm right here with you. Don't worry. We're just doing a bit of reconnaissance. We'll be back before you know it."

"Thanks, Frank."

Murine stood over Frank as he lay there still. She spoke to him as she inserted the first of the dozen probes. "Now, Frank, I have never done this before. If I should cause you any pain, please attempt to communicate with me verbally; without moving, is what I'm getting at. Do you understand me?"

"Yes"

Frank had volunteered to go first. And so, he would do his best not to show fear or cry out for Sara's benefit. When he was ready, he nodded in the affirmative. Once he was again still, Murine very slowly and deliberately began to insert the hair-thin fiber optic cable around the corner of his right eye. She

observed on a holographic image layered over the curves of his face the inner working of his nervous system. Murine had to insert this particular lead in just the right spot along the axis of a pathway that contained the optic nerve. It was delicate work. Once she correctly placed the lead, a signal was sent down the cable switching off the growth inhibitor. The lead was designed so that once switched on, in the presence of nerve tissue, it would reach out and bind to receptor cells, essentially completing the circuit. The cable was now an extension of his field of sight. Eleven other micro cables followed this procedure, each attaching to major nerve clusters. Three were inserted directly into his spinal column, one each on either side of the jawbone, into the eighth nerve. Two were inserted into a small incision near the sternum, two into the Vegas nerve, and the last into the cluster of nerves around the heart. The last two were inserted through the wrist. During this procedure, though there was pain, it was bearable. He, however, had experienced far more discomfort and anxiety.

Having completed the procedure, Murine asked him, "Sit up on the bed," to which he obliged quickly. "OK, Frank, you're all wired up. We have to test the signal amplifier, which may be unnerving. Well, here we go." She plugged the lead ends into a small electronic device shaped like a plain black box. There was

only one control button, a power switch; all other controls existed within the player's mind. It would be up to him to master those on his own. She flipped the switch, and Frank's body flexed to attention. In the instant Murine flipped the switch, the override program came online, replacing those of his actual senses. He found himself within a gold-tinted semitransparent sphere. As the machine began to put Frank's bodily senses through its paces, he began to experience wholly artificial inputs for the first time. Sights, sounds, and movements filled his conscious mind; none of which he was observing directly, of course, but the difference he would grow to find was negligible. Once satisfied with the results, she turned off the machine, and his sensory inputs returned to him. This was the most unusual yet believable experience he had ever encountered. It took him another moment to come to the full realization that it was not at all natural. He stood there with an expression of disbelief on his face. Murine, sensing his unease, sought then to soothe his nerves. "OK, Frank, you have a seat. What you've seen is as real as can be experienced without being real. You will need to learn the difference. In the meantime, I will need you to relax. Can you do that for me, Frank?" A sense of calm came over him as the logic of it replaced the fear. She was right, of course, he thought to

himself. It was an illusion that he would need to pay close attention to. To prevail, he would have to reign it all in.

As Frank lay back on the table and breathed a deep sigh of relief, Murine prepared for Sara. Frank turned his head toward Sara. He saw a solitary tear roll down over the side of her face as the leads were being prepared. She was otherwise stoic in her resignation. Despite her resolve, it was too much for Frank to watch. As the probes found their counterparts along the course of her nervous system, she swore she could almost feel, in a real sense, that her world was somehow expanding. However, she kept this thought to herself, knowing what Murine would probably say. It would be something like, "It's most likely some halo effect upon the nervous system." This, she pondered, must not be the case.

After Murine completed the implantation of all the various grafts and their corresponding leads into Sara's nervous system, the required checks tested out similarly to the way they had for Frank. Once Murine installed the control mechanism, Sara was eager to put her interface through its paces in the actual game space. So, she glanced at Frank before asking Murine, "Is there any reason we can't jump right in?"



"There's no technical reason stopping you. However, you may want to take a moment to normalize the interface, as you say, get a feel for it."

Sara turned a gain to Frank and said, "What do you say? Do you think you're ready?"

"Ready as I'm ever going to be."

"That settles it. Let's get this show on the road."

...

Once Murine had activated the hastily prepared stasis chambers, the team gathered to see them off. With their specially designed protective garments made of a shimmering Arox fabric, Frank and Sara climbed into their respective chambers. A glass-like shroud rolled along the surface as they lay back, sealing the compartment. As Linda moved in, she placed Frenoch's stasis chamber atop Sara's sarcophagi. As the cloudy suspension gases that would bring the long sleep filled the chamber, Linda and Sara's eyes met. Staring into her eyes, Sara blinked a few times before they closed for good. Linda turned her head as she

recognized that the internal light of Frenoch's stasis chamber seemed to flicker.

As the interface was initiated, Sara was falling like Frank before her. Her mind told her otherwise, but her senses had insisted upon it. After a few seconds, she found fighting the sensation futile. She looked around to see that her pace was far faster than she could calculate. Sara's body tumbled head over heels until suddenly, in an unparalleled feat of acrobatics, she rolled into the direction of the wind. Her head pointed downward, moving quickly within an unfolding tunnel of darkness. Deeper within, pulsating rings of color cascaded along its bleeding edge. In the distance, she could see a silhouette of a falling figure. Sara imagined it only to be that of Frank. Instinctively, she angled her body into a dive toward the flailing figure. She could sense from the wall of enclosing color that her speed was increasing. She found herself within a few meters of him and closing a moment later. She tumbled over again to be in the same orientation as him. As she was about to pass him, she reached out and grabbed hold of him. Just about that time, the pace of their acceleration had seemed to slow, then abruptly reverse. Their position in relation to the tunnel then began to level out toward ninety degrees. Sensing this, they angled themselves in that direction. They could see a

slowly expanding pinprick of light before them, far ahead through the channel of darkness. In its gaze, as it grew nearer, their attentions were focused. They watched as the shadows in the way gave way to light. While shielding their eyes against the coming brightness, they sensed their motion suddenly stop. They stood huddled together for what seemed a long time, shaking and breathing heavily. Slowly, they began to open their eyes. They saw a strange and stunning landscape, the likes of which they had not before seen.

They abruptly let go, stepping back from each other to observe this strange new world. So realistic was the sensory input they were receiving that all sense of this being an artificial place had faded from their minds. This was a new world, seemingly unsullied by the effects of men.

Frank was startled by what he had discovered when he opened his eyes. Just a moment before, he was in the infinity ship's belly. Now, he was standing in what appeared to be a farmer's field. Looking down toward his feet, he saw a pair of heavy, leather hobnail boots. As his eyes scanned upward, he did not recognize his clothes. He was dressed, head to toe, in an antique dark beige linen suit, a type he did not own. Suddenly, the realization of where he was came upon him as the fog of confusion evaporated. With his memory returned it took him

another moment to realize Sara was gone. Calmly, he surveyed the situation, assuming Sara could not be far off. However, she was not in his immediate area. After a few fruitless moments, he grew concerned and began calling out to her.

"Sara? Where are you? Are you here?"

"Over here, Frank," He heard her call out. He followed her voice's sound through the underbrush bordering the field. He saw her standing on the far side of a slight rise and walked up the narrow trail to reach her position. "Come up here, Frank, and have a gander at the view; it's unbelievable." From their vantage high up on a bald rocky hill, they could see with unaided eyes mile upon mile of landscape rolling out in every direction. The light from the cloudless sky casts a golden tint on every shadow. For some time, they scanned the horizon, looking for the telltale signs of life that they knew must exist here. Eventually, their persistence paid off as Frank identified what he could only describe as a black oblong shape that rose slightly above the trees in a southeasterly direction from where they now stood.

"I think I've found something."

"What is it, Frank?"

"I'm not sure, but it certainly is man-made."

"What does it look like?"

Frank faced her toward the exact location of the object and pointed. "Look there for yourself."

She followed the indicated line of sight until she spied the distant shape. As Frank had said, she could tell immediately that it was no natural object. "I see it. It has a strangely non-reflective surface quality. It appears to be a tower of some sort. It's too early to say how large it is from this distance. I suggest we begin to make our way in that direction."

"As far as I can determine, there is nowhere else to go."

"A simple yes, ma'am, would have sufficed."

Frank smiled and said, "Come on, time is wasting."

They followed the looming black tower as it grew in the distance. The pace had become monotonous until his attention was brought to a small thicket of tall grass several meters away. Sara, who had been as many paces ahead, was standing there, gesturing toward him with her hand to keep his voice down. Recognizing his mistake, he made a beeline toward her location. Once he made it there, he realized the need for quiet, for there were many potential hostiles just a short distance away along an intersecting road. Together, they watched as the long line of disheveled fighters, each dressed in an odd mixture of differing

era military uniform and weaponry, filed past. They seemed to be going somewhere in a hurry.

"Hello, Frank; so nice of you to join us," said Sara sarcastically. "It would seem that we've joined the game. Our new friends here appear to be on a march somewhere. Should we follow them?" What do you think?

"I think I'd prefer to shadow them."

"That does sound more appropriate."

"Let's wait till nightfall, if there is nightfall, and we'll follow from the safety of the roadside. I don't want to take any chances with these characters."

"Agreed, come on, Frank, let's retreat into those woods."

Together, they found their way back into the safety and shelter of a stand of poplar trees. They set themselves down near a fallen log, determined now to wait in a spot from where the road was still visible. Sara was prepared for somehow, among her accouterments, the game supplied her with a pair of field glasses. This, as it turned out, seemed to fit her current role. They looked down upon the forlorn marchers, studying them and collecting intelligence for some time.

Pondering the common threads among these people, Sara asked, "Frank, what makes some more susceptible to this death cult than others? What about human nature makes us yearn for things that destroy us?"

"I'm no philosopher, but they say it began in the beginning, with the first man."

"What does that mean?"

"Take the Adam and Eve story."

"Come on, Frank; You're an Atheist"

"I'm talking about the tree of knowledge and what the fruit represents. With foreknowledge of death, the human race is faced with choices unknown to the rest of nature. Compounded over millions of years, we find ourselves at the end."

"So, this is it, huh?"

"Seems as good a time as any."

"Wow, Frank, you are really dark today. Well, you ought to pull yourself together; it looks like it's finally starting to get dark, I mean the sky. We should get moving."

"Oh, right."

Sara put her field glasses away, and the pair began moving back toward the road. Though significantly darker, the sky had a strangely moonlit quality where everything seemed uniformly

bathed in a dull fluorescence. By the time they reached the road, they had no issue blending effortlessly with stragglers toward the rear of a column.

They walked into the night, and although the stars above them moved relentlessly across the sky, it gave no indication of the coming transition to morning. Suddenly, as if to some unknown and unannounced cue, the sky turned a ruddy pink, then blue in quick procession. In the distance before them, the lone building stood in stark silhouette against the new day's light. As they drew closer, more details became evident. A tall, almost black, dark tower punctuated the landscape. It was surrounded by a several-meter-high rough-hewn stonewall fortress that went previously unseen.

Frank and Sara had arrived at a great clearing that encircled the circumference of the fortress for what seemed like miles. Both were at a loss for what they found here, as it was not what they expected. As far as the eye could see, mighty siege engines sat unmanned. Weaponry of all sorts lay abandoned. "It would appear that there would be no fighting to be had today," Frank said with a downbeat tone.

"You sound disappointed."

"Well, it is a game; I did want to play a little bit."



"I'm sure you'll get your chance before we're through. In the meantime, we should take advantage of our good luck and find out what we can while we can."

"I suppose you're right; let's get the work out of the way first."

"Let's make our way toward the tower. I'm sure it's there within; we will ultimately find our answers."

"How should we go about this? It would appear that, perhaps today, a direct approach might be worth a try."

Taking advantage of the lull of activity, Sara and Frank made their way toward a long gravel pathway that led directly to the tower's front gates. As they moved about, great fires began to dot the landscape along both sides of the path as the participants sat idle before their encampments. It seemed that no one was paying much heed to their presence.

Sara looked around and was puzzled by what she was seeing. "I don't know if this is a good sign, but this lack of activity was unexpected. Frank, do you suspect that it could be the EMP's residual effects on the players causing this?"

"Or, it might be some ornate trap designed specifically to catch us."

"Now, Frank, how would this Lurker know we even exist? Murine said that his A. I functions are autonomic, and he is not conscious onboard ship."

"Don't forget about our friends, Old Frenoch and Simon Weisberg. If he could get away with it, I wouldn't put it past him to try and make a sock puppet out of me."

"Frank, I believe we're "hard-wired" as Linda described it, and should be immune to such degradation. Besides, I should not want to kill your avatar, even if it is just a game."

"That makes me feel all warm inside, Sara. You're the best."

"Save the sarcasm, asshole. There's something you need to see." She gestured her arm toward the gate that had grown larger as they approached. Soon, they saw a drawbridge standing before the entrance, spanning an encircling moat. As they approached the canal's edge, Frank looked cautiously down along its wall of piled stones, rough lumber, and earth. He found he was staring into a seemingly endless abyss. Through the mist that fogged his vision, he struggled to fathom its depth, but he could not. Again, Sara's voice distracted his thoughts as something appeared in the air above the moat. "Frank, you might want to turn around and look." Before he turned around, he saw that the ground around his feet was now bathed in cool cobalt light. He

turned slowly to match Sara's aspect. A shining blue crystal was spinning slowly above the moat in the sky. For a moment, they stood and said nothing.

Sara broke the silence. "What do you suppose that thing is, Frank? I would imagine, by its location, that it's some kind of gatekeeper. We might do well to try to communicate with it. No time like the present."

"With that? How do you propose we do that?"

Sara stepped forward to the very edge of the moat where the drawbridge would come down. As she did this, the great chains that held the door in place almost simultaneously began to slacken. The massive door lowered slowly until it was at ground level with Sara. All the while, the glowing crystal descended at a matching pace. They had the sense that this was not an invitation. So, Sara spoke, "May we pass?"

Before their eyes, the crystal began to take on a transformation. The crystal's internal light intensified, forcing them to avert their gaze. Turning aside, they stared toward the ground until they sensed the light's intensity had diminished. When they had again turned around, what they saw there surprised them. Now was manifesting the visage of an old man. The old man appeared most formidable, grizzled and

muscular, and dressed raggedly in animal skins. "State your business here." The strange creature barked out in response to their query, startling them.

Though surprised by this, they knew better than to be turned back. After all, they told themselves, it was no more than another artifact of the game, someone's long-festering nightmare. It was then that it spoke its name. "You shall not pass beyond the gate of Old Frenoch until you have satisfied my master to your purpose here. Then he produced from the ether a large club that he proceeded to wave menacingly. Frank reacted predictably to this perceived threat by reaching for his service revolver. Sara anticipated this and gently touched his wrist before he did anything too rash. "Hold your horses there, cowboy. Did you not hear what this old man here called himself?"

Frank thought to himself a moment and realized he had not. He focused more on his would-be opponent's intentions than his personal information. "What of it?"

"That's the name of the avatar that had come under the control of Lurker that we were forced to dispatch back on the ship."

Frank recalled now the conversations about Frenoch. He, however, had no firsthand knowledge of this person beyond the creature that had attacked him. "I wonder if he remembers us."

"I doubt it; I'm sure he'll remember this, however." She removed her shoulder bag and laid it on the ground at her feet. Bending down over the bag, she unzipped the rear compartment and removed from it the stasis unit that held the avatar's central processing unit. She lifted it above her as if presenting it to the old gatekeeper before speaking. "There is something you must see that pertains to you and you alone. Old Frenoch, do you recognize what I hold before you now? Do you remember your life before you came into the servitude of the Lurker?"

The gatekeeper lowered the club as his attention now switched to what he recognized to be a familiar object. He sensed that this must be a shard of some shattered memory. The gap to which it belonged, he could not reconcile. "I am afraid I am at a loss, for my memories before this moment are but vapors. Do you possess such knowledge? For standing before this gate and that broken object, which you now hold, is my only reality."

Sara said, "There is much then you need to see if you open yourself to see it." She lowered the object before her and adjusted the stasis field into the open position. With that, the avatar CPU came to life as the power again coursed through its matrix of artificial neurons. An almost imperceptible harmonic resonance emanating from deep within its jeweled core rose up. The pattern to which, like familiar music, the gatekeeper felt

an immediate attraction and kinship. That fractured part of his mind, lost in the quantum void, had somehow coalesced on this pattern.

Then, as before, Sara began to visualize, subtly at first, some rather odd movements oscillating on the periphery of her field of vision. Pulsating from the cortex stasis vessel, ghostlike outlines intersected the gamescape and her perception as feeble facsimiles of form. Visual instances layered thereupon each other, seemingly in an alternating rhythm, corresponded roughly to that emanating from the stasis field. She looked at Frank and realized that he had not recognized what she had. This was her vision and hers alone. She began to be cognizant of the fact that she, somehow, was the lens through which this energy was focusing. It was through her inputs, her eyes, and her mind that this vision was possible. How far could she manipulate the structure of this world, she wondered. She began to focus and concentrate on these images, and as she did, they grew more and more distinct. Before long, a near replica of the makeshift control room hidden deep within the heart of the infinity ship replaced the moat, the gate, and the tower.

...

Meanwhile, Murine and Linda were still working within the stasis field in the Infinity ship, monitoring the chamber equipment.

Suddenly, the whole ship shuddered, shaking them from their workstations. For a terrifying moment, the two had lost their footing and were sent tumbling to the floor along with any equipment not tightly secured in place. With a dozen or more ship's sensor alarms howling, Murine called out to Bodhmall's voice, "Bodhmall, report, do you read? What was that?"

"Insufficient data; I'm working on it."

"You'd better get down here as soon as possible; we may need your assistance, and while you're at it, kill those alarms." A moment later, the blaring alarms fell silent. After the initial shock, in the absence of the alarms, they noticed that a palpable low bass rumble replaced its sound. There was also a corresponding drop in the localized air pressure and temperature in the space about them. "Do you feel that, Linda? It's dropped several degrees in here."

Everywhere Linda looked in the chamber, a mist appeared suspended in the air that seemed to vibrate ever so slightly. "Yes, Murine, I do feel it. And I must admit, it's creeping me out just a bit."

Murine was beginning to see things the same way. "Bodhmall, how about an update on what set off those alarms? Do you have anything more concrete yet?"

Though Bodhmall was at a remote location aboard the ship, she could analyze sensor data from anywhere, so her response came relatively quickly, "Yes, Mistress, it would appear that our sensors have detected a rather unusual anomaly."

"What kind of anomaly?"

"After careful analysis of the available data, the sensors have activated a proximity alert to a wormhole event, a dangerously close one; I might add." there was a pause in Bodhmall's response as she gathered together her words. She would be careful not to overstate the facts as she interpreted them. When she again spoke, she did so without hesitation or a hint of doubt in her voice.

"Where did it come from? Can we get a fix on its coordinates?"

"I told you it was an unusual anomaly. It matches no Arox technology signature ever captured in our database. However, it resembles a purely mathematical form of a toroid loop. It is, in effect, a perpetual passage to nowhere, if you will. So, to answer your question, no, we cannot get a fix on it. But I do not imagine that will be a problem for much longer." What Bodhmall meant by these words was soon apparent as the fragile bonds of what held the fabric of their reality seemed to bend and ripple in the presence of this unseen force.



...

From a quiet void within Sara's mind, coruscating lines of force appeared to form from the ether. Merely by visualizing the defining edge of form, imagery flashed into existence. To her delight and surprise, the gamespace had somehow amplified her already awesome gifts of pattern recognition to a level to which she could alter the fabric of space-time under these specific circumstances within the game. She wondered how, for she was not versed in such things. Had the actions of her human mind, hybridized by her alien implants, served as a conduit to the vast powers arrayed by the game space and the stasis field? As she began to see the others through the thin veil separating them, she began to recognize the shocked expressions on their faces. To her, what was happening held all the hallmarks of magic, as she had conjured them there.

Frank, for his part, could only stand back and watch as a portion of the environment about him transformed into an amalgam of the game architecture and a particular space within the ship. He could tell by how it was demarcated that this unlikely space seemed to exist outside of time and space, and he was somehow entangled within it. Frank could see the area beyond the fixed edge where a membrane existed, an energy barrier he imagined nothing could penetrate. He, too, now recognized the faces of

Linda and Murine there. He saw, too, the sarcophagi where his mortal body lay in slumber. This was a puzzle he had not prepared for. Until that moment, he had stood back, merely a silent witness to all this. The sight of his own body had heightened his anxiety; now, he could no longer hold his tongue. "What is happening?"

Sara, however, lost in hyper-relaxed concentration, did not answer. Though her mind was conducting a power she barely understood, she did so with the ease of a child at a playground. Through her eyes, though closed, Sara had discovered some pathway native to this technology. She opened her eyes to see the doorway as she had imagined it and the surprised voices of her friends. All at once, the singularity's delicate surface tension collapsed around them. Frank could only watch as the frail threads between the two worlds lost their cohesion. When all was said and done, all was not as before, and they found themselves before the unguarded bridge. Frank was the first to break the silence, imploring her for answers. "What the hell just happened? Where is the guard?"

Just as Sara had turned toward Frank to offer an answer, they were both distracted by a rather loud noise. They turned sharply toward the source of the noise. One by one, the massive chain links were being drawn up against the castle wall and the heavy

drawbridge. It was beginning to rise, and without another thought or question, they, in unison, leaped onto the rising bridge.

...

Murine and Linda could see and hear this fading interaction through the milky haze that separated them. Linda ran to the cortex field container that once held Frenoch's consciousness as it sat atop the sarcophagi. Having gained somewhat familiar with its workings, she quickly recognized that something within had changed. Glowing in its spectral light were cascades of interlacing arcs that seemed to dance across its jeweled surface. She was unsure what it was, but something had reactivated the circuit. Linda said, "Sara, I think you've done it. I think she's managed to capture that old avatar."

Murine, who had not pinned much hope on ever seeing Old Frenoch again, immediately ran to Linda's side. What she saw within the stasis box amazed her. With her face aglow in its light, she called out to Bodhmall. "Bodhmall, are you seeing this? I need to get an analysis on this as soon as possible."

"Accessing, yes, remote viewing is functional." She was on the move to their location, but there was an apparent pause in the communication as Bodhmall downloaded the imagery, forcing her to stop. Even with the machine processors at her disposal, the data transfer rate required her to do so. Bodhmall found her footing and braced herself against a corridor wall as a stream of images began to form into a unified whole within her mind. The complex image represented a matched set between the image currently observed and what had been on file. There could be no doubt.

"Mistress, it is confirmed that the signal does appear to match the harmonic resonance pattern on record to that of Master Frenoch. I have instructed the main computer to ascertain if anyone has attempted to tamper with the file. It may take several days to conduct the full analysis, but I think it's safe to confine the file within the stasis field."

Murine was pleased, listening to Bodhmall's report over the public address speaker. When finished, she wasted no time in responding. "That was some fine work, Bodhmall. Finish up what you're doing there and make your way down here as soon as possible; there is something you need to see."

"I'm already on my way."

Murine wasted little time and accessed the remote interface mechanism. Then, she could reinitiate the stasis field by

entering a simple instruction code. The green indicator light was now flashing green. She then carefully grasped the case and handed it to Linda. "Guard this with your life; contained within that box is the living consciousness of a great and wise teacher. He is someone we cannot afford to lose right now." As she said these words, she fought off a wave of emotion. A solitary tear rolled over her cheek.

"Can we bring his avatar body back?"

"I'll do my best," Murine said solemnly. Just then, Bodhmall's avatar had finally arrived. She was just in time to see what had been created by the unlikely singularity as it had begun to break down. Though her mind had scanned the shape of the anomaly, she could not have imagined it in any real space. There were vast energies at play here, fundamental forces knitting some other reality to this one. She watched as the portal to Frank and Sara collapsed back into the game, and the strange barrier that had enveloped them melted away. Seeing what they had just seen amazed them, but none more so than Linda. She, who merely a week before was but a college student, had never seen the likes of these. And so, as it disappeared again, she spoke. "How strange it is that one should need a passage to travel to a virtual place."

Bodhmall quickly offered her perspective on this point of logic:

"In truth, this toroid bridge is a loop onto itself. What potential motion might have taken place could only have been extra-dimensional."

Linda looked at her but did not respond. However, the expression she held there on her face was bewilderment. "I'm afraid I don't understand. Are you insinuating that this virtual world is a, so to speak, flesh and blood world?"

Murine, who had witnessed this exchange, sought to clarify her confusion. So, she spoke. "Linda, you should begin to think of this virtual world more as an adjunct space, not essential to, but nonetheless joined to this one. I've noticed from my studies of your popular culture the notion of a dichotomy between that which is real and that which is not. Though such notions may make it easier for those with impressionable minds to sleep easier at night, nature is far more complex than that. Think of the effect upon reality that the infinity ship imposes on this world, this city, the very space itself. You call it an illusion, which implies it to be, by your standard, an unreality. I suggest for your own safety and your friends still present within this adjunct space that perhaps, imagining that place, as you put it, as a 'flesh and blood world' may be appropriate."

As these words had finished rolling over her tongue, the shrill noise of wailing alarms filled the air again. All were startled instantly, and attention shifted to this yet-to-be-identified threat. Linda turned about and recognized that one of the stasis containers was now empty.

...

Until this point, things had gone as well as he could have expected for Lurker. He had an ill-conceived notion that he had anticipated his opponent's moves. The setbacks caused by the EMP had allowed him to see how unprepared he was. This moment of reflective clarity showed how he had been derelict in his duty. Surely, there were hidden adversaries that he had not accounted for. So then, with his world in chaos and his armies in disarray, Lurker's pastiche psyche sought solace from the deep shadow of rebuke he cast upon himself. With only the living memories of his human hosts to glean from, he constructed a contemplative redoubt.

In the moments that moved like hours, Lurker peered through the narrow slit that passed for a window. Lurker, seemingly spending days in singular meditation, kneeling upon the cold stone floor within the darkened recesses of his meager cubicle. What little light was available dimly illuminated the crumbling white-washed walls of the sparsely furnished cell. Before this

window, Lurker dutifully served his self-imposed penance. Speaking aloud in strings of unintelligible permutations, Lurker brought a highly tuned awareness to his hybrid consciousness. It was not immediately evident to him how, but for the first time in ages, his thoughts had been clear and free from petty distractions that had for so long fettered his ambitions. However, whether or not he prepared, a new and unprecedented situation roused him from behind this formidable wall of concentration.

Something in the distance was stirring, a glaring white noise pushing its way into his conscious mind. Try as he might to ignore it, its persistence on the edge of his consciousness roused him from deep meditative relaxation. He was fully aware of it now; there was something else, an unfamiliar sensation. He could feel it. It was as if this game space was his body and someone from somewhere without had opened a hole in it. He could not claim that the experience was painful, for he held no such yardstick for pain. He had never imagined experiencing sensations in this world that were not explicitly programmed into it. How he should be experiencing this was confusing to him.

His eyes opened suddenly to an array of unfamiliar sensations and one particular unlikely noise. He had heard music before and



understood the concepts and physics of sound. This low bass tone rang out as if his tower's crystal structure reverberated.

Considering he had created this world, Lurker figured he should hear only those sounds he had programmed. He was sure that this was nothing of his own making. Standing from his meditation to investigate, Lurker began to walk toward the door. As he moved across the space, this illusion soon resolved into another as the fortress's outer walls fell away. He soon looked down from a high parapet onto the vast expanse before the tower fortress. Without the muffling effects of the castle walls about him, the ear-splitting sound had grown louder by degrees. Beyond the droning noise, something highly unusual happened down below. Staring down at an expanding sphere of glowing light, he watched its energy spontaneously emerge within the game space. He attempted to formulate a theory for what he was now witnessing. However, his experience left him ill-prepared, for an answer did not come readily.

Lurker had watched the unfolding spectacle intensify from his unique perspective high upon the dark tower. He was beginning to realize that somehow, from some outside realm of the game, a dimensional portal had erupted into his virtual construct world. He had never imagined such things to be theoretically possible. Before him, these human interlopers had somehow created a toroid

bridge from the facets of spatial singularity. He pondered that it was perhaps due to the limitations of his machine heritage that he had not foreseen such an opportunity. This time he vowed he would not be on the side caught wanting. However, he would have to act quickly if he, too, were to benefit from these highly fluid events.

## Chapter 14

With every change to his timeline, Paul's memories remained as constant as the stars. Though he could always trace them as far back as he chose to remember, he suspected he was withholding something even from himself. Having reached the limits of his recollection, Paul sought to go further. Only Murine's lightest subliminal suggestion could dislodge something barely hidden behind Paul's self-made firewall. In images resurrected from some forgotten place, he saw himself as a child wandering alone in a barren, lifeless world.

Paul's face flushed, his expression severe as he began to speak, "I am at a loss for words; I usually have the advantage in such situations. But the closer I get to ground zero, the less able I am to understand."

Murine was surprised that the answer had not already come to him. Perhaps she thought she did not quite understand the human mind. Indeed, there was the trauma, or he had chosen to block these dark memories. Searching for a way for the truth to reveal itself easily. She decided to be direct, saying, "Is it you he's afraid of?" Murine raised her hand before him, getting his full attention while speaking his name. "Paul," His body went limp as she conjured a hypnotic trance. "Paul, I want you to remember everything."

...

Paul's mind slipped backward. He grew conscious again, seemingly in another time and place where two factions had been caught in a vicious cycle of war. The weapons of the remaining humans and the sentient machine, having fought to a virtual stalemate, had at long last fallen silent.

Paul looked out upon the vast plains of vitrified earth, marking the distance between the towers. He recognized himself looking out across the plain through the eyes of a child, and he

remembered the power that surged through his veins and his corresponding circuitry. About his feet, the parapet was littered with scattered bones of the dead, some still wrapped in the remnants of their clothing. Realizing he was alone, Paul watched the wind playing havoc among tattered cloth. How long had it been so? Paul could not recall. So long had his will to survive and outlast the logical machine, he had forgotten to count the days. How long had this battle gone on, he could only guess.

His mind had been occupied only with anticipating every move the machine would make before its formidable calculators could round the probabilities. The staggering amounts of power required for the machine to form each solution had grown exponentially. For this reason, Paul knew that the machine had suffered defeat in its stalemate. The machine must have solemnly drawn the same conclusion as its planetary resources were now destroyed or depleted. Paul merely waited for the power to run out; when it did, the creature, now parading as Lurker, was dead. But that was seemingly in another time and place far different than this one.

Despite the intensity of the imagery contained therein, the memory again grew spotty at this point in the unfolding

narrative. He must have left the tower to wander on foot, for he recalled walking alone among the vast desolate wastelands that had once been his world. The light of the burning sky reflected harshly off the molten glass brazing the earth. The air was almost unbreathable, but somehow, he lived. Until the machine was dead, he had no luxury to be concerned for his wellbeing. Now he knew, soon he, too, would die. Exhausted, he returned to the tower, laid his body down on the scorching hot rubble, and drifted unconscious.

Sometime later, Paul was awoken by a rustling sound in the distance. He reluctantly opened his eyes to see a ghostly figure moving lithely over the horizon. Through the high door frame, he watched the blurring object change direction, becoming more distinct as multiple figures formed. Paul was sure he was alone. He had sensed it.

...

The circular hole opened on the ship's interior hull, and a gust of hot, dry air rushed in to fill the void of the temporary airlock. One by one, Sara and Frenoch carefully descended the

self-extruded stairwell toward the ground. Looking outward toward the horizon's edge, Sara watched as the light from the twin suns made the orange sky seem to dance and ripple. Sara could hardly deny the marked severity of the climate as she shielded her head and face from the glare. Her sensor readouts determined that though the temperature was extremely high, the atmosphere was not toxic, and they would need only to wear survival gear and keep hydrated. The equipment they had would suffice.

Their scanners detected nothing beyond the set of stone towers. Sara and Frenoch began to cross out of the shadow of the first tower and into the open light. Sara could feel the intensity of heat immediately as their footsteps permanently marked the stretch of glass-like sand. Drawing closer to the hulking mass of the tower, it began to appear monolithic, less like a fortress, as something had homogenized its formidable features by yet unknown effect. Perhaps the ravages of time or a single colossal blast deformed its façade. After several moments, they crossed the divide between them and the tower, and the time for reflection was over. They found there along the edge what was once the opening remnants of massive hinges broken and melted, the door long gone. Peering into the deepening darkness framed within the doorway, they moved cautiously forward.

Behind them, the orange rectangle of sky retreated through the doorway as they continued deeper into the massive obelisk. Sara became concerned as she realized that they had walked farther than the apparent outward dimensions of the tower. When she was prepared to express this thought to Frenoch, he needed no convincing. He told her, "Sara, we should have long since passed beyond the original boundaries of this structure."

"What is this place?"

"Each race has its hallmark technologies; this is Arox technology. Like the façade illusion structure keeps unfolding before us, after all this time, the extrusion engines are still working within the stasis field. If I were to guess, I would say that this is where the game ended for the Lurker of this world."

"I don't understand. How many worlds does he get to play his game?"

"I don't think there's a means to answer that adequately."

Just for an instant, Sara recognized a subtle movement in the corner of her eye. She imagined that she was hallucinating or witnessing some residual of the illusion. Soon, however, the illusion became real as a wraith in the form of a shabbily dressed boy appeared to rise from the splintered ground. They were startled but strangely not afraid of his sudden appearance before them. Though his appearance resembled a child's, they

could sense the antiquity hidden beneath this temporal veneer. Carefully they moved closer to engage the dark-haired creature. Seemingly he had been waiting for them in the well of blackness as if he radiated the only light within the space.

...

Paul opened his eyes into the present to look again into Murine's face, and he spoke to her. I remember now. Sara rescued me from that place, but how?"

Murine responded carefully, "As you shall see, the game space has roots that tap deep into dimensions running parallel to this one. It was from one of these that you were rescued.

"But how can that be? I don't understand."

"We possess the means; traveling throughout this ship is not too dissimilar. Just now, we accessed what your earth science has dubbed a "wormhole" to gain access to this area of the ship. For you, it was no different. That world you came from is so incredibly close to this one that going there barely registers as having traveled. Yet because it is forever hidden from you, it may as well be on the other side of the galaxy. Despite how



complex this subject matter may at first seem, you would be surprised at the simplicity of such a feat."

"So, then, I am the subject of this memory. It has more the character of a dream than a memory as if it belonged to someone else."

"In a sense, that is true, for you long ago left that world behind."

"That is, of course, until now. The timelines have converged; I have sensed it."

Murine's facial expression changed as she tried to process the meaning of what he had just said. After all, so much rested on his ability to see around the corners of probability. Seeking then to discover what she could not know, she asked him, "Tell me, Paul, all that you have seen?"

Everyone turned in rapt attention as Paul spoke. "I will tell you now all I know, but I warn you, there is no guarantee that tomorrow, the circumstances will have again changed, and my words spoken here today will have been forgotten by everyone but me. Perhaps even sharing this information is dangerous, but we have little choice. Over these few weeks, the pace and scale of temporal change have been dramatic. Up until two days ago, our problem seemed manageable. In that ensuing time, I fear

something terrible has happened, and all we see around us is an escalation of that war within the game. By comparison, you have always lived in a world like this and could not have seen it coming."

Linda was the first to question him as she felt uncomfortable with what she considered to be no more than a fortune-telling act. "Ok, let me get this straight; two days ago, the world was significantly different from this one; how so?"

In such situations, Paul had long ago become used to people not believing him. So, he did for her merely what he did for everyone else by answering her questions as she asked them. "Sara and I were investigating an anomaly. Over several days, Sara had gone missing, and her tenure at the agency had been blotted out of existence. During this same period, I witnessed the exponential growth of a character we all now know as Lurker. I learned that he is not merely a character in a game but a powerful sentient A.I. He has been manipulating the timeline through some unknown means. What else there could be for now remains hidden from me."

"I imagine you're going to tell us that's where we come in," Linda said. "The last time I visited this city, it was as much as it had been fifty years ago. Today, things have changed dramatically. The entirety of its structures has been augmented

to serve some other agenda. The question remains: what agenda could Lurker possibly have? He already controls every aspect of life on this planet."

"I suspect its purpose beyond the game is solely to power his defensive capabilities."

"What could Lurker possibly be afraid of? I'm sure it's not us. If what you say is true, he's been doing as he pleases for some time."

"Remember, from my perspective, the scope of these events as you see them seem quite sudden."

Murine spoke again, "From what I am gathering, Lurker may already be under an unknown existential threat; perhaps this threat originated from within the game and has spilled out into this one."

Paul nodded his head in agreement. "In the absence of all other evidence, I am left to conclude that this must be true. I wanted to ask a puzzling question but had to wait until the correct time. I think that time has arrived. Why have none of you cared to mention the elephant in the room? Are you all, as I suspect, blind to it?"

A variety of expressions painted their faces in response to this statement. Murine was, of course, the first to question him. She

was confused by his question's meaning and his use of metaphor.

"What specifically are you alluding to?"

Linda interrupted, "What he's saying is what we can't see and is to him the obvious source of this supposed threat is apparently before our eyes in plain sight. Is that about right, Paul?"

"Essentially, yes."

"Your elephant is invisible."

Murine's expression changed from mild confusion to consternation as she attempted to imagine what she missed. Paul noticed this unspoken turmoil and moved to smooth her frayed emotions.

"Murine, there is no way you could have seen it. You lack the necessary perspective."

"Don't think you need to come here and patronize me. I've been defending this ship for decades. If not for me, Sara could not have rescued you. Don't you forget that?"

"That's interesting, that I shouldn't forget something you purposely blocked from my memory. Thanks for that, by the way. How's someone supposed to react?"

"Never mind that right now! Tell us what we are blind to, so we may begin to see."

"It is a shadow of a beacon suspended high above the tower. It was never there before in any of the incarnations of the city I have ever seen. However, this event appears like it should be emitting vast amounts of energy. Yet this object hangs there stationary in the air, growling like some impatient monster waiting to be unleashed. Its existence is impossible. How is it that none of you have spoken on this since my arrival here?"

Murine looked upon Paul with an expression of incredulity. She paused before she spoke, "Paul, the reason we didn't mention it, and I think I'm speaking for everyone, is that from our perspective, such an object does not exist."

The room was silent momentarily as Paul attempted to reconcile the meaning of what he had just been told. It was Old Frenoch who broke the silence. "Excuse me, my Lady Murine. I believe you may have spoken too hastily. Though we cannot directly visualize this event, we may have inadvertently captured an indirect observation. We will find its shadow if we examine the field data closely enough. Is that not how the humans first detected the façade illusion?"

Linda was the first to speak up. "That's right, Old Frenoch, that's exactly right. It took us weeks of calculations and banks of computers. I don't imagine an undertaking such as that should be as burdensome to the likes of you."

Before Linda had even completed her sentence, Bodhmall's crystal circuits had devised an algorithm from which the siphoned data was already being deciphered. An instant later, Old Frenoch had also reached a similar solution, though amazingly through differing means. However, they met at the same basic conclusion. In a virtual space offline and out of view from the others, Bodhmall and Old Frenoch were seemingly alone in a three-dimensional graphical representation of the data they had just calculated. However, they discovered there was a data problem. They found several points of disagreement, possibly due to observational errors. These errors required correction, of course; that's how they found themselves here. In all this time, they had never managed to find a means to be truly alone, and today, of all days, they find themselves here with a calculation error.

As she studied the form in search of a deviation, the irony was lost on Bodhmall. Frenoch stopped her and put his hand on her shoulder. And asked her, "Bodhmall, our time is short here. Look at me as I was when I was alive. Do you remember?"

She turned toward him, and as they looked at each other, they appeared like their most youthful selves. Both were, in that instant, caught in the infatuation of memory. This blissful

reminiscence though powerful, began to fade slowly. As it did, Bodhmall asked, "How long have we been here?"

"It can only have been milliseconds; I did not know such a place as this, where conscious communication and thought could occur in such a fashion."

"And what of our little error do you suppose that has something to do with it?"

"I don't think there was an error in our calculations but rather one of the input factors. It would appear that random perturbations in our observational data are inconsistent with what we should have expected to see."

"Correct the data; I want to see what Paul is seeing."

Old Frenoch did as she had asked, and what had appeared within the simulation was astounding. Suddenly, a replica of what Paul had described was hung in a holographic display before them.

"It's true, all of it is true, and we must show the others."

A virtual second after their computations had begun in earnest, the holographic image emitters fired to life. Before the group, a three-dimensional model representing an expanding corona of constrained energy within the boundaries of a confining field was displayed. As they watched the unfolding spectacle, the event appeared to take the form the way most

would imagine the nullified force of an exploding thermonuclear device held frozen at the moment of its detonation. Paul had felt its rhythm as surely as his heartbeat. What else was he to believe?

Though it was often difficult for Paul and Linda to grasp new concepts as readily as the Arox, now all could see it virtually. For Murine, as every child on Thetis knew, notions of such things were more easily understood as a matter of practical experience than one of theory. This is not to say the arrow of time worked differently for them. But as Murine observed the sapphire illumination cast off by holographic emitters, she immediately saw what Paul had described. Satisfied with what she saw, Murine said, "It would seem, Paul, that we owe you an apology. The Data has verified your story. It is something now that cannot be unseen even as it is invisible to me.

...

Back at the ship's center, near the containment field area, Paul, Murine, and Linda continued their study of the holographic display of the temporal anomaly they were now calling the beacon. It was quite the conundrum even for the likes of Murine.



She knew her kind was not particularly sensitive to these disturbances in the fabric of standard space. Her science and technology, she imagined, should have somehow warned and prepared her; it had not. Paul needed clarification about how he should be expected to instinctively know the course of action. His foresight and precognition had brought him this far but would bring him no further. The timelines had merged. He was sure of it. Whatever was going to happen would happen in the here and now. His fate was, at the very least, to witness it.

Perhaps Linda was the most practical regarding solutions and sensed a growing unease among her partners. Seeking to simplify matters for the others were seemingly lost in their thoughts, Linda spoke, begging for their attention. "Hey, I just thought of something. Perhaps we are looking at this in the wrong way." For lack of any ideas, both Murine and Paul turned toward her and gave her their full attention. "OK then, I'm glad to have your ears for a moment. Imagine, if you will, what Lurker is so afraid of. Is it us? I don't think so. As powerful as Lurker is, who is it he needs so desperately to defend himself against? There is no evidence of assault against him in this world. What does that mean to you, Paul?"

A light seemed to go on within him as the realization struck. He seemed surprised as he said it aloud. "The beacon

originated in the game? If that were true, the barriers constraining the game's spatial dimensions from bleeding into this one is breaking down."

Murine added perspective when she responded, "Is it any different than where we stand in this ship as it unfolds before us?"

"So, what are you suggesting we do?"

"What I'm saying is that Linda is right. The key to this beacon's mystery must lie within the game architecture. Lurker is expending vast resources to keep what appears to be a weapon from fully detonating. It would seem no one better suited than you to find the truth. Perhaps if your timelines have converged because here is where the conflict ends."

"Or where I meet my end. I don't want to end up like Sara if I do this. I have a terrible feeling about it."

Murine nodded and said, "We'll do what we can."

...

They returned to the stasis field where Sara and Frank still lay. Though Paul was soon to join them, he could not help but feel a wave of macabre anxiety as he looked upon what amounted to their corpses despite the stasis field. Murine

sensed this and spoke to allay his fears, "They are safe as you shall be. Seek them out if you can; they may help to guide you. Also, let them know we have not forgotten them."

"That's the plan. Now, if I get the opportunity," Paul said as he laid his body on the table. His eyes grew heavy from the sedation that would ease his passage into the gamescape.

Murine stood beside him, holding the connection cables, and asked one last time. "Are you ready?" In response this time, there was only a nod. She then proceeded to insert the six primaries and several peripheral input connections. The indicator lights lit up, and he was gone.

...

Paul awoke seemingly in a familiar place, though he could not recall a name for it. A flat, hot expanse of brushy grassland stretched before him, marked by clusters of small thorny trees. It was a dry, arid region swept clean by winds. The scents and smells all seemed exquisitely natural to him. Even the oppressive heat of the sun weighed heavily upon him.

Looking down at the clothing the game provided, he determined he was dressed appropriately. He discovered his uniform came equipped with a utility pack. Searching within, he

found a pair of compact field glasses. Hoping to use the glasses, he spied a high point near a clump of trees roughly fifty meters away. Moving within the spindly trees springing forth among large erratic stones dimpling the ground, Paul found a high point. Climbing atop a massive rock, he found his view vastly improved. Aided by the optics, Paul scanned the horizon. From this vantage, he began to see things he could not have seen before. He could see more clearly that the landscape had a distinct curvature, and there was far more variation than he imagined.

Just then, he was startled from his observations by a dark shape passing quickly through the lens of field glasses. A moment later, an incredible sound hit his ears. There could be no mistake. It was the distant rumble of a gasoline motor. The time delay between the sighting and the sound could mean only one thing. He had just sighted an airplane. He hurriedly trained his glass onto the dark shape as it disappeared over the horizon. However, before it had left its sights, he figured a rudimentary vector on this mystery ship. He scrambled back onto the level ground and began walking toward where the plane had gone. He did not know how long he would need to travel. For the time being, it was all he had to go on.

Once Paul had determined his vector, he continued following it unerringly. When he set out, it had been midday. Now, the sun had set, and a million pinpricks of light populated the night sky, coal black. The collective effect was to leave an illuminating haze upon the grassland below. He had grown weary, having lost all sense of time walking onward through this milky twilight. His legs felt leaden, and his senses had diminished at some point.

For several hours, the only sound he'd heard had been the cadence of crunching grass corresponding to his footfalls. Suddenly, some random noises he could not identify interrupted him. To compound matters, he could not tell from which direction they had come. In the dim light, his options were few. Luckily for him, the area was studded with many long-abandoned kraals. The sounds were loud and close, so on instinct, he made himself small and close to the ground within the safety of a round cluster of stones. Before he knew it, the sound was deafening, and seemingly, he was surrounded by the lights of vehicle headlamps. Realizing that they had caught him, he rose up and turned in time to see the silhouette of a figure obscuring the lamplight. There was motion, and then he felt the pain of a crushing blow in the darkness.

Paul had fallen into another kind of darkness, a dreamless unconscious state. As first of his senses again began to stir, there was no yardstick to determine how long he had been in such a state. Paul could feel the sun upon his face and hear the rumble of tires riding slowly along a rocky terrain below him. He tried to open his eyes but had to shield himself from the sun's intense rays. Paul tried to raise his hands, but they were bound. He blinked his eyes, but yet the glare was too intense. Listening, he could hear people but not make out their muffled voices. Shortly after that, the vehicle abruptly stopped, and he became aware of other noises beyond where he had been. Paul tried again to open his eyes; this time, he was not in direct sunlight. As he did, he found he could see, but the images were blurry and doubled. "Someone must have hit me pretty damn hard last night," Paul said aloud.

Someone grabbed him roughly, pulling him off balance from the back of a flatbed truck. He fell to the ground most embarrassingly, battered but uninjured. A uniformed man then prodded him rather rudely with the stock of his rifle and said, "It's time for you to get up, sunshine. You're lucky that somebody important wants to see you."

"And who might that be?" Paul asked brazenly, considering the circumstances.

"You just watch yourself. I'll have no compunction in giving you another wallop."

"Relax there, chief, you just got me curious. I'm walking, and you won't get any trouble out of me. However, here's a thought: what if the person I'm about to see didn't necessarily imagine seeing me in such a state? How do you know I am their enemy and not their friend?"

The guard lifted his rifle and held it lengthwise against Paul's chest. As he spoke angrily at him, he pushed him to the ground with great force. "I'm not the least bit interested in your thoughts or your questions." Paul hit the dusty ground hard with his arms still bound behind his back. He leaned on his elbows and leveraged himself up as best he could. Soon, he was up and began to walk slowly, this time without speaking. The guard again barked more orders, "We'll sort you out soon enough. Now, keep walking."

Paul walked on in silence, observing the locale in detail. In the light of day, he could see how the landscape features were dominated by low stone walls seemingly set out in radiating concentric circles. These, in turn, were connected by a loose network of kraals and stone roadways that cut their way through the semi-arid savannah. In the distance, a cluster of trees showed evidence of a river having once cut through the dusty

landscape. As soon as the party drew nearer to the outcrop of trees, other strange geometric shapes became visible. Rising above the tree line, a long sweeping stone wall several meters tall appeared. He could see several massive conical stone towers behind these intricately designed walls. It soon became apparent that this complex was their destination. As they drew closer, they seemed dwarfed by the massive wall and the giant gate that guarded its entrance. Within a few meters of the large wooden gate, a pair of massive stylized stone birds hewn from polished black basalt stood above the entry. Like memories from some pastiche picture book, this image somehow spoke to some part of his subconscious. He wondered to himself if a message was hidden in all this.

Upon being marched into the stronghold, he discovered its interior to be an ad hoc military field camp beyond the megalithic walls. The whole of which appeared to be camouflaged from view from the air. The complex, which was constructed into the natural environment, consisted of clusters of dugouts built up with cobble and sandbags and roofs covered with painted tarps and Gilly nets. Eventually, Paul reached a large open area where the netting and tarps supported by ropes and poles reached cavernous proportions. At ground level, he caught a glimpse of what was invisible from the sky above: the pair of ancient



silver prop bombers parked inconspicuously below. He wondered to himself what else could be hiding here out of sight. As his mind wandered, he was jarred back to reality by his rude guard. "This way"

Paul was then directed to one specific bunker out of the dozen similarly camouflaged buildings clustered throughout the clandestine installation. To this particular unit, the guard marched him to the top of a set of dugout steps, at the bottom of which stood a door. At this point, the guard removed a large knife from a sheath at his waist and cut the bonds that tied Paul's arms behind his back. Paul was nervous upon seeing the blade but was glad to feel his hands again free. As the ropes fell away, he felt the blood flow again into his hands and the sting of pins and needles. Flexing his hands to regain the sensation, Paul decided that would take some time. However, he could not wait to find out who his host was. He had let his mind wander and had forgotten the fear they placed him under.

A second later, he turned around to find his captor had gone. Emboldened by this, he stepped gingerly down the baked earthen stairs until he reached the cool shade of the lower platform below. There, he found nothing more than a flimsy wooden storm door as his final security protocol. Opening the door, he entered. Beyond the threshold, Paul followed an ill-

lit passage where he met a tall, pale, gray-haired man dressed head-toe in black at its end. Paul stopped upon seeing the severe expression on his face. The man was smoking tobacco from a clay pipe, and as Paul stopped, the man emptied the pipe's contents on the ground and crushed any potential embers under the toe of his leather boot. He crossed his arms across his chest and spoke to Paul. "Do you know who I am, Minister Valier?

Paul responded, "No, I'm afraid I don't."

With his arms still crossed, the man closed the gap between them, and then, moving quickly, he struck Paul hard with his fist in the midsection, knocking him to the ground. As Paul lay on his back, trying to recover his breath, the Man stood over him and spoke, "Exactly what did you say about this operation to that alien on that ship? You are not authorized to make contact. I have it on good authority that you've been briefed about someone already working that angle." He paused to wait for an answer that did not immediately come. "Well, what did you tell her? You can appreciate my concern. After potentially jeopardizing this mission, we find you in an unauthorized location. Why shouldn't I believe you might be a saboteur?"

Catching his breath, Paul said as he rose to his knees, "If you work for the agency, then you'll know I'm a time-sensitive. The lines of evidence have converged to bring me here. That's what I

do. Whatever I've said to Murine is irrelevant. She's not your enemy. I don't think that's a state secret. Hey, who are you anyway?"

"You don't get to know who I am, nor do you make decisions. Do you hear me? Now, go on through there. The rest of the theoretical group is through there. You're lucky you didn't get killed out there."

Paul dusted himself off and looked back to see the man walk off in the direction he had come. Paul turned and walked into a room that was seemingly from another era. It was a nerve center, but unlike anything he had ever seen. Bundles of analog cables were strung from wall to wall as the data conduits, as a literal army of human number crunchers acting as the cogs of an intricate analog coding device. Each typing long strings of numbers onto keypress machines. Despite his intrusion, the work went on as usual. No one had noticed his entrance. Paul took a moment just to observe. This hands-off approach was a surprise after his initial treatment. However, he had no doubt he was being watched, but by who? It didn't take him long to find out that, while walking amongst the nameless players in this perpetual game, seated before their keypunch machines, there were two figures he recognized immediately. He could barely believe his

eyes when he spied the faces of Sara and her partner, monitoring the progress of the key press operators.

Paul could not determine what was being programmed from his vantage, but this method was certainly antiquated. He was vaguely familiar with the process. He had witnessed its usage in a limited industrial capacity as simple mechanical memory units. Someone was spending a lot of unnecessary time and getting into a lot of trouble with something they could do faster and easier on a computer. He could not imagine what benefits they were acquiring from its use as opposed to more modern electronic methods. He figured he would know soon enough.

Sara was busy studiously observing the army of coders when she saw Paul shadowing her presence there. She turned to Frank and said, "Our visitor is here. We should see what word, if any, may have come from the real world."

"You are forever the optimist, my dear Sara. We have not received a word from the surface in some time now. I'm beginning to believe that the world does not exist anymore."

"Believe what you want, Frank. I intend to leave this place and, in the process, destroy that old man in the tower. Can I still count on you for that, Frank?"

"Well, what else will I do while trapped in here?"

"You need to stay focused, Frank. We are at a critical juncture. This next phase could be what we need to break through his defenses and send us back home.

"Yes, but home to what?"

"Not now, Frank. We have to focus on the job at hand. Let's speak to our new friend. While we do, please, no doom and gloom talk; there is enough to go around already.

Paul suddenly became aware that Sara and Frank now fixed their eyes squarely on him. Though he knew they must have had foreknowledge of his presence, it had felt safer to hide in the shadows. Despite knowing Sara reasonably well, he could not be sure how being trapped so long in a game such as this might affect one's psyche. He would be cautious. Over the sounds of the clicking keystrokes, Sara gestured for Paul to come forward and join them.

Paul emerged from the shadows, stepped forward, and joined them. It was a surreal experience for the woman he knew, as Sara was a woman of nearly eighty years of age. Though he could see the same intensity of thought and passion in her eyes, her apparent age now seemed closer to thirty. For Frank, too, time seemingly had stood still. He did the quick calculations in his head and figured Frank should be a hundred years old by now.

Frank was the first to speak. Breaking immediately into his bad cop routine, "So why don't you cut to the chase and explain why we should not send you out to fend with the perimeter guards again? You've already seen too much. I can't see letting you get out of here on two feet." Paul was surprised by the ease at which these veiled threats rolled off Frank's tongue. It was difficult for Paul to look directly at him, so intense was his practiced intimidation.

There was a momentary silence in which Sara put her hand on Frank's shoulder to let him know she was taking a turn at it. She would play off of Frank's intro. "Let me finesse that a little bit for you. Firstly, welcome to the Abzu. I want desperately for this to work out for you. However, by the clandestine nature of your arrival here in this place, there are only two logical explanations that I will accept as the truth. However, the more favorable one to all of us requires more significant verification. Are you ready to explain why our people caught you sniffing around on the edge of our airfield? And I assure you, you want me to believe you. The Ministry Joint Taskforce has invested too much time and human resources into keeping this place a secret. It would be much simpler to kill you."

Paul took a deep breath and responded, "There is much to tell you. We better find a place to sit down; this will take a while."

## Chapter 15

The Ministry's latest intelligence indicated that Linda's efforts would be utilized best by assisting Murine aboard the *Swan*. So, once Paul entered the game, Linda was determined to stay behind to do just that. Even as she peered bleary-eyed at an amalgam of ancient crystal gauges and holographic displays arrayed before her, despite being somewhat familiar with the technology, Linda still felt a sense of unworthy awe attempting to read the mysterious devices. However uncomfortable she may have felt, she was pleased to be alone again in Murine's presence, working as she had long ago. Though time had changed much, many things remained unchanged in the interspersing years.

The investigation process before them aimed to break the problematic phenomenon of the gateway beacon into manageable abstractions. Interfacing directly with the ship's computers, Murine ran hundreds of simultaneous simulations. Despite their scrutiny, the work so far had been mostly fruitless. So, as

Murine looked across through the haze of exotic three-dimensional models' formulas and expressions confronting her, she caught Linda's gaze. Linda saw in her face a rare presentation of base emotion.

While working together, Murine had grudgingly respected Linda for her natural insight. So, as Linda stared into her eyes, Murine couldn't help but feel ashamed for the outward display of frustration and anger rising to overwhelm her. Looking at her, it was too much, so she turned away toward the safety of her machine console.

Murine's eyes hovered there, her mind seemingly locked in a loop of cyclic doubt. Linda called to her, "Murine, what is it? How can I help?" Murine looked up from the console, turned to Linda, and said, "There must be something I'm missing or something I've been made purposefully blind to."

Recognizing Murine's state of mind, Linda proffered an idea. "Perhaps we're looking at this problem in the wrong way."

"How do you mean?"

"What I'm saying is, despite all of the advanced technology at our disposal, we've been unable to recreate a plausible means to how this gateway was created. Has it occurred to you that we may never know? But perhaps possessing that knowledge doesn't



matter. Perhaps we need to be asking fundamentally different questions. A necessarily new approach might be needed."

Murine's eyes came alive as if a light had shone within her mind, and a bright smile appeared on her face. Looking up at Linda, she said, "Something you said there got me thinking. There could be another way. I have an idea." Murine got up from her station and reached out her hand to Linda, saying, "Come with me."

Though Linda was a bit confused, she grasped hold of her hand and followed. As she rose, she didn't hesitate to question her. "Alright, where are we going?"

"There are many tools upon this ship. Some are so ancient there are barely detailed notations of their usage. Though the ancient Arox did not warp space, they did retain a deep and abiding knowledge of the universe. Their ways have long since been relegated to myth. We're headed to the shrine. Perhaps among their archives, we may find an answer."

Linda followed Murine into an adjoining corridor, and they began to walk. The walkway seemed to stretch onward, but they traveled quite a distance quickly due to some spatial distortion. They found themselves in a different portion of the

ship. It appeared disused if not abandoned, though the state of the technology showed that power still flowed as proximity sensors activated the lights as they advanced.

Murine stepped before a door, passing her hand over the sensor. The door momentarily hesitated before the bulk of the door slid over on a track. They peered within the open doorway; at first, only the light from without revealed a few ghostlike shadows. Overhead, lights flickered until the room illuminated, showing what appeared to be all manner of ancient relics stacked with varying degrees of care. Murine led them carefully through the artifact-laden room until they reached a platform on which a metal table held up by four marble columns stood. They walked up the platform's stairs and looked down onto the heavily patinaed bronzed outer casing.

Linda quietly observed as Murine examined its surface. She passed her hand over with a gesture, and the ancient door slid open effortlessly as if immune to the effects of time or wear. A light from within reflected off the surfaces of a wide array of untarnished gold and platinum circuits. They shined as brilliantly as the day they were printed. Plasma arcs danced across their myriad surfaces in response to the surge of power running through them.

Higher-dimensional vectors, ordinarily invisible to the unaided eye, were set aglow in a ghostly dance in her mind's eye through the lens-like veil of the machine. Murine envisioned the schematic as the order had laid it out many thousands of years before. The interactive overlay of the two images made some crucial unseen design elements visible. What was visible was an impossible number of potential data points seemingly reaching out to every prime and theoretical direction.

"What are we looking at, Murine?"

"You were right, Linda; we may not be able to create or access the gateway directly. However, we don't need to. I see what this device is now. The ancients have preserved their four-dimensional coordinate system for us in this device."

"I'm afraid I'm not following."

"What it means, Linda is if we know two coordinates in a four-dimensional coordinate system, we can infer an object's vector and, therefore, its spatial coordinates in time and space."

"How is that possible?"

"At the moment, I don't know, but I do know what they used it for. Unlike us, they could not fold space. So, their travel was not instantaneous. After their long travels, they needed a device like this to come home to their own time and space."

"How does it even calculate?"

"Again, it's workings I don't yet understand, but in theory, everything in four dimensions is forever in motion. A temporal coordinates vector can reveal the relative potentiality of their spatial counterparts."

"Are you suggesting we can somehow avoid a physical barrier by exploiting a temporal one? How do you propose we do that?"

"Remember Linda, I told you all things are possible? You're about to find out if I was telling the truth. I have an idea. If we can identify the moment of its creation, perhaps using this mapping system, we can send a small scout ship to find out what happened.

...

When Sara awoke, she looked at the night sky through the shattered cockpit window. By the looks of things, she had to imagine something happened to the re-life process because none of this made sense. She moved to unfasten her flight harness and felt the acute pain of an unhealed injury. Shrapnel had struck her in the fighting. There was pain and blood, but she was alive. Her injuries were superficial, but the fact that she had any injuries after such a crash was indeed odd. By rights, the

game should have killed her and brought her and the plane back whole. Struggling to rise from her chair, she got to her feet and returned through the fuselage.

Near the cargo door, she saw in the dim light a ghostly outline of Frank's coherence pattern flickering in and out on the deck. She paused and called his name. For a moment, his form materialized as if it was listening for her voice to come alive. She called his name again, "Frank, are you still there?" Sara watched as Frank's form solidified where it had been lying, and his body again came to life. He slowly writhed to a sitting position. Lifting his hand to his head, Frank rubbed his temples as if to massage away the weight of pain and confusion. He looked up at her in bewilderment and said, "Sara, you've come back! Where did you go? I feel like I've been stuck here for an eternity."

"I've only just landed. If you can call that a landing?"

"What is this place, and how long have I been here?"

"I don't have time for this right now, Frank." She said as she reached out her hand. "Come on, get up. Let's go have a look and find out together."

Climbing down the ladder onto the crumbling tarmac, they found themselves beneath a starlit sky the like of which neither of

them had ever witnessed. The air was still and quiet. But for a few points of light, deep darkness girdled the glowing cloud of the Milky Way. In the distance, dim shadows revealed the outline of the airfield buildings and the stone walls of the stronghold.

As they walked toward the command center, the imagery found there forced Frank's memory to return slowly. However, nothing was quite like before. All the power was down, and there wasn't a soul to be accounted for. "What happened here?" Frank asked.

"I was wondering the same thing. It's not your memory this time."

They continued through the gate and into the labyrinth of dugouts. Finding the bank of batteries switched into the off position, they powered on the lights by flipping the blade handle into the correct position. With a crack and a spark, a string of overhead L.E.Ds lit the way forward. Knowing the way, they followed the path until they reached the once-guarded entrance of the Abzu's central nerve center. Frank and Sara examined the abandoned workshop in the pale light, looking for anything resembling a clue to what had happened for several minutes. Finding only dust and scattered debris, it appeared to have been vacant for some time.

Eventually, they came to an office area. In the bare light, rows of makeshift cubicles arranged with desks, file cabinets, and chairs conspired to conjure phantoms from the unnatural shadows. One such shade stopped them abruptly as it appeared as a figure of a man. Their hearts pounded heavily during the moment to ascertain the reality as they recognized the carbon fiber and steel form of a deactivated Arox avatar.

They paused, remembering their last encounter with such a creature.

Sara spoke quietly to Frank, "What do we do?"

"Maybe nothing. It could be dead."

The sound of their voices somehow activated the sleeping avatar. An emerald light activated within its crystal cortex, and the sounds of many servo motors whined as its body rose from the chair. Sara and Frank took a step back and watched with curiosity as its surface characteristics began to take on those of Old Frenoch. As Facial features appeared upon its head, it began to speak. "Sara, it is good to see you again. How long have I been waiting? I was in power save mode; it does not feel long."

Sara stared dumbfounded at the avatar before determining her silence might seem rude. She responded, "It's good to see you

again, too, Frenoch. However, I could hardly recognize you. It's been so long. And to answer your question, I couldn't possibly tell how long you've been here or from where you came."

"It's no matter. You're here now. I need to show you something important. Please come with me."

They looked at each other and nodded, silently acknowledging they had no other leads. They followed Frenoch at a safe distance through familiar corridors until they reached the leaded glass-shielded safe room where the workers once assembled the clockwork bombs. Frenoch pulled back the protective shroud encircling the room.

Frank and Sara's eyes were now fixed on a strange sight. Before them, a steel-studded bell-shaped object hovering effortlessly off the floor filled the volume of the space.

Frenoch opened the door to the room and gestured for them to enter. Again, Sara and Frank looked at each other. By now, they both realized it was too late to turn back. When they entered the glass-enclosed room, a gentle hum of the object's hidden power source filled their ears. With Sara's face aglow in the aura reflected from the ground, she asked, "What is this thing?"

Frenoch seemed happy to explain as he opened a hidden panel and pressed a spring-loaded button, "Oh, this little thing is a



museum piece, a relic of history." A hand-cranking mechanism self-extruded from the gap in the panel. Frenoch began turning the crank, and with a tremendous racket, the internal gears inched the door open.

Frenoch entered, realizing he was alone, turned and beckoned them to follow.

Sara seemed insistent this time, "So why are you so keen on showing it to us? You didn't answer my question. What is it?"

"It's not one of ours. It's an anti-gravity device equipped with the rudiments of a time machine. Now, do you want my help or not? You're making this more difficult than it needs to be." After which, he paused and waited for a response.

Satisfied for the moment, they begrudgingly stepped through the hatchway. An odor of oiled metal and ages of grime hung heavily in the air as Frank and Sara entered the capsule. They were immediately struck by how the shape of its interior design appeared more ample than its exterior would seem to allow. Examining the odd switches, dials, and what they assumed were seats, they tried to imagine for whom such a craft was designed.

Seemingly on cue, Frenoch answered, "It's of a Reptilian design. Even primitives like yourselves shouldn't have too much trouble with its operation."

"Hold on a minute," Frank said abruptly. "You'd better watch how you're talking. You're starting to piss me off."

"I did not intend to insult you. The Reptilians were similar to your race in most respects, but likeness. My goal is to provide you with something you could use.

"Reptilians?" uttered Sara. "What happened to them?"

"Gone," responded the bard; we found their colonies on many worlds. Their ships once plied the space lanes for millennia. In days past, these Reptilians thought nothing of exchanging such technology for something they desired. The Reptilians coveted gold above all else but abhorred the labor required to obtain it."

Neither Frank nor Sara had heard such stories, yet they could not deny they were standing before the artifact, which Frenoch seemed keen to vouch for. Frank pondered the possibilities and asked, "Couldn't this just be another part of the game like everything else we see? If it is real, how the hell did it get here?"

"That's a long story. Suffice it to say it's taken some doing. How it came to be in my possession is another story. The truth is, it materialized in a farmer's field in a region known by you as Pennsylvania, and your government has been secretly holding

it. Now, as we find ourselves in a jamb, realizing we must use every tool to our advantage, your friends outside the game in Applied Branch have been kind enough to upgrade and recommission her to our specifications for this mission. To answer how it is here now, you need only to look around to see the constraints that once separated things have broken down."

Sara felt compelled to ask, "Let me get this straight. Someone has prepared in advance for our inevitable return to this place. You knew something was happening and waited until that happened?"

"It's not as simple as all that, I'm afraid. There is the question of paradoxes. Of this, I suspect you've been warned."

"Alright. Then tell us what's so important about this machine?"

"From my perspective, there's nothing special about it beyond what it can do. However, what is extraordinary is the classified Arox coordinate system programmed into its upgraded memory core. These documents have seven unbreakable security seals; the highest holds the mark of King Xionites himself. Long may he rest."

Sara asked, "What is in the data that's so important?"

"The great crystal ships of the Arox use the celestial bodies themselves as a power source while bending the form of space to

travel throughout the continuum. But it had not always been so. In a time before such technology, the ancient Arox mariners plied the domains of space between stars known simply as *Y Môr Tywyll*. Or in your language, *The Dark Sea*.

In those long-lost days, those mariners traveled across the immeasurable chasms of black emptiness between the stars. Buffeted there by the unending currents, they required meandering safely through the channels of matter and void while propelled upon the stellar winds. In the fullness of time, they had circumnavigated the entire galaxy. With their simple instruments, they charted temporal passages lost long ago. Only in the memory of the order were fairy tale notions of such an ancient coordinate navigation system preserved."

It seemed like the meaning of what Frenoch was saying struck Sara all at once as she asked, "That's how you found the Earth in the first place. And you can go anywhere with this system, is that right?"

"That's right. And with it, you will find your way back. I will show you how it's done."

Since they had discovered Frenoch, Sara continued observing the strange patterns of happenstance as they fell into place more closely. Though it was undoubtedly the Avatar of Frenoch,

the nature of his presence there had shifted from curiosity to suspicion as the questioning continued. So, Sara responded, "Before you do any of that, you're going to need to level with us. What the hell is going on here? Something isn't adding up."

Frenoch turned toward Sara, smiled, and said, "Murine warned me this might happen. We were hoping to avoid this line of questioning. But you may have already figured out that I may not be the Old Bard you remember. But in truth, I could say the same for you. What you haven't figured out is how it is possible that perhaps I've come from a universe just slightly adjacent to the one you are familiar with."

Sara grew angry, though she tempered her words as she spoke, "Ok, out with it, tell me everything you know."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. To correct the damage you have inflicted on the chain of causality, we've attempted to shield you from potential information that could cause a paradox."

Frank uttered, "That's bad?"

"Wait one minute!" Sara said, "None of this would be happening if your ship hadn't come here in the first place and released Lurker onto the earth. So, remember that when you're pointing fingers."

"Your point is well taken. However, you've always known too much information could create a paradox, potentially nullifying everything we're trying to do. And let's not forget that there is the matter of retrieving Paul. You're going to need him to put things straight. I suggest we get to that straight away.

...

Sitting alone in his cell, Paul barely had the time to contemplate his circumstances when he began feeling suddenly ill at ease as a creeping panic overtook him. Sweat poured down his face, and pressure built up in his chest as vomit erupted from his mouth. Seemingly, the weight of gravity was pushing him hard to the dirt floor of his cage. Tilting his head toward a glowing ball of light, he recognized something was slipping into his timestream.

The spinning ball of light expanded to encompass most of his cell and part of the hallway. The spinning torus of Mercury-Halide plasma powering the vortex came to a rest as *the bell* powered down. As the spatial distortion field collapsed, the ill feeling Paul was experiencing had passed. Pushing himself from the ground, he watched as the door on the bell-shaped craft opened before him. Paul was astonished when he saw Frank and

Sara emerge from the bell, having ordered him thrown in the cell only moments before.

There was little time to explain. They grabbed Paul by the arm and pulled him, stumbling into the bell.

...

A moment later, with pinpoint accuracy, the Bell rematerialized within the bomb compartment of one of the other antique bombers parked hidden from the air along the edge of the runway. Sara emerged from the bell into the belly of the fuselage. She immediately recognized that this one, like the one she had most recently flown, had the same weaponry and defensive capabilities. She checked the fuel gauges and switched on the main battery power. Everything seemed to be in working order. "Frank," Sara yelled as she strapped herself into the pilot's chair, "Pull the chucks on those wheels, would you? I'm going to pull this bird onto the runway."

As Frank hurried down the ladder onto the field, Frenoch asked, "So you know where you're going then?"

"I think so; we're taking that bell into the first instance of the gateway. Unfortunately, you'll have to fly the plane at the final moment, but I guess you already know that.

...

The desert sand below them glowed a shade of satin rose in the fading night during their hastened ascent. They were flying low against the horizon; Paul watched through the ballistic glass canopy as they raced their own shadow along the side of the bluff. He could make out the silhouette of the plane. Adding to the illusion, the reflected sounds of the engines, from some distance away, created an echo effect of two sets of engines. He thought to himself, it indeed was a sight to be seen.

As the sun crested the hills and the tendrils of pink cloud diminished, he watched the acute shadows of the morning give way to the light of the day. Wrapped in this new light, the body of the desert began to take on a different shape and character.

The grandeur of these views was lost on Sara, who, as the pilot, had to monitor the indicator needles on dozens of old-fashioned dials. Otherwise, after completing her near-constant instrument checks, she would return her gaze to the spine of the distant hills as they unfolded in the light as a point of reference. She had practiced this before, this particular run. She had even built a model based on her observations. She felt confident she could pick her way to the target at this altitude



using what she had learned. The question remained: Would they be detected?

By now, Paul was looking over at Sara and, for a moment, lost in thought. He was still there in that moment when Sara caught a glimpse of him staring oddly and called him out on it. "Hey Paul, what are you daydreaming about?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I'm afraid I've been preoccupied."

"What's going on up there? I'm being serious. I want to know."

Paul sat up straight in his chair, and suddenly, his demeanor became severe. "Well, if you need to know, I'll tell you. It's just that I was looking at you and realized that I've probably known you longer than anyone else. Despite that, I barely know you at all. Somehow, you have significantly influenced me, one small, disjointed slice at a time. Soon, however, as I told you before, we will reach a point when our timelines will intersect. Then perhaps I will see you for who you are."

Without turning her head toward him, she responded, "Perhaps, perhaps not; for a time-sensitive, shouldn't you know better than to predict the future?" She turned her head toward him and

smiled. "That's the trouble with living in the moment; you must wait and see."

By now, Frank had climbed up into the cock pit and, along with the others, could see the first glimpse of the beacon shimmering brightly in the distance. "OK, Sara, we need to talk about this plan of yours."

"I'm listening, but you're running out of time. I intend to take this ship in through what I believe to be a gateway. I made the decision, and I'm determined to go through with it. I won't turn around; it's too late for that."

"Sara, I hope you know what you're doing."

"If all goes well, we'll find out soon enough."

Just then, a green dot appeared on the primitive radar monitor. Simultaneously, a proximity alarm sounded, warning the crew of the signal sound in their ears. "What's that?" shouted Frank.

Sara retorted calmly, "If I'm right, it's us from our last mission going in for our final approach. This is going to be tricky. We can't let them see us."

...

The many varied terrains of the game had transformed beneath them. Desert had given way to scrubland, then to dense forest. Sara dodged the outer defenses by dropping below the radar through each defensive zone they passed. This strategy, however, could only take them so far. At their final approach, they would ascend to the beacon and be directly exposed to whatever their defenses could throw at them.

The engines produced a distinct report that echoed off the canopy below as the plane glided mere meters above the mature trees. Like a mantra, the sound droned on as they watched the target grow ever closer. Paul, from his co-pilot's chair, looked through the dew-splashed windscreen at the massive hulk of the tower. In his mind, he imagined all its previous permutations. He had seen it many times. This, however, was supposed to be the prototype, or better yet, an archetype of all the others he had seen. Here in Lurker's workshop, things would follow his plan, not to circumstance. Sara broke the silence with a warning. "Are you all strapped in tightly? We're about to make a run for the beacon. Paul, be prepared; we'll likely take fire. Are we ready? Frank, you strapped in back there? Each of them called

out in the affirmative. She turned her head forward, set the fuel mixture for proper acceleration burn, and simultaneously pulled back on the yoke and the throttle. The steady drone of the four cyclone engines was immediately replaced by a thunderous roar more befitting its name. The crew was pushed back in their seats as the ship climbed higher.

Though radar caught them immediately, the human sentries whose duty was to keep watch for such things could not at first see the ship, but the noise made short work of triangulating its location. Faintly, they began to see its black shape slip across the plane of the sky. As it drew nearer, it reflected light from the beacon itself. It was at this point that the sharp-eyed gunman began to fire. Flak shells and hot red tracers streaked through the sky, and small arms fire rose from the forest. It was then that the automated defenses came online. Computerized programs searched the sky for anomalous movements. Once found, they extrapolated from likely variables a potential object's mass and rate of speed. Within milliseconds, it had determined the next likely coordinate in which the object would inhabit. There, it would be met with a sufficient deterrent. In this case, it was a high-speed machine cannon. The process from target acquisition to firing was virtually instantaneous. With

a whirl of the cannon motors and the corresponding flash, the plane's defenses came alive.

Paul saw the flash of light from below, and then, a microsecond later, one of the engines was strafed by a flying ribbon of lead. The wing, which also doubled as a fuel tank, was punctured and leaking and soon caught fire. As terrible as this situation was, he could not know then that they were seemingly being assailed from every angle. The ship began to shudder as it sustained multiple direct hits. Though its armor-plating and electronic countermeasures had absorbed much of the incoming fire, the old plane had sustained heavy damage. Just how much more damage the old ship could endure? With the instrumentation lights now all flashing warnings, Sara could only guess. She could do little else but go on even as the choking smoke seemed to burn her eyes.

...

The view afforded John Zeigler from his office high up in the tower gave him a front-row seat of the action below. He watched the unfolding spectacle as bursts of fire and exploding shells

illuminated the silhouette of the antique warplane. Suddenly, there was a bright flash and a cloud of black smoke from a massive explosion as a projectile made a direct hit. An instant later, the plane emerged from the conflagration marred but unbroken. John stared down at the plane. Somehow, he knew who was aboard and what their mission represented. Being Lurker's prisoner for so long, He could ill afford to let it fail. With his mind, John reached into the network directly. His eyelids fluttered as he read the thousands of commands before isolating the defense lockouts. With merely a thought, he had ordered the whole of the automated defense systems to stand down without so much as a keyboard. He knew Lurker would not allow this to stand unchallenged. He had no intention of waiting around to challenge him on it.

...

As the plane was approaching, Sara recognized the vessel was shaking terribly. They needed a break, and they needed it fast. With each hit, the ship shuddered; smoke and shrapnel were flying about. Without knowing it, they were in a way lucky, too, for if the cockpit itself had taken a direct hit, they would have been dead for sure. Ignoring the alarms, Sara held tightly onto the yoke, pointing the nose squarely toward the beacon. In

the middle of all this mayhem, as these hundred thoughts streamed through her mind, she had somehow missed the cannon sounds, and the alarms had all stopped. Only the distant report of small arms fire remained. She pulled back on the stick again, and the remaining motors responded. The ship, no longer hindered by the stress of the bombardment, slowly began to climb. She tried as best she could to focus only on that despite the thousand distractions arrayed against her. She knew it was time to have Frenoch take control of the plane.

Sara pondered if Frenoch were injured or, worse, would the plane continue on. If this failed, would this all happen again? Remembering the injuries she recently sustained, she was beginning to have serious doubts about her viability in the game. Was this all a final long shot? She hoped that perhaps Frenoch could maintain altitude just long enough to make the target. However, the plane was struggling. Two engines were down; one was burning. "Alright, fellas, it's time to board the capsule if you dare," Sara sang like the song.

They all unstrapped their flight harnesses and made their way out toward the cock pit. Frank and Paul entered the readied capsule. Sara turned back to Frenoch to wish him good luck. Recognizing the expression on her face, he said, "Don't forget Sara, there is every chance this will succeed, and if it

doesn't, I might survive; who knows?" With that, she ran to join the others.

As Sara settled into the safety of the capsule, she realized now, with the beacon facing them as this final hurdle, that she had not reasonably thought about what to expect once they reached the other side. Was it even logical to attempt such a crossing? After all they'd been through, it was a moot question. Then, the answer dawned on her. "Only in a game where you can re-life would one take such illogical risks."

Frank, shaken and bloodied from his ordeal, answered forlornly. "You forget, this is not an experiment. This is a mission. Let's also remember that it's our duty, for we are the only ones capable of completing it, so we must do so. All the measuring of potential risks would not have changed that basic fact."

She knew, of course, that he was right, but there was more. She sensed something had changed in him. Whatever had happened to him during his last 'episode,' the experience had brought new vigor to his countenance. It had been some time since she had seen him look so alive. She was beginning to feel the reports of his death may have been premature. "Frank, I'm glad you made it out here with us. It wouldn't have been the same without you."



"Do you think I would leave you alone with this guy? I don't think we can quite trust him like that, not just yet anyway." Frank turned to Paul and cast a playful wink at him.

Far above them, spiraling out of sight from their detectors, another similar ship prepared to deliver its deadly cargo. As its doors opened, the strange gleaming device with its immaculately timed gears tumbled with deadly accuracy toward the tower. The unstoppable event had begun.

For an instant, Frenoch could see with his own eyes the colossal forces unleashing before his visual sensors burned out. An intense flash, then nothing was all that had been registered. His internal sensors told a different story, similar to Paul's earlier prediction. Seemingly contrary to logic, the heavy strain that had pushed the remaining engines to their breaking points had begun to lessen as the airplane's wings caught a sudden, unexplainable uplift. It had soon become evident by the nature of their ascent that their ship had somehow become entwined in some mysterious invisible force. It was now inevitable that the ship's trajectory would intercept the plain of the beacon.

From within the cramped space of the capsule, they watched, mesmerized on an observation screen, the billowing clouds and dancing arcs of plasma swirling amid the sky. Drawing ever closer, they could see the leading edge of the gateway burning with a white-hot intensity. It was here where great energies were at play, maintaining the force field integrity. The ship was moving faster now. The rate at which their speed had increased corresponded directly to their relative distance from the edges of the gateway. They watched as the burning halo faded into the periphery to envelop the horizon. What sounds of the battle remained had muted into the distance until it disappeared entirely. They all felt a distinct falling sensation, then weightlessness. They were overcome by complete silence and stillness as the ship finally crossed through the boundary.

There had been barely time for them to react before they momentarily lost the use of most of their senses. Time seemed to lose its context for them as the ship broke the plain of the event horizon. Slowly drawn inward toward what they first observed to appear as a great halo of light, notions of scale and dimensionality were obscured by the raw illusion of folded space. Lost there, they tried to make sense of what limited sensory signals they could not understand. For them, this would be nearly impossible. Despite its serendipitous discovery as a

gateway, the beacon was nonetheless a void in space. Any potential use or meanings ascribed to a great tear in the weakened fabric of space-time were invisible to them for the moment. After an indeterminable time had elapsed, they had traversed through the null region from one reality into another. In doing so, one by one, the effects of the void upon their senses had begun to fade. They had come out beyond the veil of fog that had instantly obscured their vision evaporated. The sound of the droning engines entered again into their consciousness, joining the cacophony of their senses into a jumbled yet coherent whole. At once, they would cast their eyes onto a strange yet familiar world.

The silken canopy of the night shined with the ghostly light emanating from innumerable points of light that they knew instinctively to be beacons of a type they had just emerged from. The planet below them, though cloaked mostly in darkness, enough was visible in the pale twilight to tell that it was a desert world much like what they had left behind. However, its surface was marked by the long, stark shadows of ever-wandering dunes stretching for miles. It was a sand world, cold and desolate at night, hot and forbidding during the day. Upon seeing these stark and rolling features, Paul felt the stirrings of recognition as his earliest memories began to rise from their

depths. He had been here before. This had been his home. "How?" He asked himself, "How could this be so?"

## Chapter 16

Lurker was occupied conducting simultaneous campaigns on multiple battle fronts when he felt the first silent shock wave rolling through the game's landscape. This feeling so disturbed his formidable concentration that despite the threat to his defenses, it forced him to abandon the battlefield altogether, drawing him out to the precipice of his high tower.

Though Lurker could not yet fathom the whole meaning of the first instance of the atomic blast, as his force fields enveloped and stifled the wave of unchained energy breaking into his game realm, he sensed something extraordinary happening. Looking out onto the horizon, he watched in the sky as the whirlwind of clouds roiled and the heavens shifted as a brief but powerful shudder moved throughout the landscape. What effects this shock wave had on his realm was not immediately apparent. However, his keen perception of strange sensor readings streaming from beyond the game told of an exponential energy spike threatening to overrun his formidable planetary

defenses. Still, illogical discrepancies remained as his mind strained to calculate opposing forces standing seemingly in perfect balance. Taking a moment to reconcile the numbers and theorize possibilities, he concluded that the terrific effects placed by the mass of *The Swan* along the arrow of time had worn this singular point in space-time threadbare. Someone was exploiting this weakness to dangerous effect, splintering the barriers. He could only watch as new possibilities unfolded one upon the other. This war, it seemed, had taken on a new character.

Within moments, as the shifting swirling mists began to clear, Lurker saw the first of several new faint points of light appearing one by one along the horizon in proximity to Sol. Though instinctively, he knew they were not stars. They twinkled and were bright enough to glow through the daylight. The sight roused ethereal flashes of memory from the deepest levels of his mind. Something mimicking the emotions of fear and anger welled from this deep place. It puzzled him how these strange lights might have some link to his origin, which had for so long obsessed him. The more he looked at this peculiar new constellation, the more he grew in this idea. Unfortunately, there were more practical matters needing his attention.

The attack had not happened without warning, and though the automated defenses designed to protect the tower complex were more than up to the task, the first plane somehow made it virtually unscathed to the target by evading recognition. The machine monitoring for enemy activity had picked up an intermittent, unidentified radar target flying low from the desert. However, its vector and manner of flight were inconsistent with any previous approach patterns. If this airplane was a threat, its algorithmic signature did not match any accepted surveillance patterns. By the time the first plane had maneuvered to release the atomic device, it was too late for the manual defenses to prevent the bomb deployment. As the second plane made a run toward the exposed tower, despite the machines fully understanding the legitimate threat, someone ordered the guns to stand down. Only a betrayal by someone with access to the game's higher functions could do such a thing. And for those who would be suspects, there was a very short list indeed.

...

Since its sudden appearance of the beacon, John Zeigler observed the pulsating ball of light and swirling energy from his office, situated many stories above the desolate façade of the city below. From his unique perspective, with his arms stretched out wide, his old body augmented by technology pressed tightly against the dark-tinted glass, he stared out with a growing fascination. John could sense something through the smoked glass, a substance beyond the ethereal light that seemed to ignite a yearning within him. It was a sensation he had not felt since the days before giving himself to Lurker. Of such things he could barely think or remember, so long and desolate had his journey been. Somehow, he was determined to capture that light once more. He had betrayed Lurker once. Could he do it again?

From his contemplation, a desperate message from his master flickered within his consciousness, obliterating his thoughts. Before his mind could fully comprehend what was happening, Lurker had entered his mind, taking control of his body through one of the hundreds of service data ports that served as the network for his cyborg frame. Looking through John's eyes, Lurker peered out upon the same glowing orb.

Lurker's consciousness rose and swept aside the network of biology and machine, absorbing John in the process. At this

point, John was no more a man than Lurker was. But somewhere, his sublimated mind remembered who he was; he existed there, somewhere. Through John's eyes, Lurker saw the constrained explosion's frozen frame hanging still in the sky. Unable to reconcile the image before him, he turned away from the window and returned to his desk. Lurker was nervous; he could not help but channel the human physical response his psyche felt from what remained of John's body. The stress response was one aspect of a physical being that Lurker imagined he would have eradicated. However, he had little choice; he had to deal with what he had. From beneath a flap of artificial skin, Lurker removed a data cord embedded in John's arm and connected it to the port into the computer on his desk. He blinked his eyes and began to run the queries necessary to access the hard systems he could not easily access from within the game. The screen flickered faster than could be recognized by the human eye. The effect left a surreal dance of color across his face. Eventually, the monitor failed as its simple circuitry overheated, matching the speed at which Lurker had flashed the data. It made no matter to Lurker, for he was accessing the data directly.

Within minutes, he had breached all the systems monitoring the unfolding phenomenon. All the data available on the subject,



secret or otherwise, was in his possession and control. Though these were admittedly primitive, they could incrementally increase his advantage. The numbers told the tale his eyes could not comprehend. As if it had been anticipated, the massive force field constrained a seething thermonuclear reaction frozen in the moment of its creation. He asked himself how the simple creatures could have accomplished making such a device in secret. He had underestimated these humans. They are indeed cunning and resourceful. In a short period, they have evolved and adapted to my defenses, expanding the dimensions of game space. They had tapped into the resources aboard the Infinity ship. For all these years here on Earth, these had remained cut off from him despite all his attempts to exploit them.

As Luker observed the spectacle, he forced himself to ponder layers of complexity he had not until now thought possible. The dimensional doorway could not have been possible without all of the elements working in a kind of destructive harmony. Their combined energies broke it wide open. It took him another moment to realize how unlikely this scenario would have been had he not been its unwitting engineer. Was there some hidden meaning unknown to himself? He pondered. If this theory were true, not only would he find his enemies on the other side of the gateway, but perhaps answers.

Lurker was determined not to waste another moment. So, as his abandoned armies retreated to their redoubts, he gathered enough supplies to keep his host body alive for several days and exited the office, taking the private elevator to the top of the building. The company's private jump plane parked on the roof above the other buildings was ready and awaited his commands. Opening the door, he climbed inside, connected his data port, and took control of the vehicle. The small jet engine thundered to life and flew upward vertically. Lurker did not hesitate as he directed the small one-person craft to follow the vector of the airplane into the static void.

...

Through a meter-high observation oculus on the observation platform, Murine and Linda watched the probabilities foretold by Paul unfolding in such exquisite coincidence with the ancient four-dimensional cartographer's predictions. They watched as the beacon, a theoretical doorway entangled to another dimension, had, in an instant, gone from a numerical aberration to a thing that existed in their world. From all they had gathered, they could only conclude that Paul's vision had indeed been

precognition. All that he had witnessed before surely began at this point.

Linda was the first to speak as the long silence as the newness of what they saw was replaced by fear and confusion. "What is happening? Where have they gone?"

Murine took a moment to gather her thoughts together, referring to the three-dimensional screens that hung about the air around her. "I'm sorry, these coordinates don't mean anything to me. They're just long strings of numbers with no reference point. I hope the machine they're locked up in can make better sense of it than we can."

"Do you mean to say they could be lost out there?"

"No, just lost to us. Our friends can always triangulate their coordinates back on their side of the beacon to escape. There is one thing about this situation that might put us at an advantage."

Linda seemed dubious about this claim and could barely hold her disbelief as she spoke. "I fail to see what advantage we could possibly have."

"Well, we would need to find out, but now that Lurker has also passed through the gateway, it's not clear if Lurker also possesses a means to triangulate a pathway back out. It seems as

if we are fulfilling a prophecy, or rather, it may be our destiny to deliver Lurker from our realm to that one. According to Paul's story, a version of him defeated him there. Somehow, this cycle begins and ends with us."

Linda paused momentarily to take in what Murine had said. "All right, let's say you're right. How do you suppose we're going to get in there?

As Murine opened her mouth to reply, an audible shudder moved through the body, forcing them both to find their footing to keep from tumbling to the floor. Linda held tightly onto a nearby console as the base rumble resounded into the depths of the corridor. "What was that? she called out.

Murine wasn't keen to respond until she had an answer, regained her footing, and rebooted the sensor logs. What she saw there was both confusing and troubling. She read her conclusions aloud to Linda. "It would appear that the proximity to this bubble universe is beginning to have adverse gravitational effects on the singularities powering the *Swan*. The orbits are beginning to show instability. I can make adjustments, but those fixes would only be temporary. I can't predict when, perhaps in days or even hours, I will have to eject the engine core."

"How can that be?" Linda asked, "You, the Arox, and this ship are all eternal."

"No, that's where you're wrong, Linda. Everything has its end. And from that end, a new beginning will come. You have to believe that. This ship's death will not have been wasted, and who's to say some facet of the Arox and even myself might not survive?"

"But you said moving the ship was too dangerous."

"Yes, I did say that. However, the risk of two collapsing singularities in the presence of the Earth's gravity well could start a chain reaction. That's far more dangerous than anything I imagined. You're going to have to trust me."

"So what do we do now?" We're going to need to find out what Lurker is up to. We can't let him ever get back. You'll need to go on your own. I have to stay with the ship."

...

Murine did not raise suspicions with Linda when she immediately shut off the communication channel. She began a desperate attempt to reroute what was left of the available power back into the depleted extrusion engine. Linda stood in an augmented survival suit at the end of a narrow walkway before her doorway. Murine had explained to her how the mechanism

worked. Though she didn't truly understand, she watched the small display screen, a readout representing a long, unstable tendril of negative energy burrowing its way between the spatiotemporal boundaries.

Linda felt no sense of motion or similar effect as the corridor slipped downward through the wormhole. However, the experience was different for Murine. Any Arox child could perform such tasks easily on a regular day. However, this was no ordinary day. She had to concentrate, pushing all the power the limited backup power sources could provide. After several minutes of mentally wrestling the immense powers flowing through the engines, Murine confirmed that Linda had achieved a primary anchor point. Murine let out a great sigh and turned the communication device back on. "Are you there, Linda?"

"Yes, I lost communication with you for a moment. Everything has stopped shaking here. It looks as if things are nominal for the moment."

"Linda, I've received confirmation on the anchor point. I'm clearing you to proceed."

"Roger that."

"Excuse me, what was that?"

"Never mind, I'm heading in now."

"Wait, if you find they have all died, you must prepare yourself. We have not heard a word from our team since their deployment. It's possible their mission may have ultimately failed, and your mission may be for naught. So please, don't take any unnecessary risks."

"I understand your words, but unless your sensors can break through all that interference, we will not know for sure until someone goes and has a look. Then you know, as I do, that someone has to go. And I fully understand, if you do not, that someone has to be me."

"Safe journey then, Linda."

"I'll be back in a flash."

Linda steeled herself and opened the door. She found herself staring into the glasslike surface of the wormhole horizon. She looked upon her armored reflection and wondered how this all might end. Upon its bleeding edge, her image rippled in response to her hand breaking the surface. Stepping forward, she found within there a moment of darkness.

Linda sensed warmth and light streaming through the outer barrier of her face guard. Ordering the suit to retract the face shield, she saw the red desert sands glistening in the light of

the twin suns. In the distance, Linda recognized the familiar silhouette of the black tower. This one, though, seemed ancient to the one she knew on Earth. Stepping out and away from the doorway, Linda saw the landing places of the other craft a short distance from herself. It was only now that she realized her mode of transport, unlike the others, was not an actual object but a silvery circle hung like a mirror in the air.

Linda recognized that her time here beyond the corridor was fleeting at best. Murine had warned her, so she set her wrist display timer to fifteen minutes. Without the protection of the stasis field, there could be no guarantees regarding the corridor's stability. Furthermore, she had calculated a containment half-life probability that slid off the charts at that point or shortly after. Her chances as she stood now were good. However, to stay beyond that indicated time would be to invite disaster. Linda was then on the move.

Murine was alone, but in a way, she had been alone her whole life, for she knew one day she would have to make decisions only she could make. As she climbed into the pilot's chair for the first time, her body and mind had, in a way, regressed into equilibrium with the ship. Despite this feeling, a lingering array of factors still filled her mind. Prime among



these was the ominous threat Lurker presented. The cost to people's lives had been her most significant responsibility. With the final, most dangerous hurdle of escaping the Earth's gravity well within her grasp, Linda having all but confirmed Lurker was no longer on Earth, she could not be sure what would happen as the Swan's proper form and dimensions rematerialized in space, At least Linda would be safe for the moment. But she would need to act quickly.

Murine let these thoughts leave her mind as she made the preparations. Bodhmall had taught her this was a terrible business, but it was hers to conduct. So, she called out to her. "Bodhmall, my old teacher, if any part of you is still present, I could use your help. Proceed with the coordinate projection. I will begin calculating an orbital assist vector to clear us out of this gravity well." Though there was no verbal response, the computers followed Murine's commands. Even as she ran these numbers, she was simultaneously attempting to obtain a radio signal on her communications panel. Scanning the entire electromagnetic bandwidth, her hands mindlessly manipulated the communication controls. She could find no open signal among the jagged sounds of background interference. Against this wall of empty noise, she cast her naked, muffled voice. "Goodbye, my old friends".

## Chapter 17

The communication ended. With the harsh light of the twin suns at Linda's back, protected by her armored suit, she had the luxury to stand momentarily and stare into the tower's opening. A sprite appeared to flicker in the distance. Its appearance surprised her. However, she had seen such phenomena before. If she was correct, the rendering was breaking down, and this perceived flash of light was likely no more than a broken pixel. As she pondered the situation, what remained to be determined was what was being overlayed onto what.

Linda checked her clock. Realizing she had spent barely five of her allotted fifteen minutes, she called out into the yawning opening, only to hear the echoes of her own voice. "Hello." "Is anybody here?" As these sounds trailed off, Linda determined she was alone and there was nothing more for her to do there. So, with her remaining time, she would make sure she would do a number on Lurkers jump ship, so she turned to go where ships had landed.

She was beginning to feel the heat through her protective boots as she kicked her way through the glass-encrusted sand. She caught a glimpse of the air rippling off the vehicles. The wings of the antique bomber had begun to buckle, and the rubber

tires had already melted from the rims into the sand. *That plane isn't going anywhere*, she concluded. The other craft were largely unscathed. The door on the Jump craft, a modern machine, opened quickly for Linda. She eyed the control console, knowing there must be hundreds of vital mechanics and sensitive electronic bits to target. Making a beeline to the instrument column, Linda reached beneath, grabbing hold of any wires or cables she could get her hand on. Pulling with all her might, sparks flew, and the console lights went dark.

Warning alarms began to flash and buzz as the system electronics failed. This was as good a sign as any. Determining the job here was finished, she left the jump ship behind. Crossing a dozen meters of sand to reach the capsule, Linda firmly grasped the door release mechanism and gave it several good hard yanks. Despite her efforts, it would not budge.

After several minutes of struggling, Half standing up and exasperated, Linda crouching over the stubborn handle, nerves about shattered, remembered almost as an afterthought to check her watch. Time was short. She had less than a minute remaining. So, she abandoned the capsule. Linda's breathing echoed in her helmet as she took off running.

Linda felt most uncomfortable when she drew close to the shimmering circle. She seemed to recognize that the portal

appeared possessed by the same glitch and flash she had witnessed earlier in the tower. Filled with a fear that she might be stuck there forever, Linda didn't hesitate to jump immediately through the portal.

Through the mirrored void, Linda stepped off from the extrusion platform and into another space entirely indescribable to most. Murine had set the controls to retract automatically. As Linda stepped off, the platform disappeared. As the platform's lights faded to darkness, the lights built into her suit came on automatically. Linda called out to Murine, "Murine, where is this place you've taken me?"

As if afloat in an empty sea, Murine's isolated consciousness was one with the ship's systems. Her body and mind were host to a barrage of signals cascading through her faster than she could process. Amid this, she began to hear a small voice calling out her name from somewhere outside the volume of data.

Distracted, Murine opened her eyes and answered, "You are in a place of safety in the deep caverns below the sacred grove. Down there, you will be shielded from most of the detrimental effects of the coming space flight."

With her helmet lights still glowing, Linda lifted the helmet from her head and answered, "But we've been in space before; what will happen this time?"

Ignoring her, she said reassuringly, "I suggest you find a spot along the ground and get as comfortable as possible. Hopefully, we're about to ride the edge of a gravity wave, and we cannot predict how rough a ride it may be. So please, try to remain calm."

Linda called out several more times but received no further response. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she could make out that she was in what appeared to be some underground cave system. Eventually, she found a protected area with a long, wide stone with the correct dimensions to sit upon. As she sat catching her breath and contemplating her condition, she directed the light from her helmet to an image scratched into the cold stone above her head. She squinted her eyes in the dim light to understand the meaning of what was reflecting back to her.

Through the overlying patina, someone long ago had cut a diagram into the underlying rock. How long had it been there, she could not say. But by the accumulating rind upon the white limestone, it indeed appeared in her estimation to be ancient. It was not, however, the antiquity that was surprising to her;

it was the iconography. She swore she was looking at a crudely drawn image of two stars falling together to form a black hole.

...

Having gathered as much data as they could from the computers, Paul, Sara, Francis, and Old Frenoch had determined it was time to leave. As they moved to the stairwell, they each, to varying degrees, as if the whole of the tower were moving, began to feel the physical effects of motion. Sara paused, searching for something to hold onto. Placing her weight on a console beside her, she was shocked as she fell to the floor when the console, without warning, disappeared.

Embarrassed but unharmed, Sara lay on the floor within the cave holding the mainframes. The noise of the machines faded as the flickering light revealed a metamorphosis of form expressing itself upon the walls and ceiling. Lines and angles appeared, subsuming the crags. All the while, a uniform light expanded to the remainder of the void. All that had been there was replaced by something strange yet oddly familiar.

Paul walked over to Sara, who was still on the floor. She could hardly believe her eyes as she looked at him wearing the ridiculous outfit. Paul offered her his hand, and she asked as she rose to her feet, "What is that?"

Paul, pointing to his uniform, said, "This, I believe, is the skin of some otter-like creature indigenous to Thetis. You don't like it? It's better than that sackcloth that you're wearing."

Sara turned around, examining the new environment, eyeing the complex lines and otherworldly technology. A flat external display plate and a massive crystal lens were at the room's far end. Francis and Frenoch stood in their furry garb before the vision plate, looking out onto space. Sara approached the platform, suffused in a blue light. She stepped up to see as the others had seen the glowing planetary orb parked in geosynchronous orbit. "Where are we? What is this place?" asked Sara.

Old Frenoch responded, "I can't say where we are exactly, but this appears to represent the place of Lurker's final battle of the Arox Civil War. Here, he was captured and his fleet destroyed."

"So, he wants a redo of his 'Waterloo.'"

"If I understand you correctly, then yes. That being the case, we should do all we can to indulge this self-destructive impulse."

Paul stared into the crystal sphere while the others stood fixated on the vision plate. From previous experience, what it lacked in imagery tended to make up for in insight. Peering into its perfectly polished crystal surface, Paul could almost sense the coming events. He closed his eyes, pressed his hands against its cold surface, and felt something odd. Though it was fleeting, Paul and Lurker both caught a flashing glimpse of one another as they stared into the perspective lenses of their constructs. Seemingly, there was an unspoken acknowledgment of each other's presence and actual opponent in that instant.

Lurker severed contact from the sphere, and as he stepped back, a semblance of his humanoid form returned. He saw his reflection. Pale-complected with jet-black hair that matched his neck-to-toe uniform, it had been a long time since he had last seen himself in a mockery of Arox military regalia. Staring into the eyes of a hunter, he said, "It's time we end this once and for all." Then he turned and motioned toward the door and out toward the bridge.

As Paul's hands made contact with the sphere, the others became full participants as the game parameters were gifted into their minds, employing some simultaneous flash download. Each seemed to pause momentarily as the recognition of this new



knowledge was accounted for. They, in turn, immediately stopped what they were doing and crewed their respective battle station.

Paul slowly removed his hands from the sphere and opened his eyes. The pieces were seemingly in place as he looked at the game before him. However, he could not help but wonder, had it been his doing, or was he being manipulated? That was, after all, knowledge that was critical to the game.

Paul put all thoughts of doubts out of his mind as he called on the central computer. "Computer, what is our status?" The light emitters focused on a point in the air, and a threadbare three-dimensional image of Bodhmall appeared. Its mouth moved as it said, "Please, I haven't come all this way to be called a computer. Could you use my given name?"

"Why, Bodhmall, what a happy surprise to see you. I didn't imagine you'd be joining us."

"I've been with you all along. But that's hardly important. You said you wanted a status report, so pay attention. As you must be aware, as we speak, we are being stalked by the *Lark*. Its sensors are tunneling deep from beyond the cloud of debris that shrouds this solar system. Also, I have detected the deployment signature of long-range energy weapons."

Paul's complexion turned ashen, and his demeanor stiffened as he responded. "What in the way of armament does the *Swan* possess?"

"The *Swan* is not a warship. It carries only defensive capabilities."

Paul was silent, pondering his course of action, until he looked at the others seated in their control stations and said, "So it will be speed and our wits then. Sara, take evasive action. Keep us out of weapons range for as long as possible. Frank, search this ship. Find whatever is onboard that can used as a weapon."

"Aye, captain."

Frenoch, monitoring the long ranger sensors, interrupted, "Excuse me, Sir, I'm detecting an energy burst forty-five degrees south of east to your starboard at a distance of approximately 50,000 standard units." Almost simultaneously, a brilliant flash of light illuminated the external vision plate. Coming shortly on the heels of the blast, a palpable rumble passed through the body of the *Swan*.

"Frenoch, report?"

Frenoch turned, responding to Paul, still bathed in the ghostly light of the view screen. "Our maneuvers have been

successful. The energy weapon was not yet close enough to significantly affect our defensive shielding."

Frustrated with the situation, Paul asked the group, "We have to get eyes on that ship. Does anyone have a suggestion?"

The flickering Avatar of Bodhmall was the first to respond. "There is a way. Sara, follow me." The semi-transparent specter floated through the closed blast door into the corridor.

Sara instinctively rose, wanting to follow her. She paused and looked at Paul in the commander's chair, awaiting his approval. Their eyes met, and Paul said, "GO! What are you waiting for? She smiled back at him and ran toward the door. As she approached, it swung open before her, and she saw the ghostly image moving briskly down the hall. Sara moved quickly to keep up. She called out to her, "Where are we going?"

"You'll see soon enough."

Sara had trouble gathering together her senses as the shifting physical proportions of the spaces around her were subsumed and reorganized. She strained to hear Bodhmall's voice sounding weak beneath the deafening racket. Through the distortion, Sara recognized the gesture of Bodhmall's outstretched hand beckoning to follow. She thought it odd that suddenly she could grasp a spirit hand, but she embraced the

illusion, and together, they stepped into the passage. Between the two ends was a spatial compression field whose far end exhibited a glowing light as the far-flung spatial points drew within walking distance. After walking what felt like only a few meters through the newly extruded passage, the outside sound dissipated, and the structure around them grew more substantial, taking on all the qualities of a permanent structure. Sara's face flushed with childlike wonder as they opened to a transparent dome open to space. She turned excitedly to the avatar and said, "Where are we?"

"I don't think your science is ready for it," Bodhmall said with a tone of sarcasm. "If you must know, we are in a high polar orbit above the plane of the solar disk. And in truth, we also never left the confines of the ship. We are, in effect, in both places at once."

Sara walked onto the platform and turned around three hundred and sixty degrees. Seemingly, all of the heavens, unobscured by earthlight, were now visible to her. In the center, a tremendous milky river of stars divided the sky roughly. Bodhmall allowed a moment for all of this to sink with her before she again spoke. "Now, on to tell you what we are doing here. Somewhere in this expanse is another Arox ship. It is a vessel different from the ship you are presently on. It is

built for battle, and we are, for all intents and purposes, defenseless against it. However, all is not lost. We shall endeavor to play a dangerous game of what you might call cat and mouse. It will test both their and our skills and resolve, but perhaps a trap can be laid for which they cannot counter. But first, we must find them."

Bodhmall made a gesture with her hand, and Sara's bio-interface network was at once alit with a stream of information flowing in from the sensor array. Sara bent her head and balled her fists against her temples as she immediately felt overwhelmed with pain by the weight of the data flowing into her mind. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"I'm not doing anything to you. I'm here only to show you the way. Now look before it's too late."

Sifting through the myriad signals, Sara sensed the building energy at a point beyond the far edge of the elliptical plane. As the systems came online, Sara searched for hidden patterns in the background noise of the extraneous data streaming through the sensors; each tuned to a specific set of frequencies. With the assistance of the ship's computer, to which she was now partially linked, Sara directed the computer to run an algorithm to filter for even the slightest inconsistencies. Within several dozen passes and in an elapsed

time of fewer than sixty seconds, she had triangulated *Lark's* vector, and the first crude images of the enemy vessel began to appear upon the three-dimensional emitter.

Sara called Paul on the ship's communications system and said, "Paul, I've got them! Calculating evasive course correction pattern. I'm patching in a visual to the forward view screen."

All attention on the bridge turned to the silhouette of the *Lark* growing in the display. Frenoch watched the sleek dark triangle move against the backdrop of stars, and he immediately recognized the ancient ship as an Arox Warship. "It's one of ours. It'll have a full complement of fusion and antimatter weapons."

Paul asked, "Aren't these primitive weapons for the Arox?"

"Perhaps they are primitive now. But many thousands of years ago, during the period this scenario is referencing, battles took place where weapons such as these were used. Our race barely survived this dark period. Perhaps we, too, may not survive."

"Tell Me, Frenoch; you said earlier that this ship had almost no armaments. What kind of weapons does it possess?"  
Asked Paul.

"None as such. However, many things could be easily augmented to become quite deadly. I've already got a few ideas."

"We may only have a short time before this ship gets another lock on us. In the meantime, I want you and Frank to head to engineering and see what you can figure out."

While in the background, another flash illuminated the screen, and they braced themselves for the inevitable shockwave, Frank and Old Frenoch rose from their stations. Frenoch turned to Paul and said, as he bowed his head, "I promise we'll get it done and get back, Sir!"

As they moved quickly through the passageways toward the engineering section, Old Frenoch reviewed a schematic of the massive storage facility as a graphic overlay to his ordinary vision. He silently ordered the computer to identify the location of a particular set of items from the ship's manifest. Lights on the map began to flash, verifying their presence. His mind focused on a point within the map. "Computer," said Frenoch aloud, "Deliver these items to this specific location within the main engineering staging area."

As they made their way simultaneously, robotic arms were already at work, pulling the needed parts down from cold storage. When he and Frank arrived in engineering, massive

appendages lowered the fragile probe drones and a sophisticated selection of specialized tools and sensors they would need onto workbenches.

Once Old Frenoch was satisfied everything he needed had been gathered, he proceeded without further delay. Frank watched as he approached the first probe, removing the outer carapace and examining the internal markings. Despite being designed to withstand the rigors of space, to remotely measure such phenomena as black holes and nova, upon visual inspection, its internal makeup appeared deceptively simple. High-range sensors and a communications array took up the bulk of the space within the probe core. The rest consisted of a filigree of fragile electronics and metallic spheres that seemed to glow with an odd light from within. Shrouded within the internal sphere's casing was phased plasma hindered by powerful electromagnets, which, in its way, was like the ship's own power system but in miniature.

Looking over Frenoch's shoulder, Frank could not help but imagine the danger constrained within. He watched as Frenoch moved quickly to augment the probes into makeshift weapons. After finishing the first one, he told Frank, "Load this weapon into the launch bay, and I'll get started on the rest." As part of the mission download, Frank knew instinctively how to load the weapons. He thought it was amazing how, after all these



years, he could be surprised by such details. It lasted several minutes until Frank loaded the last augmented probes into its launch bay. Just then, a concussion from another massive explosion exterior of the ship knocked Frank to the floor. As he fell, holding the probe tightly, Frank used his body as a shield against the hard floor. Breathing heavily and clutching tightly onto the bomb, he got up, moving carefully the firing tube.

As he sealed the compartment, Paul's voice came over the com system, "If you guys are finished, you'd better start making your way back to the bridge. We're taking fire, and that was a close one."

Meanwhile, far above their position in the extruded observation platform, Sara watched as the *Lark* maneuvered into the debris field that bounded the leading edge of the solar system. Frank and Frenoch returned to the bridge in time to hear her communication with Paul. "Come in, Paul. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you. Report."

As her lips parted to speak, she watched another missile launch from the *Lark*. "Paul, we have another incoming! Take evasive action now!"

Paul called out, "Everybody, hold on tight. I'm taking direct control of the helm from the computer." For an instant,

they felt a sensation of falling as the ship banked in an oblique turn to starboard. "Sara, increase speed to full. We must try to outrun and out-maneuver them until we can strike."

The faint hologram of Bodhmall appeared, standing beside Sara, and said, "Does he not know we can't outrun them? Our only course of action is to disable that ship. For that, we're going to have to get in close." Looking out from the platform onto the shroud of ice circling the system, she formulated an idea. Opening up the commlink to the bridge, she said, "Paul, may I suggest you find any one of these comets and tag along for a ride? We can hide in the debris tail until the *Lark* is close enough for those weapons you've created to cause some real damage.

...

Having lost contact with *Swan*, Lurker paced the bridge, awaiting news of the full spectrum sensor sweep and having come so close to reliving the final destruction of the *Arox*, anger seemingly boiled within him at the idea of the *Swan's* escape. The *Lark* was now painting every surface within an astronomical unit of its location with its full array as it cut a pattern through space sector by sector. Lurker had waited thousands of years for this, and they were not making it easy for him.

Lieutenant Bengé called out to Lurker, "Sir, our sensors picked up something." Lurker stopped and turned toward him, and Bengé continued. "It's faint, Sir, but for a moment, we observed what appeared to be the signature of a compression field."

"So someone is initiating the façade illusion. Lieutenant Bengé, we've found them! Triangulate on that signal. Ahead full speed."

"Yes, Captain."

...

The *Lark's* long-range sensors tracked the signal back to a tremendous wandering ball of ice and dust on the far-flung perimeter of the solar system. As they approached the object, Lurker ordered to match its relative speed and run a concentrated scan and analysis. Lurker and his small cadre of officers from the bridge looked out onto its shimmering tail stretching out for thousands of kilometers. However, as expected, they were coming up empty-handed in their current sweeps.

Paul had ordered the *Swan* to compress in size and shape to mimic one of the thousands of debris field objects tagging along for the ride. The *Swan* sat quietly. Paul and the rest of the crew watched on the view screen while the warship

glided into the debris field. Its form cut a stark silhouette against the illuminated ice and dust. "Sir, it looks like they've taken the bait," Sara said excitedly.

Frank's hands fidgeted nervously over the control switches as he awaited the order. Though the targeting computer, constantly adjusting the fire solution, was already locked on the *Lark*, he knew they would have to be reasonably close for this to work.

Paul's voice whispered over the com, "So far so good. Steady as we are, Sara. Let's keep our velocity in sync with that body until I give the word. Frank, stand by."

"Aye, Captain."

They watched silently as the sleek black ship slipped to within striking distance. At a distance of less than a hundred meters, the crew of *Swan* could now see details such as external lights and markings that distinguished the Arox warship. The time was right to give the order, so Paul entered the command to suspend the compression field and simultaneously gave the order to Fire.

Benge's eyes were square with the view screen as the true form of the *Swan* unfolded into space, filling the entirety of the view aspect. It was too close to see the launch of the probes or to take evasive action. Benge could only exclaim

"Captain" before a barrage of direct hits rocked the ship. A second later, a resonant concussion traveling through the body of the vessel shattered the crystal sphere that dominated the Lark's bridge. With a loud crash, splintered crystal shards exploded outward like translucent scythe blades.

Lurker was momentarily knocked down and stunned by the explosion. His humanoid form was injured, but not mortally. All power was lost as confusion reigned in the darkness. The sound of explosions reverberated in the distance as he found his footing. He looked around to see that all of his officers had been killed. Due to the proximity to the blast, even clad in battle armor, their semi-robotic bodies were no match for the concussion and debris. Lurker looked to the view screen and saw the *Swan* drawing ever closer. It would be up to him alone to end this fight. He once again abandoned the humanoid form in favor of the shaft of light and floated through the hull of his dying ship toward the *Swan*.

Aboard the *Swan*, the small crew held their breaths as the ship materialized and unloosed its weapons. The packages were small but powerful enough with precise targeting to disable the ship. So, as he watched a cascade of explosions across the length of the *Lark*, Paul knew they were, for the moment, safe. He also knew it wasn't yet over.

Paul turned to the others and said, "Sara, Frank, there is nothing more for you here. Get back to the capsule. It's evident to me now that someone has to get back to set those computer programs before Murine closes us off forever. It's got to be you, Sara. You've been the key to all this from the beginning."

"What about you, Paul? Are you going to be stuck here or worse?"

"You have your destiny, and I have mine. If everything goes according to plan, it's likely that only you will remember what happened here. You hold the data inside you. All evidence of these events will cease to exist elsewhere in your universe. You must go now. I will hold Lurker off long enough for you to escape."

Sara realized much of their relationship had been one-sided. She did not know or understand this young man how he knew her. Soon, he would be gone forever, and only her memories would remain. "I'm sorry it has to end this way. I don't want to abandon you, but I don't see any other way."

Sara walked up beside Frank and unceremoniously unholstered his sidearm. She said goodbye to the crew again, stepped back two steps, looked Frank in the eye, and said, I'm Sorry, Frank,

but this is the quickest way out of the game. She raised the pistol to shoulder height, locking her hands together with her arms outstretched. Looking down the short barrel, Sara looked at Frank. He did not protest as she pulled the trigger. He merely closed his eyes. The shot rang out, and he fell. The others were too shocked to react or even move in the instant it took to unfold for anyone to stop Sara from turning the gun on herself. Paul could barely reach out his arm as the second shot sounded. In less time than it had taken for this gruesome scene to happen, both she and Frank disappeared from the game space.

...

As the game unfolded beyond the gateway, Murine's augmented senses examined the portal's physical reality. Calculations for the precise folding of space-time were formulated. Only an event such as the jettisoning of the engine core into the anomaly held sufficient energy to close the doorway forever. Knowing what this meant to her and her friends, Murine tried suppressing her emotions. There was a slim hope, but it would take all her concentration if anyone survived.

Using the gateway as a center of gravity, Murine turned the bulk of the crystal ship on a vector, cutting close to the object and out on a steeply elliptical arc. Firing up the

antique fusion generators, she channeled the substantial reaction mass using the added force as the Swan had turned on its downward course from the apsis.

Though Murine was safely restrained within her pilot's apparatus, the inertial stabilizers could only do so much at the increased rate of velocity. With pressure growing in her head, she struggled to keep her wits as the lines of code streamed into her mind. Again, she heard a voice against the background. It was Bodhmall. "We've got about twenty seconds until your mark. When the clock strikes zero, you will need to jettison the core. Don't worry; everything is perfectly aligned. After that, the suns within the parallel realm will go critical, and the gravity well will collapse. Their combined mass will fall into a black hole. Beyond that, I want to say I wish I had more time. It is all quite unfortunate for all of us. When you jettison the core, I will power down the main computer, and my long sleep will begin."

Murine looked up at the digits on the display as they clicked down toward zero. "Goodbye, Bodhmall." As he spoke these words, she nodded her head while turning the command key on the control console. With this final command, all went momentarily silent as the computer shut down.



The *Swan* glided unpowered at tremendous speed when a terrific blast rose from somewhere deep in the ship. For an instant, the entire bridge shuddered as the engine core was expelled into space. The dim emergency bulbs then replaced the primary lights.

From her high orbit, Murine witnessed the conflagration as the twin stars, unbound, became unstable in their orbits and collided. She could not believe what data was streaming from her sensors into her consciousness. Frame dragging had begun within a localized field, and time was seizing at the point of the singularity. There could be no doubt that a black hole was forming.

...

While still shocked by what he had just seen happen to Sara and Frank mere seconds before, Paul watched as the Pillar of Light penetrated the hull of the *Swan*. The relative darkness of the space was illuminated as the entity morphed and transformed through the previous incarnations it had embodied. Paul recognized all of them. Paul smiled and spoke to the entity, "You've lost Lurker, but if it's any consolation, you get to take me with you into the black hole."

Anger roiled within the creature, recognizing his imminent defeat. Paul broke the smile and said, "I imagine it's going to be one hell of a ride." A sound pulse like a man screaming, and a concentrated energy pulse shot out from the pillar of light. Paul lost his balance momentarily, nearly falling to the ground. He could feel the illusion of his flesh burning until he could concentrate and constrain the power. He knew he would only have to hold him off briefly. Turning back toward the crystal sphere, he saw in the display that the deficit between the unbalanced pair became critical. After having passed this tipping point, The roiling mass of the target star contracted upon itself, subsumed by a more massive body.

A visible shock wave moving at immense speed came rolling out from the epicenter and struck the ship. Lurker's attack halted as his signal appeared to flicker. Paul raced for a flight chair, strapped himself in, and braced for impact, but little could be done as the entire vessel rolled and shuddered as it hit. At first, all went bright white in a dazzling burst of fundamental particles and energy. Then, all went perfectly black at the core as a spinning corona of plasma erupted far into space along great arching magnetic field lines. Space itself was collapsing. Though Paul could hardly tell up from down at this point, he began to feel time dragging as if leaden

weights were holding the moments, and though he sensed that both the *Lark* and *Swan* were falling, tumbling irrevocably into the abyss of the event horizon. The distortion effect on the fabric of space-time folded in around them as they fell.

...

Sara found herself lying on the warm stone surface near the entrance to the tower where this had all begun. She looked around in the half-light and did not immediately see Frank. It took her a moment to find him flickering and glitching near the tower entrance. He stood there observing the change in the darkening sky. The heat from before had dissipated significantly as the mass of the event horizon had begun to affect the light of the twin suns. As Sara arrived, they paused, wondering what was happening; neither wanted to wait to find out. Frank, whose form by now had stabilized, said, "Come on, let's get out of here.

Things appeared differently as they ran toward the capsule. Though the ground retained some heat, the sky had turned charcoal gray, and the wind blew heavily, kicking up the sand and debris. It stung their faces. Sara turned out of the biting wind and, for a moment, caught a glimpse of the landscape. With the tower flickering in the foreground, the neat pocket of

celestial bodies that had hung like paper cut-outs on the blanket of sky twisted and bent in an obscene caricature.

Having reached the capsule, Frank Pulled the lever with all his remaining strength, and the internal lights activated as the door swung open. Frank and Sara quickly crawled in, clamped the door down tight, and managed through the many odd straps and cages and into the capsule's pilots' chairs. Once they were secured tightly to the bolted steel frame, the automated sequence was triggered, and the launch was initiated.

They immediately began to sense movement as the frame flexed and contorted from the strain of the forces placed upon it. Frank could feel the churning plasma field constraining the spinning disc of liquid mercury within. It was there where the distortion field was generated somewhere below him.

A pressure was building in Franks's chest, causing him alarm. He reaches out his hand toward Sara, realizing then that the whole capsule is shaking terribly. Their hands touched briefly as their eyes made contact. He speaks, though she will unlikely hear his voice over the sound of the shaking equipment. He said, "I'll see you on the other side, love." Sara tried to read his lips, but it was no use. They felt the ship lifting with great force, falling, and being squeezed through a narrow

tunnel. Suddenly, the space around them was cast in an intense light just as they lost consciousness.

...

Murine could feel the ship's weight as it was relentlessly pulled downward. In her years aboard spacecraft, she had never felt as vulnerable as she did now. As the orbit drew closer to the yawning abyss beside her, it took all she had to focus on the razor's edge of her vector. With each second, the pressures upon the great ship grew more intense. The ship was still moving too fast to be captured as it slipped into the inside curve toward its closest approach. (periapsis) At the final course correction, Murine forced herself to direct the ship's vector to the closest approach. The ship would pass within a hairsbreadth of the event horizon's critical sphere of influence. (ergosphere)

The ship began to tremble for the first time as it struggled to emerge under the influence of the opposing forces. Murine could do nothing now but wait and watch as the chronometers ticked off the seconds. Within the view field of the crystal sphere, Murine observed the reflective ink-stained clouds spinning in a kaleidoscope of star patterns upon its mirrored surface. So beautiful was this image that it appeared

to be a universe upon itself. She, however, knew this to be only an illusion. The vector data matched precisely to the corresponding course as the clock struck zero. The elaborate synchronization of the orbital insertion maneuver had been proven accurate, and the time had now come to take a leap of faith and veer off from orbit.

She had a maximum window of a few seconds to correct. She closed her eyes and made an arbitrary course selection out of orbit. Merely by adjusting the ship's direction by a minute degree, the *Swan* was, in an instant, free of the gravitational drag of the event horizon. An exponential increase in the rate of acceleration was instantly transferred from the singularity to the ship. Despite losing the power of its main drives, the *Swan* was now traveling away from the black hole and into the depths of the void at velocities in excess of ninety percent of light speed.

Murine had not until this moment believed her chances of survival were very good. She reran the numbers and was amazed that their chances of escape had not diminished. In fact, her calculations indicated that despite the singularity's mass, it appeared the *Swan* was gaining the required velocity to escape the event horizon. Perhaps, she thought, this may work out in

our favor after all. However, how this trip would ultimately end was another story.

When Murine again opened her eyes, she could not be sure how long she had been in a trance. All sensations of physical discomfort related to the effects of gravity had diminished. Disconnecting herself from the pilot's chair, she moved to interface with the crystal sphere. All instruments indicated that the *Swan* was riding the crest of a graviton wave, and through its motion, the laws of nature revealed their fundamental secrets. She watched as the arcs of the heavens, distorted by their relative motion, were compressed into a singular indigo-tinted disc-shaped object with all of its dimensions, including time, racing away from her as if through a long tunnel.

Carefully examining the object, Murine could discern a definite pattern of light emanating from its center, redshifted outward toward a watercolor magenta along its edges. Like the ancient ones, she attempted to hold the image and all it possessed within it as a set of static points in her mind. This task required a concentration level she had yet to attain. Each time she tried, the image collapsed.

As Murine watched raw image data unfolding from a higher dimensional space, none of it made sense until she applied the

spatial mapping techniques ascribed to the ancients of Thetis; Murine discovered the potential locations of hundreds and then thousands of stars and planets. Once she determined that that was the course of action to be taken, the pace of the data transfer was a frantic blur of which she was barely conscious. A moment later, the data stream transformed, via sets of algorithms, into a facsimile of the potential spaces through which they were traveling.

Using long-range telemetry, the computer immediately began classifying the star's systems and worlds within them according to their likes and orders. She created a real-world map of potential landing sites. In the end, the discovery of a somewhat familiar-appearing water world made the selection process easy. She set the ship's sights on this previously unknown world and set the ship for an automated landing.

Linda struggled even to keep the air in her lungs as the pressing weight kept her body from rising off the debris-laden floor of the cave. Thunderous noise echoed, and an odd light issued through cracks from beyond the safety of her hidden confines. However, due to her constraints, she could do little more than wonder about the state of the world and the fates of those she had left behind.



Seemingly, as Linda helplessly watched the patterns of lights displayed upon the cavern walls fade and the deafening sound receded, the force holding her down began slowly releasing its grip. Except for the painful ache in her joints, everything soon returned to its normal appearance as she pushed herself off the ground.

Linda sensed a cool breeze rushing from a passage within the rocks. Her eyes, focusing in the darkness toward the breeze, spotted a momentary flash filtering through the narrow passages. As her vision adjusted to the new light, she sensed an all too familiar shade of blue light, like a flavor she couldn't name. The identity of the hue sat on the edge of her conscience. Its light grew brighter as she followed its dappled reflection downward through a dampened rock corridor. As Linda reached the bottom of the path, she found herself standing in a natural pool where the cave walls perfectly framed the body of the moon. Now shining in blue moonlight, the pool perfectly illuminated the cave chamber. Linda dropped her helmet into the shallow pool at her feet and continued through the corridor. She was causing the pool to ripple as she emerged from a crag in the rocks in a forest along the edge of a rocky coastline.

The sky was dark, darker than Linda had ever seen. The white band of stars that was the Milky Way glowed brightly in a

path that dissected the heavens. Linda scanned the horizon until her eyes fixed upon the graceful figure of a woman walking toward her. It took a moment for the stars and moonlight to sufficiently illuminate her. Soon, it became apparent it was Murine. She walked the remaining expanse of beach, threw her helmet down onto the sand, and sat cross-legged. She sat quietly, waiting for Linda to join her.

Linda sat down, and as she did, Murine started to talk. "I apologize for not bringing you back to your time. I did the best I could. And unfortunately, the Swan will never fly again. So, there's nothing I can do about it. But there is good news! We, meaning you and me, are both stranded on Earth. It's your Earth; it's just a very long time before you are born." She turned to view what had been unfolded beyond and away from the sea. Great, tall, mature stands of oak and chestnuts crowded among the fern- and moss-covered rocks now shaded in darkness. Murine seemed overwhelmed and spoke through a wave of emotion. The parallels are pretty extraordinary. It would appear that despite all that's happened, it was my destiny that I, the last of our order, was to find this place and deliver the sacred grove to Ynys Môn, the Island of the Moon." Murine took hold of Linda's hand, looked into her eyes, and said, "I don't believe

your presence here is a coincidence; perhaps we were meant to be together here and now. Maybe we will keep knowledge of the Arox alive by teaching the locals some facet of our ancient ways."

Linda smiled and said, "Sure, you could do that when you're not working on the time machine."

...

At some unspecified moment later, filtering through a tattered veil of sound, unrecognized voices filled Sara's waking ears. She called out to Francis just as a weight of sleep seemingly lifted from her eyes. Sara's eyes were open. To her surprise, she found herself in a hospital bed, attended to by people she didn't recognize. These she assumed were agents set upon her for a debriefing. All that, of course, would have to wait. There were questions of her own that needed answering. The young agent assigned to watch the older one sat idle, waiting for her to wake; when Sara saw him, she spoke. "Young man, it's time to get work; get up if you're going to follow me around." Casting her bed covers aside, she continued, "I must find out about my partner Francis." As Sara rose from her bed, she did her best to find her slippers, but she did not immediately notice the silent stare from the agent. Putting on her robe, she

saw the expression on his face for the first time when she put on her glasses. "What is it that you haven't told me?"

"Ma'am, most of your case is top secret. So, I've not been read in completely. I can tell you that, as far as we know, you are the only survivor of an investigation that began almost fifty years ago. You and two colleagues entered a suspected anomaly and haven't been heard since. Your disappearances have been a cold case until recently. With the recent implosion, your unlikely disappearance became news again when we found you alive but in a state of suspended animation very near where you went missing decades before."

"What about Frank?"

"If you're referring to Detective Francis J. O'Neil, well, I'm sorry to inform you that he didn't make it. He did not survive whatever mission you were sent on. I have to say, Agent Burton, it's the strangest thing. When we found him, there wasn't much left but some bones and clothing. Yet the circuits connecting all of his artificial nervous system implants were still connected to that alien machine and, by all accounts, active. All those scientists over in theoretical are going gaga over it. No one quite knows what to make of it. So, for the moment, we've left it alone."

"Sara was feeling anxious, her mind seemingly racing. None of this was as she would have expected. One thing was for sure: she would not give up hope so easily. So, as she began to walk, she said to the young agent assigned to her, "So, he's over at Theoretical. I have to get over there right away. I'll have to hire a car. You go ahead and check with your superiors. They'll tell you to leave me to my own devices if they know what's best. I have to ensure no one lays a hand on those circuits."

"Checking with them won't be necessary. You've already been given top clearance."

"So where are they keeping the holding tanks? I want to examine them."

"We won't have to travel far. We've been keeping you at the Theoretical experimentation lab. The inputs and devices associated with you and Mr. O'Neal are being studied in the lab down the hall. I can show you if you like."

Sara turned and walked down the hall, and as she did, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the glass windows lining the walls. She paused, for she did not recognize her image. In the intervening years, she had grown older and frail. What had she sacrificed her life for in the end, there would be nothing and no record of her sacrifice. She looked up from her

reflection to see the young agent holding open the door. Through the gap in the door, she could see the emerald light of the Arox interface circuits illuminating the faces of the researchers. With that light still glowing, there was hope for Francis. Perhaps there was still work for her at the agency after all.



