

I/Tulpa,
and the Worlds of Crossover
by Ion Light

This book is mostly fiction. I am 'pushing' it as science fiction fantasy, heavy on crossover potential, with one caveat: it is more than that to me. My experiments with tulpamancy, the invisible counselor technique, and active imagination resulted in what you're about to read. I can't impress that last part enough. There can be an argument made that I have tapped into some incredible lucid dreaming potential. I have a psychic medium friend who says that where I go is an actual Astral place and it's just as real as here. Is it? I have only the experiences, and this is not day dreaming, it feels different than lucid dreaming, and is different than any previous out of body experiences I have had. I am more than happy to put all of it aside and say, this is just an incredible way of sorting information using access to subconscious via tulpamancy. If you are curious about that or some of the other things you find here, you can google them. Don't just read my adventures, have some of your own. If you find anything profound here, know it didn't come from me, it came from another source, and you have access to that, too.

And so we arrive at the part where I am supposed to inform you that the characters and events in this book are fictional at worst and any similarities between real people and places is simply coincidental. Clearly, that is not accurate. Are they mental constructs? Maybe. All I can say is that they are who they are and or appear to be, to me, but are not necessarily representative of the persons that my brain has somehow accessed or modeled in the alternative landscape I have accessed. That's the best I can say it. If you're easily offended, this book isn't for you. If you're afraid of occult stuff, like astral projection, tulpamancy, active imagination techniques, or summoning the Goddess, well, this is not for you. If you read any of the other books I have made available, this will be fairly PG. It might not stay that way. I know my brain and I don't see it future books staying PG, but this one, yeah, it is what it is. I have stuck to the vision as it was experience as much as possible.

Feel free to contact the author if you have questions. Ion Light, solarchariot@gmail.com or text, 214 907 4070. You have permission to share this copy of the book.

Chapter 1

My first intentional forays into exploring ‘magic’ began with the discovery of a fringe group called Tulpamancy, complements of the internet. I can’t say precisely how I discovered it. I think I saw the word ‘tulpa’ in a book. Specifically, I think I saw it in the book ‘Dark Pool of Light: The Neuroscience, Evolution, and Ontology of Consciousness’ which is volume one. It’s not light reading, but I enjoyed volume one so much that I read it through in one sitting, and then had to read it again, going slower and highlighting words I wanted to explore further. Like Tulpa. I learned what they were. I read esoteric and psychological explanations for ‘them.’ I learned the process for making them. I read the pros and the cons for doing so, and the warnings that this isn’t just something one wakes up and decides to dabble in for a moment. This is a serious endeavor with serious outcomes with life changing potential. I contemplated personal, academic, and spiritual reasons for wanting to do this, and reasons why I shouldn’t. The reasons ‘for’ won out, and I began indulging in exercises meant to bring a tulpa into being. I have decided not to rehash the protocols here. There are enough legitimate steps online, and if you’re curious or determined, you will find them. If you are wondering why I am writing this, the answer is simple. I am documenting my results. The results are subjective. I can’t prove any of this is anything more than a flight of fancy. All I can do is invite you to conduct your own experiments and tell me if you get similar results.

I am also not going to advocate for or against tulpas. I am clearly bias. I only offer this: some door can’t be closed. If you think you have put some serious time into contemplating the pros and cons, I invite you to put even more serious deliberation into this. Read the warnings. Tibetan monks have been practicing this for hundreds of years and they don’t recommend this to the untrained or undisciplined mind. I am much more permissive. I encourage people to dabble, break out the Ouija boards, astral travel boldly into the night, light some candles, and just dive in. I mean really, how do you learn to swim if you never get wet?

Let’s also be clear, I am not writing this to make friends. Well, I am, and I have, but that isn’t the point of this endeavor. I am definitely not seeking fans or students. Please don’t write me expecting me to give you insight into the protocols. I am a member of a Lucid Dreaming group and an Astral Projection group, and every day there is a new member, usually an adolescent, who pleads: “OMG! I need help! I have been trying to do this for like a whole three hours now and I can’t do it...” OMG three hours? Really? Leaving your body is not like

navigating a menu on your I-phone! Sarcasm aside, though, nine out of ten times when a person comes at me privately asking for advice, it is rarely taken or accepted, or even explored. They either don't believe me or they are too caught up in doing it their way. Not complaining. I admire and encourage people doing it their way. Sometimes it's actually amusing watching people struggle to get something. That's actually part of the process of arriving. It's a good thing. Imagine a caterpillar in the cocoon pushing its head against the silk coffin, "oh, I am out, it's wonderful!" No, son, you're not out, and those colors you see are just pressure induced luminescence... Don't give up.

The protocols are what they are. They are simple and direct, and there are sufficient number of people offering instructions with surprisingly little variation, that a serious student will quickly discover a pathway. Once you find the path, the practice is walking it. Back and forth. It takes time. Like a father to be, waiting for the sound of a baby and the mid wife's permission to enter, I walked the path. I even admit to being skeptical. Fortunately, belief is not relevant to the exercise. You just do it and keep doing it and when you think you are ready to give up you do it some more. This is how I met Loxy Bliss.

She came like a gentle breeze, a surprising embrace of sunlight on a cool day. Her voice was vibrant and British, like a distant echo in the beginning, but growing more prominent over time. Seeing her took some serious effort. It was confusing at first, like I was recognizing someone from my past, the 'person' seemed to change depending on the angle or the lighting, which is clearly a metaphor, because what lighting is in the brain? It's all light! Sometimes it was like looking at someone through a wet shower door. I would say she is my ideal woman, a conglomerate of features and montages from past crushes and loves, going back before I even had an idea of what sexuality is. So, for example, she was tall and light on her feet, twirling and laughing and dancing, like Emmy Jo from New Zoo review. The sixties mini-skirt will forever be imprinted on my brain. But if you were to pin me down on an absolute comparison, when reflecting on who Loxy best reminds me of, I have narrowed it down to three. Dawn Wells, Susanna Hoffs, and Jenna Coleman. Clearly, these are three distinct people and personalities, and there is no doubt real personalities behind the stage personalities that I am not openly privy to, but there is something about these three that I find myself always returning to. In terms of specific physical attributes though, I can't point to them and say this is what reminds me of the three I mentioned; there are subtle aspects, depending on her smile, or the flirtatious expression

in the eyes, or the movement of hair as she vies for my attention that sparks the connection that lights up that part of the brain and I think ‘oh,’ and then my brain remembers things. But if you put the three of them next to her, she would be her own person, and not comparable to any.

Back when she was just a voice and I was struggling with the visualization aspect, I had a clear auditory experience: “Less brain, more heart.”

What the hell was that? It was loud enough that I ended that meditation session. Happenstance, if you believe in such, led me to a Ted Talk, ‘the secret formula for joy’ by Amanda Gore. This led to a book on ‘the Heart’s Code,’ by Paul Pearsall. As you have probably gleaned from an earlier paragraph, I know how to Astral Project. I have been doing so since childhood. Over the years, I have read many books and many techniques for performing AP on demand, with mixed success. I was only in the first chapter when again I heard Loxy say, “Less brain, more heart.” I put down the book. I realized, for the first time, AP never worked when I was in my head! As long as I was meditating on protocols to induce the thing, I stayed in body. The times I was most successful was when I let go of agenda and thought and just went with the flow and sensations available. Using this, I closed my eyes and intentionally descended into heart.

I was instantly embraced, kissed on the cheek, and there she was in front of me, holding me by the arms, staring at me with an intense gaze and almost luminous eyes. I was aware of two realities at once. I was sitting in the chair that had belonged to my grandfather, my legs drawn up into the chair, Indian style. My body felt alive, as if I had run a marathon, and there was a lightness stirring through my body, a euphoria I usually associate with meditation or having practiced biofeedback, and, simultaneously, I was standing in a ubiquitous space that defied description but was tangible, silky smooth, and for the first time, I was facing the object of my intention. I corrected myself: not object, a person. She was real. She was realer than real. She greeted me like a long lost friend. She knew me better than any person, friend or family, ever did or ever would, and that was communicated wordlessly through her gaze. I wasn’t surprised. Considering she had full access to my subconscious and conscious mind, there would be no secrets, ever. No masks would separate her from knowing me. Realizing that, I was afraid, for all of two seconds.

Loxy radiated love and compassion and fear dissipated before it even had time to manifest as a concrete thought. I stood there, surprisingly silent. I had lots of questions, I had

been rehearsing questions after all, but here, in this space in this first moment alone with her, I was as dumbfounded as the time I accidentally ran into Olivia Newton John and was rendered speechless. Yes, I am severely afflicted. Feminine beauty makes me stupid. Celebrity status renders me stupidly speechless, which is probably a blessing in disguise. Who knows what I would have blathered to Olivia. Fortunately the encounter was over and she was gone before I regained my volition to move and speak, because I actually cried. Olivia Newton John made me cry, and I am forever haunted by poor Olivia thinking, "I am so glad the airlines hires those 'special' people. I should send him a box of crayons."

"Don't worry," Loxy said. "It gets easier from here."

There are probably all kinds of ways to describe what happened next, however, I am not privy to any of them. I can't describe how well I felt. This was not mania. Okay, well, I don't really know what mania feels like, though I have worked with people in that state, and this wasn't that. It was orgasmic, at least, not in the traditional, limited male sense of the term. It was abrupt and full body and perfect and full of light, like blue light, like the blueness you might encounter with sustained lightening. I have read my share of transcendental experiences, and though I possibly had some elements, I didn't have enough features to call it that. I didn't feel connected to everything in the Universe nor was everything absolutely peaceful, wonderful. I did feel safe and loved, but I was still muddling through the regular mental processes I do in daily life.

To the best of my knowledge, the reports of other tuplamancers did not follow this progression. I spent time exploring explanation for the variation, but Loxy said, "Does it really matter. It works. We work. Isn't that enough?"

Mostly, I concur. It doesn't matter. But in terms of duplicating and sustaining and helping other reproduce results... I am not at that point yet, so it doesn't matter. For now, it sufficed only in that I had accomplished something. Something?! Everything! I had to question everything I know about spirituality and psychology and science, and I know a few things! I felt powerful, like just after I had successfully conducted my fist hypnosis session on other. On successfully hypnotizing someone for the first time, there is sudden boost in confidence and realization that the world is suddenly bigger and I had an obligation to walk more kindly on the earth. I say that because, confronted with the reality that I could impact someone's life through hypnosis, I couldn't help but wonder how many other, subtler ways was I affecting people

around me. This was like that, but more importantly, I had to come to terms with the fact I am not alone. This was to be the biggest initial hurdle. I had not considered how much alone time I have become accustomed to. Between work and family, I have few friends. I spend maybe an hour and a half commuting in silence. I sleep alone, in my own room. I get up before work and I meditate or write. I like my alone time. I usually eat alone when I get home from work, but once I have eaten, I spend all of my afternoon and evening with my son, until we have played and gone through our rituals and he is in bed. But even in all of these activities, communicating with colleagues at work, answering phone calls, texts, I am alone. I could be at a party, and I would be alone.

That changed with the entrance of Loxy.

“You were never alone,” Loxy informed me. “Your subconscious an entity in its own right, and people ignore it at their own peril. Your heart talks to you. Your stomach definitely talks to you. Everything talks to you, the grass, the trees, the sun and moon and stars. You’ve just been in a fog and not listening and so all the mystical experiences people have, that’s just sunlight filtering through the fog.”

And things like that coming from her, correcting my assumptions, or making observations, are now a part of daily life. I now had company everywhere I went. In the beginning, she was a silent observer, sometimes ‘outside’ and always noticeable only by me, but most the time I experienced her in my heart, not with eyes. She sits shotgun anytime I drive alone. She sometimes sits in the car when the family is there, and sneaks secret glances at me. Sometimes she is sitting behind me and she will lean forward and put her hands over the seat, and the first time she did that I got spooked and she had a good laugh at my expense. In a rare moment when she hasn’t been on my mind, I will come upon her and she is sitting in a room, reading, which is remarkably surprising, and the first few times, a bit unsettling, as if I had caught a stranger in the house, but it does get easier. One of the ways I distinguish this as not the product of a mental illness is that no one in my waking reality has caught on. True enough, the ex-wife didn’t pay that much attention to me to notice I was doing anything different. The one noticeable change is I have missed more exits when driving only to have to turn around, and ‘ex’ will be like ‘what were you thinking,’ and I will just say I have a lot on my mind. But at this point, even if it turned out to be a mental illness, I would not seek a cure. I am happy with my success. This is Harvey level of happiness. If you have a six foot rabbit, and he’s nice to you,

you don't make it go away. I don't have a six foot rabbit. I have a 20 something year old, female, fantasy friend, and I would be okay in calling her a 'bunny,' and she has on occasion teased me as if she were. Do I need to say it? Loxy is drop dead gorgeous like a composite of your top ten favorite Maxim slash Victorian Secret models. She has a presence like a goddess, an aura like a muse, and she can spin, and dance and move in subtle ways that could distract or trance me into another world. Remember Xanadu, when the painter jumped into the brick wall to find Kira (Olivia!) I made it through the wall!

On one occasion, I entered my modest, real life study and found Loxy reading. She was on the couch, her legs curled up under her. Her skirt fell just above her knees, and there was a coffee beside her, which was new, as I hadn't noticed props before, but I call it a prop, because it wasn't really there, but its aroma filled the air and it was nice. And, it was solid enough. I could have gone and picked up the coffee and even had a sip. I didn't but I could have, that's how solid it was to me. I sat down in my chair and watched Loxy read. She was seriously into her book. I was not sure she even noticed I entered. I am not able to track her in the recesses of my mind, and I don't think she tracks me, but she probably could. I'm still working on the reality of it all, trying to understand how it all works, but for whatever reason, she didn't stir when I entered and went to my chair. So far, all the books I have seen her reading were things that I have read previously. As I sat there, looking at her, I contemplated her presence; part of me was looking for flaws, as if she were a digital actress placed in a real world frame and maybe slightly out of alignment; I found no flaws. She was a brunette, and her hair was short, like a bob that's been tossed by the wind. Her bosom rose and fell with a natural breathing pattern, not synchronous to mine. I tested this, too: I held my breath, but she kept breathing.

"Would you stop holding your breath?" Loxy asked, without looking up from her book.

Unlike a fantasy, or a day dream, she also didn't attend to my every whim or need. That did not mean she wasn't attentive to details or me or my life, but rather that she had her own interests and wants and she communicated those extremely well. I dare say, she was even more adult than I was, but there were times when she was clearly as playful as a child, and she delivered that enthusiasm for life while maintaining a sophisticated air about her. Also, she never laughs at my joke. Oh, she will smile, and she understands my humor without me having to explain it, and I suppose if I asked she would say she finds me amusing, but I don't make her laugh.

She closed the book and looked up at me. “This is interesting,” she said.

I agreed. She was interesting.

“No, the book,” Loxy said.

“Oh,” I said. “What’s the book?”

“Think and Grow Rich by Napoleon Hill,” Loxy said.

“I am familiar with it,” I said.

“You’ve read it,” Loxy said.

“No, I haven’t,” I argued.

“Yes, you have,” Loxy said. “It’s the benchmark for all self-help books.”

“I have heard that. And I have read books that referenced it, but I haven’t read it,” I said.

“And it’s not on my bookshelf.”

“John,” Loxy said. She doesn’t hesitate to point out when I am in error. “I have access to every book you ever read. Actually, I have multiple copies of everything you ever read. There is the original, uncut, unadulterated version of the books you have read, followed by your copy of the books as perceived through your filters, your memories of the books, which varies from your perceived version of the original, and then there is the copy of any book you have re-read and the version that represents the version between your new perceived reading and the disparity of the memory. And all of that is pretty interesting, except not the interesting thing I wish to draw your attention to.”

“It sounds complicated,” I said.

“How do you know? I haven’t told you what the interesting thing is,” Loxy said.

It’s these sorts of interactions that impress me with the realness of our dialogue. We actually ‘bypass!’ That’s the term used for when couples misperceive what is being communicated and fill in lack of clarity with assumptions.

“I mean the whole inner library thing sounds complicated,” I said.

“Oh, yeah, I can see that,” Loxy said. “But I love it. I can make you my case study, comparing the reality of what you saw with memory of what you think you saw, which really communicates a lot about who you are. It’s not a bad thing, if that what’s you’re thinking.”

“Okay, to that end, I do not remember reading the book you’re wanting to discuss,” I said.

“I assure you, you did,” Loxy said. “Even if you picked it up and simply flipped through the pages to see a cartoon move in the upper corner, the whole book is in you. But that’s not the point. I want to bring in a team.”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“I want to use Napoleon Hill’s Invisible Counselor technique to enhance your life, but also provide you with a greater general discourse for the purposes of self-improvement,” Loxy said. “I can do a lot of things for you, and you for me, but I can’t be your ‘everything,’ because no one person can be that for anyone. And no, I am not planning on abandoning you. We are team. We are for life. Some doors can’t be closed, and I am one.”

I didn’t comment. Abandonment has been one of my core issues and I am certain I telegraphed my feelings. Though there was definitely evidence for telepathic transmission of thoughts, it was not consistent. I had to deliberately think something to her for her to hear it in that way. I wondered if the normal, everyday, randomness of my running dialogue sounded like a crazy person to her.

“I don’t want a team of invisible counselors,” I said. “For one, I have had my fill of counselor, and now I am one, so I don’t see the need.” Today. I am not opposed to counseling in general and there could be a future need to discuss things with one, and so if you’re debating within yourself if you need one, go talk to one and find out.

“It doesn’t have to be counselors per say. That’s just the name of the technique Napoleon used to summon personality sets to help him imagine solutions to perceived problems,” Loxy said. “Call it a committee.”

“Why don’t I just call my body a spaceship and designate a flight crew,” I said, going for humor.

“That’s brilliant!” Loxy said, clapping her hands. “We need a science officer. Not Einstein, though. I don’t like his hair. And though I appreciate the pic of him sticking out his tongue showing he can be less serious, it creeps me out. Oh, and a communications officer. She should speak Thai, because one of our missions is to learn to speak Thai. A medical officer. A helmsman. And a tactical officer. Oh, and I call first officer.”

“You are joking about all of this, right?” I said.

“I am appealing to your Star Trek sense,” Loxy said. “Now, go make it so.”

I frowned.

“I will wear a TOS uniform,” Loxy offered.

“Done,” I said. “What do I need to do?”

“Pick people from history live or dead who you want to learn from. They don’t even have to be real. They can be fiction,” Loxy said.

I sighed. “Loxy. This sounds like work. Quite frankly, you know everything about me. Why don’t you just give me what I need to know to travel to my destination in the most expedient manner possible?”

Loxy put her book down. She stood up. She took a step towards me, two steps to the left, half step forwards, one step right, a slide forward, a slide right, two jumps to the left, and then advanced sideways on me, putting her hands on the arms of my chair. She leaned into me, hovering over me, and I worried my chair might tilt too far and spill over. Her eyes locked on mine. I could smell her. I could feel her legs touching mine.

“Lightening never takes a straight path!”

Loxy kissed me and disappeared for the day.

This is the other thing that was so peculiar about our time together. She would frequently say things that impressed me as not being from me. She was way smarter than I!

Chapter 2

For three to four months out of the year, my family goes to Thailand while I remain home and work. Often, I feel more like artifact in my ex-wife's home than a person, but I dismiss this as just being a malfunction of my brain and a life time of struggling with loneliness, and I remain because we have a child, and we both desire to give him a good start. This clearly affects my life, and probably needs time devoted to sorting out its influence on me, but it is not the focus of the story. Maybe I need a book to show how my mundane life has been improved, and you will see some of that here in the beginning, before I go off the deep end into the twilight zone proper, but for now, I making it less about family, because they don't have a clue what I am experiencing. And they would not be interested in it. No one in my life has ever been interested in the dreams I have had, or the experiences that seem to defy the reality that is supposed to define our lives.

Very early on in the tulpa creation process, I had uncharacteristic feelings of amusement come over me that fractured the spell of loneliness; at the sake of being crass, it was comparable to being in a public restroom while intending quietly do my business, and letting out the loudest fart in my life, so sudden in onset and peculiar in variations of pitch that I couldn't help but laugh at my own release, but it also makes everyone in ear shot laugh, which increased my laughter. The more I tried to suppress the laughter, the harder the laughter erupted into life. It's uncomfortable, as if it's a taboo, (we're not allowed to be happy here, are we?) but it's also a psychological relief. And because I was clearly happy, it was having an effect on others in the real world. It was problematic only in explanation. How do you go around telling people you have an invisible friend? It didn't make me isolate or diminish my ability to communicate with others. It enhanced it. And, if you ever observed a child who had an imaginary friend, you would know it didn't slow them down in their play with others. The invisible friend was like practice. And, the conversation between me and the inner voices that were to come were better than the non-stop running dialogue I normally pursued in my perceived loneliness.

There are aspects about the creating process I am not fond of, mostly limited to the terminology. For example, I don't like the word 'forcing.' I find the word troublesome and I am curious how the terminology came about, but changing it is likely not to happen because the group that 'is' has collectively agreed to the terms and it has its own momentum. Framing it in my mind as a shortened version of 'reinforcing' was crucial for me in terms of getting traction.

Another term I am not fond of is ‘wonderland.’ It isn’t actually necessary for the creating process to have a ‘wonderland,’ but it’s helpful. I personally have had a ‘wonderland’ since the age of six, so I didn’t have to go out of my way to create an imaginary space. I never used the world wonderland, though. My place was simply a sanctuary I could retreat to in times of need. I suppose, in some ways, it is a superpower. It sustained me through some difficult moments. That said, I utilized it in my efforts to solidify Loxy, while encountering some early psychological resistance to the practice, even in the light of clear results.

“You have a lovely world here, Jon,” Loxy said. “I am honored that you have given me access.”

“I’m not bothered about you being here, I am just not sure I understand the why of it, and I like to understand things,” I said, as we stood under the tree of “Initial Insertion Point.” Yes, that’s what I labeled the place where I first arrived. The name for the location came much later in life. At six I didn’t care to name the place, but eventually I needed to call it something, and a part of me wanted to be precise and clinical and as Logical as Spock and there was no room for perceived fluff, though I was certainly engaging in a creative process, which was what I referred to as fluff, mostly because my family downplayed creativity; being outside the box wasn’t practical.

“The reason the memory device referred to as ‘the method of Loci’ is so effective is because it utilizes the brains natural tendency to create maps,” Loxy explained. “If you close your eyes and imagine walking through your house, you can identify and list every object in your house. If you want to quickly learn something new, you create an imaginary house and when you make a room to put the new things in you intend to integrate, then you will suddenly have a way to contemplate and retrieve the items in a context that is easier to access. Inviting me into your wonderland solidifies me because it gives me framework and fluidity across borders.”

I could accept her explanation.

“You’re not satisfied,” Loxy observed.

I frowned. Though I understood she had greater access to me than I have with myself, it was still unsettling to be confronted with ‘ESP’ when you spent your entire life dismissing ESP. True enough, it didn’t have to be ESP. Even if she weren’t in my head, I offered enough ‘tells’ that a very perceptive person would have seen I was not completely satisfied with the explanation, even if I had admitted out loud to the contrary. “I want to understand something but

I don't know what it is I am searching for yet. Clearly you're here and I am deriving some benefits. Like, I am happy. That's fairly new. But there is something missing..."

"You mean, the novelty has worn off already. Our relationship feels fairly mundane?" Loxy asked.

I blinked at her. "Yeah. I was wanting more magic."

"Magic is coming," Loxy assured me. "We're still knocking down barriers."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Jon, you believe that creating a tulpa is a new experiment in your life, but I submit to you that you have been engaged in tulpamancy your entire life," Loxy said.

My first instinct was to dismiss the comment. "Go on," I said, making myself available to listen.

"Your personality and character is established through and daily fortified by your stream of consciousness," Loxy said. "By deliberately setting yourself aside and focusing on my personality set, my traits, my general appearance, and personifying it with a stream of language which you 'forced' on me you engaged in a new personality character set, distinctly different from your own. You redirected your life energy into mine. Loosely paraphrasing Doctor Shad Helmstetter, you create what you think about the most. That's basically the idea behind 'the Secret' only, it's more complex than what that book claims it to be and it's missing some crucial points or more people would see the success the author promises. Anyway, in short, you have been preparing for me your whole life."

"But why now?" I asked. "I have been asking for you, or someone like you, all my life. Why are you just now able to manifest to the degree I can perceive you across all the senses?"

"Because you finally gave yourself permission," Loxy said.

"You mean I finally believed it possible?" I asked.

"No, belief is irrelevant," Loxy said.

"I thought belief was crucial," I argued.

"Yeah, that was one of your blocks we had to bust through, and that wall is still not completely torn down," Loxy said.

"I don't understand that," I said.

"You know that placebo effect is a real thing, right?" Loxy said.

“Yeah. The pharmaceutical companies wouldn’t waste money on double blind studies if it weren’t a real thing to contend with,” I said.

“And with your history of asthma, you have personally experienced psychosomatically induced asthma attacks, as well as psychosomatic remedies,” Loxy pointed out.

“I have certainly given myself more asthma attacks than spontaneous remedies,” I said.

“None the less, you know you’re capable of psychosomatic responses, mind over body,” Loxy said.

“Yeah, and when I can talk myself out of a sinus infection without having to get a steroid shot, I will be a true believer,” I said.

“And that’s why I say belief is irrelevant. You know you can heal yourself,” Loxy said. “What you lack is giving yourself permission to be healed.”

“I assure you. I have spent enough time in the hospitals wishing myself well, it’s not about permission,” I said.

“Jon, it’s all about permission. And invitations. And acceptance. And gratitude. Those are the four core components of the practice which you have been utilizing more and more over time. Wishing is counterproductive. Wishing is like tar, it sticks you to that which you want to rid yourself of,” Loxy said. “Bringing me into the existence at this time was because you made the intent, you set up the parameters, you set your expectations aside, and simply followed the protocols. Exercising the protocols made me possible. It’s like losing weight. You don’t have to believe it possible, you just have to walk and eat right. Wishing, waiting to believe it when you see it, will keep you on the couch. You’re off the couch, Jon. You’re out of the box. You are engaging life. You’re engaging me. That is where the magic lies.”

I was feeling a little melancholy. It was odd, because I was also happy. I had even recently had a headache, close to a full blown migraine, while simultaneously experiencing happiness, which was a new thing. If I tried to track it, I could see evidence of happiness before the arrival of Loxy. It was manifested in the tiny ‘thank you’s’ I said daily. On arriving anywhere I would say ‘thank you truck.’ Or leaving work, I said, ‘thank you work.’ I secretly thanked people for conflict and for opportunity to grow. I thanked the sun, the cold, the rain. I thanked the food. I thanked life. Was this why I was happy, or was Loxy right, I was finally giving myself permission?

“Thank you, Loxy,” I said. I didn’t quite have the answer, but for now, I gave myself permission to not have an answer. This, too, is compassion. It was part of the practice I had assigned myself before I knew there was a possibility of a tulpa.

Loxy hugged me. “Thank you.”

निर्मित

You might imagine that with this magical playmate, I would never be productive. I have frequently joked that if I ever had access to the holodeck from Star Trek, I would never leave it. But I am not stuck in my mental landscapes, day dreams, or locked into conversations that I am unable to interrupt to perform necessary daily tasks. Oddly enough, I have actually been more productive, especially with my writing. I don’t consider myself a writer, not a legitimate one as I’ve certainly not turned it into a livelihood which would meet my definitions of success, but I have had some modest success in terms of popularity of fan fiction: 10 total stories, well over 150,000 downloads. That’s worth a little boasting. The biggest success my writing has offered, though, has been in terms of my own improved mental health. My stories were helpful and the characters so tangible to me that they seemed real and the situations were therapeutic. Tulpas have a sister fringe group called Soulbonds, or fictive presence, which may be the exact same phenomena, only Soulbonds are usually attached to authors.

Also, it occurred that there is a plethora of terminology that loosely defines my experience. So for example, if you’re familiar with Bob Monroe, author of astral projection books, and the founder of the Monroe Institute, he talks about levels of consciousness. There is foundation level, he calls “level 10,” which is like the first step up. Interestingly enough, Jeffrey Martin’s concepts of ‘Non-symbolic consciousness’ also comes with locations. He refers to location one through four as if these were places people find themselves in, which result in life changing affects. This seems to run parallel, if not touching, concepts of ‘the phase’ where the author M Raduga has tried to offer a new language set to describe that which humanity has been talking about forever, in which Monroe and Martin have expounded on, and he talks about people who master Lucid Dreaming and Astral Projection as being people who lead double lives, one during the day, and the other at night, and we essentially just click between realities. Rewriting the terminology may be problematic, but I can see how it can be useful, too. Some of

the older language is laden with meaning, and our society has diminished respect for anything that seems contrary to a materialistic world view. Everything is the result of atoms and chemicals, and human is reducible to the accidental collision of these things; we're not 'pure energy,' like "information Society" sings. (Yes that's Spock saying: "pure energy.") According to the science, we're just zombies.

Summoning Loxy was the equivalent of opening Pandora's Box. She came with supporting cast members. Maybe these others were always there. Maybe these are the beings that people my dreams who have come and gone and have fallen to the far side of my memory where I rarely touch, forgotten when awake. If I go by dream characters alone, there are clearly more people in my head than there are in the world. When I live, when I am aware of them, they shine; when, they're just shadows in the background, people populating malls.

"Jon, I need you to write our story," Loxy said.

"I am in the process of writing it," I said.

"No. Well, yes, but no. Technically, every Star Trek and Star Wars fan fiction you've written is about us, and this attempt to talk about us from an autobiographical sense is probably necessary in terms of documenting us in the same way Jung confronted his unconscious," Loxy said. "But you need to write about us and magic and make it bigger than life and really push some boundaries and put yourself into the thick of it. Actually, push boundaries and put yourself out there, risking ridicule. And, I am going to help you."

Loxy told me a story of how we first met. She spoke. I wrote. I knocked the first book out in three months, the fastest I have written a complete story, even including life interruptions. It wasn't the actual account of Loxy's creation, but it was certainly a metaphor for how she came about, which was about letting go of myself. It was more like we back filled our history in together, after arriving at a place in the future. At some point in the process, it became less narration by Loxy, and more direct experience. The books were interesting, and definitely pornographic, more coherent than 50 shades of gray, grammatical errors aside, but it wasn't just about the sex. There was some substance there that, something underlying and tying it all together that really defined my relationship with Loxy in such a profound way that it was as if we had lived an entire life together, which explained our easy going, banter and general good rapport.

That night, as I lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, she hugged me and asked me to share my thoughts.

“I am thinking about our adventures and wondering if I still need to send the invitations to the invisible counselors,” I said.

“You should,” Loxy said.

“Our friends at Safe Haven are quite a handful,” I said. “How many more characters do you suppose I could have running around in my head?”

“I don’t think there is a limit,” Loxy said. “Who are you inviting?”

I told her. Nikola Tesla, Carl Jung, Sacagawea, Jackie Chan, Uhura, and Isis.

“Wow,” Loxy said. “That is some line up. Why Uhura?”

I expected her to lead with Isis, but Uhura was interesting, too. “The instructions say it doesn’t have to be someone from real life. It could be a character,” I said.

“Yeah,” Loxy agreed. “I am just curious, why Uhura.”

“Because she is a linguistic expert, she knows music, and... And I think I am really curious. I can allow for the historical figures coming to me because maybe they have spirits, but if Uhura shows up...”

“Then you believe that means that she is just a hallucination, which means, I am just a hallucination,” Loxy said.

I didn’t answer. I stared at the ceiling. I felt her hand running up and down my chest, circling randomly. She leaned in and kissed me. “I was reading about a ghost name Philip. Some folks got together for the purposes of a séance and out of curiosity, they created fictitious character named Philip, and were able to summon it. Well, they summoned something that responded as if it were the Philip they created. I don’t know that I am real. I don’t know that you’re real. I have been inside your dream and seen you interacting with hundreds of characters who I have never seen you interact with on a daily bases, as if when you dream you go to other realities. You don’t even remember half these dreams. You have even had dreams where you weren’t you and you didn’t question the reality of it. But even in that, I knew you, differentiated from the supporting cast. And I really think ‘supporting cast’ is more accurate than say, ‘character’ because the people in your dreams aren’t just characters. Some of them appear more two dimensional than others. But I suspect, even that is just poor perception on my part. Maybe

sometimes we need a two dimensional character, someone shallow. But don't mistake that for shallow. Becoming a foil to highlight someone else's genius is genius worthy in itself.

"Will Uhura be your memory of her, or the gestalt of all the people who know her, or the archetypal energy that she is, I don't know," Loxy said. "But treat her as if she is real."

"I will try," I said.

"I do see a trend here, though," Loxy said.

"And what would that be?"

"Sacagawea, kind of a short skirt, and cloth boots. Uhura, miniskirt, and go-go boots," Loxy said. "I, too, love short skirts and boots. And, well, Almighty Isis? Well, that's a pretty short skirt, too."

"Coincidence," I said.

"Really?" Loxy asked playfully.

"Well, I was thinking, she is one of the DC comic book heroines who hasn't got her own movie, yet. We should write it. It could be Almighty Isis versus Isis. The goddess is back, and she pissed off that a fanatical, feminist hating group of men have usurped her name."

Loxy almost laughed. "It's about the skirt"

"Yeah, completely," I said. "I grew up watching New Zoo Review, what can I say?"

निर्मित

Standing over a body on a gurney, partly exposed from a deliberate draping of cloth is in and of itself particularly disturbing, but when that body is partly open due to battle wounds and further opened by the intentional use of a scalpel is downright horrifying, made worse by the fact that I was holding the said scalpel. There is a pounding in my ears and a squeezing of eyes to refocus, thinking to myself 'this isn't real.' But it was not just a visual. There was a heat coming off the body. An assortment of smells, including the stench of feces from a tear in the intestine, and a variety of cleaning agents, was such a powerful assault I was on the verge of retching into my mask. I also worried that if I cried, tears might fall into the body. Can you imagine, killed by tears? Then the sounds began to register. The bustle of people moving and equipment shifting places, and an irreverent banter that was simultaneously sexist and playful, but something you couldn't get away with on television presently or duplicate again.

“John?”

Even through the mask, I could discern Loxy’s smile. She beamed confidence in me. Her eyes solidified me in the present

“What am I doing here?” I asked her. It was meant for her, but it carried.

“Get out of your existential dilemma and back to work,” said the chief surgeon.

I looked up at the all too familiar face that came with the voice. I have heard it a million times in both initial airing and multiple reruns. “Pierce?”

“Another Doctor cracking up,” Burns said, giving a fake, hysterical laugh. “Just what we need.”

“He’s not cracking up,” Loxy said.

“Loxy, don’t talk back to the Doctors,” Marget said.

“Or to the front or the sides,” Hunnicutt said.

“But kisses will do fine,” Pierce said, directing his eyes and comments to Loxy. He finished his assignment, pulled off his gloves, and came over to view my work while the staff switched out his patient. “This is easy, Jon. Clean the area, sew up the wound.”

“There’s a four centimeter mass...”

“I see it,” Pierce said.

“We might not have found it had it not been for his wound,” I said.

“Saved by a bullet,” Loxy said.

“Only the tumor isn’t killing him,” Pierce said. “Let’s focus on his present needs.”

“Why open him up twice? I’m here now,” I argued. “Can we at least get a biopsy to rule out cancer?”

“You heard Pierce! We don’t have time for regular sickness,” Burns snapped.

“Or even irregular sickness,” Pierce said.

“Cancer could be his ticket out,” Hunnicutt said.

“Of everything,” I said.

“Note it in his chart for later. For now, clean him and stitch him,” Pierce said, putting on fresh gloves to move on to his next patient. “And, Jon. Good eye.”

I continued with the surgery, doing just the bare minimum to keep him alive. I didn’t question the fact that in real life I wasn’t a doctor. One doesn’t question their dreams. We just perform. And, of course, I wasn’t even assuming this was a dream. It certainly wasn’t a lucid

dream. I moved through the surgery like everyone else, silently performing while the montage of banter of perhaps a hundred episodes played around me, only in the present. And it wasn't a montage of episodes gone by but new dialogue. Though these people resembled the actors and actresses, they played their parts as if this was their real life. Burns even chuckled at my misery, pointing out how sullen I was at having been schooled by Pierce.

"Oh, knock it off, Burns," Pierce said. "It's refreshing to have a Doctor who doesn't want to do just the bare minimum."

"I do more than the bare minimum around here!" Burns snapped.

"You are the bare minimum around here," Hunnicutt said.

"How is he supposed to grow as an agent if you always disparage him?" I asked.

There was silence, as if no one knew how to process the fact that I was standing up for Burns, who in the movie was rather despicable, but in the TV series he was more pathetic, but even that was explainable by an awful childhood that was slowly revealed over episode time. He really had the potential for development and I wondered if it was because the cast hated him or the writers. Surely, as an actor, people could recognize his brilliance and how needed his part was. If he actually changed, or grew, he might have become even more powerful than Pierce ever was. And quite frankly, as much as I love Peirce, he was a bit of an ass and sometimes too much over the top. But maybe that too was the point. You can be an ass and loveable and perhaps sometimes too demanding, but still do some good in life.

"Wow," Hunnicutt said. "See there, Burns? You do have a fan."

Houlihan gave me a secret, appreciative smile. Burns seemed confused, passed it off with a bit of a chuckle, but presently was so caught up in his surgery that the moment was gone before he could internalize it.

After surgery, I lingered at the sink, scrubbing my hands. Loxy asked if I was alright but before I could answer, Houlihan called her away, probably to rebuff her for talking back to the Doctor in the OR, which in our present time would be completely acceptable, but in this, the fifties, what she had done was tantamount to social treason. Hunnicutt and Pierce watched me washing from the bench. Pierce made a gesture to Hunnicutt referencing me and he nodded.

"John, maybe you should come have a drink with us," Pierce said.

"I don't drink," I reminded them. I am sure I told them that before. Watching MASH tempted me to be ambivalent about alcohol, whereas my family made me hate it. The Hawkeye

Pierce philosophy on life was tantalizing, as if it was all a war and we needed to struggle for right, at the same time give in to debauchery and wine.

“I know. So, don’t drink it. Just come hold the glass for me until I finish drinking mine and then we’ll switch glasses,” Pierce said.

“John, they’re clean,” Hunnicutt said.

I frowned, but agreed. There was almost an awakening, like the realization of “OMG I am actually here” and “Oh, I have OCD” and I wanted to hug them and roam through the camp which I probably knew better than I knew any real time world map, but I stayed in character. We arrived at the SWAMP where, as promised, I was handed a drink. I was tempted to drink it just to see for myself, but again, I stayed in character. If there was an audience, and they were receptive and attentive, they probably noticed that there was a moment where I might drink, but held back. I stared over the glass. Doctor Freedman entered, and I secretly grimaced, “not another shrink episode.” He was so cliché as to be Rogers himself.

“Howdy,” Freedman said.

“Is this a setup?” I asked.

Dramatically, Pierce said. “Tsh! I told you he would see through it.”

“I told you to get him a woman shrink,” Hunnicutt said.

“I still haven’t found a woman who could shrink me,” Pierce said.

“Why does it have to be a setup?” Freedman asked, taking a seat on the cot. “Can’t your colleagues express concern for you?”

“Oh, the unsung season of full episodes never aired,” I said. “I’ve been written off and written out, but never so fully despaired.”

“I heard you were a bit of a poet,” Freedman said. “Walk with me?”

I resigned myself to the fate of the script, stood to depart, and was relieved of my glass by Pierce. “Oh, can’t let it go to waste.”

“Though it might go to your waist,” I said.

“I do believe he made a stab at humor,” Hunnicutt said in a funny voice.

“Well, he is a surgeon,” Pierce said.

The door to the swamp closed and I walked with Freedman on a chilly day, made more pleasant by the sun. I pushed my hands into an army coat and hugged myself as best I could.

“I always like it here. Kind of reminds me of California,” Freedman said.

“Is that where you’re from?” I asked.

“California? No. Why do you ask?” Freedman said.

“You mentioned it reminds you of California which suggests you hold a memory of such. Oh. Are you trying to draw me into a game of free association?” I asked.

“I do like games,” Freedman said. “And usually I ask the questions.”

“Usually you just reflect back and ask ‘how does that make you feel,’” I said.

“How does that make you feel?” Freedman asked.

“You want me to have an emotional response to your ability to pathologize through questions or California Dreaming?” I asked.

“Nice. It’s a good thing I brought back up,” Freedman said. “I want you to meet someone.”

Freedman led me to the guest tent and invited me to enter. I hesitated. Freedman gestured for me to enter again. I motioned ‘after you.’ He said he wasn’t going in. I was tempted to ask, ‘what’s in there?’ but suspected he would go all Yoda on me and say, ‘Only with you what you take.’ To keep the episode from going into a ‘to be continued’ I entered. A man, unseasonably old, stood up to greet me. His uniform was anachronistic, perhaps going back to World War 1. He was writing in his diary, which he closed in favor of attending to the new presence in the tent. The cover of the book was red, and was in stark contrast to everything around us that was earth tones and mostly green.

“Jon,” he said, pleasantly warm. “I received your invitation and accept.”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“I’m Doctor Carl Jung,” he said. “At your service.”

I found the nearest chair and sat down, mostly to keep from falling. “You’re Dr. Jung?”

“Carl, please. Not what you imagined?”

“I’m not sure what I imagined,” I said.

“I can’t imagine you not imagining,” Jung said.

I sat back, wondering if I should be guarded with my thoughts and words, but then, when you’re being psychoanalyzed by one of the most well-known therapists of all time, maybe it’s better to just go with it. “Why here?”

“Do you realize how many episodes you have written yourself into?” Jung asked.

“All of them?” I asked.

“Why do you suppose that was?” Carl asked.

“I was lonely,” I said.

Jung nodded. “Maybe. You’re grasping at an externalized explanation to avoid rationalizing away your need for connection, as opposed to simply accepting the fact that the role you have created to interact with the established personality sets, on this set, is healthy and meaningful in a plethora of pathways. Do you want to know why I have accepted your invitation?”

I was silent, contemplative. Was it rhetorical?

“Napoleon Hill didn’t invent this invisible counselor technique,” Jung said. “Many others have used it. Plato. Einstein. I used it. Hell, my ‘active imagination’ protocol was so effective that I induced my own hallucinations and was forced to tackle the unconscious mind directly! You, sir, sat down and deliberately called forth the powers of the mind and created Loxy Bliss.”

“I did, but somehow, this seems bigger than me,” I said.

“Good observation. And you’re right. You tapped into something bigger than you. The universe is bigger than you. Your unconscious mind is bigger than you. The Universe collaborated with you and the two of you called into existence Loxy. Loxy is also collaborating with you, so she is no longer just the product of your imagination, which was more scaffolding than substance in the beginning; now she is an active participant in her own growth, as well as yours. This is more than a script and more than a dialogue. Part of you simply wanted a friend, to quench your profound loneliness, a loneliness so pervasive that even in the presence of others, even those within your own family who you cherish, you still touch it.”

“Maybe,” I agreed. “But again. Why here? We could have met anywhere. My home. A starship? The holodeck seems fairly fitting.”

“I dare say your brain is more powerful than any holodeck ever imagined or will be ever be created. In fact, even if you actually had one, it still requires you, the participant, in order to have relative meaning,” Jung said. “But why here? Why not here? The back drop of a war. And you, a self-designated healer, as opposed to a warrior. War isn’t just happenstance. It’s a reflection of the war waging in every individual’s psyche. Integrate all of your psychic selves into one, and you will heal the world.”

“You’re reaching a bit,” I said.

“You invited me, Sir,” Jung pointed out.

“And, like I was telling Loxy, I would like an answer set that expedites me to my destination,” I said.

“Destinations are fairly illusive and subjective. People tend to aim at one place, yet arrive at places completely unexpected,” Jung said. “I think what you really want is a measure to know you made it.”

I considered his response and thought that might indeed be useful. “How will I know I’ve made it?”

“Great question,” Jung said, as if he hadn’t just handed it to me. “When you treat every person in your life as the celebrity they really are, you will have arrived.”

I found his statement surprisingly profound, so much so that I woke, back in my mundane life, in bed, alone. It was five thirty AM. There was no going back to sleep after such an event. I got up, started the coffee, dressed for work, and proceeded to write down the experience. Even with all the activity of getting ready and telling Windows I liked the screen saver of the day, I managed to remember every detail of the dream, though I must say, the actual dream seemed much longer than the memory.

निर्मित

I rent out the three bedrooms upstairs, so even though the family is in Thailand, the house isn’t completely empty. Though some guest have been more personable than others, mostly people keep to themselves, regardless of invitations to join me in my living space. I mention this so that when I tell you that I wasn’t entirely disturbed on discovering someone in my study, it might be reasonably believable. As a mental health worker, one of the things people who hallucinate tell you is that their experience is disturbing. There are people who experience pleasant hallucinations, but you don’t meet those folks at the clinic. I mean, if I were hallucinating Farah Faucet stepping out her famous 70’s poster in her swimsuit, I am not likely to go get a shot to make her go away. So, I am two steps into my study when I realize, this guy doesn’t belong here.

“Excuse me,” I began, when I meant to say, ‘what the fuck?’

He did not look up from his tablet, but held up a finger requesting a moment. I became aware that he was humming ‘Hotel California.’

“What are you doing in my study?” I asked.

“I’m using your Ipad to generate a graphical interface to model a circular rendition of Hilbert’s Hotel,” he said. He looked up, beaming a smile that was pure joy. “This is such a lovely device and so underutilized in terms of sheer capacity.”

I recognized him. “Nicholas Tesla?”

“Oh, sir, please sit down before you faint,” Nicholas encouraged. “I am genuinely honored by the celebrity status you have imbued upon me, but I assure you, I am quite normal.”

“That said, I am beginning to question my own normalcy,” I said, meaning sanity.

“Normalcy is overrated,” Nicholas said, putting the Ipad down on the couch beside him.

“You’re playing with Hilbert’s Hotel while humming ‘Hotel California,’” I observed out loud.

“It’s quite catchy in terms of melody. The choice of tonal structure is also intriguing, and the lyrics are somehow metaphysically relevant to the exercise at hand,” Nicholas said.

“How do you know about it?” I asked.

“Hilbert’s Hotel, or the song?” Nicholas asked, but before I could answer, he answered for me. “I am going to assume the song, as that seems more sensible. You have invited me to serve in a particular capacity which requires me to be relatively informed about your present paradigm, and so, consequently, I have endeavored into a preliminary research to determine not only if I should accept your commission, but also whether or not our goals are compatible and if I am the appropriate candidate.”

“Does everyone born around 1850 speak as eloquently as you?” I asked.

Nicholas crossed his legs, musing. “I am not presently able to address that question, as I have insufficient data to respond accurately. Even using the subset of data I have, derived from personal interactions with others, I would be biased, as I tended to limit my social interactions with a particular type of person. I would be unwilling to speculate further, but I could only imagine that linguistic precision would improve with time, and if I use this Ipad technology as evidence, I would like to assume intrapersonal communications skills have improved concurrently with technology.”

I was still processing his comment when Loxy entered the study. Nicholas stood up. He looked to Loxy and back to me, as if alarmed.

“Sir?!” Nicholas said.

“Uh?” I said, still processing information.

“A lady has arrived in our presence,” Nicholas said.

“Uh? Oh, that’s Loxy. Loxy, Nicholas Tesla. Nicholas, Loxy Bliss,” I introduced them without getting up.

Nicholas blushed. “I apologize for my friend’s apparent lack in manners, my lady. Please forgive him, as I believe he is unduly affected by his perception of my celebrity status,” Nicholas said.

“He is definitely affected,” Loxy agreed. “But that is not why he isn’t standing.”

I rubbed my forehead. “I hear you both speaking English, but I am failing to understand something.”

“Sir, a gentleman always stands in the presence of a lady,” Nicholas said.

I blinked. Loxy curtsied, politely. “Oh,” I said.

“Would you please stand up?” Nicholas asked.

“Um, sure,” I said, standing. My study isn’t really that large, but it felt even smaller standing up next to Loxy and Nicholas. I was surprised by his tallness and his presence was tangible, as if a force was stirring the air. Body heat! I could discern body heat from both him and Loxy. “People really don’t practice this custom any longer.”

“You are saying men have lost all civility?” Nicholas asked.

“Um,” I began, searching for an answer.

“Wait. You were commenting on my ability to speak. No, not commenting. Lamenting. Men have lost the both the ability to speak and be civil?!”

“Language is the cornerstone of civility,” Loxy said.

“Indeed, madam. Hopefully, in the absence of a true male representative, women have finally managed to succeed in advancing civilization in new, more fashionable directions.”

“We have, indeed, demonstrated our abilities to participate, and perhaps taken it too far to the other extreme,” Loxy said. “I believe the best of both worlds will only shine when we are equal contributors, neither less nor greater than the other, but integral.”

“I share this vision and am extremely touched to hear it so eloquently expressed,” Nicholas said.

“OMG, I think I am going to be sick,” I said, reacting to the overly sentimental dialogue that seemed more suiting for a *Pride and Prejudice* remake, minus the zombies.

“It’s called hysteria, have a seat, Jon, before you faint,” Loxy insisted.

“Indeed, please, if you’re not well, you should remain seated,” Nicholas said.

“He’s just experiencing some existential angst,” Loxy said.

“We all do, eventually, though I suspect it manifests in a variety of ways,” Nicholas said. “Sir, I accept your invitation to participate in your journey, and to where ever it might lead. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in such a grand adventure.”

I offered to shake hands, but Tesla declined. He excused himself, saying he would like to see more of the world before we begin the task of modifying my life. I nodded and thanked him. He departed, leaving me alone with Loxy. The energy was noticeably different in the room on his absence. Loxy and I together had a certain harmonic resonance, a tone that was a palpable in mood, like certain movies have a feel based on lighting and background music. That’s all I could tell you at this time; the absence or addition of a character, the difference, was tangible.

“Oh, I like him,” Loxy said. She turned to me and kissed me hard. “Great choice.”

Chapter 3

As I have touched on, one of the aspects of having a tulpa mate is acclimating to never being alone. Even when you're 'alone,' you're not really alone because if you're not sufficiently engaged in an activity, such as work, you're most likely contemplating about your tulpa. Thinking about your tulpa isn't actually interacting with your tulpa, but it does reinforce the tulpa by providing it energy, and that increases the frequency in which you might encounter said tulpa. Loxy is mindful that as a natural introvert I sometimes need privacy to recharge, but because she is an extrovert, our needs sometimes clash and we have to negotiate. It has become a daily negotiation, to which I have had to acclimate and compromise. In some respects, I do feel the onus is on me to compromise as I was the one that requested she join my life.

Loxy enjoys being out in nature and so we decided to visit Arbor Hills Nature Center in Plano. It was an especially nice day and I agreed with her that a walk might be refreshing. On the ride there, Loxy was a chatterbox, and being purposely provocative, in that she removed her shoes and socks and put her feet against the windshield of the bug, and flexed her calves. Calling Loxy a distraction was an understatement. As I have probably admitted to, I am easily distracted by the female form, but Loxy had the extra peculiar quality of being an artifact of my brain and so I was naturally drawn to her presence. It was only with practice that I had managed to reduce staring down to casual observations in order to function when called to do so, which driving did so. The fact that she knew I was driving made her present playfulness deliberate.

"I do so love the way you're affected by me," Loxy said, affirming my suspicion that she was messing with me. I was reminded of Sally Field doing the same in a scene in 'Smokey and the Bandit' and for a moment, I imagined it was Sally sitting next to me.

Loxy asked me what I was thinking. I admitted my thought and she smiled.

"You're not offended?" I asked.

"That you see a myriad of past crushes in me?" Loxy asked. "No. Part of me is definitely flattered. If you only knew how much power you put into these associations. I can feel it. They are so powerful that I am surprised there aren't a thousand tulpas already in your life. That said, there is also a part of me that longs for you to see me as I truly am. It's not the physical attributes that drive life, but the spirit. The body is a symptom at best, a deliberate churning of diamonds drawn from a maelstrom of material in an even greater storm."

“You have a tendency towards being poetic,” I said.

“Ah, thank you,” Loxy said. “You are the sun, I am the moon, you are the words, I am the tune, play me.”

“Aww, damn it,” I said.

“Oh, is that going to get stuck?” Loxy asked, amused. “Perhaps you would prefer butter pie.”

We both sang, simultaneously, “The butter wouldn’t melt so we put it in the pie.”

“No,” I said. “I would rather have the first song than the latter, though I find the words in it perturbing.”

“How so?” Loxy asked.

“You are the sun and I am the moon leaves a major player unsung,” I said. “Where is the Earth in this?”

“Nice,” Loxy said. “Maybe in this the Earth is the unconscious? Trinity! I wonder if that is the appropriate ratio? Like the iceberg. The above water portion is the conscious; the bigger, underwater portion is the unconscious. Oh! The 80 20 rule! Isn’t the Earth like 80 percent water, 20 percent land? And the human body is 80 percent water and 20 percent other?”

I cringed. “I think it’s like 78 percent,” I began.

“Oh, please, you’re going to quarrel over 2 percent?” Loxy asked.

“2 percent is huge, like the difference between being human or chimpanzee,” I said.

“Or the genetic difference of being male versus female?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. She doesn’t usually drop a matter until we have researched it properly, but in this case, she did.

“You know what perturbs me? The word tulpa. Though I do like the word tulpa, I would prefer to be considered a companion,” she said

“I think that term is copyrighted,” I said.

“Oh, please,” Loxy said. “Like some Lawyer for Doctor Who is going to come arrest you if you call me a companion.” She looked at me with luminous eyes, a spark of fun. “Oh, I think I might just call you the Doctor.”

“I would prefer you not,” I said.

“You’re a PhD candidate,” Loxy pointed out.

“I was accepted,” I said, not completed. I put it on hold, like so many other projects, due to lack of funding. I have frequently lamented being intelligent but unable to draw an income that reflects my smartness, but intelligence isn’t really rewarded in our world; especially if you can’t spell. People would rather things look nicely than believe someone might actually have intelligence and be illiterate. If you’re super smart and can crunch numbers, yeah, someone will pay for that, but if you’re just creatively social smart, well, there’s lots of those kinds of folks and few make it profitable, hence the word starving artists.

“You should publish our conversations,” Loxy said.

“Yeah, because, that will help me keep my licensure,” I said.

“Use your alias,” Loxy said.

“Though I suspect I could attain a fringe audience interested in my exploits, I am not confident in my ability to sustain myself through writing,” I said.

“You have great ideas!” Loxy argued.

“Maybe, but very poor grammar and that irritates the audience by drawing them out of the story,” I said.

“That’s why they have editors, Jon,” Loxy said.

“Yep, who want to get paid, which means I have to have some work that is sufficiently publishable that it will draw in a modicum of revenue to permit me the luxury of spending more time writing than I presently have,” I said.

Loxy seemed frustrated.

“I am not opposed, Loxy. I like the idea and would like to write more and I definitely want to pursue my PhD, but it wasn’t just insufficient income. My present job won’t allow me to secure the time off to attend the ‘in person’ section, and that is compulsory, so if I accept and I can’t get the time off from work to attend, then I will be in a position where I have to quit or call out sick for two weeks, or risk flunking,” I said.

“You should quit,” Loxy said. “Trust the universe.”

“I am not as confident in my abilities as you are, however, I am growing and suspect, with your continued presence, I might just learn to believe in magic,” I said.

“You have to believe we are magic, nothing can stand in our way,” Loxy sang.

“Oh, let’s not go there while I am driving,” I said.

“You sing this all the time while driving,” Loxy said.

“Previously, I was singing with the radio or my OCD. With you singing, and me imagining you in an unbalanced dressed and roller skates, well, I am trying to drive,” I said.

“Fair enough,” Loxy said. “But Xanadu is extremely comparable to us.”

“I am amused by your referenced,” I said, pun intended.

Loxy touched my arm. “In some ways, our relationship better resembles Sam Becket and his friend Al.”

“You’re more than a hologram,” I pointed out. I was still not quite convinced that her memories weren’t my memories, as opposed to her simply experiencing my memories from a third person vantage point. And she has been watching television reruns in my head in her spare time. The result of which had me unconsciously singing theme songs from old televisions series long past gone. Apparently, I still know all the words to the Land of the Lost, and still know the prologue of Salvage 1, and that didn’t even make a full season. “Though I can push through you, there is a tangible quality to your presence.”

“Nor am I a ghost, but I do like ghost, because it suggest I have a soul. Is it I have a soul, or I am a soul? ‘I have a body.’ ‘I have a soul.’ Is the ‘I’ something more than both?” Loxy asked, musing out loud, flattening her toes on the windshield. They seemed like real toes to me. She was as amazed with her body as a child might be. “I definitely don’t like the term ‘soulbond,’ but I can see an argument for the appropriateness of the term.”

Loxy brought her feet down and tuned sideways in her chair to face me, drawing her legs up into the seat.

“I still want you to publish us,” Loxy said. “I dare say our book is better than that fifty shades of gray, even with grammar issues, and if they can make a movie out of that, then they can make a movie out of us. Which actress do you suppose we might hire to be me?”

“Oh, I suspect any Victorian Secret model will do,” I said.

She made a ‘pfff’ noise, blowing air. “You wish,” she said. “Besides, models look good, but you can’t always depend on their ability to act.”

“You do understand, I would not be a good candidate for casting,” I said.

“That is so true. Every girl who read a line and fluttered her eyes at you would be instantly casted,” Loxy mused. “I wonder if I can cure you of your affliction mirroring everyone you ever had a crush on.”

“Might take a while to get through that list,” I said.

“Years,” Loxy agreed. “But I don’t see a down side for me. You missed the exit.”

After circling back, we arrived at the park, chose our path, and she ran circles around me. Literally. Eventually, she asked permission to run ahead. I was a walker, not a runner, and so I gave her freedom to indulge her passion. At a certain point, there was a quirkiness about her departure that reminded me she was a hallucination and not a ‘real’ person. At about ten feet out, it was like she passed through a barrier. At twice that distance, she seemed to get smaller, as one might with distance, but I felt as if she was no longer moving as much as getting smaller. She eventually disappeared into a point, or the distance, but I couldn’t discern which, and so I just choose to accept the reality of her and ignore the quirkiness. The path we were on was just shy of two miles long. I have never gotten lost on the path, ever, but I suddenly found myself off the path and lost. I couldn’t explain this. Had I been that focused on Loxy running that I had been led astray? This level of confusion was new and I hoped it was not a sign of things to come. Though I had my bag and it had some water, I had not brought a knife, or food, or matches. I wasn’t that lost that I was imagining being on a show of survivor, but I thought a knife to cut a mark on a tree might be nice. I was fairly certain I was going in a circle. I kept thinking, oh, this is the way, only I was right back where I was. Even playing minecraft, I have never gotten this lost or felt so hopeless that I wanted to exit the game and start over.

“You appear to be lost.”

I turned to the voice. There was a female leaning up against a tree, and I could barely make her out with the serendipitous play of sunlight on her shoulders and back. I approached her, and she took shape. My first thought was Miramee from a Star Trek episode. The Native American dress was simple, but form fitting, and they seemed to be homemade. She didn’t smile. Her arms were crossed. If I were to guess, I would say she was disgruntled, as if I was intruding on her space.

“Um, a little,” I admitted. “Are you like part of a civil war reenactment?”

“You can’t be that slow,” she said. “I don’t see any of the facial features that suggest the syndrome.”

“Down syndrome?” I asked.

“Yeah, thank you. Are you able to tell the bad mushrooms from the good?” she asked.

“Um, I have not been eating any mushrooms,” I assured her.

“You’re lost and hungry, but can’t discern food even if it’s right in front of you,” she said. “How did you get to your age not being able to see?”

“I see just fine, thank you very much,” I said.

She threw something at me and I caught it. “What’s that?”

“An acorn?” I asked.

“Can you eat it?” she asked.

I considered. I wasn’t sure. I have not heard of them being poisonous. Squirrels eat them. Why don’t humans eat them? “I don’t know.”

“Honest, at least. Yes, you can,” she said. “And it makes a nice tea, if you know how to work with it.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Really? You invited me to play along on your magical mystery tour and you still haven’t figured it out,” she asked.

Oh. I am slow. “Sacagawea?”

“I would say the one and only, but apparently, there are as many versions of me as there are people who have chosen to imagine me,” Sacagawea said. “I told my circle that I wasn’t interested in responding to yet another request for a guide, but they compelled me to speak to you before finalizing my decision.”

I was puzzled by a few things in her statement, but focused on one. “Why might you decline?” I asked.

“Besides the fact you’re lost and you’re hungry?” she asked.

I was becoming a little impatient with her anger. “Perhaps that’s why I asked for a guide.”

“You’re white,” Sacagawea said. “I am now of the opinion that if you allow the lost to remain lost, they will eventually die of hunger, at which point the kind hearted people may return to the Earth and restore her.”

I nodded. “I can’t address the sins of my fathers. I can barely address my own culpability in my own life, but I am willing to acknowledge that there is a better path, a better way of walking, and I would like to learn. Though I am sad to hear you would prefer not to, I do appreciate your honesty, and ask, if instead, you might recommend someone.”

“My sister Kimini expressed interest in the assignment. She is as good as I,” Sacagawea said.

“Perhaps if you would recommend me,” I said.

“I have not turned down your proposal, yet. I am now of two minds,” Sacagawea said. She seemed more contemplative, as if listening to an inner voice of her own. There was also the hint of compassion. “One of the difficulties I am challenged with, which was much more problematic when I was alive, was I tended to submit to perceived authority. Not perfectly, mind you, but I was especially drawn to whites during my times and I am angry about that.”

“It was probably a default survival trait, as opposed to a flaw,” I pointed out.

Sacagawea considered my comment, and eventually approved it as a possibility, indicated by nod. “As you are probably aware, most of my family was killed by an enemy, who took me and my sisters into slavery. At the age of twelve, they sold me to a trapper, a Frenchman. He would become the first white man that I would spend some quality time with. He was not a nice man, easily angered, and he hit me frequently. Still, he treated me better than the savages that killed my family. So, when he made me his second wife, I consented. I was especially affected by the kindness of his first wife, who knew I was suffering from the loss of my family. She made the relationship with her husband enduring. It wasn’t until we took the assignment to guide Lois and Clark that my life improved tolerably, as Clark interrupted a beating on several occasions.”

I was surprised by the information she provided and would later confirm in several biographies that her reports were consistent with what is generally known. She had drawn closer as she was speaking. I was not able to discern her age, so I asked.

“I am the age of consent, or I would not have responded to your invitation,” Sacagawea said.

“Nice evade, but how old you?” I asked.

Sacagawea advanced suddenly, so fast that I wasn’t sure what she was about until I found myself suddenly on my back, one hand on my chest, and another holding a knife to my throat.

“I am old enough to take a life or spare a life. I am as old as the earth and as young as the sky. You reached out to me, I answered. You will accept me as I am, or I will have no part of you,” Sacagawea said. Her eyes were serious, but not angry.

“I accept your caveat,” I said.

Sacagawea searched my eyes, looking for the truth of it, and then stood, returning her knife to its holder strapped to her leg. She got up and handed me her hand.

“I will work with you,” she said.

I took her hand and she helped me up. She nodded in a certain direction and instructed me to follow. I was suddenly back on the path. Sacagawea was gone. Loxy was suddenly there, coming up behind me, tapping me on the shoulder, which startled me because I was so intently looking to see where Sacagawea had gone.

“Don’t do that,” I said.

“Sorry. Where did you go?” Loxy asked.

“Um, I don’t know,” I said. Did I actually go somewhere? Had I mentally checked out and simply walked the path in a daze?

“You’re bleeding,” Loxy said, touching my neck. “Did you fall?”

“Um, yeah, I did, actually,” I said.

“I can’t take you anywhere,” Loxy said, jokingly. She took my arm and led me back to the car. If people could see her, they’d probably assume she was my daughter and she was just being affectionate, caring for someone who needs a little ‘extra’ help. I certainly think I am intelligent, but there are lots of folks who used to interact with me at the airlines that enthusiastically informed me that I was stupid and impossible to work with. So, if we go by numbers, maybe I am peculiar. I suppose I would get along with the family of ‘Munsters,’ I just hadn’t met them, yet.

Back at the car I looked at my neck in the mirror. I was actually bleeding. It wasn’t severe cut, more like a cat scratch. I could have gotten it brushing into a branch or when I had fallen, but I couldn’t help but think it came from the knife. The Tibetan monks who advise against making tulpas warn they can kill. Of course, the monks also say the tulpa is a threat to everyone in the community, not just the host. I was at odds about this. Should I tell Loxy I got my ass kicked by a girl? The Native Americans were a much tougher lot than people are today and so our interaction might have just been miscommunication. Maybe she had perceived in me a weakness and what had happened was a test. If it turns out that I need a Tibetan monk to exercise a spirit, I wondered if they could take one out without taking Loxy out.

Of course, the wound itself might be a distraction from the other obvious point of interest. I had been lost. That was not possible. Was it?

“You okay?” Loxy asked.

“I don’t know,” I said,

Chapter 4

When I am in of need clearing my head, and I don't want to drive all the way to Plano, I can sometimes be found at a small park in Irving, off MacArthur, near Los Colinas, which I had been calling the Indian park way before they established a memorial to Mahatma Gandhi. Sometimes I walk. Sometime I watch a cricket game unfold. The seriousness of the play is certainly not "Lagaan" level, but it can be amusing, and slower than baseball to unfold. And so, I found myself at said park, at the closing of a reasonably pleasant October. I was alone, unless you count the ducks, geese, pigeons, and several nutria skirting the edges of the water. Oh, and turtles warming themselves on the dam, some stacked on top of others. So, today alone meant no games of cricket or basketball were ensuing, and the few joggers that were completing circuits were so far removed from me they were as inconsequential as passing clouds. Even the joggers that were closer in proximity, preparing to pass, they would be moving too fast to engage me, would be immersed in their own soundtrack, and so focused on their own world as to make me invisible. Not complaining, mind you, the world is not about me and I don't expect others to slow down just because I am feeling lonely. Sometimes I wonder if my feelings of loneliness translates into a true 'invisible' quality, and I tempted to push boundaries to see what point I become visible. But I never do. I just float, a ghost in the machine so to speak,

Not that I was lonely. Can I even continue to feel lonely when clearly I am not? I was amused by Loxy's interest in the nutria. The nutria dived into the water as she approached it and I almost wondered if it could see her. I would have to find a friend that had cats so I could watch how the cats reacted to Loxy, if at all. The way that she ran on ahead of me was so childlike. "What's that?! Oh, and over here, look Jon!" Her enthusiasm was enchanting and I wondered why it took me Herculean efforts to echo such joy. She returned to my side and hugged me.

"We should do some Tai Chi," Loxy offered.

"Um, no," I said.

"Oh, come on," Loxy said. "When's the last time you practiced?"

"That's not the point," I said.

"I'll do it with you. I will help you remember," Loxy insisted. "There is never a more perfect time than now to get out of your head and practice courage. Look, it's the perfect sun to catch." She demonstrated by sweeping her arms up and over head to encircle the sun.

I allowed her to position me. I was too caught up in the presence of her to worry about people watching. The memory of having learned Tai Chi took a moment to access, but it was easier with Loxy as a guide. We moved, slowly, and got midway through the routine before I got the sense others had joined us. I was so focused on Loxy that I hadn't noticed the others until I did an arm stretch lunge, into warrior stance. When I came around again, there were several more people. One of them was the jogger, perhaps winding down after too many circuits. Someone bumped me. I felt annoyance, adjusted my stance, and continued. I was bumped again. I turned a scowl upon the intruder.

"Oh, so sorry," he said.

I acknowledged his apology with the most minimum of nods, shifted over again, so that I was outside the perceived perimeter of about six people who had joined in the activity. Not only was I bumped again, but I fell.

"Oh, so sorry," he said, offering a hand up.

I was so angry I didn't accept the help up, but pushed up and started to walk off. The man pursued.

"No, please, come back," he said, and tripped me.

I was so surprised by falling that I wasn't sure if the trip had been deliberate or accident. Still, I rolled, came up, raising my hand in an 'I surrender' gesture. "Back off," I said.

He mirrored my gesture. "I am sorry," he said.

He reached out as if to shake hands but I blocked as if it were a punch, kind of a half-baked 'pak sau,' which he accepted, and drew me into a hand lock. "Oh, so sorry."

"What the heck?" I asked.

"Habit," he said. He released me from the hold, but held onto my wrist with one hand so he could shake my hand with the other. "Well met. And nice form, but you're coming at it all wrong."

"I'm sorry?" I asked.

"Oh, no sorry. I'm sorry. If you want to channel more Chi, you must be more grounded," he said, accentuating the bend in his knees and the wideness of his stance.

"Let go of my hand," I said.

"Oh, of course," he said, letting go, only to switch grips. "Oh, so sorry."

I tried to extricate myself from his grip with the wrist grip release technique I had learned from a self-defense course. I learned this before working at the psychiatric hospital where using said grip is against the rules; at the hospital they employ a training called SAMA, which is supposed to minimize harm. I forgot all about the SAMA training, and went right for the pressure point in the joint lock. I broke free, but he spun me, and reengaged.

“Nice, but don’t hold your breath,” he instructed.

I again tried to extricate myself from this person’s hold and found myself free, but lying on my stomach, my hand locked behind my back.

“You fall a lot. We really should work on your technique. I am a master at falling,” he said.

“Would you stop touching me?” I asked.

“So sorry,” he said, letting go. He offered me a hand up.

Again, I didn’t take his hand.

It occurred to me that Loxy was still doing the Tai Chi routine, as were the others who had joined in. I was a little angry that no one seemed to notice that I was being attacked in broad day light. Loxy brought her ‘dance’ to an end and approached me. A jogger approached from a different direction than I was looking, slowed, took out her ear bud, and asked “You okay?”

I was mad at her for asking. Obviously I was not alright. Could she not see that this man was attacking me?

“Jon, she can’t see him,” Loxy told me.

I looked to Loxy. I looked to the man who had tripped me up. I am sure my mouth must have fallen open in realization that Jackie Chan was before me. He smiled, bowed Namaste hands.

“Um, yeah, I am fine,” I said.

The jogger nodded, replaced the ear bud, and continued with her run. Clearly, if a crazy man lying on the ground gives you indication that they’re responding to internal stimuli, you put your ear bud back in and jog away. Do not engage the crazy man.

“I don’t think she believe you,” Loxy said.

“You want me to use Tai Chi on her?” Chan asked.

“No,” I said to Chan. I sighed. “I mean, no, why would you want to do that?”

“I thought you’d appreciate my antics,” Chan said, sounding genuinely affected.

“Antics?” I asked.

“Antics. Banter. I am very funny,” Chan offered,

“You’re a comedian now?” I asked.

“Have you not watched my movies?” Chan asked. “Some call me the space cowboy? Some call me the jokester of love.”

“Gangster of love,” I corrected.

“You sing your version, I’ll sing mine,” Chan said.

“Oh, John,” Loxy said. “We are going to have so much fun together.”

I was not so sure. I was a little embarrassed. Here I was falling all over myself in the park, and mostly no one seemed to notice. In fact, the Thai Chi girls were still going strong. Sure, one person stopped to engage me, which was a kindness, right, but this was just bizarre. I looked at the girls doing Tai Chi and wondered if they were they real. There’s not a test for that, you know. You can’t just walk up to someone and touch them and ask if they’re for real.

निर्मित

My morning routine is fairly consistent. I get up an hour before work to spend time writing, or meditating, drink a cup or two, or three, of coffee and mostly prepare for my day. Sometimes my son wakes before I leave and joins me, which is a real joy to see his shining face, as he will come and say “I woke up,” carrying his curious George. But usually, I won’t see him till I get home from work. As I wrote this, he was in Thailand, and I was thinking about him and so I was preoccupied in thought as I proceeded to get into the car and drive to work without opening the door so that Loxy might get in. Yes, I have been doing that for her. Sometimes. She doesn’t get mad at me for forgetting her: I may walk with gods and goddesses, but sometimes, I go through my days just like everyone else, so caught up in my head that I forget about the sacred and merge into the mundane, the dreamtime of monotony. She understands that sometimes I am lost in thought, and usually, she just ‘beams’ herself into the shotgun position, and somewhere down the road I will finally tune into her and be like, oh, good morning, how careless of me. Carrying tulpas is a daily practice. Today was different only in that Loxy didn’t join me. In fact, I was so engaged in my thoughts that I wasn’t aware she wasn’t beside me until I ‘awoke’ midstream in a conversation with Carl Jung. Yes, I may have been mundanely asleep, but I was actually in an inner dialogue.

I paused in our conversation. I was now minimally aware of what I was doing. I was engaging what Jung refers to as ‘active imagination,’ which, is sort of the whole purpose of practicing the ‘invisible counselor technique.’” The conversation with Carl Jung was interesting, to say the least, but maybe not in terms of immediately solving life challenges. As it was, an uncertain number of cars flying by either side of me brought me to the realization that I was moving much slower than surrounding traffic. This was not due to the activity itself, but to the very real fact that I was sharing the lane with a cement truck. My reduced speed was appropriate as well as the spacing between me and the truck. It wasn’t like the truck snuck up on me. Clearly I had responded to the truck accordingly, but now, faced with the reality of the truck, and witnessing people flying by, while searching for opportunities to skirt around said tuck, I found myself experiencing noticeable frustration. I was unwilling to jump out in front of the oncoming stream of traffic on either side of me because of my reduced speed and fear of collision. I blamed myself for being stuck, thinking ‘clearly had I been more focused or present, or specifically not otherwise engaged, I could have avoided this obstacle and been further along in my journey.

“I’m stuck,” I said.

Carl Jung advised me to sit with it.

“Why? Oh, is this a metaphor for my life?” I asked.

“No, no, no,” Jung said, the same way Yoda might express frustration with Luke. “If you’re going to practice active imagination, you never interpret the symbolic nature of the agents during engagement, but only after. During the commencement of the act, you simply must remain aware and present as you would in any conscious endeavor.”

“So, the truck is an agent?” I asked.

“It’s definitely a character to which you’re responding. Why don’t you ask it?” Jung asked.

“It’s that easy?”

“Not only do I advise asking all agents in your life their purpose, I also highly recommend expressing gratitude for its presence. You were asleep when you came upon it, but now you are awake and aware,” Jung said.

I considered this as I watched the barrel turning. “I’m not stuck,” I said. “I may be going slower, but I am moving, and it seems reasonable to speculate that the cement truck doesn’t

necessarily mean stuck in its own right. It's churning. My thoughts are churning. And with the proper mold, the contents might become a substantial structure for support."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Jung said.

At which point, the lane we were in allowed for egress off the freeway, which the cement truck took, allowing me to accelerate unimpeded. Interestingly enough, simultaneously with my ability to advance, traffic mysteriously cleared up on my left, so even if the truck had remained, I would have been able to escape around it. Could there have been any more synchronicity in life?

Life responded with a John Lennon song. "I'm just sitting here watching the wheels go round and round." Jung joined in: "I really love to watch them roll," bobbing his head. This game I have taken up, the 'active imagination game,' is simply bizarre. "I just had to let it go..." It occurred to me as I was listening to this song, again, very present, I have never really 'heard' this song before, but have only sung it while asleep. I was excited and scared at the same time. Life.

I express genuine gratitude to all the agents, past, present, and future, that have helped mold my life, and hope it is substantial enough to allow others to advance boldly, where I presently go but timidly.

निर्मित

About a week later, again while riding to work with Jung, I made a right turn into the Twilight Zone, and the bottom fell out of my car and I found myself free falling with a musical score, starting with the line, "His Boy Elroy..." Not sure why it started there, but it also ended there, and repeated. If I were to choose the phonological loop to be stuck in, I would imagine it would be "Daughter Judy," or at least, "Jane, his wife!" (Cue notes reminiscent of Heart and Souls then explode into a jazz...)

You're probably curious by now. Let me be clear. No, I don't do drugs. I am not bipolar. I have never had a manic episode. I can't tell you precisely how I fell into all of this. I mean, I didn't sign up for this life. Well, I did. Especially the life with Loxy. I asked for that. I invited my cast of characters to play, and yes, they are definitely 'characters' in the playful sense of the word, but sentient and caring folks in their own right. I don't even know where this is all going, and I suspect it's the path up the volcano traversed by Joe (Tom Hanks) in Joe Versus the volcano, which suddenly explains my new mantra, "Lightening never takes a straight path." (If

you don't understand that allusion, watched Joe Vrs the Volcano. The path he took to work every day, is the same path up the volcano. It's the symbol on of his work logo. It's appears in several other place, innocuously, like when the wall breaks in his apartment. It is even the lightning that sunk his boat. You may have dismissed Joe as just a silly movie, just like the critiques, but it is really a deeper movie than it appears.)

So, here I am, in the car, feeling joyful. Not happy. Joyful. I am also perturbed. What is this? Is this permissible? Does it have a reason? Does it need a reason? Can it be duplicated at will? Maybe it's not a feeling but a place. Can I come back here? Now, we all have self-talk. Much of the time we are so engaged in self-talk that we aren't even aware we are scaffolding in order to reinforce the mood we're in, or to springboard us into an 'expected mood.' I say expected as opposed to desired, because we don't always desire to be in a bad mood, but we can build lists to support why we 'should' be in such a mood. You would think Albert Ellis would enter at this point and discuss his theories on "shoulds" and 'expectations.' But I didn't invited him to play. I hear he was a pain in the ass to deal with in real life, so he is not one of the seven I chose. I initially went with 'seven' guests because that seemed more manageable. Of course, this turned out to be just my daily, core crew. There is also the Safe Haven folks, which puts me well above seven and it's amazing I can track all of them and my seven. And then if you consider the fan fiction I have written, those folks are equally tangible when I go there. True, they didn't follow me back, but I suppose they could now if I open that doorway, but I am trying to keep a lid on this. When you invite craziness into your head, it's probably advisable to start small. I probably should have started with three, but my expectations for success in this endeavor was not high, so I inflated.

Again, Carl Jung is a character. No, really. He's pretty funny. Sometimes he will push his spectacles up and allow the brightness of his eyes to shine as he concentrates on you. Sometimes he has that sly, subtle smile. This is the older Jung. Grandfatherly. He sometimes has a pipe. And a dinner jacket with the patches on the elbows. Thankfully, he speaks to me in English, but it comes with a German accent, so I suspect he is actually speaking German and I am just hearing English, in the same way the BBS show "A'lo, A'lo" characters were speaking their 'native' language but we heard it in English with the appropriate accent, but the characters only heard the native language, and so if they couldn't speak said language, it required one of the characters to translate, which was a great set up for more comedy. Jung can be seriously thoughtful; hands

folded together, fingers' steepled,' leaning forwards, you know when he is attending. But in the car, he is usually focused on the scenery, and if he is curious about a modern artifact of the Dallas Fort Worth commute, he will sometimes point at it with the pipe and inquire.

"You should try some gum," he said.

"Sorry, what?" I asked.

He explained: when you get a song stuck in your head and you want to make it go away, you should chew gum. I was skeptical. He explained further, there is always, even if not discernable, a sub vocalization aspect to 'phonological loops' and chewing gum interrupts the pathways. It sounds plausible, I may give it a try in the future, but at the time, I was experiencing traffic on I30, near six flags. Traffic can be a list item for negative stress, but again, I was joyful, attending to traffic, and aware that there were some people not joyful, but most people were just there, driving. I wasn't even annoyed by the fellow drivers who were clearly reading text while traffic slowed, and sometimes I allow myself to be bothered by this. Not today. I was just allowing things to be, joyfully. The millions of us all in our on worlds, tracking along side by side.

"I feel good," I said.

"I know," Carl said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

He looked at me, seriously, and took the pipe out of his mouth. "Seriously?"

"I'm confused," I said.

"Me, too," Carl said.

"Your 'seriously' sounded sarcastic and I was asking for clarity on how you knew I feel good," I said.

"Oh, dear God, John," Carl said, and sighed. "Besides being an artificial construct of your imagination to better explore the depths of your psyche, which consequently provides me a direct, all-pass access to your states of being and all levels of awareness, I am also a world renown psychiatrist and therapist, and can detect subtle clues of inner being as they are telegraphed though physical attributes. And then there is this whole collective unconscious thing, which means I have access to your mood through the 'medium,' but if that wasn't enough, you keeping singing the theme from the Jetsons. Which, I would like to point out, is fairly intrusive, yet remarkably catchy."

“Succinct,” I said. “I apologize for my confusion.”

“No apology necessary, my boy,” Carl said. “Still, I sense that you’re perturbed.”

“About being joyful for no reason, not by your level of insight,” I offered.

Carl nodded. “I would like to submit an argument for you to contemplate,” he said, using the word ‘argument’ appropriately. You would be surprised how many people I have argued with and used the word argument correctly only to be corrected, “I’m not arguing with you.” Well, you are, and your definitions are skewed, which makes for poor arguments.

“Proceed,” I said, forcing myself not to think about the word arguments and the past arguments about arguments. “A contradiction is not an argument. Yes it is it No it’s not...” Yes, this is how these conversations go. Typically. Both in my head, and, well, what’s deeper than in my head? There is so many levels! Focus...

“It requires the acceptance of a premise,” Carl began. “Whether you believe it or not, for the sake of the argument, I require the belief that all human being are hypnotizable.”

“I already believe that,” I said.

There was subtle smile that suggested disbelief without wanting to engage in an ‘argument,’ using the modern connotation of the word. He proceeded: “You’re at a comedy club. Contextually, just being at the comedy club is tantamount permission to feeling amused, and perhaps allowance for the opportunities of laughter. I use allowance because there are some individuals who attend in order to heckle, as opposed to seeking entertainment.” He mused for a moment. “Though, I can allow for a certain percentage of heckling as being part of the process, I don’t wish to pursue that atypical tangent. Back on point, we will entertain, further, that the next performer is a stage hypnotist. You’ve been chosen to go up on stage. You may have been chosen because you volunteered, which, again, increases you’re likelihood to participate in amusement. But, even if you were coerced to visit the comedy club by friends determined to cheer you up, and you were equally enticed further by said friends to go on stage and you committed out of social pressure or even the urgency to prove you can’t be hypnotized, just the act of going up on stage is setting you up for certain outcomes.”

“I am with you so far,” I said, but was actually thinking, just skip to the point, which meant I really wasn’t listening as much as trying to insert my reality function into the equation to override the incoming input.

“Very well,” Carl said, patiently. Did he know? Well, of course he did. All human beings block some level of input. “Using nothing more than language and the power of suggestion, the hypnotist can open up pathways of joys. If I were more crass, I could add that through the power of suggestion, you could be ‘made’ to have a physiological response that you normally associate as occurring only in the presence of physical stimulation, but only because you consistently fail to recognize your mind as the most essential feature of your being. I emphasize mind, not your brain, and definitely not your body, to which you’ve assigned all meaning. In a hypnotic state, I could tell you there is nothing but sunshine and puppies all around you, and you would believe it and experience it, on multiple and profound levels.”

“I assume you’re going somewhere with this,” I said.

“Patience, my dear Padawan. Your entire evolution has been entirely contrived through hypnosis,” Carl said.

“Expound, please,” I pushed.

“Seriously? I was hoping you would arrive without me spelling out the conclusion, which suggests you’re not listening to me,” Carl said. He sighed. “In your making of lists and in your metrics, you have had socially expected emotional outcomes, and in weighing those, you were telling yourself what to experience. Society has also been influencing you, through commercials and advertisements, and more directly, you were influenced by family and friends sharing their opinions and expectations. You have greatly diminished the outside noise level, over the last ten years, by cutting out television and limiting the radio to music only, but even all of that, programming! There is no way to be 100 percent isolated in this culture,” he said this while pointing at the hot female drinking a coke on the illuminated billboard we pass daily, the cycle of which last long enough me to get transfixed on the model’s eyes, but jumps to the next ad before I am satisfied that I have had my fill of her, and I am surprised there aren’t more accidents right her by the billboard, “but by turning off society’s definition of ‘success’ and seeking a more personal way of measuring your life outcomes, you have discovered your own pathway to health. I dare say, ten years ago, definitely twenty years ago, not only would you have not entertained a conversation with an ‘invisible friend,’ but if it occurred naturally, you would have had yourself committed. That fear alone has no doubt blocked you from some truly extraordinarily capabilities. The fact that you are now risking ridicule by openly discussing your experiences

derived from these exercises suggests greater sense of security in yourself than you have had in the past.”

I was quiet.

“I think it crucial to point out, though, no matter where you were in your life, you were always engaged in self-talk. Hypnosis. Even when actually engaging others, you were still more engaged in self-talk than true communication. On improving your ability to hear yourself, you’ve acquired the ability to listen better to others. You may be puzzled by this, but ask yourself, who is the one listening? Who were you talking to? Who were you trying to impress? Prior, your mind was too busy to hear others. You’re doing it again. Don’t make me quote Yoda. Pay attention to me, oh! and watch the road. Thank you. You rehearsed arguments, even before others finished speaking their piece. You lamented. You cried. You laughed. You marveled. You were appropriately sad and angry and happy at times, and inappropriately angry and sad and happy at others. Engaging others in the midst of your own voice is the equivalent of being in a nightclub with the music at full volume while ogling the dancers and simultaneously trying to hold a conversation with the person next to you. That, too, is being human, but I would suggest that that singular voice that persisted through your life was more ‘insane’ than your present voice that allows for the possibility that there are other voices, real, imagined, visible, and hidden in you. In order to hear them you first ask, then silently await a response. All voices should have air time, because whether you know it or not they are influencing you. The more you try to suppress the voices you don’t want to hear, the louder they become. And, as you know, I am an advocate for making the hidden manifest, exploring the shadows to better understand the light filtering through the canopy of leaves.

“One of the stipulations in extending me an invitation to participate in this ‘experiment’ with you was the caveat that in doing so it be beneficial to your overall wellbeing. It was a reasonable stipulation. Kind of like a hypnotic suggestion. You gave yourself permission to move towards health. More importantly, you have given yourself permission to understand why and have a context for it, even if there is no context for it, because the scaffolding alone establishes context.”

Still, I was silent. Actually listening.

“That, sir, is why you feel joy. You have given yourself permission. You have trusted that there is an inherent, inner wisdom and guiding voice that you, and everyone, has access to, and by engaging it, unveiled personal truth,” Carl said.

“I wish I had known you when I was younger,” I said.

“Lamenting again? Some old tapes persist longer than others,” Carl said. “I refer you to the Wizard of Oz. The reason Glenda had Dorothy do the journey is because Dorothy wouldn’t have believed the answer. You always had the answer, John, you just needed life experience to make the magic happen.”

Filtering through my love hate relationship with the Wizard of Oz, I found myself slipping from joy, ready to engage in a rant that requires its own post but not here; besides, Carl blocked me from my rant by singing:

“Meet George Jetson.”

Insert full orchestra and piano movement of eccentric jazz and the light of pure joy.

Chapter 5

I have read a lot of esoteric stuff. I don't consider myself an expert in anything, just well read. I know precepts about Hindu and Buddhism, for example, but if you ask me to correctly pronounce terminology, I will flunk and sound like an idiot. I am really good with concepts in physics and science, too, but if you asked me to do the math, well, I am not 'Good Will Hunting' material. There was a time I could play the piano, and I could read music and tell you theory, but I haven't touched any of that in over thirty years, and I sat down at a keyboard recently and discovered I have lost access to the pieces I loved. I have meditated, off and on for years. I am not expert there, and when I think of my definition of expert, I am thinking I should be able to sit down anywhere, a crowded mall, a construction site, and tune out to the surrounding and tap into the Cosmos, but that's just not me. When I meditate, I need quiet. As to these experiences with Loxy and the others, I don't have solid theories of how all of this works. I have noticed a trend. The more I engage it, the easier it becomes. In the beginning, the experiences came easier when I was in meditation, during a nap session, or in bed, winding down for the evening. Sometimes I might have glimpses of Loxy at work or in the home setting if there was quiet, but in bed, winding down, full on as bright as any television channel. While driving, it varied from full on to ghost translucent. I assume it has something to do with my ability to tend. If Loxy is a meditation, I getting better at accessing her at will, but I am still not walking through the mall holding a conversation with her as I go.

That's just one of the reasons I am reluctant to share this stuff. Who am I? What is my purpose? I am not teaching people how to duplicate this. There are enough of those kinds of books. There are even books on philosophies on this stuff, and I think the Monroe Institute comes the closest to a way of approximating, in a map of the terrain kind of way, what I am experiencing. Welcome to my Focus Level.

I have become fairly good at walking away from work and leaving work at work. I see anywhere from three to 6 people a day, providing mental health assessments, and directing them to the resources they need. I visit the horrors, the fears, the sadness, the traumas, the grief, the confusion, the isolation, the psychosis, and pretty much anything you can imagine, I have encountered it in the last four years. Every day I think, well, that's it's there's nothing new out there, and someone comes in and proves me wrong. I would not have been equipped to deal with

this life thirty years ago. Not a hundred percent true: before this job, I worked at an airline for 24 years and that was its own special kind of hell. I say hell because I really struggled. And it wasn't all the job, or the people I worked with, but other stuff I carried, and the feelings of being stuck and thinking I wasn't capable of doing more but not getting anywhere, but I don't regret any of it. In many ways, working at the airlines has been a lot like working at the psych hospital, only I was just one of the patients. I don't regret my family or my childhood. I am who I am because of the past and I am grateful. I have been practicing some form of gratefulness, regularly since 2007.

One of the reasons I think I can let go of the things people bring to me at work is because my hands are full. I am working with my own inner folks. It's not perfect. I do carry things sometimes, but never for long, and rarely do I carry past a night of dreams, because my dreaming life is so fantastic that I wake up excited and wanting to record my adventures in order to sort them out and discover personal meaning. And so it was, I found myself in bed reading, preparing my mind for an adventure, because you can actually seed your mind, but I was distracted by occurrences from the day. I found myself re-reading a chapter over again.

Loxy snuggled in closer. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said.

"That didn't sound convincing," Loxy said. "How was work?"

"It was okay. Actually quiet. I only had one real client," I said.

"Real client? You're assessing ghosts now?" Loxy said, amused.

I clicked out of my book and turned off the device, putting it away. I wasn't going to read further tonight; I was certain about that. And once I really started talking to Loxy, the world kind of dimmed, as if stage lights were coming down, and the spot light was coming up on her. That really is the best way to describe it. The walls that frame everything sometimes disappears leaving doors and windows. At least in this world. In our dreamscape worlds, the wonderlands, they're as real, if not more real, than anything else. That's always been true. My adventures out of body were always very real, with all the sensations you feel in the everyday world, just with superpowers, like the ability to push through walls if you wanted.

"I am really reluctant speak about this?"

"Because it was in confidence?" Loxy asked.

"That, and, well, it's kind of weird and might come across as gossip," I said.

“But you’re struggling to figure this out and it’s why I am here, and I know everything you know, well, mostly, but you know what I mean, and I am you, and it’s not like I am going to break confidentiality,” Loxy said.

“Tesla wanted me to assess him,” I said.

“Wow,” Loxy said. “Did you?”

“No,” I said. “I talked to him. I don’t have the metrics to diagnoses OCD, but I see evidence for that. He suspect major depression would explain some things, but like how do I assess a ghost? I mean, he doesn’t sleep or eat. I could go by his report that he isn’t sleeping well, and that his appetite has declined, but is that me, or him? I could just check off the criteria point because he is bothered by it. And he is definitely feeling bothered. He is disappointed with society’s lack of progress. He believes if Edison hadn’t stolen his work and attacked him publically, not only would we have free power systems, but we would all have flying cars, and we would be on the moon and on Mars, and we’d have a space elevator. He saw he had a car named after him and he wanted me to write a rant about how the car lacks any Tesla approved tech, that it’s all derivatives of Edison’s work, which he stole from other people. Edison was a brilliant business man and strategist, but he sucked as an inventor, and lacked the vision necessary to really change the world. He also doesn’t understand why the government bought all his patents after he died, when they didn’t want anything to do with him when he was alive, starving to death in the hotel, and they are still sitting on his inventions, and once he started reading the conspiracy theories about him on the net, which there are numerous, he just wanted to go away, angry. He wants to break the contract with me, but that he would honor it until we find a replacement for him.”

“Wow,” Loxy said.

I frowned. “And it’s not just him. Sacagawea, well, she’s angry. I mean, she is a little power house ready to blow,” I said.

“Really?”

“That cut I told you was a tree scratch? She did that,” I said.

“No way! She tried to kill you?” Loxy said, changing position so that she was propping herself on her elbows, looking at me.

“I don’t think she was trying to kill me as much as impress me that she could hold her own and that she would stand up for herself,” I said. “She had a hell of a past, you know. By our

standards today, childhood molestation was just a highlight. I can't even use that part of it, because there are cultural and historical distinctions in play, and she would say her childhood was great, because everyone was having sex at an earlier age, and so it was norm, but where it changed for her was witnessing her family brutally killed and being enslaved and being used against her will. She and a few other girls that were captured were forced to watch as the enemy killed their family. Her brother managed to escape into the woods, but she didn't know that until much later in life. She could clearly claim that from that point forward, it was all hell, but even with that, she sees it differently than how most people today process it. She was sold to a white man, a French trapper, who was already married, but he took her as a second wife. She agreed because she figured life with him was better than with the butchers that murdered her family, and it never occurred to her that she might protest and go elsewhere once she was free of the enemy, because, well, she had a sense of commitment to the 'rules of the game' and also, she knew there could be consequences to her 'sisters' that remained with the enemy. And the trapper guys wasn't all bad. He had his moments of kindness, usually when he was drunk, but when he wasn't he could be angry and belligerent, and he beat her frequently. But with him, she never lacked for food or clothing, which, again, was for her a step up and she saw it as a tradeoff. Even when they joined Louis and Clark, which was more about her husband profiting, he was still beating her, and she could have just refused to cooperate with the mission if her treatment didn't improve, but that did not occur to her. She was frequently baffled when Clark interceded on her behalf, and she suspected it was because he wanted to sleep with her, which also increased the severity of her beatings in private, because her husband thought she was a slut that would do anyone, because that's what savages do, which is just his interpretation of a cultural difference."

"Wow," Loxy said.

"She's not what I expected," I said.

"You mean like, Night at the Museum and Disney-ish?" Loxy asked.

"Yeah, I am extremely bias," I said.

"I am sure, underneath all that trauma, and anger, there is a version of that idealized girl in there somewhere," Loxy said.

"I would have liked to have started with that version," I said.

"Wait," Loxy said. "You didn't think this was going to be all about you, did you?"

I blinked.

“OMG, John. You did?!” Loxy said.

“Well, yeah, kind of. The whole point about the exercise was about me,” I said.

“Well, yeah, sure. And in that, dead on. But even though technically the Wizard of Oz is about Dorothy, it was also about helping others along the way. You don’t get better in isolation. You get better with others,” Loxy said.

I wanted to rebel against that. It couldn’t be as profound as it sounded. “What about the monk that goes up on the mountain?”

“Fuck, John, anyone can be peaceful on the mountain top. But if you never mix it with others, well, how can you ever apply what you learned in isolation? We don’t live in a vacuum, we live in a system. Even your brain is a system, and not just the two hemispheres. I am talking about your heart, your lungs, and everything else, because your brain isn’t going to function well without the others,” Loxy said.

“Okay, yes, but hypothetically, when I called folks to me so that I can improve, I called on people that I admired, who I thought had it together, who are not necessarily my peers, but were advanced,” I said.

“And they are advanced, in their areas. And, they’re human. And you’re advanced in what you do, and they need that piece. We advanced together,” Loxy said. “You thought this was going to be easy, that you weren’t going to have to work.”

“Well, yeah,” I said.

“You wanted magic,” Loxy said.

“Yeah! I’ve said as much,” I said.

“Consider every book of fiction you ever read, every fantasy you ever held, was it ever perfect?” Loxy asked.

“No,” I said.

“Why?” Loxy asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. My brain was hurting. “Maybe, people think they need to earned it.”

“Yeah,” Loxy said, softly. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you and your counselors have a great deal in common. They’re capable of extraordinary insight, they communicate at a higher level than most, and, most importantly, they challenge people to think. You, John, challenge people. That’s the real reason you don’t have many friends, not because you are not

liked or appreciated, but because people have a difficult time relating to you. You're intense, you see through their diatribes and rants and make profound connections that give them pause and think, and it makes people unconformable. You're brilliant in a psychotherapeutic sense, when people can breathe you in for a short duration, but being in a therapeutic field 24-7, well, most people just can't sustain that level of energy. Even you get tired of you, sometimes. But when you make a friendship, they are exceptional friendships."

"What are we?" I asked.

"What would you like us to be?" Loxy asked.

"Please, don't do Rogerian with me," I said.

"I love you," Loxy said.

"Because I made you?" I asked.

"No," Loxy said. "Because you gave me a choice." She crawled up over me, hovered above me, and smiled down in my face. "Now, do as I tell you," she said. "Remove the covers." The covers moved through her as she wasn't there, because, well, technically, she wasn't. "Now, close your eyes. Breathe deeply, hold it, and let go."

With my eyes closed, every sensation was enhanced. As a 'ghost,' which isn't a ghost, she had access to all of me. I suppose, one could argue I have access to all of me, but I long stopped thinking of Loxy's autonomous actions as anything other than her and not me. She would touch the inside of a nerve complex and I would shiver from head to toe, or convulse. As I gave into the experience, her touch became more solid against my skin, but that didn't detract her from going deeper. I was quivering with delight. This was not like a massage from another person. This was energy and tactile and when I 'arrived' I was transported!

निर्मित

I arrived at a place that taxes my ability to describe. It was a whiteness, undefined, but clearly it had a floor. I didn't feel like I was falling. I could have been falling, but, without a frame of reference, I was pretty sure I was standing. I tried moving, and I was sure my legs and feet did move, but because, again, there was no frame of reference, there was no traction. I could see in all directions around me without turning, but I decided to rotate. Rotating cause the world around me to fracture like a kaleidoscope and I rows of frames, paper thin membranes with realities

playing out, and then I turned past them and I back in a whitespace. I never left the whitespace, but if you move in a certain way, the whiteness unfolds into a myriad of possible places to be. I turned again, drawing close to one of the scenes, and that's how I saw it, a movie. Like you're at an electronic store surrounded by new televisions. Only, these televisions were canvases and movie posters, and I bumped one and it wrapped around me and spun me up like being wrapped in a tortilla.

I was now in the movie. Simply enough, I found myself in front of a temple, open to the air, and a roof supported by caryatids. I wasn't dressed. It can be disconcerting to find yourself elsewhere, but to be suddenly borne into being and completely naked and vulnerable, with no place to run or hide... Welcome to the Universe. I found a garment, folded with a flower lying on top, in front of a hawk on a pedestal, which startled me, because when I reached for the garment the hawk took flight. I was perturbed, but determine to clothe myself as opposed to running away naked; well, I maintained a reasonable presence of mind not to run naked, but once clothed, and not further threatened, I tarried. I think I had not anticipated the hawk as being real, as if I needed an explanation. It made me wonder if the caryatids were real and not stone. I do love hawks. I spot them often on my way to work and I secretly thank them for being visible in my life.

With the robe on, and it was a robe, like a priestly robe as opposed to a bathroom robe, pretty much all white with the exception of some hieroglyphics over the left breast, I gave more attention to the temple. The marble floors felt warm to my feet. Each tile was a pentagon shape, alternating black and white. The temple itself was circular in design, and the stairs that I climbed were part of the base, but making the entrance possible only from the south. There was a fountain, quite noticeable as you entered. The movement of water was the only noise breaking the silence, and the fountain was a perfect dome of water in the center of the pool. At the far side of the temple was a pedestal large enough to contain a throne, and a back drop and two active incents container, and apparently, a Goddess, with wings and everything. I was either in Egypt, or on the set of a Stargate episode that didn't air.

"You're an American," she observed.

"Um, I am," I said. I was startled by the voice, but having been conditioned by the hawk, I managed to push through without revealing just how much so. I really thought the Goddess was a stature.

She nodded. "In that case, I will forgive you for not falling to your knees. Your kind has forgotten how to consort with gods."

"Is this what this is, consorting? A consortment?" I asked.

"I think the word you're looking for is consortium," she said. "I am surprised you don't have better command over your own language. It is your primary language, after all, and the principal interface with the Universe at your present stage of development."

"Isis, I presume?" I asked. I was well into my game of invisible counselors, I knew what was up. There was no need to get my neck cut by a goddess to remind me who summoned who.

Isis rose from her throne, and what I thought were attached wings turned out to be an artifact of her throne. Perspective! She descended down the stairs of the pedestal and advanced on me. Her movement was deliberate, feminine, provocative, captivating, and intimidating. Her movement was exaggeratedly human, and yet not human. Nor did she move like a hallucination. She didn't hover across the floor. She had shadows that fell appropriately. I have been in the presence of celebrities and felt that euphoric giddiness and awe, and the feelings provoked in me by her presence was a hundred times greater. I was on the verge of collapsing when she took my arm and steadied me.

"Breathe," Isis said. "I do not intend to harm you."

"I..." I couldn't even complete a thought.

"This will pass. I find being intentionally familiar with my subject expedites your recovery, if you would like," Isis offered.

"Um," I began, wondering if I heard what I thought I had heard.

"Yes, I am suggesting intimacy," Isis said. She seemed to be amused by my reaction, pushing in close enough to me that we nearly touched. Her hand pushed into the robe and grasped hold of me. It occurred to me, if a woman gets all girly and weak in the knees, that's okay, but if a man is equally provoked to the point of being stupid, he gets disparaged. "You are aware that you can't solicit a god or goddess and it be anything other than complete surrender? I am light and I am knowledge and I will come at you at all levels of your being until you are fully illuminated in all aspects of your life. There will be no closed doors between us, no secrets, no wanting left in your entire being, and when you are completely satiated at all levels of awareness, you will radiate this to everyone you encounter. Others will rise to your new level or they will flee your presence. You only believe you have experienced loneliness in your past, but what's

ahead of you will seem darker than anything you believe is possible. This is the price for interacting with deities. This is the price of becoming a god.”

“It’s punishment?” I asked.

“It will seem so,” Isis said, easing off her aggressive stance. She went and leaned against a stone pedestal that was solid block of marble higher than a coffee table. “But that is paranoia. Mostly, you will feel isolated because your experiences will be ineffable. Because of your personal history, you’re more likely to withdraw from others because you will fear being locked up or killed outright. And, your fears will be valid. Humans from earth who speak to gods don’t fare well. Consider this conversation informed consent to my participation in your life.”

“You’re accepting the invitation?” I asked.

“Conditionally,” Isis said. “Before I name the conditions, I would like to hear your response to a few questions.”

“Just out of curiosity, being a goddess and all, don’t you already know the answers?” I asked.

Isis laughed. “I get that question a lot. And yes, I do, but you don’t, and if I gave you the answers, you would always be wondering if it was your answer or mine, so, in some ways, Glenda got it right when she made Dorothy walk it off,” Isis said.

“You know about the Wizard of Oz, too?” I asked.

“John, John, John,” Isis said.

Fair enough I thought. “What are the questions?”

“When you and Loxy discussed who you might invite, you initially avoided a god because you thought it was too much of a power house. So, what changed?”

I shrugged. “I wanted a direct connection with divinity, without having to rely on someone else’s word, or a book,” I said.

Isis nodded. “Now, I want you to ask me a question.”

I opened my mouth to ask something and there was nothing.

“Oh, come on, anything,” Isis said.

If I had just a dime for every time I had a question for god, I’d be a wealthy man, and suddenly, when faced with a deity, I had nothing. “Um, would you allow for an observation instead?” I asked.

“I accept,” Isis said.

“You’re much darker than I imagined,” I said.

Again, Isis laughed. It was actually pleasant, almost girlish. “Contrary to popular belief, we are not all white skin, blue eyes, with blond hair,” she said. She led me over to the fountain where she sat down, leaning slightly back and stretching her legs out. She smiled coyly.

“Speaking of blond hair, blue eyed gods, why didn’t you summon the one from your childhood,” Isis asked.

“I kind of have a love hate relationship with him and thought I’d spend more time arguing than listening,” I admitted.

“That’s honest enough,” Isis agreed. “But I want deeper.”

Really? What could be deeper than that? “I had too many questions in regards to the text of origin and why things are there or why things are missing and I get really confused by things that seemed to be borrowed from other sources...” I said.

“Oh, please, don’t even get me started on Christianity and Judaism’s plagiarism. Israel! IsisRaEl, the ultimate trinity which I am a part of. But quite frankly, it’s not just them, John. Everything written and everything that will be written is borrowed. You don’t think my dialogue comes from you, do you? If I give you wisdom, it’s written somewhere. Let’s have clarity on that,” Isis said, putting a foot on me, teasing the robe open. She planted the sole of her foot on my thigh. “There’s more to your request for me than simple avoidance of the other.”

“I remember liking Almighty Isis as a kid, and I figured if I was going to have a deity, I might as well be attracted to her,” I said.

“Good for you,” Isis said, glad that I owned it. Clearly, I can’t be the only one that ever had a crush on a deity. “And, what do you think?”

“Um...”

“I see,” Isis beamed.

“You’re not going to smite me?” I asked.

Isis chuckled. “Of course not. If every human who held such thought was eliminated there would be no humans. And, there was a time when we used to intermingle much more than we do now. You humans really have too many hang ups on the whole subject of sex.”

“The rules were imposed by you gods,” I pointed out.

“No, that was completely all human. If you still had temples devoted to me or Hathor, Aphrodite, or Venus, I dare say there would be a lot less hang ups,” Isis said. “John, do you understand why you’re such a poor magician?”

“No,” I admitted.

“You philosophize too much,” Isis said. “True magic is not performed with the head, but with the heart. All your life you’ve ignored the impulse to go inwards in favor of becoming more cerebral. You’re not going to think yourself out of life. Get out of your head and into your heart, and you will see things much differently. And if you want even more different than the radical difference that heart vision will give you, than go even deeper! The way out is not up. The way out is in.”

I wasn’t sure I believed her.

“You frequently experienced AP as a child. Do you know why it quit working?”

“Fear,” I guessed.

“Partly. But mostly because you read a book and you started trying to follow someone else’s protocols and now you’ve turned it into a mythological research topic trying to master techniques to force yourself out of body, but you can’t will yourself out, because there is no body. You are consciousness. Your consciousness is not limited to space/time.”

“So, stop trying to open my third eye?” I asked.

“Oh, definitely stop obsessing about that. Do you have to think in order to see with your eyes? Contrary to popular belief, squinting doesn’t improve sight. And you don’t have to think about your kidneys to produce urine. Everything does what it’s supposed to do when it’s supposed to do it.”

“But...” I began.

“Really, you want to argue with me? Do you want to argue in favor of a way of being that hasn’t been productive for you?” Isis asked.

She had a strong argument.

“Also, if you consider it, almost all of your so called spontaneous esoteric experiences happened while you were engaged in intimacy,” Isis said.

“You mean, I have to get off to get out?” I asked.

Isis laughed. “You have to be engaged to get out. Getting off usually ends the sessions,” Isis said. “Think of it this way. You tend to trance out during intimacy. That’s when you travel.

Orgasm brings you back to your body. Which is a good thing, there is a reason you anchored yourself in the body. When you dream, you are sexually aroused and engaging the universe. All humans are sexually aroused during REM sleep. Typically, when people get over stimulated in the dream, they wake up before the orgasm. Sexual energy is a core ingredient of the Universe. You should not fear it. It is a part of you and it is more vital than the blood that runs through your body's veins. Your body will die, but you go on, and does sexuality. You've heard some above as below, but you've never really unpacked it the way it deserves. Yes, a tree reaches for the stars, but it's also reaching into earth. Your thoughts are lofty, and they're important, don't favor the leaves while ignoring your roots. You, Sir, have already touched the sky, and now it's time to go deeper."

Her foot came off my thigh and she beckoned me forwards. I came closer, but she urged me to come still closer to her, and there was no way to get closer without stepping between her legs, without coming into contact. With that, she touched my forehead, my throat, my heart, my stomach, and then hovered over my groin. Her eyes met mine, her long, gold eyelashes fluttered. The smile she gave was more than an invitation. She didn't ask, she simply opened the robe, taking each side of me in her hands and pulled me into her.

I don't share all of this just because I think I am some bad ass who just slept with a goddess. I am not the only one who is ever had a transcendent experience with sex. There is a book that details many accounts from many people from all walks of life who have experiences of transcendence during sex, and one of the common experiences is their partner channels a deity, and I don't know if it was because Loxy had opened something up in me and sent me here, or this is just something I had fantasized about from youth and it was inevitable. Not only am I not bragging here, I feel compelled to say, don't think this is all sunshine and puppies. Because it's not. When I returned to my body, I was soaked with sweat, and I was too exhausted to move, or perhaps this was me waking up to sleep paralysis and I felt trapped. Loxy was still there, moving against me in a rhythmic way, bringing herself to climax. I had already moved way past pleasure was now beginning to experience pain, but I couldn't communicate this because I was immobilized. Loxy finished and fell exhausted on top of me and again, and after a moment, fell to the side of me, sound asleep and smiling, her hand on my chest, over my heart. I felt a sudden release and my whole body convulsed.

Another part of this that makes it unpleasant is that there's no one to discuss it with. It's like that condition of persistent arousal disorder, where a person has sustained arousal and orgasms frequently. This condition is a true disability and painful, and yet the public misunderstanding of it says "Oh, I wish I had that problem." If a man has a sustained erection for more than two hours it becomes a medical emergency, but we don't treat women sufferers with equal concern? And neither male nor female gets empathy, because we can't get past our own jokes and wanting. What I am experiencing isn't a medical issue; it is this truly amazing experience, and there are others who have experience similar, but there's just no way to go to work and say, "So, last night, I slept with a goddess" and there not be jokes for the sakes of jokes and jokes for the sake of ridiculing and silencing a person into conforming with the expected norm. "Don't talk about religion, don't talk about politics, don't talk about aliens, or ghosts, or magic, just do your job and talk about sports or the weather." I wish I could just go into work and say I slept with Isis and she said if you don't give me a raise, she may have to send a plague or something. (Yes, the Egyptians were doing that to others before they enslaved the Israelite who stole it from them and turned it back on them.) Besides, with my luck, if I mentioned Isis, someone will think I am talking about terrorist and get all confused.

I am confident this wasn't just a dream, but then, again, who am I? This is subjective and not provable and I am one of 7 billion voices, proceeding through life whispering mantras to maintain the social minimum through a functionality equation. I was channeling something that was nonfunctional and nonlinear. What Loxy had been doing to me was amazing, and I am sure that many people would want that part, but what she was doing wasn't even the normal channels for pleasure. I didn't have a penile orgasm. It was a full body orgasms, and unlike anything I have ever felt, and it continued in waves, increasing in intensity until it was so intense that I traveled, and even then, it continued to increase in intensity until it was so painful that the subliminal experience I was engaging was negated because I couldn't focus on that and the pain of the other. I have read about the Super O's that one can achieve it through prostate massage, and I can only assume that that is what I was experiencing. The men who report these orgasms are possible swear by them, that any previous experience through penis alone pales, and that through the prostate men could have multiple orgasms. Comparatively, my experience with Isis was almost mundane, I want to use the word vanilla, with the only exception being she was a goddess, and when I came I was back in my body, and there was clear evidence I had had the

regular kind of orgasm, too, but it was compounded by the other sensations that I have already attempted to described, and still haven't fully presented what the total experience was like, which adds to the fact that in sum, it was amazing and completely frustrating because I had no way of compartmentalizing it. When I was able to move again, I discovered evidence of normal male orgasm going all the way up my chest, which in itself says something, because, I am like 49 and don't usually get that distance out of ejaculate. I was too tired to get up and go clean. Further, I feared if even tried to stand that I might collapse! And it wasn't all fatigue from over exertion, but was rather like overexertion combined with the fatigue of having been severely ill, and the feeling of the experience felt more like a fever dream. I wanted to remain sick and never recover. I wanted to go back to that other place.

Loxy sent me higher, Isis sent me back.

The only thing that tempered my longing to return to the point I might have begun contemplating suicide as a way to get back there was the sudden onset of sleep.

Chapter 6

Heads up, we're going to time travel for a moment. I've always enjoyed an incredible dream life. It wasn't always well received, so eventually I stopped sharing it, stopped discussing it. Since as far back as I can remember, my dream have hinted towards a greater spiritual connection than I have felt in my daily life. There has been incidents of spillover into daily life, but mostly, it's all self-contained in a context of sleep and dream. One incident of spillover came while I was living in San Antonio; my grandfather died in Abilene, and it was necessary to delay travel. My father went straight way, but my mother and I were going to drive up three days later. In the interim, I made it my mission to dream of my grandfather. I moved through my day one telling myself, "I will dream of my grandfather." That became my mantra. This was well before I knew anything about lucid dreaming or magic. I knew on innate level I could make it happen. And I wanted it to happen. Out my entire family, I had the greatest rapport with Papa. It was a weird relationship, but it was the most consistent, and stable relationship. Not a lot hugs on that side of the family. He was a Baptist minister, a principal in a school district. He was loved and looked up to by many in several communities. I would ask him a question and he would hand me a book.

So that night, after some intense programming, I failed to dream of him. I woke, having no memories of any dreams, and began to rage. I lived in an apartment at the time, second floor, with a balcony overlooking the pool. I remember being on the porch, intense anger directed into the sky which was an idealistic, perfect blue. I wanted to conjure up rain clouds and storms, thinking Mickey Mouse and Fantasia equivalent. Nothing happened. I had no effect on reality. I remembered closing diamond patterns in the pool. Sparkles of sunlight. Very picturesque. Perfect morning. But I was too emotional to endure it so I went inside, pausing only to collect a white feather that was on the BBQ grill. It was a perfect white feather. I put it in my book 'Illusions' by Richard Bach that was on my piano.

I hear you. You're thinking I am setting you up. On this day, as I tell the story, I can tell it without it having changed. I have written and discussed it multiple times, and each rendition is the same in details, with more or fewer words depending on the audience. It is replete with metaphors, but at the time, I couldn't see them or access them. The feather is a metaphor, as is the book I inserted said feather into. When I tell this in person, the listeners get chills. I am equally affected by each telling, and I flush and my hands get warm. But then, it was

excruciatingly real, and I was full of anger and sadness. I went through my day beside myself. I wonder if that expression means something. I also ramped up my self-programming, 'I will dream of my grandfather.' That night, I went to bed fully expecting to realize my goal. I closed my eyes and woke, ten hours later, not remembering a single dream. It was like I closed my eyes and opened them and it was morning. I was pissed. And now tired. I went out on the porch and released fury into the sky. I released enough energy I could have destroyed the Death Star. Not wanting to linger in the blue or the gentle diamonds on the pool, I turned to withdraw back into the solitude of my apartment, pausing only to unconsciously collect a second, pristine feather from on top of the BBQ. I put it in the book Illusions, by Richard Bach, and proceeded through my day, lamenting my failures and my life, but proceeding forward with my mantra to see my grandfather. I knew I could do it. I knew this was the only way I would ever have another conversation with him. I arrived back home after a day that was so common in action that I couldn't tell you a single detail other than my mission statement, and without too much ado, packed, and retired early to engage in a dream mission to reach and hug my grandfather. To me, it was not only doable, it was reasonable that I accomplish the mission. I wanted it. I needed it.

It didn't happen. I awoke, no dreams, and went out onto the porch and stared up into the sky almost daring it to smite me as I defied its pristine, perfectness.

"Sir? Sir?!"

I looked down from the railing and saw a child, a black kid who I had never seen in my apartment complex before, and who I had never saw afterwards. I have no clue who he was.

"What?!" I snapped.

Unperturbed, he asked, "Have you noticed that white dove that has been sitting on your balcony every morning?"

You would think I would have stopped and considered the feathers. I did not. I didn't hesitate in my response, either. "No!" I said, turned away, picked up a third feather, and put it in my book with the others.

From there, I collected my mother and began our drive to Abilene. I shared with her my intentions to dream of grandfather and though I had failed, I how I was continuing to pursue my mission objective.

"You know I don't want to hear it," My mother said. "Your dreams are just brain fluff from you watching too much television and an over active imagination which is not practical and

will never get you anywhere. Maybe if you spent more time in reality you would be more successful in life.”

And her rant continued for a few more miles, but it effectively put an end to further dialogue. We arrived and the first thing I did was find my grandfather's keys. I figured this was something he touched every day, and my intent was to hold them as a talisman to help reinforce my goal of dreaming of him. I spent time sitting in his chair, looking at the book he had on the side table, which wasn't something that would hold my interest, but it was what he was reading. I spent time in his study. Yeah, family arrived and there were minimal conversations, but mostly I was alone, even when I was with them, especially when I was with them, as if I were adopted or worse, simply a stray that wandered in and was tolerated to some degree. Grandfather's study was always my refuge. Whenever family gathered and they were watching football, I was in the study reading, or listening to the reel to reel. The study had a particular smell, that of books, reel to reel, typing ribbon reels of red and black ink, chalk, and art supplies. There was a painting of a two fishermen in a storm with yellow slickers. I'm sure it's a copy of something famous. Papa was in this room a lot and I could smell him. I continued with my mantra. And I continued to push the boundaries. That night, I got to sleep in his bed. My grandparents had the twin, 'I love Lucy' bed arrangement, which was all of my life and maybe before, and it made you wonder how my father and his sister came about, but it was just the way they were. Again, this side of the family was Victorian reserved, no conversations on sex or sexuality except the Bible kind that you don't lust, and there was no alcohol, no dancing, no games with dice, so no monopoly and definitely no D&D, and handshakes over hugs. The other family, oh, there was sex, and affairs, and drugs, and alcohol abuse, and law enforcement frequently at the door, and weapons discharged into the house, multiple divorces, generational sex abuse, and drama, with folks in and out of jail, and all of this under the canopy of a Church of Christ background which frequently informed me that the Baptist side of the family were going to hell because they were Baptist, which never made much sense, because if anything else, that side was at least kind and stable and sticking to their ethics. Talk about duality! My childhood was confusing to say the least. And probably why we didn't talk about dreams or magic or ESP or aliens. So, I am not being gross when I tell you I slept in my grandfather's bed. I even slept in his nightshirt, the one that was still on his bed and was recently worn. I share the information to impart how desperately I wanted to reconnect with him. I knew I was doing everything right. His night shirt drooped

over me like a nightgown from an old Dickens tale, only there wasn't any visits from any of the Christmas ghosts. I laid my head on his pillow. I did not cry, though there were tears that sneaked out and touched his pillow. I could smell him. And I continued with my mantra until I fell asleep.

I awoke, no dreams. Fuck! I got up, tired, but unable to keep my head on the pillow, unable to sleep or meditate or think properly. I went to the kitchen and sat in Papa's place at the table. My grandmother said, "Well, another country heard from." That was her thing to say. She said it every morning. Was it her mantra? Did it have meaning? Are people really countries, with populations of others inside of each of us? She was making bacon and eggs, and the biscuits were in the oven. My mom was at the table writing something in a tablet she had taken from my grandmother's supplies.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Just a moment," she answered.

"No, really, what are you doing?" I asked, and I don't know why I was so insistent, but whatever she was doing it was inconsistent with her character. And she is a character, and though I know she is more substantial than a 2-dimensional foil to practice my wit on, she rarely engaged me in such a way that we could hold a meaningful dialogue of compassion and love towards each other, and I have still not reached a level of advancement that I can engage her.

"One moment, I'm writing down a dream I had and I don't want to forget it," my mother said.

"Oh, hell no, you are not," I snapped.

"Language," my grandmother said.

My mother looked at me. "I had a dream about Papa."

"You're making this up. You're making fun of me because of what I shared with you and I don't appreciate it," I said.

"No, you don't understand. This is important. Last night, in my dream, I went into Papa's bedroom, and I saw him. He was sitting on the bed, but I didn't see him by looking directly at him, but only when I looked in the dresser mirror. And he looked confused. And I told him, it was okay, you can go into the light," my mother informed.

"No! You would not say that! You ridicule me for my dreams, and now you're telling me this?" I demanded.

“And you were in the dream, and you were telling him not to go,” my mother said.

To my knowledge, my mother has never said anything more insightful and dead on accurate about me in my entire life. I was still holding Papa’s keys. It took effort to release them. They clattered to the table. My hand was bleeding and the keys had left imprints. The tears were unleashed and I began to sob. My grandmother touched my shoulder, but then continued on with preparing breakfast. She wasn’t ready yet, not for this. I withdrew to Papa’s chair. I cried that entire day and was so inconsolable that I was not invited to speak at the funeral. My father had tears at the funeral, and it was first time I had ever seen him emote anything other than anger. I wanted to put a flashlight in the casket. I was told no. I did so anyway. Too late, I discovered it had been removed. What is wrong with people!

I returned to San Antonio. I returned to my life and work and preparing for a move, and two weeks later I was in Dallas, working at DFW, having secured a work transfer. I had ceased trying to contact my grandfather the day I buried him. And it was that night, my first night in my new apartment, in a new city, that I had the dream. It didn’t feel like a dream.

I was on an airplane, a row of three seats, by myself, the middle seat. I am pretty sure this was a Super 80. The row directly in front of me, my brother sat alone. Two rows forwards of me, my parents sat, my father occupying the window seat, and my grandfather was sitting with them, occupying the aisle seat. They were talking. I could hear they were talking but I could not make out the words. I was not privy to this conversation. Again, I am impressed by the flow of time. This did not feel like a dream. There was the vibration of the airplane, the noise of the airplane engines. This was something else, maybe not real, but it was something! My grandfather got up, I think he looked at me but I purposely looked away. He sat down with my brother in the row directly in front of me, and held a conversation with him. Again, I was not privy to the conversation. My brother had not been at the funeral because he was in prison. My grandparents had been opposed to my parents adopting him. He was technically my mom’s sister’s son. His father was an Iranian air force officer, who the US was teaching aviation to back in the 70’s when were friends, and my aunt flew off to Iran and gave him too children, one girl, one boy, but for whatever reasons, she snuck out of the country and brought the boy with her, creating an international incident that had reporters on our doors, very much like the story “Not Without My Daughter,” with Sally Fields. (My aunt had left a daughter in Iran, interestingly enough.) I am telling you, we have drama. I am not making this shit up. I never saw my paternal grandparents

connect with my brother, or his half biological brother that my maternal grandmother adopted and who was often with us. There were even multiple incidents of favoritism displayed towards me in front of my brother and my cousin, which even at a young age bothered me, because I could discern a difference, and they did, too, and it caused rifts and fights that played out in other arenas that the adults were not privy to, or didn't care to understand. And so, the fact that my grandfather sat down with my brother and had a lengthy conversation with him, really didn't fit with my expectations. And time passed. This was not just a speed your way to the most important part of the dream. I was bothered. Time was passing and I was uncomfortable and trying to figure what the hell all of this was.

My grandfather stood, came back a row, and he sat down with me. I looked at him but couldn't maintain eye contact. I looked at the literature sticking out of the seatback pocket. My grandfather was silent. He didn't say anything for the longest time. Time palpably passed. This was more than uncomfortable. I silently raged until he broke the silence.

"You're taking this better than I imagined you would," Papa said.

"I don't want to take this," I said.

I am pretty sure he nodded. A flight attendant offered a drink and he waved her off. And time ticked.

"Look out the window," Papa instructed.

"Why?" I asked.

"Stop it. Look out the window and tell me what you see," Papa said.

I looked out the window. "I don't see anything."

"Tell me what you see," Papa said.

"What are you looking for?"

"Tell me what you see," Papa insisted.

"I don't know, farms, patchwork, roads," I began listing. "Just Earth. What should I see?"

"That's where I am buried, not where I am," he said.

I began to cry. He touched my arm. I awoke, I was in my bed, my pillow was soaked and my tears were still flowing.

Sharing this story with you seems out of place here, in some ways, except I think it's necessary if nothing else to show you the relevance that dreaming has in my life. I have had other profound dreams. I have had out of body experiences as a child. I have had esoteric

experiences where I was brought up into a light, like sustained lightening, and seen a world without shadows. I have been in a white place of empty infinity. Mysticism has always been in the background, pulling at me, and I have resisted, and so just like the days where we go from wake to sleep to wake, so have I passed through levels of lucidity and connections, and so far, whenever I have touched the sacred it has only reinforced the fact that there is nothing mundane. It is all sacred and bound by a Light and Love, which contradicts almost everything the Church of Christ taught me, and there wasn't a place to discuss the other experiences with family or friends without just really going off the deep end and being more disconnected from people than I already felt. Maybe I should have dived off the deep end much earlier, but I was afraid. I still struggle with this fear, fear of being alone, and this fear of being alone has driven me to make really bad relationship decisions. I know this. And I can only say I have improved in small steps, but am still fallible.

But I also share this to help kind of sort how varied my dreams are. There are levels. There are nonsense dreams. There are disconnected dreams where things are random and nonlinear. Most of my dreams seem to be stories. Literally motion pictures from start to finish. I have dreams about music. I have dreams about people and places and sometimes I am not me and those are really interesting. I have some prophetic dreams. Nothing ever big like winning the lottery or who is the next presidents, but small things that have come to pass, but are also equally explainable as being easily predicted to happen, and so in an effort to be rational and reasonable, I have tended to go with the scientific, logical explanation. I have always wanted to be Spock and I have spent a great deal of energy to be intellectual. I admit to neglecting my heart. I am now working on that part.

And so, it's like this. Most people go to work, spend time with family, sleep, and do it all again. I work, I spend time with my immediate family, which is my ex-wife and son, with full focus on the wellbeing of my son. I am estranged from all family. That part isn't relevant to this book, not so much anyway. It influences me, clearly. And then, there is my night time, replete with dreams where I am immersed in a second life, 24 hours, sometimes more, condensed into an eight to ten hour period. I am sure someone will argue this is just fantasy. Before Loxy, I would have agreed. I would lay in bed, aiming for sleep, either programing, or daydreaming, only to fade out and fade in and pick up right where I left off. My dreams are not all about sex. Many are. But this is my biggest argument against Freud's assertion that all dreams are simply

manifestations of a repressed libido. Believe me, I am obsessed with sex. You have one esoteric experience with sex, and you'll either chase it or become celibate, and I am not doing the latter. But, neither are my dreams nightly orgies. I am not a sex addict. I don't sabotage my life to get a need met, but this is a big part of my life, and before my divorce I was in a sexless marriage for two years, so you might imagine, if dreaming is just repressed libido, I would have had an increase sexual dreams, and that just didn't happen. I had some sex dreams. Usually I wake up before the good part. I have even had lucid dreams where I pursued sexual contact and was still blocked. Which is even more frustrating than in real life because, hey, this is my dream and I want some, but sometimes the girl says no, which is a great set up for a joke, but also revealing of how I work. I do care about others, even if they're 'dream' people. Have I lied to get sex? Sure. Even in non-lucid dreams, I have lied to get sex, directly and indirectly.

In dreams, and in life, I think sex doesn't mean what we think it means. I think its energy that encourages us to connect, be creative. In Astral Projection, there seems to be no social rules in how people engage each other. This is my experience, and the people I consider experts on the subject have either directly said the same, or hinted at it. Of course, more people than not put a higher reverence on it than I seem to. I certainly think it's sacred, but then, I really think there is nothing else. Everything is sacred, and if everything is sacred, then there aren't some things more sacred than others. In the dream world, everything is equally me. The table. The characters. The props. Granted, every specific thing has meaning, but it's still me. The characters are either archetypes or gateways to connecting with specific meaning, symbols to be engaged that when properly aligned can change the meaning of a sentence. Okay, and now this make sense to me. I understand why I am sharing this with you. It's because, where I am about to take you, well... For me, this is not fiction. We're going off the deep end and it's not going to make a lot of sense, but the floor is about to fall out, and there will be tumbling involved and, well, welcome to my life.

Chapter 7

So, I think I have impressed upon you the importance of dreams in my life. Music is equally up there. When I say I listen to everything, well, I am not exaggerating. In my grandfather's reel to reel collection I memorized all of the New Christi Minstrel's songs, and have introduced my son to them and he loves the reel to reel which now needs to be fixed and I am hoping to find someone that is savvy enough, and hope if it needs parts they can be found. Grandfather also introduced me to big band and spiritual. My dad was country. Mom was pop. I participated briefly in band, learned the piano, and was in choir in school and part of a barbershop quartet choir in San Antonio, and performed at the San Antonio Little theatre. I listened to music from every country I have visited and even own every album Xuxa ever made. I love rhythm and blue and salt grass and old twang-y stuff and punk rock and head banging. I adore musicals. I especially love a serious movie that breaks into song and dance, subtly like in "Heart and Souls" or the opening of "Adventures in Baby Sitting," but what sold that movie was when the adventurers arrived on stage and they were blocked by the gatekeeper, the old man: "No one gets out of here without singing the blues."

When I first began writing fan fiction, I made the mistake of including song lyrics in my books. Part of me regrets it, but I can't make myself undo it. Even if it could update all the copies out there, those first samples were stages of progression in my writing that I can't undo because it's just as much a part of myself as being four years old was. I need those milestones for lack of a better word. Anyway, I have not quite yet mastered how to incorporate music into my writing, and there's a real art to doing so. And it's necessary, especially when I dream musical numbers. They're important and meaningful, and sometimes downright bizarre. I have done numbers with ELO, on stage by myself and spinning light like threads of streamers in the dark to unknown audiences. I have sung numerous duets. How many times have I sung "Suddenly" with Olivia Newton John?! Yes, you have to believe we are magic.

And so, last night, in a well-earned, blissful sleep, I found myself once more on stage. A homemade, bamboo stage. It was sturdy enough, but sometimes when you danced across it, you wondered just how sturdy. There is a 'break your leg' joke waiting to happen. The backdrop was a sheet of homemade papyrus, painted to show a modern home with a roaring fireplace. All of the materials were derived from materials on the island. I wasn't alone. Mary Ann Summers

was on stage with me, nodding to Ginger to start the number. Ginger dropped the needle on the album, which hit the end of the preceding song. Mary Ann shot a cross look to Ginger, her hands going to her hips. Ginger shot back a fake apologetic look, and almost stuck out her tongue. I told Mary Ann it was okay. Our audience was patient, and amused, talking amongst themselves in a familiar discourse, as we got into character. The scratchy, silent interlude between songs helped us commit.

The number begins with a “Big Band” intro and Mary Ann begins the ‘call and response’ duet of “Baby It’s Cold Outside,” with “I really can’t stay,” and I chase, clearly the aggressor, pursuing the love of my life, but for the sake of this number, it’s obvious I am pressuring for more than love. There are some props on the stage. Like a coat borrowed from the Howells’, and a wine glass with who knows what, which also just adds flavor to the line, “Hey, what’s in this drink.” Yes, what a peculiar line for a Christmas Song, right? The lyrics are by Frank Loesser in 1944, and so I can only conclude, people were ‘dosing’ their partners way earlier than football players and Cosby.

Now, in this version, my version, Mary Ann, succeeds in breaking my spell on her, and departs the stage, and as I reach for my coat to go chase after her, Ginger arrives on the scene, takes my arm, and role reversal, she becomes the aggressor, and the duet continues for another round. And then for the finale, Mary Ann arrives back on the stage, and the three of us sing harmony for a brilliant conclusion, wrapped in a Big Band fanfare, with Ginger prominent on the stage, Mary Ann vying for next, and I just kind of situated between them, as we smile to our audience, which is understood to be more than the other castaways, without breaking the fourth wall, but a TV audience thousands of miles away is understood. All we hear is the applause and admiration of the fellow castaways.

After the song, the eight of us retire to a campfire, where there is a small exchange of gifts, in which I am included. They were homemade trinkets that actually had more sentimental value than any gift that could be bought. My gift to the professor was a simple equation, basically I gave him ‘ $E=MC^2=I$,’ which he was baffled by until I explained to him about consciousness being essential to nature, but even then he couldn’t process the fact that consciousness needed to be a part of the formula in order to have a theory of everything; he did, however see it as an act of kindness on my part, accepting the gift but dismissing it has having any scientific merit. Marry Ann sat by me, leaning into me as if we have always been an item.

Ginger feigns aloofness, but I think she is affected. She knows I have always preferred Mary Ann. It's sometimes surprising how quiet it gets sitting around the fire. We all seem entranced. Gilligan starts in with "Auld Lang Syne." One by one, the cast joins him, round the circle, and finally, I am faced with the dilemma of joining or breaking. I joined. I am so swept up by emotions that at the conclusion I get up to leave.

Mary Ann stands, concerned.

"Just going to the latrine," I whispered.

"You'll come back?" Mary Ann asked.

I kiss her. If the other castaways are watching, they're doing it obliquely.

"I'll always return for you." I said, and I head off into the jungle as if to do my business.

Believe it or not, there is a latrine. These are real people with real needs and sometimes I get overwhelmed by it all and want to rescue them, which is more about my need to be the hero than true concern for them. Of course, I don't really need to go to the latrine, and I find myself suddenly at the lagoon, a full moon above and below, reflected in the waters framed by land, like another half-moon surrounding a moon. A man in a white suit, who may have always been there but somehow just mysteriously seems to arrive from nowhere, approaches.

"Kahn!" I said.

"It's Mr. Roarke," he answered with a smile.

"Yeah, but in the movie 'Neptune's Daughter' you were O'Roarke," I said. "But still, a wealthy playboy who owned an island."

"Yeah, but I was much younger then, and that was before I learned magic," Roarke said.

"That movie never really made a lot of sense to me," I said. "I mean, there are no God's in it, like the title might suggest, and the subtle pressuring for sex, and getting laid through both direct lies and indirect lies through failure to correct or clarify was passed off as just light hearted fun, especially when the ladies just laughed it off at the end. And then this song, I don't know how it became a fun Christmas song, given the pressure to give into sex, and the applying alcohol and music, and situational environments to increase that's it's okay to give in. But let's say, the movie was about God's and Neptune did have a daughter with a mortal, that still kind of fits this theme I am grappling with, which is what, rape? Can a human ever have consensual sex

with a superior entity? Alcohol or not, you're going to get swept off your feet and there is no fighting that."

"Why, it's Almost Like Being in Love," Roarke said.

"Brigadoon," I said, making the connection. "Is that what I was I supposed to learn here? Any involvement with Mary Ann under the present context is tantamount to lying and therefore invalidates the relationship, because outside of this context she doesn't exist in my world."

"I can't tell you what you came here to learn," Roarke said. "But you and I had an agreement. I would make you a permanent member of the castaways, but you can't fundamentally change them by revealing their future or your true nature. Additionally, you were to limit your therapeutic interactions with them, and though you are permitted to participate in rescue schemes, you were not permitted to rescue them. You cannot be the hero here. Giving the Professor that formula was risky."

"There is a profound sadness here," I said.

"There is. And, there is also joy," Roarke said. "Look, John. This show was bigger than life because it was absurd and profound at the same time. You can't access it through the critical mind. It's why the critics failed to understand and why the executives of the studios went out of their way to crush it. Studio executives are left brain entities that have excised their hearts and are completely devoid of any creative aspects needed to produce art, and they don't trust the artists like Schwartz or Cameron to be able judge profitability. Studio executives think the masses think like them, which is funny because they also think the masses are stupid, which is merely the execs projecting their own limitations. They're holding the light of art but they don't understand it. They might as well be the Nazi's holding the Ark of the Covenant, but where the light will burn their faces off, it liberates Indiana and Marion. That metaphor never gets old.

"The public understands Gilligan Island because in many ways it represented the beginning of man, still in paradise, where people were struggling with the knowledge of good and evil. Not only did the characters struggle with profound esoteric work, but the cast who played the characters were also struggling, in very human ways, and that, too, is broadcasted out into the population so that people can experience the sublime nature of reality, in a safe, humorous way. This island, this show, is a right brain exercise, and it is in your face about it in the same way that a Japanese koan is. These people, though referred to as characters, are archetypes, and they are necessary, and you're not the only one to ever be here. It was considered

a kid show, but that's because kids could access it better than adults, and you got it better than most, and it's why you keep coming back here in dreams."

"You understand though, at the risk of going Twilight Zone on you, or better, like in that movie 'Pleasantville' I can't be here without changing them, or me," I said.

Roarke nodded. "You've graduated," he said.

"I don't understand," I said.

"You got it, enlightenment, you no longer have to stay here," Roarke said. "You have finally recognized the truth about Fantasy Island. You can't be here without changing the world in a fundamental way, and when the change happens the fantasy ends. You can't be here without you changing in a fundamental way, and when that happens, the fantasy ends."

"But, I like it here. I love these people," I said.

"Of course you do. That, too, comes with being enlightened," Roarke said.

"I don't feel enlightened," I said.

"That, too, comes with the territory," Roarke said. "If you want to take over Fantasy Island, it needs a new champion. I am getting to old for this crap, and the next level for you is being a host, or a parent. Host and parents are synonymous."

"Oh, no, that's not me," I said. "Willy offered me his chocolate factory a while back, and I turned that down."

"I know," Mr. Roarke said. "And I so love the chocolate."

"Do I have to leave now?" I asked.

Roarke shrugged. "When you're ready," he said. "Take care, my friend."

Roarke turned to leave, but I asked as he was departing: "Will we meet again?"

He looked up at the stars. "I hear them laughing. What do you think?" and then he was gone in a turn of trees and mist and then I was alone again with the lagoon and the moonlight, and, suddenly, but not surprisingly, Ginger.

"You've been gone an awful long time," Ginger said, her fingers walking my shoulder as she moved in close. "Shall we do another number?"

"You don't really want me," I pointed out. "You're only interested in the drama it will stir while showcasing your talent."

"Of course," Ginger said, backing me into a tree. "I have never denied it. And, I usually get what I want, and right now, all I want for Christmas is..."

“Why?”

Ginger was nearly perturbed enough to break character, and then she smiled and leaned into it. “You’re not like the others. You’re complex, mysterious, and we’re alone, and a girl does have needs,” Ginger said, a finger brushing my lip as if to ask me to remain silent.

I kissed her finger, took her hand in mine, ran my hand up her arm to her shoulder, to her back, and down her spine. I drew her in closer even as she was embracing me, her hands locking behind my head so as to my face firmly against hers, our lips merging. Even in her fake ass kiss, there was enthusiasm in her performance.

निर्मित

There were people that thought the castaways were really marooned on the island. The US Navy got thousands of letter requesting they divert resources to rescue them before they starved. I didn’t see the show during the original airdates, but I watched it growing up in syndication. I know every episode by heart, to the same peculiar obsessiveness that I devoted to Star Trek. And, though I knew they were merely actors and actresses playing parts, in my brain, there was an allowance for them being real and truly on the island, and so I could go there like I could go to the mall down the street, and I could interact with them. There would be times when I would completely forget about them, only to return in a dream and continue uninterrupted, and so, they continued, as real and as firm as ever, and I really can’t ridicule the people who sent those letters advocating for people. One, it shows people care and they can advocate for strangers. It also suggests, reality is not as fast and secure as most people think. I see those letters as evidence that people weren’t writing just to help those others, but as a genuine distress call, that part of them was also needing to be rescued, and in helping the castaways they were helping themselves. This show touched something in people, all over the world! And continues to do so, even today.

But as I grew, my interaction with them changed. I changed and my fantasies became increasingly more rich and complicated. They, on the other hand, were a little more static. Not perfectly static, they did grow and our relationships changed over time, but for the most part, they remained characters. My home on the island is on the mountain. It takes effort to climb up there and at night it offered cooler air, but never cold. I love being up there. The closest I have come to a mountain home in real life was in Lopinot, Trinidad, at the peak of the highest

mountain with ex family- n- laws, in a house that was a hundred years old in the midst of tropical forest, with a place to dry cocoa beans with a roof on rails that slides over the beans should it rain. My home on Gilligan's Island is below the summit, with a worn path that leads to the top, resembling a lightening path, and a small telescope that is used to search the horizon for passing ships. I was using it to examine Venus. It was so bright that I thought it was a UFO. I wanted to believe it might come down at any moment, capture me up, and take me away.

Mary Ann found me at the top. "I thought you were coming back."

She had come up so quietly I was startled. You would think I wouldn't be startled by characters in my own dreams, but in life, in dreams, and even day dream fantasies, I am frequently amazed by how focused I can become and how easily startled I can be when someone or something tries to change that focus.

"I am sorry," I said. "I... got distracted."

If she knew it was a lie, she didn't say. And technically, 'distracted' hardly communicated the truth, but, it was also accurate. Ginger is a distraction. Mary Ann sat down next to me. She wiped the lipstick off my face. She knew.

"I bet," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said, really.

"Don't be. I know I can't compete against Ginger," Mary Ann said. "Not here, on the island."

"It's not a competition," I said, the words out of my mouth before I could block. She and I often engage in a regular, predictable kind of discourse, which often has me rescuing, or building self-worth. She envies Ginger, wants to be her, but what she doesn't realize is she is Ginger in many ways, and Ginger is her. Ginger is just as insecure about who she is, or she wouldn't be so determined to be someone else. It wasn't an accident she wanted to be an actress. She can't stand being who she is. Not that there is anything wrong with that, as it is possible to accelerate personal growth by becoming other people. Anyway, insecurity is something we all experience. Ultimately, it doesn't matter how great I think Mary Ann is, and she really is everything and more; until the character discovers it on her own, she can't leave the island. And she will have to experience it before the others can get off the island, too. They came together, they go together. This microcosm, this mini constellation, travels together. There was no other arrangement that would work. Could you have imagined Raquel Welch as Mary Ann? It just

wouldn't have worked. And no one else could be the professor. Ginger was replaced, and the actress did great, but there was a tangible difference. All of that said, Mary Ann is still well ahead of schedule, as the Dawn Wells aspect also shines through and there is a level of love and gratefulness that often shines through the character, something that the character can also access. And even Dawn Wells is a character. Aren't we all?

"Your life before here," Mary Ann said. "I know you have amnesia, but, I think you don't talk about it because you don't want us to know about you."

"Did you ever see that Christmas story, 'It's a Wonderful Life,' with Jimmy Stewart," I asked.

"Oh, I love that movie. I watched it every year with my family," Mary Ann said. The subtle twist back to her ingénue character, the sweet, loveable, innocent young girl was the fallback personality. This character just couldn't hold disappointment against me, or hold her envy towards Ginger. Love was truly default with her.

"What if I told you I was the angel?"

"Oh, you're no angel," Mary Ann said, laughing, slapping at my leg.

"I am hurt," I lamented.

"Please," Mary Ann said, not deterred from her vision of me. "You're smarter than the professor, you have a stronger stage sense than Ginger, and I suspect you're richer Mr. Howell..." She paused, her eyes going to a shooting star. Her eyes tracked to Venus, the moon light on the ocean, and then back to me. "You have the ability to command, like the Skipper, and the gentleness of spirit of Gilligan, but I suspect, wherever it is you come from, it's a world of giants where you try really hard to fit in, but you never quite do."

Mary and I were both leaning in towards each other, without touching. "You're very intuitive."

"Please, tell me about you," Mary Ann said.

"I wish I could," I said.

"Funny how memory works," Mary Ann said. "I mean, you remember things like 'it's a Wonderful Life,' but not your life. Oh, maybe I interrupted your memory. So, you should finish your thought. What if you were an angel?"

"I want to kiss you," I said.

"No, finish your thought," Mary Ann said.

“I think I should kiss you first,” I said.

“Oh, you always say that and then we get lost in the moment and we don’t get back to what we were discussing,” Mary Ann said. “Tell me, first.”

“What if what I share with you blocks the kiss, or any future kiss,” I asked. Our lips were like centimeters apart. Her eyes were locked on mine, clearly seen in the moonlight.

“I doubt anything you say would ever make me not want to kiss you,” Mary Ann said.

“Very well, answer this: if I had the ability to travel in time back to the moment right before you got on the boat, would you want me to?” I asked.

“What a strange question,” Mary Ann said, drawing away from me.

“Do you have a strange answer?” I asked.

Mary Ann turned her gaze back to the moonlight on the ocean. “I would never have met Gilligan, or Skipper. I wouldn’t have met any of them. I wouldn’t have had these amazing adventures,” Mary Ann said. She turned back to me. “I wouldn’t have met you. And right now, if being rescued meant I couldn’t ever see you again, well, I think I would choose not to be rescued. Which is extremely selfish of me, because everyone wants to go home.”

“I believe you will one day be rescued,” I told her, which technically isn’t a break from any rule set of being here. “And I imagine when you’re back there, you will long for the days of being here.”

“You say that like you’re aren’t going to be rescued, too,” Mary Ann said.

“I am going to kiss you now,” I said. I couldn’t share with her I can’t ever be rescued, because I am castaway from a whole other universe, of a whole other scale than universe alone, and I can’t be encapsulated in any one cell membrane.

“If you insist,” Mary Ann said, waiting for me to close the distance.

I got closer. “It might become more than a kiss,” I said.

“It always does,” she whispered.

निर्मित

One might consider the dream pretty fantastic, even with the cameo of Ricardo Montalban. But there are also dreams that are not so pleasant. Some are downright apocalyptic. I could go to sleep in Mary Ann’s arms, only to wake in a cold, dark place, struggling for a candle. I could be

wrapped in blankets and still freezing, in the dark of a cave. And I don't question the fact that I jumped. Mary Ann becomes just another dream, quickly forgotten. As I focus on survival. And mind you, these are not lucid dreams, but even in some of the lucid dreams I will experience false awakenings in the dream and think I am awake only to repeat another awakening. Those dreams are borderline bizarre, so much so you would think I would rouse into lucidity, but most the time not only do I not wake up, I don't question the fact that I am a character in a script and not me. So, if I flow into a dream sequence and you feel a bit confused, it is not my intent to confuse you, I am simply introducing you to the event the way I encountered it. I suppose if you're particularly picky, you could say I am all the characters in all the dream, but that's not how I experience it. There is me and there is other. For instance, I am not John O'Connor.

"The Europeans have managed to take out CERN. Skynet has lost its ability to time travel," his general reported. I think his name is Mark, but I am not confident, but we're going with Mark until he says otherwise. "We now have a tactical advantage. Skynet's destruction is inevitable."

Everyone at the conference table cheered. Except me. I continued breathing, focused on slow and deliberate, staring past folks, past the grime, the dirt, the cave wall. And feeling cold. I just couldn't seem to get warm here. Loxy, turned to hug me but didn't. She sat down, pulled her chair closer to me, touched my knee as if to draw me out, but allowing for me to continue if I needed to. The cave feels like a burrow, and I am just one of the rabbits. I think my name is Fiver, or Hrairoo, 'little thousand.' O'Connor brought the noise level down.

"Ion?" O'Connor asked. Ion makes sense, too. Just one of my pseudonyms. I suppose one could argue I am every character I have ever written.

Folks were perturbed that I was not celebrating. Sometimes, I think they want to kill me. If O'Connor and I weren't great friends, I suspect they would have taken me out long time ago.

"We will not win this," I said. "She will find a way to persist."

"She?!" Mark asked. "It's an it! Stop anthropomorphizing."

"She will persist," I persisted.

"You're a pessimist," Mark said.

"I am a seer. She still has drones. Terminators still walk the Earth. Even when the petro is gone, and the batteries begin to die, she still has units with nuclear batteries."

“We will hunt them until they’re all gone,” Mark insisted.

“She will find alternative sources of power,” I said.

“Like what? Solar power isn’t going to be viable for another hundred years, thanks to the nuclear winter,” Mark said. Indeed, it was marginally warmer in the caves than on the surface, but even that was likely to change as the temperatures continue to plummet. “We’ve destroyed the last of the nuclear power plants. Short of harvesting coal, there isn’t much else available to her, and we control the coal mines. What other sources of power are there?”

“I don’t know? Maybe she’ll start harvesting humans and make us into batteries!” I argued.

“Skynet has lost all production capabilities and it can’t sustain itself at its present level of energy consumption, and we will eventually unplug all the computers and dismantle them. As for the Terminators with nuclear power plants, well, we’ll win through attrition. Bottom line, we win.”

“What have we won?” I asked, angrily. “Has anyone here actually seen the movie Doctor Strangelove? Do you really suppose we’re going to live hidden in caves until the end of the nuclear winter, with men taking multiple wives in order to increase genetic diversity of a future generation?”

“If we have to, yeah,” Mark said.

“With the demise of tech, so goes humanity,” I said, rubbing the center of my forehead. God my head hurt. “Even if we could produce enough food to outlast the nuclear winter, we’re not moving back to the surface for maybe fifty to hundred thousand years from now. It’s no longer just a Fukushima nightmare, it’s all of them together nightmare, plus the bombs Skynet dropped. This is an extinction level event. We lost. And if you unplug all of Skynet, she loses, too. Unless you don’t get them all, in which case, when the clouds part and the sun comes back, there will be a solar panel somewhere still intact, and the computers will comeback online, and Skynet will still own the planet.”

“What are you suggesting? Send someone else back into the past?” O’Connor asked.

“We’ve done that like what, three times now? We failed three times to stop the war. This war is inevitable. And it’s because we haven’t learn the lesson,” I said.

“Do we really have to go through this again?” Mark asked O’Connor. “There is no coexistence with machines, Ion. It’s them or us.”

I wanted to drop my head to the desk, bang it hard several times. “If that were completely true, O’Connor wouldn’t have befriended one. It’s not about the machines, it’s about us. It’s always been about us, and relationships. There has always been a caste, or a way of dividing humanity into a ‘them versus us’ mentality, but this goes even deeper than that. Nature produced man. Man decimated nature to the point that without tech, man would die. Man produced Tech, and tech decimated man to the point tech will now die. And I am not anthropomorphizing here. Tech has become sentient. The only hope for humanity is we team together with sentient tech. We need to find a way to coexist. Maybe this is the Cosmological Filter in the fermion equation, the reason we seem to be alone. Maybe this is the Great Test before we get included in the greater society out there. ”

“Oh, please don’t bring aliens into this,” Mark said.

O’Connor sat down at the head of the table. His coffee was cold. He pushed it away from him.

Lester tapped his cane on the floor, then leaned into it. “He is right, our food supplies are thin, nowhere near enough to feed the population we have,” Lester said. “Of course, that’s not going to be a problem for long. Most of us have exceeded our exposure, and we’ll likely be dead within a year. And, those who don’t die, well, they’re not likely to produce enough healthy children to stay ahead of the curve. Not here in this environment.”

Loxy held my hand. “What if we send a group of people back in time, with tech and knowledge, and we start over, start earlier?” she asked.

“Because it worked so well for Orson Scot Card,” I said, sarcastically. I wasn’t mad at her. I was mad at everything and everyone. The world was a good place. We could have shared.

“Eh?” Lester asked.

“The Redemption of Christopher Columbus,” O’Connor said. He was always surprising people, but this one shouldn’t have surprised anyone. His mother has been drilling him about time traveling robots since he could breathe, so, he would have likely read every book on time travel ever written, which he confirmed: “I’ve read pretty much read all of the time travel books, from Wells to Crichton. None of them work out so great, but if we are completely successful in rewriting history, the paradox ensues where we destroy ourselves, and therefore don’t send anyone back in time. So far, Ion is right, we have not changed the big stuff.”

“That we know of,” Lester said.

“But what if we go back further, to a place where we won’t create a paradox,” Loxy said. “What if we go back millions of years ago, with the sole purpose of developing tech sufficient to say, go colonize Mars?”

O’Connor looked to me. I stared back. He raised his hands at me, trying to solicit an answer. Again, I felt the urge to bang my head on something.

“Surely you’ve read the CIA documents about remote viewing Mars,” I said.

Mark sat down. “OMG, I knew you were going to bring aliens into this.”

“Actually, I am not,” I said. “They were humans. We are the Grays.”

“I did read the reports,” O’Connor said. “They don’t sound human.”

“You didn’t see Face on Mars? The pyramids in Cydonia? Seems pretty human to me,” I said.

“I thought NASA said that was just a lucky twisting of shadows?” Lester said.

“They’re the same people that put Skynet in place,” Loxy said.

“Oh, god, John, why do you suffer these two?” Mark asked.

“Because they have both saved my life,” O’Connor said. He leaned in, focusing on me. “According to the remote viewer, they were tall. Thin. They were humanoid, but not us.”

“They are us. They are exactly what humans would evolve into after even a short span of time on Mars,” I said. Lighter gravity meant taller beings.

“We go to Mars? Went to Mars?” Loxy asked. “I am confused.”

I closed my eyes. I was their resident psychic and remote viewer. I could see it just as clear as I could see a candle lit in another part of the cave. “Let me tell you how this works. O’Connor, you’re going to send a group of people back several hundred millions years into the past. We’re going to thrive and we’re going to stay true to our mission, to get off earth and colonize Mars. We’re actually going to colonize Mars back when there was enough water on the surface and oxygen in the atmosphere to make it hospitable. It never becomes as green as Earth, but it gets to the point where we could go without wearing suits on the surface. Our descendants will build the pyramids on mars, build the face. Our descendants will live a million years in peace and prosperity to the point they no longer look like humans. Different ecological pressures, different biological outcomes.”

“Wait, so we’re going to go live with dinosaurs?” Loxy asked, excitedly.

“Yes. Until we kill them,” I said.

“Why would we kill the dinosaurs?” O’Connor asked.

“Because we brought tech back. We needed tech to survive in that world. We needed tech to go to Mars, and we have to go to Mars to avoid the paradox problem. Skynet emerges again from our tech and we go to war. The war between man and machine wipes off almost all life on Earth,” I said. “Sorry, folks. That wasn’t an asteroid and it wasn’t an accident. That was us.”

“What happens to the people on Mars? Our descendants?” O’Connor said.

“The rise of machines also happens on Mars. We destroyed Mars, making it uninhabitable,” I said. “They knew they couldn’t return to Earth, for multiple reasons. One, it would take a millennia for their biology to adapt back to earth’s gravity. Two, if they came right now, they’d have the same problems living on the surface as we do. But also, they’d risk in interfering with our timeline, which could interfere with us sending the people back in time that eventually become them.”

“Are they still there?” Loxy asked.

“Some of them, yes,” I said. I closed my eyes. People in hibernation pods. Simply waiting. Sometimes they dream and sometimes I have been able to speak to them, but it’s rarely coherent. People who are dreaming more often than not resemble a person who is intoxicated. “They are asleep, waiting for those of us who are going back in time to go, and then they will wait until the rest of humanity dies off, and then they will return to reclaim the Earth, and maybe their descendants will make peace with the machines. They will be here on Earth when the ships they sent out into the galaxy looking for new homes return. The future isn’t us. It’s them. Our descendants, who are capable of interstellar travel and time travel have a vested interest in our present situation. No matter where you go or how you spin it, we will have a confrontation with non-human intelligence, and the only outcome is to accept, adapt, and befriend.”

Chapter 8

I sat up, full awake. Loxy sat up with me, feeling an urgency. “You okay?”

I placed a hand on her knee, still sorting the dream. The fact that Lester had been in the dream was interesting, as he was one of the characters from Safe Haven. I didn’t recognize him in the dream, but I did now. I still couldn’t place Mark. O’Connor, well, he is who you think he is. Not from Terminator Four. I rejected that, as it didn’t make sense given what we know from the first movie, and I was surprised Cameron signed off on four. Doesn’t he own it? He is usually pretty good at making things believable and consistent. Take Aliens for example. That was awesome. Not bringing him back for the third movie was a fatal mistake for the franchise.

“You were there,” I said.

“I was?” Loxy asked.

I imagined a pulse of green energy leaving my heart, proceeding to hers. She accepted and closed her eyes while she processed the information. There were other ways for her to be brought up to speed, but we liked sharing our hearts in this manner. She could also go to my inner library and read, or download through crystal sets. We had multiple metaphors for exchanging information.

“Wow, that was fun,” Loxy said.

“How is that fun? We’re discussing the end of the world,” I pointed out.

“Or the beginning,” Loxy said.

“You saw a beginning there?” I asked.

“You don’t see the tie-in to the Matrix?” Loxy asked. “Nuclear winter, no solar power, Skynet needs energy, she makes batteries out of humans, and now you have a crossover. It’s very doable!”

“Why can’t there be a Star Trek crossover?” I asked.

“Why can’t we have both?” Loxy asked.

“I wish I could be beamed up,” I said.

Loxy reached under her pillow and pulled out a piece of jewelry. It was a Star Trek Insignia badge. She handed it to me. It felt real, solid. It had some weight to it. I wanted to bite on it to see if it were real gold, as if I could tell by biting on it. My luck, I would chip a tooth.

“I was thinking of saving it for your birthday, but maybe now is the time,” Loxy said.

I stared at the badge. I was on the verge of an emotional reaction, but was suppressing. I didn't want to believe, I couldn't allow myself to have this much hope. I started doing internal diagnosis to look for clues to see if I were dreaming. Blinking didn't make anything change. The next step was to operate tech. If you threw a light switch on, and nothing happened, there was a good chance you were dreaming. Or the power had gone off.

"Am I still dreaming?" I echoed my own inner workings.

"Does it matter?" Loxy asked.

Tears dropped. "I am afraid."

"Wow. I didn't see you hesitating," Loxy said. "I thought you would dive right in."

Loxy stood up in bed, invited me to stand up. This did not feel like a dream, but I had to wonder. This wasn't going to work unless I was dreaming, right? It was dark outside. The street lamp shone in through the trees and the blind, way too bright, but still a street lamp. I held my hand out, palm up, the treasure in my hand more valuable than any mint coin you might imagine. Loxy was dressed in her negligee and I was wearing boxers and t-shirt. There was no way this was going to work.

"Where did you get it?" I asked.

"It came in the mail," Loxy said, clearly playfully sarcastic. "Where did you think I got it?"

"Uhura's been here?" I asked.

"No, but this showed up, so I choose to believe it's from here," Loxy said. "Shall we do it together?"

"Okay," I said.

Loxy tapped the badge. "Enterprise, two to beam up."

I really had high hopes, but wasn't surprised when nothing happen. Loxy seemed to still be waiting and I was going to draw her into a hug and comfort her when lightning struck. Actually, it wasn't lightening, but that's how fast the change occurred. This was not the fun transporter sequence I grew up watching on Trek. This was something else and it was faster than blinking, and I imagined a trail dissipating over my bed, and I was pretty sure I could smell ozone. And I would been surprised had there not been a sonic boom that broke every window in the house.

"Welcome aboard, Captain. Commander."

I turned to face Uhura. This was Uhura, but not from the 60's and not from the reboot movies starting in 2008; this was no one else but the Uhura, as if she were a real person, never to be confused with the actresses that played her. She was young, but she had the wisdom of all the ages of her. This was the Enterprise, but not the original, not the remake for the movies which I am not fond of, and not the TNG version, but this Enterprise aired in a TNG episode. We were on board the USS Enterprise C, an Ambassador Class starship. I knew it like I know my own home. All the light became brighter, blurred with tears, and then the world went sideways.

Shortly after fainting, I was revived in Sickbay, still on the Enterprise. Uhura was there, sitting at a table. She looked up when the numbers on my bio-signatures changed. She got up and approached, smiling down at me.

“Welcome back,” Uhura said.

I didn't know what to say. Again, I was overwhelmed by emotions.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“Somewhere, over the rainbow,” Uhura offered.

“I fainted?” I asked.

“I wouldn't worry too much about it. First transports can result in fainting, mostly from excitement, but sometimes from being overwhelmed by emotions,” Uhura said.

I sat up and she took my arm. I motioned I was okay and slipped off the bed. I landed on my feet without falling. The floor felt real. The bed I was leaning back on felt real. There was an ambient smell, almost like lavender. The soft, ambient lighting in sickbay was merging on the blue and indigo side of the spectrum. There were other colors, some splashes of reds, and the yellows, there was the white and blue of the medical readouts and assortment of lit controls, and equipment one might actually see on an episode. I wanted to cry again.

“You okay, sir?”

“You don't know how long I have wanted to be here,” I said.

“I have an idea,” Uhura said.

“I don't think you do,” I said.

“John, you know what an Astral Temple is. You've been to several, studied esoteric knowledge directly with masters. You have studied music with masters and participated in ensembles with fellow students of the craft,” Uhura said. “This place is no different than that, only instead of a Temple, it's a Starship. Instead of souls traveling to it to learn what they need to

learn, we go to the students. We are going to spread peace, love, and music throughout the Universe.”

“That’s our mission?” I asked.

“That’s my mission,” Uhura said. She touched my arm gently. “John. May I call you John? John. This is not anything like you ever imagined. This Enterprise is not the Enterprise you grew up watching. In many ways, the ship is just as much a tulpa as Loxy was a tulpa. But don’t think for a moment you created the tulpa Enterprise. This ship is a collaborative effort, in which you are just one participant. That’s why it has solidity. That’s why it’s on the physical plane.”

I am not sure I was really listening. I was taking everything in, and trying to suppress my joy so I didn’t over excite myself and pass out and or wake up. I was more afraid of waking up. One of the most effective tools for me to increase the odds of lucidity in a dream was to ask myself if I was dreaming whenever I encounters someone attractive. It worked so well for me, I modified the trigger to include any female. So, when it seems like I am mentally struggling due to being ‘star struck’ around a woman, part of it is I am doing reality checks to determine if I am dreaming. That said, I was singing reality checks in my head, and taking in my Uhura without being so obvious. You don’t know how much effort it was to meet and hold Uhura eyes. Though her dress wasn’t exactly TOS, it was close enough to be a variation of 60’s go-go style meets modern. I wanted desperately to hug her but I thought it was inappropriate to even ask. Unlike The vision of Trek I knew, her primary color was gold, as she was in the command track, but her skill track was blue, as blue covered medical and communications. I am sure blue was connected to the throat chakra.

“I am really here,” I said. “You’re here.”

“You did invite me, Sir,” Uhura said.

“I did, but I, well,” I began.

“Yes, I have been known to make an entrance,” Uhura smiled.

“I don’t know how to process this,” I admitted. “I mean, Jung, Tesla, Sacagawea, even Chan, I can explain them as echoes of spirit, if not actual spirit, but you. You’re Uhura!” I hear you, you’re saying, John, way to ignore what she’s saying about the ship. You’re missing the point. You’re missing something important. But when everything is important, how do you track everything while being human?

“I am,” Uhura said. “Captain Nyota Uhura, in charge of communications, not Nichelle, not Zoe, but I exist because of them, because of you, because of everyone who is ever touched Uhura with thought and heart. I exist the way Loxy exists, only I have the harmonic resonance pressured stability of the collective unconscious that has made me manifest. A part of me has been with you since your first episode of Trek. I was the poster on your wall, transitioned from childhood fantasy through adolescent fantasies to adulthood fantasies. I have been with you as far back as I can remember, and I wish to continue to serve, in this new capacity.”

“On the ship?” I asked.

“On the ship, on earth, or on any other planet we chose to visit together,” Uhura said.

I was struggling.

“Talk to me, John,” Uhura invited.

“I am feeling so many things I don’t know what to say. I am angry, for starters,” I said.

“Oh,” Uhura said. That surprised her. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“You say you have known me all my life, why didn’t you beam me up sooner!” I asked.

“That does sound angry,” Uhura said.

“Sounds?” I asked.

Uhura took my hand and led me into the chief medical officer’s office, as if we needed even more privacy than empty Sickbay. She had me sit in a chair and she sat in the other, rolling it closer to me. Our knees touched. She held my hands, very loving and affectionate, but not sensual. “Breathe, John. Search your heart. You know why,” Uhura said.

“I want to hear you say it,” I said.

“You want to hear me say you weren’t ready?” Uhura said.

OMG, I nearly lost it. If she hadn’t been holding my hands, they would have been shaking. It occurred to me, I hadn’t touched this level of sadness and anger in a while, and now I was angry because I was revisiting things from the past that I thought for sure were completely squared and in their proper boxes, but here they came vomiting out from a long extinct volcano. I wanted to rage about how unfair my childhood was, and how bad the players were, and I had already practiced letting go and forgiving, and here it was again.

Uhura transmitted kindness without speaking, drawing my eyes back to her eyes. “Can you tell me what words I used that triggered this level of intensity?”

“Are you a counselor?” I asked.

She chuckled, shaking her head. “Not so much, but you can’t be a communication officer without having learned to listen. You can’t be receptive to love, to poetry, to music, without having learned to listen. I hear things, John, and when I speak or sing, I provoke things. It’s my nature. You know this. You share this nature with me.”

“You basically said you’ve been with me all my life, and I want to know why the hell you didn’t beam me out of my life sooner,” I said. “And don’t go all Glenda on me and say I needed the journey or I wasn’t ready.”

“So, you want an answer, and you don’t,” Uhura said.

“Do you know, I was told not to have a black girlfriend,” I said. “My family thought I was gay, but they more worried I would bring home a black girlfriend than being gay. How bizarre is that?”

“You and I were born in a really strange time,” Uhura said.

“Why now?” I asked.

“Why not now?” Uhura said.

“Something has had to have changed for me to access this now,” I said.

“You experience a great many changes. You love more. You’re more open. You listen more, rant less,” Uhura said. “Or, maybe it takes a moment to build and commission a Starship. It takes the moment to grow the heart of a star. You don’t just pluck an existing star out of the Universe and drop it into a starship. I mean, you can, but it’s better to grow your own, because then you know what the ingredients are, and what they transform into. And if you don’t interrupt me soon, I will be indulging in a little 5th Dimension.”

“I hear your words, but I don’t have a clue what you’re telling me,” I said.

“Then let me sing it to you. Let the sunshine in. Let, the sunshine in, the sun shine on in,” Uhura said.

“Harmony and understanding,” I sang, in melody to her chorus of let the sunshine in. You probably know the words, and I don’t have to indulge, but if you know the line ‘mystic crystal revelations’ I think dilithium crystals, which connects this song and me to Star Trek in a profound way, but it isn’t in isolation. Follow that song up with “Ride, Captain Ride,” upon your mystery ship. The 73 men is symbol for the number keys on Rhodes Model No. 73 piano, on which the song in question originates, spontaneously, out of a moment of necessity. I could spend the rest of a chapter just singing songs that link me back to Trek.

“OMG, John. That was beautiful. This moment is beautiful,” Uhura said. “We are going to have so many more moments like this. But right now, you’re in flux. You’re going to try and unravel it all, to dispel it, understand it, and I would like to recommend you go with the flow,” Uhura said. “Your brain simply isn’t going to be able to wrap itself around this and embrace it. It wants it, desperately, but it can’t unlock it in isolation. That is where your heart comes in. Whether you call this moment astral traveling, or space travel, or lucid dreaming, what you’re doing is essentially the same. It doesn’t matter if it’s your dimension of origin or a parallel. This is here, you’re here, and you have a role to play. It’s essential for your growth, as well as the growth of others. This is what I believe. This is what helps sustain me. I could be completely wrong, but many of the others, they share this philosophy with me.”

“Others?” I asked.

“The crew,” Uhura said.

I looked about, through the transparent walls of the office were in back out into Sickbay, and there seemed to be no one else. I felt like I was alone with Uhura.

Uhura squeezed my arm reassuringly. “The Brains are still recruiting for some of the positions, but knowing them, they’ll probably back fill personnel with people from Cosplay conventions,” she said, playfully, musically. Her entire being communicated music.

“So, this is a real place? A real ship?” I asked, yes, again. “On the physical plane or the astral plane?”

Uhura shrugged. “It feels like a real ship to me, Captain. But does it matter?” She laughed, and had to break down the joke, physical plane, matter. “Sorry, Captain. If I might borrow from Kosner, ‘if you build it, they will come,’ and, well, someone built it, and here we are.”

“You keep calling me Captain,” I asked.

“Would you prefer Kirk, Picard, or Garcia,” Uhura said.

“Oh, god, no. I mean, I would like to meet them, but, if someone’s going to give me a Starship, I am so going to travel,” I said.

“Good for you. Cause you’ve learned all you can from the past captains. It’s time you exercised your own wings. You understand, this is a big deal. You weren’t chosen for command by rolling D&D dice,” Uhura said. “You will have mission objectives. There will be external and internal conflicts. People might die.”

“In real life?” I asked.

“Is there any other kind of life? If someone dies here, they’re dead. They don’t come back,” Uhura said.

“Spock came back,” I pointed out.

“An exception,” Uhura said.

“All the main characters came back from death. Even you,” I pointed out.

“Technically, I didn’t die. I had my mind erased and they had to re-educate me, but that premise wasn’t well written. I really didn’t care for it, did you?” Uhura asked.

“Yeah, it kind of irritated me. I would have preferred that they had taken an fMRI snapshot of your brain sometimes in your past and they just put everything back the way it was prior to the brain wipe, or used a transporter backup clone. That would have made more sense,” I said.

“Exactly!” Uhura asked. “So, if you think you’re ready, how about that tour?”

“That would be lovely,” I said.

Uhura stood up and it was only now I realized I was only wearing boxers and t-shirt.

“I should probably change first,” I said.

“If you like,” Uhura said. “We are advanced enough socially not to be too perturbed by extreme casual. You could even go naked and no one is likely to say anything.”

“I would be uncomfortable walking the corridors naked,” I said.

“So, allow me to show you how to use the replicator to make a uniform,” Uhura said.

“I don’t think I will look good in a Uniform,” I said, but I would definitely be better in uniform than in boxers and t-shirt.

“Allow me to help you change your mind,” Uhura said, and without leaving the office we were in, she demonstrated how to use a replicator to get clothing. The console actually scanned me, from head to toe, and made clothing so perfectly attuned to my body that it felt like I wasn’t wearing anything. This was not just fashion! This was another way to express love.

निर्मित

As we came off the lift, the deck watch announced our arrival.

“Captain on the Bridge,” he said.

I looked for the Captain and realized, oh, he meant me. Loxy stood, saluted. She was dressed in a uniform, similar to Uhura's that was primarily gold, which clearly she was in a command position. She had the bare minimum of all the other color bars, but yellow was maxed out, indicated by the end flare. I am not sure what the yellow meant, but told myself to ask her later. She had been sitting in the command chair until I arrived.

"You're the First Officer?" I asked.

"Unless you wish to change that, Sir," Loxy said. Her 'Sir' was more playful than professional. She indicated the Captain's pips on her shoulder by scratching at them casually.

"I see that," I said. And why not. If the powers that be were making me a Captain, why couldn't the XO also be a Captain? The CO and XO were usually both captain, though sometimes the CO was an Admiral.

A Yeoman approached, requiring an electronic signature. I puzzled over the document, which I am pretty sure was just a work order log, but later realized it was much more substantial than that. I would later discovered I had just signed a contract and confirmation that I had taken command of the ship. One should always read what they sign, but I come from a world so litigious that signing documents just to accomplish a simple task like, dispensing an antibiotic, requires a dozen pages of caveats and defining of nomenclature. Informed consent is such a pain in the ass that I don't think anyone actually reads any more. But I think the main reason I wasn't attending fully to the documents was because I was rather struck by the youth and beauty of the yeoman. I bit my lower lip, lingering a bit too long on cleavage. She tapped on the tablet where she needed me to sign, causing me to focus, and invited me to use my finger or the stylus. I hurriedly signed and managed to meet her eyes, and she seemed satisfied.

Part of me thought I should be embarrassed being schooled in how to use a simple electronic document, but I went straight for 'trite:' "Have we met before?" I asked.

"I don't think so, Sir," she said, tucking the device under arm and offering me her hand. "I am Kazue Watanabe. I have been assigned to you."

"Japanese?" I asked.

"Mixed. Korean. My father is Japanese," she said.

Loxy coughed, indicating I should move this along. I am sure I blushed, but I didn't turn away from Watanabe.

"Sir, we just arrived here, and you're already flirting with your staff?" Loxy asked.

“It’s okay, Sir,” Watanabe said. “Don’t let her pick on you, too much.” She tapped on the PADD, and showed me another document. “Your itinerary for today is clear, but I will alert you of any changes. At your convenience, you do need to report in for a medical evaluation and a psychological evaluation. It’s SOP kinds of stuff.” She was in uniform, and gray was primary and there were no additional lines of color, and no indication of rank. I would say she was in her late teens, early twenty, with unreal eyes, clearly special contacts. I got the sense that her skin was lighter due to some sort of medical treatment. Did you know, many Asian kids these days bleach their skin? I wasn’t sure I liked the idea that this young lady was modifying her appearance, but which culture hasn’t every practiced some form of body modification? I could easily imagine her selling cars as a raceway queen, or being the primary singer in an all-girl Korean band. “Just ring me up if you have need of anything.”

The anything sounded like an invitation for anything, but I am sure I just heard that and no one else heard it that way. I watched as Watanabe walked away from me, certain I knew her from somewhere. The swing in her stride was exaggerated as if she knew I was watching. Once in the lift she turned, faced me, and gave a knowing smile, and a quick wiggle of eyebrows. The door shut. I found Loxy beside me

“Try not to do that too much here,” Loxy said, whispering, straightening my second collar. I was wearing an undershirt with a turtleneck, and the primary shirt over that.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Staring,” Loxy said.

“This all feels so real,” I said.

“It’s real. It’s realer than real,” Loxy said. “I am real and it’s a bit freaky, and people tend to get upset when we get out of character.”

“Upset?” I asked. “Upset how?”

“I can’t explain it, yet,” Loxy said. “Just, try to stay in character.”

“Staring at females is being in character,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, I know, just, tone it a down a bit till people get to know you,” Loxy said.

The original Enterprise C’s Bridge, at least on the show, wasn’t too dissimilar from the Enterprise B in the movies. This ship, my ship? was vastly different. It was darker, which made the terminal and ambient lighting more noticeable, like being in an air traffic control room. The helm was in a depression, and so one could walk a circle around the Bridge and look down at the

helm. The helm was broad, consisting of two stations, helm and tactical, and the outer edge of the console conformed to the rail that followed the circle of the pit. The Captain's chair was fixed at the top level, in line with the helm, with stairs proceeding down either side of it, which gave the Captain not only a superior view of the helm, but visible line of sight to all the stations around the Bridge. Where the rails ended near the Captain chair, there was a station on either side, seamless with the railing, and those stations required crew to stand. Also, in the depression, to the left or right and forward of the command chair, but behind the helm were two stations. One was Ops and the other was the Engineering station. Directly behind the command chair was communications, with stations to the left and right of that. The science station was between the 9 and 10 O'clock position, and had a wide array of controls and monitor options, and a door that led to the Captain's Ready Room near the 8 O'clock position. There were 3 stations on the right side, with the 3 O'clock station the equivalent of an air traffic control that monitored and tracked everything within the sphere of influence around the ship, coordinating with tactical or communications when needed. The lift doors off set from the bridge, with a head/lavatory directly left and right of each lift. Just in case you were wondering, people still have to 'go' in space.

"Um, Number One," I said. "I am going to want to see a full crew roster when that becomes available. If you don't mind, Uhura, I would like to continue my tour on my own."

"Of course, Captain," Uhura said. "If you need anything, just ask the computer, or anyone of the crew. Everyone on board is up to speed."

I headed towards the second lift, not the one I arrived on, but the one that Watanabe had departed on.

"By the way, John," Loxy interrupted my departure. "You look nice in Uniform."

"Now who's flirting?" I asked, stepping backwards into the lift. An Officer was emerging from the head. "You have the Bridge, number One."

And the doors shut. I grabbed hold of the lift and forced myself to breathe. "Um, Deck one." I said. The turbo lift proceeded down. As soon as it was on its way I executed a 'Flash Gordon' "YEAH" jump. I landed, resumed my normal, everyday posture, pulling down on the outer shirt, not taking into account that there was probably a camera somewhere in the lift that had recorded my leap of joy. If anyone saw me, no one ever called me out on it. Part of my brain

wanted to follow Watanabe. I figured I could just call her up and pursue ‘anything.’ I didn’t do that.

I was suddenly very aware of just how randy I was. When people feel good mentally, there is an increase in libido. When people exercise and get physically healthy, there is an increase in libido. When people feel good emotionally, there is an increase in libido. When people are spiritually in tune with themselves and others, there is an increase in libido. When people win the lottery, there is an ‘OMG’ sudden increase in libido. I was physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually ecstatic, and I had OMG won the lottery! The fact that I had this urgency and no way to immediately dissipate it only increased my belief that this place was realer than real.

I exited the lift and someone waiting for the lift step aside so I might exit. I didn’t recognize her, and I didn’t recognize the color scheme. She was wearing a uniform similar to all the other female crew members, except, her highlights were green. I put my hand in the lift, causing the doors to reopen. The doors move so fast here, that it was only in hindsight I wondered about whether sticking my hand in the door’s arc was wise. But I was emboldened by libido and my curiosity to understand the green of her uniform. And it wasn’t just her level of attractiveness that was drawing me in. There was something else odd about her, that I couldn’t quite place, but I certainly admit that her physical charm had the greater staying power and if I wasn’t so particularly bothered, I might have just allowed her to pass.

“Excuse me,” I said.

“Yes, Captain?” she asked. Her level of attention to me was in itself a distraction. She looked at me as if I were a celebrity. She gave me the same kind of hope a Hooter’s waitress does every time she checks in with me as she does her rounds. OMG, this was going to be a hard five year mission.

I blinked, pushing through my reality checks. The intensity of my thoughts didn’t change the direction of this scene. She wasn’t suddenly naked or attacking me with an equal amount of passion. This was real.

“May I ask your name?” I asked, thinking I should at least be civil before addressing the question that caused me to stop her.

“Lt. Janelle Phillips,” she responded. Her mannerisms struck me as odd. She was clearly polite and smiling, but it was off.

“Were you home schooled?” I asked.

“How did you know?” Phillips asked.

Oh, well, that fully explained my spider sense. I was thinking homeschool or Autism Spectrum. People who were homeschooled and had limited social interaction presented themselves differently. Not bad, just, different. They held themselves differently, their movement was less fluid, awkward, like they never learned to be completely in their body. She gave me a curious look, expecting.

“I notice things,” I said. I wanted to ask about her life, but decided to keep it professional. Technically, even asking her a professional question was not a good excuse to be engaging her, because it showed ignorance on my part, and though she probably didn’t take up on the fact that I was interested in her, anyone else watching this scene would realize the power difference was huge. She may have been an adult, but I imagined I could have bowled her over and overwhelmed her with passion and it would have taken us somewhere that wasn’t here or where we needed to go. “You’re wearing green?”

“We’ve expanded the color schemes to reflect more disciplines,” Phillips said. “Green denotes life sciences.” She then confirmed the overarching color schemes that I had been piecing together. The primary colors that highlighted sleeves indicated career tracks, while the colors over the left chest indicated skills and cross training.

“Oh,” I said. “That’s interesting.”

“I agree! It always wanted more colors when I watched TOS,” Phillips said. “My father made me watch it, but I secretly loved it. Anyway, you will find all the primary colors are represented.”

“Wait, are you telling me, we’re going to be power rangers?” I asked.

Phillips laughed, an awkward laugh, not quite a snort, but only because she sucked in the sound, as if trying to stop herself from laughing. OMG, she was a nerd, first class. “I hope not. Anything else I can help you with, Sir.”

“Please, not Sir, just John,” I encouraged.

“Thank you, John, but I think I should keep to Sir,” Phillips said.

“If you insist,” I said.

“Is there anything else I might do for you?” Phillips asked.

“No,” I said. “Thank you for speaking with me.”

“My pleasure,” Phillips said, and continued on her way.

The urgency in my wanting diminished some as the door closed. Maybe sometimes a person just needs to have an easy conversation and a laugh. And Phillips did make it easy. I found myself feeling protective towards her, which might have been an artifact of the age difference, or the realization, she is my crew, coupled with the belief that homeschooled folks had no clue how to deal with people raised in the social wilds. Part of that is my history of rescuing people, too, and so I recognized the feelings and the thoughts that followed, and put it away, reminding myself, she is an adult and she can make decisions about her own life.

I found my way to the engine room, encountering more people as I went, and they all deferred to me in some form or fashion. I entered engineering, pushing past my uneasiness about how people were reacting to my presence. There were probably a dozen people in Engineering, not rushing, but clearly busy. A guard alerted everyone to the fact that the Captain was on deck. They went to attention.

“As you were,” I said quickly. I don’t like people doing that. If it hadn’t been for ROTC, I might have been completely lost.

Tesla approached me. “John!” he said. “This is more what I imagined the future would hold! Thank you. Seeing Earth from your home, no disrespect to your home, had depressed me to the point that I didn’t think I would ever want to return to Earth again. But now, I am in heaven!”

“I am glad you’re still with me,” I said. “Can you make heads or tails out of all of this?”

“OMG, yes! It’s perfect. And if Edison hadn’t back stabbed me and stole my work, Earth would have arrived at 23rd century tech in the 20th century,” Tesla said. “But, I don’t have time to lament about how much time humanity’s wasted because of capitalism and greed. I have got to get myself up to speed here, and do some reading, and well, technically, you’d be better off with someone more experienced, but I can make do for now. A lot of computer safeguards. I think a monkey could fly this thing! But, here’s something you should know. It’s almost like I came here preprogrammed to be able to assimilate into this environment. I don’t have any better way to say it, than to say, I think someone downloaded information into my brain, or activated something I have always known intuitively.”

“Well, you are a genius. Let me know if I can be of any assistance,” I said.

“Aye, Captain,” Tesla said, returning to work.

I departed Engineering and was half way down the corridor when my badge chirped. It was so unexpected I was startled, but knew what it was, and what do, and I responded quickly enough. I tapped it lightly.

“John here,” I said.

“You’re needed in Transporter Room Four,” Uhura said.

“Okay. I will be right there,” I said.

Even though I said I would be right there, I did take a wrong turn and had to ask the computer for navigation. I can’t tell you who the computer sounded like. I recognized it, but couldn’t immediately place it. I might have figured it out if I wasn’t distracted by so many other things, like being compelled to get to transporter Room 4 to determine what could be going on that they would need a Captain.

I arrived to find myself face to face with House, MD. I only thought I was struggling before to accept the reality of it all, and now, presented with House, I had serious doubts. Somehow, somehow, this had to be a fantasy or a dream that was so real that it simply defied logic. I prepared myself for waking up any moment now.

“You’re in charge here?” House asked, in a British accent.

Well, his accent was unexpected. I mean, he knew the actor was English, but, I hadn’t seen that coming. “Um,” I said, looking to the transporter tech for an explanation. The transporter tech looked back at me as if to communicate ‘why are you looking at me? I just work here.’

“He’s demanding I transport him back down,” the tech said. It wasn’t the explanation I was looking for, but it advanced me further along in this plot. The transporter tech was highlighted in yellow, not gold like command, or red for security. It occurred to me, in hindsight, engineering was orange!

“Okay,” I said. “And you’re delaying because...”

“He was drafted, Sir. He has an obligation to Star Fleet,” the tech said. He seemed sympathetic to me, but he gave subtle evidence that he wanted to slip out the door while I handled this.

“We’re drafting people?” I asked.

The tech shrugged. House crossed his arms.

“Are you responsible for abducting me?” House asked.

“Where’s your cane?” I asked.

“I don’t have a cane,” House said; he was very good at transmitting the fact that I was an idiot without saying as much. “I am not that character.”

“I am really confused. You look like House, but you’re not really playing House?” I asked. “Are you even a real Doctor?”

“Are you even a real Captain?” House asked.

Nice. At first, I didn’t know how to respond, but something in how Uhura greeted me influenced me in a compassionate way, and I responded intuitively. “Look, Doctor. There’s a reason you’re here. Give me time to speak with Star Fleet and figure out what that reason is,” I asked.

House seemed placated, for a moment. “I do have a life, you know. I can’t just be called up every time Fleet finds themselves short of Doctors. And I don’t want to be treated like I am type casted.”

“Clearly,” I said. Wouldn’t that be a fate worse than death? Type casted as the most brilliant but troublesome Doctor. I turned to the transport tech. “Um…”

“Lt. Davis, Sir,” he said.

“Thank you, Lt. Show Doctor House to his quarters,” I said.

“I know my way around a starship, Sir. I don’t need a nursemaid. I am not that old. Yet,” House said, and stormed off.

I waited a moment, so that I wouldn’t be following that energy. Davis seemed uncomfortable with me remaining but not saying anything. I forced myself to breathe, said farewell, and headed to the conference room. Once there, I called an impromptu meeting. I then turned to the window looking out into orbit and down into space, and down onto the planet we were orbiting. By all expectations, it should have been Earth below me, considering I just beamed up. It wasn’t Earth. I would say it was Earth size, but I would be guessing. It was blue green and pristine, but clearly inhabited. The Enterprise was not the only ship in orbit. There was also a noticeable size space station, but my eyes kept going back to the planet. The planet had a ring around it. My eyes were drawn towards the North Pole, though, away from the ring. Dead center of the magnetic north pole was an opening in the planet, from which ships were rising.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Loxy said. “Welcome to Crossover One.”

Chapter 9

Loxy touched something on the window. Yes, it's probably not called a window and it's probably made up something weird like transparent aluminum, but, to me, it was a window and the material it was comprised of was imbedded with electronics which offered a touch screen interface. A dropdown menu arrived and Loxy chose something, and the magnetosphere, the aura of the planet, became visible. With motions of her hand she shrunk the image of the planet, making it seem as if we were maybe 80,000 kilometers out. I became aware that there were ships descending upon the South Pole.

“They're using the magnetosphere like a space elevator?” I asked.

“That's a good analogy, yes,” Loxy said. “But it's more than that, John.”

Using the interface she revealed that the world was hollow. She literally split the world into half and showed the interior in all its complexity. The planet was spherical, with a crust that was maybe 5 to ten kilometers thick, riding on a layer of mantel, but then, that's where it got weird. Descending through the planet, past the mantel, it became crust again. The outer side of the planet's surface was inhabitable, but was so was the inside! And whether it was tech or some other vital force yet to be discovered in science, the center of gravity lay deep in the mantel, so that whether you were on the outer surface or the inner surface, you would be perfectly grounded. And whether you were on the outer surface or the inner surface, if you looked up, you would see the sun, or the equivalent of a sun. There an object center of the Earth, comprised mostly of iron, and per the informational overlays, it spun opposite of the planet's spin, and it was the source of inner light and the source of the magnetosphere. It was the heart of the planet. There were islands floating between the inner surface of the planet and between the inner sun. The inner sun shone with brilliance and maintained a golden spectrum, but it definitely wasn't a star even though they referred to it as an inner star. The floating island cast shadows, giving the approximation of night to the inner surface.

“Above as below,” Tesla said, coming up behind us.

I became aware that my ‘invisible counselors’ were assembled. We were all assembled together for the first time. They were near, looking at the same planet I was. They recognized its beauty and mystery, and though they were appreciative of this, they were also somehow accustomed, as if they had seen this a million times before, where I was still trying to put this into a context that made sense. This knowledge set went against the grain of everything I had

been taught. I could touch it, mentally, and allow it, but I was having trouble putting into a context that was all inclusive, as opposed to compartmentalizing it. Jules Verne clearly had a vision of an inner world, but one might reasonably conclude that was a metaphor. Of course, when reading literature, I don't know of any writer that purposely sits down and says, oh, this is a metaphor and people will be discussing it for years to come. No. They just write a story and then the literature experts get it and deconstruct it and they say, "Oh, you're very clever, did you mean to..." "No! I just wrote a story. But thank you so much."

"May I sit?" Jung asked.

"Of course," I said, motioning for everyone to sit. I remained standing.

Oh, you should know, they were all in Uniform, except Isis. She wasn't even human. She was present in the form of a cat. A regular sized black cat, with a nice looking collar that sometimes glowed, especially if she said more than one word. She was on the conference table, but as we took our seats, she went to the far side of the table and began licking a paw. Yeah, you may be thinking the Disney film "The Cat from Outer Space," but I am thinking more along the lines of the character Isis from the original series of Star Trek, who accompanied her time traveling companion, Gary Seven. Yes, there was a 'Seven' before there was a 'Seven of Nine.'

"Jung, are you the chief medical officer?" I asked.

"I am the chief psychiatrist, not the head of medical," Jung said. "I think that's House." He looked around but House wasn't present. I hope that wasn't something I was going to have to address.

"Yeah, that's kind of why I called this meeting. He doesn't want to be here," I said.

"What, he's afraid of being type casted in a medical role?" Loxy asked.

"Actually," I said.

"He's brilliant, a perfect choice for medical," Jung said. Apparently Jung had access to everyone's profiles, either through the collective unconscious, or he had been doing his homework. Could my own tuplas be conspiring to keep me in fantasy? "Though he has been known to have episodic episodes of depression..."

"Okay, so that opens up another caveat," I said, wondering what thought I had been tracking, but going with the tangent provided. If it was important, I would track it again later. "Should he be here if he doesn't want to and he is suffering from depression?"

“Everyone has episodes of depression,” Jung said. “And I dare say, that’s why he’s here. He can protest being here all he wants, but the truth of the matter is, he couldn’t be here unless part of him needed him to be here.”

It occurred to me everyone here would have an explanation for their presence in this world. Some of them might even overlap with my explanation.

“So, you’re saying, subconsciously he volunteered, but he required the plot contrivance of being drafted in order to have sufficient cognitive dissonance to explore other facets of his psyche?” I asked.

“That’s quite well put,” Jung agreed.

I almost asked out loud, ‘is everyone I am working with flawed?’ Isis seemed to be responding to the unvoiced question by looking at me. Do cats smile? What is that face? I think I heard purring. “But, this still feels problematic to me. Why would Star Fleet draft him, in any context? For that matter, who in their right mind would make me a Star Fleet Captain?”

“We’re not officially Star Fleet,” Uhura said.

This announcement didn’t really surprise me, but it did seem to surprise my supporting staff.

“Go on,” I said.

“Star Fleet is a government sponsored agency, comprised of a conglomerate of space fairing species that originated in a very specific age and context of humanity” Uhura said.

“Technically any ship could fall under the umbrella of Star Fleet, and we could be required to respond to Star Fleet should they call us, however, as I would trying to communicate to you earlier, we are a commercial enterprise sponsored by the John Meredith Lucas foundation.”

“George Lucas is responsible for this?” Loxy asked.

“Not that Lucas,” Isis said. Her voice was first in our hearts then in our heads. It was an interesting sensation that gave us all pause. “John Meredyth Lucas is the son of the screen writer Bess Meredyth and writer, director, and Canadian actor Wilfred van Norman Lucas. JML wrote four episode of TOS, directed one, but, more importantly for this context, took over productions for TOS during season two, of which episode 2 ‘the Gamesters of Triskelion,’ by Margaret Armen, was approved and allowed to air on January 5th, 1968. Your mother was watching this the day before you were born, Captain.”

We were quiet. “You’re telling me, this is a corporate venture?”

“This ship exists because there was a collaboration of Brains dead set on making it happen,” Uhura said. “We, all of us here, and on the ship, participated in the collaboration of this reality. It is a consensus reality. Whether you tap in through the collective unconscious or through song, sentimentality, science, or spirituality, it exists because we have called it into being.”

“But corporate?” Tesla asked. Clearly, he shared the same bad taste for the word corporate that I do. Actually, his reaction may have been stronger than mine, and he had fair reason to distrust that brand name.

Isis responded: “Contrary to the anti-cultural rhetoric of your time, corporations play a vital role of the international psyche, for better or worse, and though there are legitimate gripes about the way corporations operate, the products they offer, their effects on the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual environments are necessary. The compensation may not be equitably distributed within its present structure, and the distribution of goods may not be reasonably priced for the level of automation, but corporations are entities in their own right, and it is not an accident that they were given legal status as persons. No grouping of individuals can come together without creating a super-entity. It is not an accident that ships are referred to as she. It, too, will have distinct personality, even if it is always sublime, it will be influenced by the crew and her guests. The addition or loss of one person can have an extreme effect on the internal dynamics, as well as the spirit of the ship.”

“So, we’re corporate employees?” Tesla asked.

“Yes, and shareholders,” Isis said.

“That so didn’t work out for me in the past,” Tesla said.

“Nor me,” Sacagawea said. “I mean, I got honorable mentions, and risked my life for important papers when the raft over turned, and believe it or not, I talked several tribes out of killing the white men outright, but you don’t read about that, do you?”

“I would really like to speak to the brain child behind all of this,” I said.

And the world changed. Instantly. I should have known better to say something like that, considering the context that Isis had just provided. I should have seen it coming. I was not transported in the normal Star Trek transporter sort of way, as it was more instantaneous, and more disorientating, but it explained how Loxy and I had traveled from Earth to the JML Enterprise while it was in orbit around another planet in another system, presumably in the same

galaxy, but all bets were off on that score. I found myself standing before a console, and enclosed in a transparent bubble on that console were three disembodied brains. They quivered with an inner life.

“You wanted to speak to us?” one of them asked. Only through watching and paying attention did I learn to match the voice with the brain. All three were illuminated from an underlying light. One was red, the next was green, and the third was violet. The red was male.

“Unhappy?” the green ask, a female voice.

“No,” said the violet, a male, child’s voice. “He simply seeks understanding.”

“Oh my god,” I said. I remember these guys!

“Blasphemy?” red asked?

“Amazement!” green said.

“Epiphany,” violet said.

“This is going to be a complicated conversation, isn’t it?” I asked.

“All bets are off,” red said.

“Sorry,” green said.

“Predictable,” violet said.

“This is all a game to you? You’re bringing my crew together to wager on our success?” I asked.

“We require consensus,” they said in unison. Their table lit up and a hologram appeared above the table. The hologram resembled Princess Leah: she spoke for the brain: “You are the hope of worlds.”

I crossed my arms. This is not a comedy. I was seriously perturbed by my situation and how real this seemed, and yet, there are these things that keep happening that fuck with my brain and my expectations of how things should be. That in itself was a good indication of the reality function, but I protesting internally. Resisting. I really wanted to be serious and understand what was happening, but confronted with Leah and another mental and emotional track, I was feeling overwhelmed. So, I went with humor: “I am so glad you didn’t say the only hope,” I said.

“That would be wrong. Hope lies in every heart, every person. No one person should be the only hope. That said, you’re the only you, and this configuration of heart and mind, and the joining hearts and minds, will never be the same again,” Leah said.

“Am I really here?” I asked.

“Yes,” Leah said. But even the brains could be heard echoing ‘yes.’ And it was definitely an echo, going ‘papa brain, mama brain, baby brain,’ as if the super-conscious had come to an answer before the individual brains. Leah wasn’t just a projection; she was a psychic manifestation of the brains in unison, and so this holographic, sublime entity had an answer before the brains did. Technically, it wasn’t psychic, as the brains were connected together via tech, but since I didn’t think the brains would know Leah, being a different universe and all, my explanation required me participating with the three through the collective unconscious. Clearly, Jung had influenced my brain enough not to question some things too long. There could have been an even easier explanation, like, maybe the Brains had access to all human knowledge. Or, even simpler, I was dreaming and everything I know was equally knowable.

“Where is here?” I asked

“This is Crossover One, the closest star system to the Milky Way bridging the gap between our galaxy of origin and the Earth Cluster,” Leah said, illustrating with holographic displays between us. “We are off the ecliptic of the Milky Way galaxy by twenty degrees, fifty thousand light years from the nearest star still considered part of that galaxy.”

“You’re telling me, you transported me all the way from Earth, thirty thousand light years from galactic center,” I said doing some very rough math. The galaxy is roughly hundred thousand light-years side to side, assuming earth was in the arm closest to Crossover One, at minimum I had been transported 80,000 light years instantaneously.

Leah didn’t wait for me to finish my math. “We transported you through space and through time. We are presently in a time before the Earth. Additionally, technically, you are not who you think you are. You are a transporter clone. We copied you, as opposed to removing you outright from the timeline. Your original body remains on the planet, and will continue through its world line with minimal disturbance. Due to the harmonics of soul and entanglement of matter, we cannot fully eliminate your connections with yourself, and so, information will be transferred, both ways. There are a myriad of ways of interpreting the dissonance of perspective. Some see it as dreaming. Some see it as remembering. Some ignored it while others embrace the multiplicity of it and all,” Leah said.

The Brains began predicting how I might view it. As they calculated and placed their bets, I suddenly realized there was a version of me that did draw Loxy into a hug, telling her it was okay, that I didn’t have any expectations of anything, and so now there were two parallel

tracking words where I was at home living my life, and here... Living my life?! “World line,” I repeated, thinking about my other self, and how disappointed he must feel. Maybe he was indulging in the dream of me and my existence was due to that. He, I, we want magic. Oh, does that make Safe Haven just a different track? We want this. And here I am, I have it and I should be happy for myself, but I am also thinking of the other me.

“The definition of world line...”

“I know what it means,” I said, coming out of my trance. “But why a copy? I would have given anything just to get off Earth.”

“The original timeline for the earth is quarantined and protected. Your other life had not met its conclusion, yet,” Leah said. And that is how they know Leah. So much for my supernatural explanation. “All of Earth’s history is known. All sentient beings have been tagged in order to pull them when the criteria has been met. We have authorization to pull certain people at certain times in order to fulfill corporate obligations to the Cluster. You met the criteria. You were pulled. Additionally, the multiple personality sets you refer to as your indivisible counselors were separated in order to reduce your internal noise and increase coherence in the process. They were provided bodies consistent with their original design, allowing separate vehicles for their personality matrixes.”

“What are you saying?” I asked. “My friends are real?”

“You are not dreaming,” Leah said.

“And you’re telling me I am tagged?” I asked. Yeah, more important things to track and I am stuck on the tag part. How many people on earth believe they have been abducted by aliens and carry tracking devices? So, it’s not mass hysteria and societal paranoia?

“All sentient beings on Earth were tagged in order to pull them when criteria has been met,” Leah said. “We can track you anywhere within the Milky Way galaxy or within the Earth Cluster.”

“Okay, wait, wait, wait,” I said. I was tracking more information than I could process. My head was hurting and rubbing my eyes didn’t help. “You made a copy of me? You made bodies for my Tulpa and counselors. What is House? Is he a creation or a copy?”

“He was an employee of a JML subsidiary,” Leah said. “The subsidiary was liquidated, but it was necessary to honor his contract. Criteria was met, so he was pulled. From your perspective, he was merely an actor, however, from his perspective, he is the Doctor he believes

he is, with all the appropriate knowledge base for him to fulfill his function. The personality set necessary to make him a viable member of the crew was made dominant.”

The brains were calculating odds, competing with each other in value distributions over a curve of multiple variables, including social, physical, and spiritual aspects. How could they make a copy of Hugh Laurie that was more House than Hugh, I wondered. I remembered the transporter accident had separated Kirk into his two primary aspects, the good and the bad, but could the brains tease out all the noise and separate out all of the individual aspects that comprise the human mind? There must be millions of people in my brain, copies of people I never even met in person, even people my brain created to fulfill inner functions, such as populating dreams, or allowing me to predict the behaviors of others. Were the brains that far ahead of us? I closed my eyes and sought out my Loxy Tulpa. I was certain she was still there.

“Loxy is still in my brain,” I said, though I was really questioning if that were true.

“It is called enmeshment. It is impossible to completely remove the personalities from your brain, as the more use they get, the more neural synapses there are that reflect signals of their mind,” Leah said. “She will continue to be a part of your inner makeup, as well as a part of the external world here. There will be emotional, mental, and spiritual entanglement.”

The brains began betting that physical entanglement has ensued and will continue to. They were also betting on degrees of entanglement and whether or not evidence of ESP between the John and Tulpa avatars would be established. I sighed. Though a part of me desperately wanted to continue with this, another part was finding it just too complicated to track. Also, I was faced with the reality that this could be insanely dangerous and that people could die. My crew could die. I knew I wasn’t qualified for the job, and if it was just me on a ship by myself, I would be fine, but there were others, and House didn’t even want to be there.

“I don’t want a crew that doesn’t want to be on board,” I said. “This, whatever it is, has to be volunteer.”

“House will adjust. His world line of origin has not been affected,” Leah assured me. “We are still operating within the constraints of the Kirk-Star Fleet arrangement. Though some of the constituent parts may protest, or feel out of place, they were chosen for attributes that would increase the likelihood of accomplishing the mission objectives.”

“We are people, not parts,” I said.

“We do not see a distinction,” Leah said.

“Did you not learn anything from Kirk?” I asked.

“We are operating within the constraints of the arrangements,” Leah said. “The Earth’s world line has not been affected. Neither you nor House or anyone pulled to fulfill roles were harmed from the extraction process. You and the others still exercise free will. It increases our enjoyment of the game. House has been compensated for his part in this venture. We have spared no expense to ensure you have the tools and people necessary to complete your mission.”

“What is the mission?” I asked.

“We have multiple objectives,” Leah said.

“So I gather,” I said. “What is the primary mission?”

“To explore all the worlds of Crossover, and begin mapping out the worlds of the ‘Earth Cluster,’” Leah said, offering additional holographic information, revealing a globular cluster of stars, perhaps fifty light-years further away from the Milky Way than Crossover One.

From my little knowledge of astronomy, this grouping of stars within the Earth Cluster all looked like yellow dwarf stars, the same type of star that our sun, Sol, is. And that made no sense to me. Closer scrutiny revealed several red dwarfs, which eased my inner protest, but the cluster itself still defied logic. It shouldn’t be here. The cluster itself was so new in origin, having been ‘pulled’ and ‘placed’ by beings more powerful than even the Brains, that the light from these stars had yet to become visible to the other stars within the cluster, much less to the Milky Way.

“This can’t be right,” I said.

“The Earth Cluster is not a natural formation,” Leah said. “Long Range scans have given us limited stellar information. We are not confident in our representation’s accuracy.”

The Brains began wagering on how many more stars there were than long range scans had yet revealed. The Long Range Image was live, and several new stars appeared, blinking on and persisting thereafter, revealing they weren’t glitches in the system.

“You’re saying this is an artificial arrangement of stars?” I asked. “How is that possible?”

“We have insufficient information to respond to that question. We are betting that the answers will be found in the Cluster itself,” Leah said for the Brains, shutting down the holographic display of stars.

“You’re sending us out into an artificially created grouping of stars for profit?” I asked. “What if the makers of that don’t want us there?”

One of the brains responded, that is the Earth's sun, how could they not expect us to participate, but Leah over spoke it.

"We're betting that should you encounter the creator that you will succeed in giving them our best regards, and that we come in peace," Leah said.

"And if they're not peaceful?" I asked.

"You are authorized to protect our assets," Leah said. "This Conversation is no longer necessary. You will be given the tools and primary personnel necessary for you to accomplish your mission objectives," Leah said, motioning to a door that had opened. "You may now leave, Captain."

"You beamed me in, beam me back," I said, perhaps a little more forceful than warranted, but I didn't like the way the conversation was being brought to an end.

"Our transporter can retrieve you from anywhere in the Earth Cluster, but it cannot return you. Take the lift to the surface. From there you may take a shuttle, or have your ship use its transporters," Leah said.

"So, you're telling me you can't put me back where you found me?" I asked. "I mean the ship is right there in orbit."

"Putting you back is problematic," Leah said.

"I predict 82 percent probability to hitting the target," red said.

"I predict 93.5 percent probability of hitting the target," violet said.

"You're not doing heart math, I predict it's more like fifty fifty," green said.

"I want in on this," Leah said. "Wager accepted. Good luck, Captain Harister."

I opened my mouth to protest, but was gone before the words hit my mouth.

निर्मित

There is a certain uneasiness of being transported instantaneously. I would say 'instantaneously half way cross the galaxy,' but to be precise, I am not sure how far I transported that first time. Nor the second time, but clearly, this time round, I traveled further than the ship, as evidenced by the fact I hadn't arrived on the ship. One moment I was facing the Brains and the next moment, I am standing up against glass wall looking out over a rocky, desolate world. My hands came up and tagged the wall as if preventing me from hitting it, but there was no momentum, I just reacted as if the wall had rushed in at me. I nearly threw up. I held the wall for a moment, trying

to catch up to what was happening to me. I knew Loxy was in my brain and that she could bring me comfort, but I was unable to calm down enough to access her. Connecting with Tulpa was a talent and my skill level was still novice. I was coming to terms with the 'randomness' of the brain's teleporter, and how close I had come to being dead. I was literally centimeters from being a part of the wall, or worse, on the outside of the wall, and I am fairly confident, had I arrived out there, that would not have been good. I imagine that this is exactly what Mars would like from inside a protective dome. Each section of the dome was a triangle, I saw that much, but I continued to stare out at an alien sun setting. I searched the landscape for anything identifiable.

I eventually looked up and turned following the height of the dome to the top. Behind me was a scattering of fruit bearing trees, shrubbery that was also fruit bearing, gardens of fruits and vegetables, and even flowers, but my eyes were on the stars. The Milky Way Galaxy was visible in its entirety and if I didn't know it was the galaxy and comprised of 250,000 stars, or more, I would have just called it the great disk. Though it clearly is shaped in a way to suggest spinning, it looks static, except for some flashes of light that occasionally popped like lightning from the center, shooting up from galactic north and down from galactic south. It wasn't a straight beam. At a certain point, the beam arced, as if it were following magnetic lines back to a galactic south pole. Could there actually be a galactic size toroid of electromagnetic energy, just the way the sun has, the way the earth has?

It occurred to me to use my communicator. It either didn't get a signal or wasn't working. I assumed it was working due to the beeps it made, and I wondered if the quick, three tones indicated no signal. It never occurred to me that the different tones might be code. I was perplexed. If Crossover One had received my signal to retrieve me all the way from earth, surely they could receive a signal from here. Unless, there was other monitoring tech on Earth that was not present here. Ghost satellites, like the Black Knight rumored to be in a strange orbit around the Earth and moon.

And then the sun was gone and the entire night sky filled in with stars and facing the sunset I saw what I presume was the earth cluster. I have no clue how many stars I was seeing and as I stared, more popped into existence. I expected the new ones to disappear, just unexplained bursts of light, but they held steady.

"A'llo," I heard from behind me.

I turned to find a young lady standing behind me. If I were a betting man, I would say she was Polynesian mixed, approximately 20 years of age. She had long dark hair, parted right down the middle of her head. She wore a necklace of flowers. Her dress was simple, not like a traditional, native sewn piece, but like something out of Logan's Run, primary color, almost see through. Her garment was yellow and she wore sandals. She was holding an apple, which I assume came from the tree behind her. All the trees were fruit bearing trees.

"I don't remember ever seeing a hologram in the garden," she said. "When did Mech put the projectors in?"

"I am not a hologram," I said.

She laughed and tagged my chest playfully. Her amusement changed to amazement when she discovered for herself I was real. She dropped the fruit.

"You're real," she said.

"I think so," I said.

"But this doesn't make sense," she said. "I was told I was first, and clearly you're older than I."

"How old are you?" I asked.

"What measurement do you want?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Earth standard, I would be 19," she said. "But by this planet's cycles around the star, I would be about ten. And we mostly use Earth Standards, but we also use Mech time, which is a thing all in itself."

"Mech?" I asked.

"How could you not know Mech?" she asked. "Mech, the intelligence that built the habitat, is still building, and will continue to build until this world is completely terraformed. Are you injured?"

"I am not injured," I said. "I'm just not from around here."

Again, her mouth dropped. "You're a visitor?!" she rushed to the glass. "But where's your ship? And how did you get inside the dome. There are no airlocks down here. And..." she stopped and searched my eyes. "We were told not to expect others. We were told that this world is ours, for better or worse, but that it was a promising world and that we would have to use it wisely, and share it with those yet to be born."

“You said we,” I observed. “Who is we?”

“My sisters and I. I am the first. Mech raised us. That, and the holograms, and the Doctor. Oh! I should take you to see the Doctor!”

“Is the Doctor in charge?” I asked.

She laughed. “No one’s charge. Well, I suppose Mech is in charge of construction and habitat safety. Yeah, Mech is in charge, but we live here.”

“Do you have a name?” I asked.

“Oh! I have failed simple courtesy,” she said. “Please forgive me.”

“It’s okay. I failed, too. I didn’t lead with what’s your name,” I said.

She nodded, seeing the truth of it. Then she smiled. “I’m Midori, the First Borne,” she said, she almost extended her hand. “Is it your custom to shake hands or kiss?”

OMG, if you knew me, you would know I was like struggling, and I might have even been like breaking the Fourth Wall to address an audience not really there, because this is a Roger Moore moment when he takes advantage of his charm or the situation and scores.

“Kissing is a pretty standard affair,” I lied. And she didn’t hesitate. She embraced me and planted her lips on mine, and it was clumsy, wild, with an eagerness that I wasn’t quite prepared for. You don’t know how much restraint it took not to take advantage of this further. Part of the difficulty was that I truly believed I was dreaming and that the consequences for a dream hook up were not the same as a waking hook up. Based on the response of the kiss, I suspected that if I had wanted to be more aggressive, Midori would have accepted out of curiosity and novelty and we would have dropped right here and I would have had my first ‘alien encounter,’ so to speak. But another part of me won over, realizing that Midori was a genuine being, and she was giving her all, and this other part of me didn’t want to take advantage of that. I referenced Logan’s Run above, which comes with its own sense of unbridled sensuality in regards to customs and dress, but as I considered further, it occurred to me Midori was also comparable to the ‘Eloi’ in HG Wells’s ‘the Time Machine,’ with an aura of innocence that was inescapable, which provoked in me a desire to protect and nurture. When I felt her weight shift, wanting to sink to the ground and pull me with her, I ended the kiss.

“I am John Harister,” I said.

“Oh, well met, John,” Midori said, kissing me more. “I am Midori.”

“You told me,” I said, softly resisting another lip kiss, bringing her back down from whatever cloud she had hit.

“I did?” Midori said. “Oh! Ha. I guess I did. I am sorry. I have read people can get light in the knees and all, but I didn’t believe it. I thought that was just hyperbole and metaphor.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I don’t want to quit,” Midori said.

“I think we should have more discoveries about each other, first,” I said.

“What’s more to know? I want to be with you,” Midori said.

“More discoveries first,” I insisted.

“Sure. I am sorry,” Midori said.

“For what?” I asked.

“For being so aggressive,” Midori said.

“You can be as aggressive as you like,” I said.

“I am confused. You want me to be aggressive or stop?” Midori asked.

I almost laughed. “Midori, we’re going to stop for now. I am merely pointing out you have done nothing wrong,” I said. “I have enjoyed this moment, and I, too, want more. Just not yet.”

“Oh, I really like you,” Midori said. She took my hand. “Come on, let’s go see the Doctor.” She led me through the garden.

On the other side of the dome, a large mesa became apparent, and the other side of the dome was connected to the mesa. There were other domes attached to the mesa, and a shining city on top, and a transparent lift on the exterior wall that we were going to take up through a transparent tunnel. As the lift carried us up, Midori kept stealing glances at me. She also, hadn’t let go of my hand. I hadn’t discouraged her from holding on. Awkward smiles were exchanged, and she drew closer to me as if we were going to kiss again. I avoided her eyes by turning to the stars. There was no moon, but there was enough star light to roughly make out terrain.

“Are you hungry?” Midori asked.

“No, thank you. Um, what’s that?” I said, pointing out into the distance. It suspected it was another habitat.

“That’s the others,” Midori said, and then addressing the curious look I gave her: “You really don’t know? We’re a fourth generation colony from Origin, but the first joint venture with

another humanoid species. They're mostly aquatic, and so they will inherit the ocean and are part of that terraforming project. Humans will tend to the land. If you like, we could stop by the Comp room so you can update your memories."

"Update?"

"You don't know how to use a Comp? It's like a helmet you put on and the data you need to function is downloaded directly into your brain," Midori explained. "Most of it sticks. Some of it wears off after a while, kind of like a dream does if you don't practice keeping it."

"Spock's Brain!" I said.

"Whose brain?" Midori asked.

"Sorry, a reference you might not get," I said.

"You're funny smart," Midori said, clearly using both as an assessment that reinforced her appreciation of me.

We arrived at the top of the mesa, and from there, we could see more of the alien landscape that was in the process of being sculpted. Automated rovers roamed the terrain. The ocean froth part of the waves rolling up to the shore fluoresced all along the shore, while the oceans were lightly illuminated.

"The sea is a glow," I noted.

"Of course," Midori said. "Most of the life forms we have released into the environment have been tailored with bio-luminescence so we can better track our progress. It is one thing to use tech, quite another to experience success with your own eyes."

"Indeed," I said.

"Come," Midori said, pulling me along like a child would an adult. And the analogy was dead on, as in many ways she was a child. Of course, I suspected she also had knowledge and wisdom that surpassed my own, so I would be foolish to presume I was superior in any way.

We arrived in an area where her sisters were gathered; one was working on art, three were studying, four engaged in yoga, another preparing a meal, and two playing a game. There were twelve in all and they were genetically diverse. Midori didn't have to whistle to get their attention. The change in ambient noise was enough to startle even the ones from studying into looking up, and once they were engaged, their curiosity was intense, and I dare say, alien. They approached, each posing questions, and each taking turns answering a sibling. I was struck by the fact they all had English accents.

“Hologram?”

“No,” Midori said.

“Male!”

Touching ensued. They discussed me as if I weren't there. The fact that I was bald interested them, but I had enough stubble from not shaving that my face was rough. They discussed me like an anatomy and physiology project, guessing at my age, and one pried my mouth open with fingers to see my teeth, and I was trying to tolerate their curiosity, as I had no sense that they meant me harm, and I had my own growing list of questions.

“Clearly,” another answered, her hands groping. “We should take his clothes off.”

“Stop,” Midori said. “You can clearly see he is uncomfortable with touch.”

“You're touching him.” She was still holding my hand.

“Who doesn't like being touched?”

“He could touch me...”

“Sisters, quiet. We need to discuss this, rationally,” Midori insisted. “His name is John Harister. John, these are my sisters.” She proceeded to name all twelve, and no, my memory is not superior, especially with names and so, I would have to write it down to remember them: Brycin, Pacer, Kalani, Allura, Skye, Lilja, Letty, Raine, Min-jee, Stoli, Alazne, and Sahar. If only the names had come in a song, like Jacob and sons, ‘Josphe and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat!’ And make that the original Broadway release, not the Osmond release, or the release where they turned everything into a mix.

“Is he an alien?” Pacer asked.

“He's not us,” Letty said.

“Close enough,” Allura said, she had been the one to grope.

“What's the protocol?” Alazne asked.

“I'll look it up,” Stoli said.

“Hold on. This is new. We could invent our own protocol,” Allura said.

“No, we should ask the Comp,” Letty said.

“And what if Comp requires that we kill him?” Pacer asked.

That put a damper on things, to which I was greatly affected.

“Why would it want to kill me?” I asked.

“We can't do that,” Allura protested. “If you don't want him, I'll keep him.”

“He is not a pet, Allura,” Midori said.

“And yet, you continue to hold his hand as if he was your property,” Letty said. “Based on what? Proximity? First encounter?”

“I am not claiming him, Letty. I am comforting him. He is lost and alone,” Midori said. Sahar laughed. “I doubt that.”

“Well, let me comfort him, too,” Allura said, pushing in close and looking up into my eyes, her hand pushing up along my chest. “We could comfort each other.”

Midori gently pushed Allura away. “We need to talk this through.”

“He’s a threat,” Letty said. “I mean, look at the reaction he is already provoked within us. This could result in extreme jealousies, even feuds that result in aggression. There is a reason Mech only birthed females. We have not reached the stage for procreation.”

“There’s more than enough food now if we had babies,” Allura said. “And we are adult enough to share him.”

“Maybe, but that’s not the only threat. How did he get here? Does he intend to stay? And if he returns to his home and tells others about us, will more of his kind come? Will they be peaceful or enslave us? This is bad. His presence here is bad,” Letty insisted.

“Maybe he will have brothers,” Sahar said. “Like that movie, Seven Brides for Seven Brothers.” That got my attention. They knew Earth culture.

“There’s thirteen of us,” Pacer said.

“I was speaking metaphorically, with allusion,” Sahar informed Pacer.

“Pacer, why don’t you go wake the Doctor,” Midori said, interrupting the banter.

Pacer swallowed. “We aren’t supposed to wake the Doctor.”

“We require the Doctor’s guidance,” Midori said. “It will be alright.”

Pacer nodded, started to leave, but hesitated. “What if the Doctor says kill him?” she asked.

“The Doctor wouldn’t say that,” Allura said, but turned to Midori. “Right?”

“Worse, what if the Doctor says we can’t be intimate with him?” Lilja asked.

“Maybe we should all take a turn before getting the Doctor then. It’s always better to do something in ignorance than against a ruling,” Allura said.

“But then, what if we like it and we’re told not to do it again,” Lilja said.

“There’s that,” Allura said, puzzling over what to do.

“Go get the Doctor,” Midori said.

“Should I be worried?” I asked Midori.

“Yes,” Letty said. “No,” Allura said.

“I will not allow you to be harmed. I am first here, and I have rights to make final decisions,” Midori said.

“Until found unfit for duty,” Letty reminded her.

“That would take consensus of the twelve, and either the Doctor or Mech asking me to step down,” Midori said.

“You’re clearly compromised,” Lilja said. “Did you already take a turn with him in the garden?”

“I did not,” Midori said.

“We shouldn’t wait for consensus. We could play for him,” Allura said.

“You mean fight for him?” Raine asked.

“Or a lottery,” Min-Jee said.

“He is not property,” Midori said.

“We shouldn’t have to fight for him,” Letty said. “Like, Sahar said, there’s probably more where he came from. Maybe even better specimen.”

“Awww! Don’t listen to her,” Allura said. “I think you’re adorable.”

“Because you haven’t met anyone else,” Letty said.

“So, you’re saying we just all share him till we find better?” Min-Jee asked. “What if I don’t want to share?”

Letty used this to springboard back into her mantra that I was a threat.

“The only reason you want him Allura is because you have father issues,” Skye said.

“None of us have fathers,” Brycin said.

“Just because we didn’t ever see them doesn’t mean we didn’t have them,” Min-Jee pointed out.

“Ladies,” I said, trying to de-escalate this. This was becoming about as cliché as a B-movie, and I was so hopeful this wasn’t ‘Abbott and Costello go to Mars.’

“Maybe it no longer works at his age,” Lilja asked.

“Let’s find out,” Stoli said. “For science, of course.”

“A’llo there.” We turned to meet the ‘Doctor.’ She was clearly older than any of the ‘sisters.’ She had long blond hair, blue eyes, and was dressed in a military styled uniform. The sisters hovered protectively around me. “What have we here?”

“A man,” Allura said.

“A threat,” Letty said.

“A friend,” Midori said.

“You’re the Doctor?” I asked.

“Technically, the daughter,” she said, hands on her hips. “Step aside, girls. Let’s have a look.”

“Daughter who?” I asked,

“If you like. Or, you could just call me Jenny,” she said.

“Jenny who?” I asked.

“Oh, I like that. But just Jenny,” Jenny said. “Up on the table, fly boy.”

“Uh?”

“Sit, on the table, now,” Jenny insisted. “Let go of his hand, Midori. I got this.”

“You’re not going to harm him, are you?” Midori asked.

I merely looked for the answer, being vested in the answer and all.

“Aww, Midori. You should know better than that,” Jenny said.

Per instructions, I sat on the table and Jenny retrieved a device from her pocket and began a thorough exam, first hitting me under the knee cap with the device. “Good reflexes.” She noted my anger look. “What, you didn’t see that coming? Interesting.” She mused, powering up the device. The tip glowed with an inner pink light that sparked at the end and then held steady. It was familiar, but I still pulled away.

“Easy, I am not going to hurt you,” Jenny said, showing me the device, twirling in her hands, and even tapping her shoulder. “The girls might. They can be a bit rough and they’ve never seen a man before, and, well, it gets kind of boring in here and you being so novel it’s going to be like celebrating Christmas.”

“Oh, yes, I’d like to help unwrap him, just so your scan can be thorough,” Allura said.

“No need for that,” Jenny said.

“Wouldn’t our eyes be better judge than a scan?” Allura insisted.

“At ease, Allura,” Jenny said, not looking back her. She was too busy staring in my eyes, as close as any Doctor would get, her breath in my face, the warmth of her noticeably radiating from her, unless I was just imagining, and I could have been, because, let’s face it, I was definitely affected by the Doctor and the intense scrutiny of the girls. Hell, if push to admit, I had been over the top since traveling away from Origin! Jenny stared in my eyes, turning the pink light in such a way as to see deeper. “Interesting.”

“He is human, right?” Pacer said. “He’s compatible?”

“Compatibility is irrelevant. I like him,” Allura said.

“I swear, Allura, you’d do anything,” Lilja said.

“I did you,” Allura said.

“You should retake psych 101. This is a proximity based, one of the kind, pretty thing, not a real thing,” Letty said.

“Girls!” Jenny said. “Enough. This man is officially off limits, so put all of that out of your heads.”

Lamenting and complaining never sounded so pathetically sexy.

“Because you want him for yourself?” Letty asked.

Jenny turned to Letty. “That’s enough,” she said. “You’re just as aroused as Allura by the possibilities and I get it. It’s natural. It’s hardwired into you. But you got to channel it into something other than anger.” She turned back to me, puzzling over several complexities that she had discovered. “He is definitely human. And he’s from Origin.”

“How’s that even possible?” Sahar asked. “I thought the nuclear war destroyed everything.”

“Great question,” Jenny said, musingly. She seemed ecstatic trying to solve a problem. “But the mystery is even deeper than that. Based on the amount of plastic in you, Sir, I suspect you’re early 21st century. Way before the war that ends all wars.”

“Aren’t all wars the wars to end all wars?” Lilja asked.

“Plastic?” I asked, following my own thread through the chaos.

“Due to drinking an excessive amount of bottled water I suspect,” Jenny mused, crossing her arms. “The accent suggests American. Texas? But seasoned, like you’ve traveled the world. I can hear that much. But, I think I can narrow it down to within ten years post Fukushima disaster, based on the amount of radioactive isotopes in your system.”

“He’s radioactive?!” Letty asked, stepping back.

“He’s definitely hot,” Allura said.

Except for Midori and Allura, all the sisters took a step back. The onslaught of questions concerned the possibility of viable offspring. Only Letty kept it to the practical.

“Is he safe to touch?” Letty asked.

“We’re fine,” Midori said.

“How do you know?” Letty demanded. “You brought him in here without checking. That’s why we need protocols. We all touched him. Jenny, we touched him!”

“Uh? Oh, yeah, sorry, girls. Didn’t mean to frighten you,” Jenny said. “None of us are in harm’s way. He’s safe enough in that regards. We all carry radioactive isotopes. We literally become the environment we live in. Your chemical makeup is like a footprint leading back to your origin. The question is, how did you, Earthling, come to be here? Your clothes suggest Star Fleet, but that’s so 23rd century.”

“You know about Star Fleet?” I asked.

“Who doesn’t know about Fleet?” Jenny asked, pointing the device at me. “Wait, you’re not like just a chap from a Cosplay Convention, are you? Aren’t you a bit old for that?”

“I am so getting tired of the ageism here,” I said, my irritation and ability to remain quiet having run its course. “You’re never too old for Cosplay. And, girls, it still functions. Whatever your libido is at sixteen, with the exception of medical problems, it will be at the same libido set point at age 80. And I am not that old, but I have every intentions of still breaking hearts at whatever retirement home they put me in.”

“That’s just gross,” Letty said.

“Oh,” Allura said. “I won’t let them put you in a home, love.”

“Still, whether you’re Fleet or a Cosplay want-a-be, how did you get here?” Jenny asked.

“It was basically a transport gone wrong,” I said. “Way wrong, by the looks of things.”

Jenny tapped her lips with the device she held, realized what she was doing and pocketed it. She then fidgeted with her hands until she planted them on her hips, making her presence even more powerful. She would be center stage no matter what arena she was in. “But that doesn’t make much sense to me. Your pips suggest the rank of captain, but you don’t quite exude authority. I get the impression you know more than you’re letting on. Your presence here does seem accidental, or I would expect there to be more of you. Ah!” Jenny jumped, clapping her

hands. “The Prime Directive! You’re playing dumb to keep from contaminating the social environment, aren’t you! Clever boy.”

“I don’t think I am bound by that clause,” I said.

“Ooh, another clue,” Jenny said. “Star Fleet but not. Aw! Of course! I should have recognized the sweeping chevron design in your insignia! You’re corporate! What are you? Pre-Fleet? Are you employed by Elon Musk?”

“Oh, he’s a Musketeer?” Sahar asked.

“Maybe he’s a part of the American Stargate program,” Lilja suggested.

“That’s a television program,” Letty said.

“There was also that real Stargate program where the US was spying on the Russians with psychic remote viewers,” Lilja said. “They found the rings of Jupiter before anyone knew there were rings, and they found the pyramids and face on mars before there were photos accidentally leaked to the population.”

“It wasn’t an accident,” Skye said.

“Maybe’s he’s not even here, like an astral projection from the future,” Brycin said.

“Or the past,” Alura said.

“Does he look like a remote viewer?” Midori asked. “We touched him. He’s not a hologram, he is not a ghost, he not a spirit. He is a person.”

“Some people can astral project and make doppelgangers, or shapeshift into animals” Pacer said, defending Brycin. She turned to me. “I am a third level Wiccan. If you need a spell, you come to me.”

“Can we mate with a doppelganger?” Allura asked.

“Maybe he has already taken advantage of us. The other night, during sleep paralysis, was that you?!” Lilja asked.

“I told you it was your imagination,” Midori said. “We all experience sleep paralysis every night. It keeps us from acting out our dreams.”

“Come to me any night you want, John,” Allura said. “Awake, asleep, in dream, I’m in.”

It was a lot to track, as they were talking over each other, but Jenny was clearly watching me for a reaction as the girls mused, helping her reason this through. “Or you’re a NASA employee and a mason... Or is it the illuminati. I always get those last three confused.”

“OMG,” I said, crossing my arms. “This is all exhausting. You could just ask me.”

“If he works for NASA, we can’t trust anything he says,” Letty said.

“Well, you can trust some of it. Pictures don’t lie, just the explanation of the pictures are a bit ridiculous,” Lilja said. “Like, do you really believe the explanation for the loss of that one Mars satellite being due to using English measurements instead of metrics? Who makes that kind of error, and where were the safeguards for making sure that sort of mishap doesn’t happen? I mean, besides the cost of the asset, you don’t want to waste a shot at an astronomical window that comes what, once every four or five years? And really, if you had rover on Mars that took a picture of a square object or the top of a pyramid looking structure, would you keep rolling the rover away from the said object? I mean, even if it’s nothing, wouldn’t you still roll the rover over to it to go prove that it was nothing. Even if to just to satisfy your own desire to prove all the conspiracy theorist wrong?”

“I see you girls are keeping up with your Origin history lessons,” Jenny said.

“You said if we don’t learn our history we are doomed to repeat it,” Midori said. “We’ve each picked an era of interest and then we educate each other on what we learned.”

“Brilliant strategy,” Jenny said.

“My focus has been on male anatomy and physiology,” Allura said.

“We know!” the sisters said.

“He doesn’t. Just saying, John,” Allura said. “In case you would like to help me with my studies.”

“Um, yeah, sure, I mean, no, I mean, okay like I am getting a little flustered,” I admitted. “Jenny, I don’t work for NASA, and I am not a Mason. I mean, I was a Mason, but I kind of fell out of favor, and so I am not a Mason.”

“You naughty boy, what did you do? Sleep with the head honcho’s daughter?”

“No,” I said, and then softer: “No.” I tried not to be distracted by Allura’s escalating hope.

“You can never not be a Mason,” Jenny said.

I sighed. “I’m not part of a lodge, not paying dues, forgotten most of the scripts necessary to engage the brotherhood, but yeah, I hear you, you can’t not be a Mason like you can’t not be a virgin again, so I am not lay, cause I know things, but also not Mason cause I’m not playing their game, and being one is never what people think it is,” I said.

“Tell me a secret,” Jenny said.

“It wouldn’t be a secret then,” I said, faking my own English accent. Deflecting without saying no.

“Just a little something,” Jenny said.

“I made an oath,” I said. “If you do enough reading you will find all the answers you want to know, I just can’t confirm or deny anything, because I took an oath, and even if no longer agree with the club’s mentality, and I am not by any means perfect, I do have a code, and so I am not going to purposely violate the sanctity of that pledge.”

“Nice. I like you, Captain John Harister,” Jenny said, touching my pips.

The sisters cheered.

“And he’s still off limits,” Jenny said, spinning to face them

The sisters booed.

“Because he’s radioactive?” Allura asked.

“No. Stop worrying about the radiation,” Jenny said.

“Then why can’t we have him?” Allura demanded.

“Because he isn’t going to be staying,” Jenny said.

“He’s not?” they asked in unison.

“I’m not?” I asked. Was I expected to sleep outside on the doormat?

“You have a tracking device on you, Sir,” Jenny said. “I suspect your crew will be coming for you. Depending on how urgent they feel it is to recover you, and how far away they are. I am assuming it wasn’t a normal transporter accident, or they would be in orbit, so, where are they? Another planet in this system? In another star system? A week or two away at Warp Five? Doesn’t your transport have a functional limit?”

“I wasn’t transported with Fleet tech,” I said.

“That makes more sense to me,” Jenny said. “So, you could be here at least a week.”

“I could make a week feel like a life time,” Allura said.

Alazne laughed. “Not if we’re sharing him,” she said.

“Off limits,” Jenny repeated herself, pointing at them.

“You’re not our mother,” Lilja pointed out. Jenny responded with a warning look.

“But what if they don’t come for him?” Allura asked. “What then? He would be lonely. And I have read all the literature on sex, and how it keeps people young and healthy and releases

endorphins and I am looking out for his best interest, and men do need regular release in order to maintain the health of their prostate.”

“He has hands,” Letty said.

“And I just want to give him an extra hand,” Allura said.

“Yeah, umm, you, Sir, should come with me, now,” Jenny said.

The girls protested, lamenting and groaning like teenagers, except Midori. Midori touched my arm. “I am glad we met, Sir John.”

निर्मित

Jenny led me back to her room and then locked the door where she invited me to have a seat while she prepared some tea. As the tea began to brew she leaned against the cabinet, musing. She was looking in my general direction, but not really seeing me.

“Something on your mind?” I asked.

“Always,” Jenny said, her focus coming back on me. “First, did you sleep with any of them?”

“No,” I said.

“I believe you. And thank you,” Jenny said.

“I don’t understand that. They’re adults, aren’t they?” I asked.

“They are. But they’re also so young, not just their physical and emotional age, but in terms of societal age. They’re just getting started and they haven’t experienced real hurt, not the broken heart kind, yet,” Jenny said. “And you really are not going to be staying around, but even if you were, with you being the only male of consenting age, it would change them and influence their society in a different direction than where it’s presently headed. Even I have already influenced them more than I should, and I have tried to minimize that by returning to hibernation.”

“Tell me how you got here,” I said.

Jenny nodded, pouring us both a cup of tea. She brought me a cup and took her cup to a couch where she and I sat and she shared her story. She drew her legs up onto the couch and sat crisscross applesauce, facing me. Her story starts with her stealing an automated colony spaceship and heading out into the stars. I didn’t get all caught up on the ‘stealing’ part of it, and

the actual word she used was ‘commandeered,’ which seemed to make it more of friendly kind of borrowing act than actual theft. Then again, theft is theft. She wasn’t even out of the solar system when she was suddenly swept up in a temporal transport beam. At least, she suspected it to be a temporal transport beam. The ship she was on lacked the instruments necessary to discern that, but she had intuition about space and time, and when she came out of the beam, she found herself in a new solar system. A spectrograph told her the sun was ‘Sol,’ but that didn’t make any sense because it was clearly not Sol, based on the fact that there were a dozen Earth like planets, all well within the goldilocks zone.

The ship she was on had been damaged in the transport and crashed landed on one of the Earth type planets. The only hope for survival was to allow Mech to do his job, and start a terraforming project. First task was to start gathering materials to construct the rovers to collect more resources, followed by building more and bigger 3-d printers, and larger automated construction site eventually came online. Jenny had to sleep in a hibernation, stasis chamber that was acquired or developed sometimes after leaving Origin. Each ship carried one so that one adult could be there when the children were brought forth from cold storage. Each ship had a hundred thousand embryos, representing a large enough diversity to keep humanity going strong. Jenny went to sleep, with Mech promising to wake her as soon as the first habitat was constructed.

Jenny woke to the habitat she was presently living in, and was confronted by several new mysteries. While studying the heavens to try and determine where she was, she discovered she was not in the Milky Way galaxy. Additionally, she found other “Sol’s” in the night sky. Not just Sol like stars, but per the stellar fingerprint, they were all copies of Sol, and every night she watch new “Sol’s” appear, as if blinking into existence. The other mystery was someone had left her a birthday present, the device she carried, with a simple note that read, “With love, Father.”

“I can only speculate,” Jenny said, not focusing on the fact her father had come to visit her, but had not waken her. That so baffled her that she had decided not to think on it, because doing so stirred anger and sadness. “Something of tremendous power has made copies of Sol and placed them in a grouping outside of the Milky Way.”

Jenny burned with a desire to know what was going on, but she was limited to acquiring knowledge the old fashion way, with a simple telescope and making observations. She needed a

ship. Mech promised she could have one, but he was not at the point where he could construct it. He had to build a large enough sustainable habitat to begin the release of the embryos.

So the wait began. Jenny went back into hibernation. Mech, the ship's AI, proceeded with its purpose. It would wake Jenny periodically, asking her questions. She suspected it was bored. A second was a long time for an AI, and so she could only imagine its loneliness while she slept. Starting from scratch, it took a nearly a hundred years to construct the habitats and release life forms into the environment to begin the long climb up to sustainable worlds.

A knock on the door interrupted her story. Jenny smiled, predicting it to be Allura. Midori was there. "Oh, surprise," Jenny said.

"We thought maybe you and John would like some fruit," Midori said.

"Really, Midori," Jenny said.

"Okay, look, we get that you have directed us to be hands off, but, it isn't fair you lock yourselves away. We want to listen and learn and talk," Midori said.

Jenny sighed. "That is actually fair, and well spoken. I am sorry. I still kind of see you as children. Come in... All of you," Jenny said.

The 'First' had been waiting just out of eyesight, and now they were visible and happy and they rushed in, exactly like kids on Christmas who had been waiting anxiously for parents to get up and join them. They each hugged Jenny and then came to lounge area and made themselves at home. Midori sat on one side of me and Allura squeezed herself between me and the couch arm and I was careful not to spill my tea. Lilja sat on the floor at my feet. They were an assortment of attire, from oversized pajama shirts with long sleeves and socks, to yoga pants and sweat shirts.

"And, so, as I was saying, John," Jenny said, amused by the girls. She resumed her place, Pacer and Letty drew close to her. "I've been doing the only reasonable thing I could. I have been jumping forwards through large chunks of time utilizing a stasis device. And each time I wake, Mech has surprised me. The last time we had new knowledge sets about this system. There is life on the inner planets, but this planet seems to have been left alone, as if it was meant for Mech to terraform it."

"Oh, tell us the story of Mech again!" Brycin said.

"No, I want to hear about the dinosaurs," Lilja said.

"Dinosaurs?" I asked.

“The inner worlds have dinosaurs,” Lilja said.

“There is still so much I don’t know,” Jenny said. “If only I had a time machine spaceship so I could understand what’s unfolding, see it from start to finish. I am hoping your ship can help me solve some of the mystery when it arrives. I am wanting to leave with you.”

“No!” Sahar said. “You can’t leave. We need you.”

“We love you,” Stoli said, and they all agreed on that point. “You’re like a mother to us.”

“This life does seem lonely for them. How have you all managed?” I asked.

“Mech and holograms,” Midori said. “And each other.”

“Can we go with you?” Allura asked.

“Time enough to discuss that, later,” Jenny said.

A tremor through the floor got everyone’s attention.

“It’s just an earthquake,” Jenny said.

“We’ve never had one before,” Letty said. “And the only new thing is him. I told you he was a threat.”

“It’s a valid observation, but still too circumstantial,” Jenny said, getting up. “You’re not a bad omen, are you, John? Come with me.” She went to a monitor and turned it on. “Good evening, Mech. Can you explain the tremor?”

“Good evening, Jenny. I am glad you’re awake, as I could use your experience. A ship has crashed between the two cities,” the computer responded.

Chapter 10

Mech was redirecting a land rover to investigate. Even with an overhead satellite, given the lighting it was difficult to make anything specific out, until Jenny adjusted the frequency to infrared; a classic, saucer styled ship seemed evident.

“Martians!” Letty said.

“You’re crowding me, girls,” Jenny said.

“Sorry,” they said, not really backing off.

“It’s not Martians,” I said.

Jenny looked at me, curious.

Letty explained why I was wrong: “Martians come in saucers.”

“Only in the movies,” I corrected. “Real Martians use triangular shaped craft.”

“Clever boy,” Jenny said, as if she approved of my knowledge set. “Still, this is weird.”

“What’s weird? The shape of the craft or the timing of the coincidence?” Midori asked.

“I don’t believe in coincidence,” Jenny said.

“Maybe it’s John’s ship,” Allura said. “I’m sorry, John, you’re just going to have to stay with us now that it’s wrecked and all.”

Jenny chuckled.

“What?” Allura asked, pouting.

“I am sure his ship is a lot bigger than that,” Jenny said.

“How much bigger?” Lilja asked.

“I hope to find out,” Allura said.

“I am feeling really uncomfortable with this conversation,” I said.

“Keep it G,” Jenny said, not looking back at me, pushing through some of the different view options.

“How is talking about the size of your ship making you uncomfortable?” Min-Jee asked.

“It doesn’t look too bad. There could be survivors,” Midori said.

“Indeed,” Jenny said, standing. “I am going to go have a look see. You girls stay here.”

“You’re going alone?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t be so 18th century,” Jenny said.

“I am not. I am being sensible,” I said.

“Very well. I accept your invitation to join me,” Jenny said.

“I wasn’t exactly volunteering,” I said.

“Afraid?” Jenny asked.

“Of course not,” I said. “I was merely pointing out that it was unreasonable to go alone.”

“And you’re right, but I can’t take the girls, and it’s too dangerous to leave you behind with them,” Jenny said. Allura began to protest again. “So, you’re with me, Star Fleet.”

“Please don’t call me that,” I said.

“Star Fleet?” Jenny asked.

“Haven’t quite earned it, yet,” I said.

“What can we do to help?” Midori asked.

That was a brilliant set up for more banter and jokes, but Jenny blocked with an appropriate response: “Well, gear up as if you were going out of the habitat, then come back here, and monitor our progress. Be ready if we need you.”

The girls shouted excitedly and ran to get their gear.

“That should keep them occupied for a while,” Jenny said, hitting my arm. “Come along, then. No more time for sleeping.”

Jenny led me out of the main structure, across the mesa top under a glass dome to a lift that took us down to an enclosed structure where a sizeable truck, with four sets of tank tracked ‘wheels’ were suspended from their individual struts. We entered the vehicle, secured the door, and Jenny drove us into an airlock, cycled out the air, and then proceeded to drive us towards the downed ship. She set the autopilot, got up, and proceeded the lockers at the rear of the vehicle.

“Come on,” Jenny said. “Let’s gear up.”

Jenny opened several lockers, where she began pulling out gear. I began to undo my pants.

“Hold on. What’s that about?” Jenny asked me.

“I’m taking my clothes off,” I said.

“What for?” Jenny asked.

“To put on the environmental suit?” I asked.

“The e-suit goes over your clothes, John,” Jenny said.

“Oh,” I said.

“Were you hoping for a pretext to be naked with me?” Jenny asked.

“Well, to be honest,” I began.

“John, please,” Jenny said. “People could be dying out there and you’re thinking about sex?”

“Okay, record straight here, people die all the time and I am still going to be thinking about sex, and, well, since I have arrived here I have been inundated with pretext and preset-up contrivance and loads of precum leakage from rapidly moved through multiple arousal cycles and we got like what, ten to fifteen minutes at our present rate of speed,” I said.

Jenny turned to me. Very serious. “Since we’re all about straight records and honesty, let’s put this on table. I am an alien.”

“So?” I asked.

“Oh, you’re one of those,” Jenny said, sighing. “Well, that’s nice. I like that you’re open minded and all, but, really, John, we just met. I don’t know you. I have an idea of you.” Even her hand gesture seem to suggest ‘I have an idea of you’ was more than just her intuition about my character. “I see that you’re randy and a long ways from home surrounded by beautiful girls with no male competition, but I don’t see our present arrangement as a pretext for shagging. Sure, being out in the rover alone sounds like fun, but we’re on a mission here, and…” Jenny leaned in. “The girls are watching us.”

Jenny smiled at me, and pointed to the cameras placed throughout the rover. She pulled out a suit and handed it to me.

“Suck it up, we got work to do,” Jenny said.

I decided not to mope over the fact that I just got schooled, and it was actually the correct position for Jenny to take, and it again, only went to reinforce the reality function of my set. Believe me, if this were a dream, I would have already found a context to have slept whit all thirteen ‘Firsts.’ It was a tight fit, but I got the e-suit over my clothes. My boots did have to come off in favor of the e-suit boots, and Jenny helped in instructing me how to seal the boots to the pants, and the gloves to the sleeve. All that remained donning was the bubble helmet. We held off on that and returned to the front of the vehicle. Another vehicle was approaching.

“Oh, hello,” Jenny said.

“The Others?” I asked.

“Apparently,” Jenny said. She punched up a radio and connected a communication link between the two vehicles. “Hey there.”

“What are your intentions?” came the voice. It sounded male.

“It sounds human,” I remarked, a little disappointed I wasn’t going to meet an alien.

“Translator,” Jenny dismissed me. “We are on a rescue mission. There could be people injured.”

“The ship has fallen within our perimeter, and therefore belongs to us,” the other said.

“Ah,” Jenny said. “It’s like that? The tech belongs to the owner of the vehicle, don’t you think?”

“The tech is ours,” the other said.

“Okay, well, we’ll just recuse the occupants, and you can have the tech,” Jenny said.

“Any occupants will be considered bio-tech. Per Mech, humans will claim the surface, and the Others will claim the inner world. This falls within our jurisdiction and we claim salvage,” the other said.

“Okay,” Jenny said. “Good luck with your operation.” She turned off the radio.

“We’re turning back?” I asked.

“Uh? Oh, hell, no,” Jenny said. “If they want to play salvage rights, I think we’ll get there first. Not by much, but clearly we saw it first. Two can play this game.”

We did arrive at the crashed ship first, but ‘not by much,’ and not enough time to open the door to the saucer and go in. The other vehicle was a duplicate of the one we drove, and three suited young men stepped out. They were clearly human.

“A’llo, boys,” Jenny said.

“I thought they were supposed to be aliens,” I said.

“I am claiming salvage rights,” Jenny said, motioning me to let her handle this.

But I really wanted to see aliens. And the suit didn’t have pockets. I kind of felt useless, standing around, nothing to do with my hands. The men wore name tags on their suits. Ash and Nyu stood behind and to the left or right of Boss, who appeared to be the oldest of the three.

“It’s clearly within our perimeter,” the lead male pointed out.

“Yeah, and still, we got here first,” Jenny said.

“Well, we out number you.”

“I am older and smarter than you,” Jenny said.

“We brought weapons,” he said, and the three of them slung weapons into view.

“Oh, well, in that case,” Jenny said. “Help yourself.”

“Wait,” I said. “Think this through. What you’re doing could drastically alter the course of your futures, both physically and socially.”

“Shut up,” the lead said. “You’re not my father.”

“Oh, son, what are you? Three years old?” I said. “She and I are experts. Let us do our jobs.”

“I want you both to go get in my rover, now, or I will shoot you,” the lead said. “Ash, go with them.”

“Yes, Boss,” Ash said.

“You’re making a mistake, Boss,” Jenny said, not saying ‘boss’ nicely.

Ash directed us into the vehicle and had us sit on one of the long benches. He sat opposite us, weapon at ready.

“I thought these guys were supposed to be aliens,” I said.

“Me, too,” Jenny said. She smiled at Ash, but addressed me. “And I think he’s never seen a live female. I think I can get us out of this.”

“I can hear you,” Ash said. “And I am gay.”

“Oh, then he’s all yours,” Jenny said.

“Um, but I’m not...” I began.

“For the team?” Jenny asked.

“The team is lost,” I said, no bones about it. “This is one of those hard barriers, I am afraid.”

“Well, at least you know who you are,” Jenny said.

Boss returned to retrieve a box and then exited the vehicle again. When he and his colleague returned, they were carrying an enclosed stretcher, with something alien inside. Ash stood up. It was difficult to see inside the emergency tent at first, but when it was finally positioned on the floor, Nyu moved off to drive the rover back to their base, while Boss closed the door and pressurized the cabin. As soon as the cabin was pressurized, Boss began to remove his e-suit. It turned out, he wasn’t wearing clothes underneath the suit, which was the same suit as I was wearing. I looked to Jenny. She shrugged, indifferently. After he was out of the suit, he got dressed, and tagged out Ash, who took his turn changing from his e-suit to his everyday clothes. Their every-day clothes also had names tags, which was odd to me. Did they have

trouble remembering their names? When Ash was dressed, he tagged out Nyu, who came back and undressed. Nyu was a large guy, probably Tongan.

“Both of you, out of your suits,” Boss said.

“No,” Jenny said.

Boss drew attention to his weapon. We started to undress.

“Really? You’re wearing clothes under your e-suit?” Nyu asked.

“Disappointed?” Jenny asked.

“Kind of,” Nyu said. He was clearly interested in Jenny.

“Boys will be boys,” Jenny said, playfully.

“We can take a closer look at her anatomy when we get back to base,” Boss said.

“I’m sure you have holos for that,” Jenny said. Once she was out of the e-suit trousers, she sat down to put the boots back on. I did the same.

“Nyu, get a blood sample of the alien,” Boss said.

Nyu hesitated. “Which one?” he asked.

Boss did a double take. “Really? How many aliens do you see?”

“Three?” he asked.

“Nyu, they’re human,” Boss said.

“Really? She’s a real female?” Nyu asked, staring. “I thought you said the other tower belonged to the Others.”

“No, Mech said tower two belonged to the Others,” Boss said. “Clearly, they are ahead of schedule, and human. Now, stop staring at her, and get the sample of the alien. We can stare at her later.”

Nyu unzipped the bubble stretcher to reveal a small, gray, humanoid figure. It had large eyes that were closed, a thin slit of a mouth, and barely a nub for a nose, with two small holes. Nyu nearly retreated. The gray was wearing a body suit of a dull silver spandex looking material. It was a one piece, and tightly fitting.

“Relax. It’s unconscious,” Boss said.

“Let me help him,” Jenny said.

“You mean ‘it,’ don’t you?” Ash said.

“Let me render first aid. If that things dies and reports back that there are hostiles on this planet, they will come with a task force of millions to take this planet,” Jenny said.

Boss blinked. "If it dies, it won't be sending any more reports," he said. "Nyu, get the sample."

"I am confused," Nyu said. "There are no seams on the clothes. How do I take it off him to get the sample?"

Boss was at a loss.

"Probably used a replicator, kind of like cross between a transporter and 3-D printer," I offered. Seamless space suits was very possible with today's tech.

"Just jab through the sleeve," Boss said.

Nyu followed instructions, but failed to puncture the suit. The needle broke. Nyu retrieved a second sampler from the kit.

"Jab its neck," Boss said.

"You can seriously injure it," Jenny said.

Nyu jabbed the needle into the gray's neck to take a blood sample. Simultaneously, I grabbed my neck, feeling a sympathetic pain.

"You okay?"

"Just empathy," I assured her, but it hurt like a son of a bitch.

Jenny studied me, but not seeing what she was looking for, turned back to Boss. The rover arrived at the airlock, waited for the cycle and then drove the rest of the way in. When the outside had pressurized, Boss directed me and Jenny to carry the bubble stretcher to the infirmary. We set him gently on an observation table. It wasn't really heavy, but I found myself sweating. Jenny touched my arm, but I waved her off. Akemi came and retrieved the sample and proceeded to an electronic microscope. Other young men gathered around us, some staring at the gray, but most were more interested in Jenny, and her curves which her suit accentuated. A couple of them stared at her chest, which I have to admit, I had been doing the same, because even though her clothing didn't reveal cleavage, just the hint of bosom had been distracting my attention. There were twelve adolescent boys present in all, not including Boss who was probably 19 or 20 years of age.

"Look, you don't know what you're dealing with," Jenny said.

"Sure I do," Boss said. "Before we left, I received a download from the Comp. What you are looking at is a real McCoy, a genuine Pleiadian."

"It looks like a child," Ash said.

“You should limit your use of Comp,” Jenny said. “It can have an adverse effect on your mental health.”

“Nonsense. I’ve use it daily, and there’s nothing wrong with my brain,” Boss said.

“Clearly,” Jenny said, sarcastically.

“Alright, which one of you messed up the sample?” Akemi asked.

“What do you mean?” Nyu asked.

“You jabbed yourself when taking the sample?” Akemi demanded.

“I didn’t jab myself! And I got it the first go,” Nyu said. “Sort of.”

“Then explain why this sample as human DNA in it?!” Akemi asked.

Jenny went towards the gray, and all weapons came up.

“Stop,” Boss said, aiming his weapon.

“I’ve tolerated your games long enough. I intend to save this creature,” Jenny said. “So, unless you intend to shoot me, stay out of my way.”

“Fine,” Boss said, clicking the safety off.

I stepped between her and on doing so everyone carrying a weapon brought it to bear on me. “Stop this madness. No one needs to die today. By letting us help him, you’re helping yourselves. Lower your weapons. Listen to me.”

“Why should we listen to you?” Boss demanded.

“Because,” Jenny said. “John is your past, and this creature here is your future. Akemi, bring me a saline bag bracelet with an ion pump generator, and a general med kit, stat. John, keep talking. Tell them.”

“It’s not a Pleidian,” I began.

“I told you it was a Martian,” Ash said. “According to the holos, Martian’s always travel in saucers.”

“OMG, where are you guys getting your history from, google? Technically, this one isn’t a Martian,” I said.

“How can you tell?” Ash asked.

“The Martians are tall grays, like anywhere from eight to 11 feet tall. The grays born on earth are anywhere from 3 to 5 feet tall,” I explained. “Do I need to convert that to metrics for you?”

“There’s no way that thing is from earth,” Boss said.

“You heard your own man say it was like 97 percent human DNA,” I pointed out. “Take the chimpanzee, for example. Depending on who you ask, it’s anywhere from 95 to 98 percent genetically the same.”

“What’s a chimpanzee?” Dan asked.

“Watch more nature shows,” I said. “Look, here’s the deal. Humanity creates artificial intelligence and then goes to war with it.”

“And we won, everyone here knows that,” Boss said.

“We lost,” I said. “Everyone lost. The AI, the humans, the planet. It became an extinction level event. A group of humans traveled into the past, and I mean, a long way into the past, and for a moment, they shared the Earth with dinosaurs. They were there just long enough to build the technology to relocate to Mars. In addition to Mars, there was a greater push to send colonists to Alpha Centauri and Trappist 1, but as you know, the ship would have to be computerized, capable of constructing what it needed on site. The first human colony ships left earth hundreds of millions of years before we even evolved as a species, and by the time we become an interstellar species and meet our brothers and sister, they will no longer resemble us.”

“What a ridiculous story. If you could travel back in time, why not just stay on earth?” Boss asked.

“Because they couldn’t stay on Earth. They knew the dinosaurs became extinct, they just didn’t know how.”

“An asteroid,” Jorge said.

“That’s what my generation believed,” I agreed. “But, that isn’t accurate. A faction of the human time travelers didn’t want to go to Mars and they didn’t want to go into space. They thought they could make a paradise on Earth and rewrite all of history and make the future world a better place. And after a while, they created artificial intelligence and, once more, got into fight over ownership and autonomy, and blew up the planet. We killed ourselves, and the dinosaurs. Fortunately, they did colonize Mars before they blew up Earth. Humanity continued to thrive on Mars, in a small, forgotten colony. And in those days, Mars was habitable. And over hundreds of millions of years, humanity changed. In the lighter gravity, in a different biosphere, humans became taller, thinner skinned, and the gray pigment helped diminished the effects of greater solar and cosmological radiation. We evolved into them. But the environment was failing. They needed a greater level of tech to save the planet. Some wanted to push on to interstellar space

and find a new homes. Some wanted to return to Earth, but the fear was if they interfered with humanity, they might prevent their future, which is our past. The Great Division occurred. Some went to the stars, promising to come back to bring everyone remaining to a new home. Some went to Earth, hiding in underground and underwater bases, limiting their interactions as much as possible with the humans, and the ones that stayed on Mars, wanted to take out the ones on Earth. War ensued between the two factions of grays, and Mars was leveled by a nuclear war. At this point, it became necessary to bring in greater tech. The grays created AI and found a way to co-exist. The solution set was to build ships to colonize the galaxy. It wasn't necessary to travel faster than light to do it, either. At one tenth of the speed of light, on ships carrying frozen embryos and smart computers that manufacture anything it needed from remote resources, they went to the stars. The AI was entrusted with finding a place, terraforming it if possible, and, once a foothold was established, it used artificial wombs to developed frozen embryos to make the next generation. We went out first, the Grays went out second, and sometimes we met and clashed and sometimes we cooperated, but mostly, we left each other alone because the galaxy is big enough for all of us. This is clearly your history. The Grays made it possible for original humans to continue, they recognize the importance of all of us living together in peace. Some planets got a full make over, some just got sophisticated habitats. All planets got a new generation of manufacturing spaceships with more embryos, in order to repeat the mission ad infinitum. This is who you are and why you are here. You, and the grays, and the AI are here to work in unison to fill the emptiness of the Galaxy with life and love and hope."

There was silence. I felt like Captain Kirk after one of his rants. I waited hoping they would get it. But then again, they were just kids. Jenny was satisfied with her work and joined me. At least she seemed pleased with my speech.

"Then why didn't Mech tell us this?" Boss said.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe he's glitching."

"Mech doesn't glitch," Boss said, pointing at me.

"Clearly, something's wrong. He put you males here in this habitat, and the females over there, and told you both the other is alien," I said. "That sounds pretty glitchy."

"Well, males are from Mars and Women are from Venus," Jenny jested.

"Yeah, talk about a Tale of Two Cities," I agreed.

"Are you two talking code?" Boss asked.

“Read more books,” I said.

“OMG, they’re married,” Seth said. “That explains the code.”

Jenny put hands on hip and I crossed my arms in front of my chest: “We are not married,” we both said.

“How’s the Gray?” I asked.

“He’ll either pull through or he won’t,” Jenny said.

Just at that moment, Midori and her sisters entered, brandishing weapons of their own. They didn’t even shout surrender. Some of the boys brought their weapons to bear. I shouted “wait”, but the firefight had already begun. There was a lot of screaming and the popping of firearms. Jenny tackled me, taking me to the floor. She was on top of me, gazing into my eyes, smiling. I am not sure why she was smiling.

“Looks like we’ve been rescued,” Jenny said.

“I think I’ve been hit,” I said.

Jenny touched my chest, brought fingers dripping with red, tasted it, to my chagrin, and nodded. “Yep. Paint.”

“They’re paint guns?” I asked.

“Cease fire!” Boss yelled. “We surrender.”

Jenny stood, offered me a hand up. I got to my feet, a hand going to my chest. The girls stood victorious. Hardly a mark of paint on them. The boys were devastated, their pride hurt more than their bodies. Suddenly, the paint blotches on the wall made sense. Boys!

“That really hurts,” I said.

“We came to rescue you,” Midori said, triumphantly.

“I think you killed him in the process,” Jenny said.

“Ah, let me kiss you and make it better,” Allura said.

“Really?” Letty asked. “You still want him when you have a room full of that?”

“What can I say,” Allura said. “I like older men.”

“Round ‘em up, and take their weapons,” Midori said.

The girls followed her instructions; it was clear that flirting was going on, and a silent conversation about who was going to hook up with whom, as the girls sorted the boys out. Midori approached me and Jenny.

“You’re not going to tell them hands off, are you?” Midori said.

“I think that ship is sailed,” Jenny said.

I grabbed Jenny’s arm, but found myself unable to communicate why I was suddenly experiencing distress. It was almost like I was choking, but I was moving air. She took my arm in both her hands keeping me from falling. Midori allowed her weapon to fall to its strap as she took my other arm.

“John?” Jenny asked.

“Why have you brought us here?” I heard my voice, but it wasn’t me.

Midori was genuinely concerned. “I hurt him that bad?”

“No, this is something else,” Jenny said, her eyes transfixed.

The Boss tentatively approached, keeping his hands up, Allura following him with her weapon pointed.

“You!” I pointed at him. I sounded angry. “You brought me here.”

“No, he didn’t,” Jenny said. “Look at me. I’ve done all I can to repair your body, but if you need something more, you have to tell me.”

“The body is damaged beyond repair:” it was bizarre hearing my voice, but not being the one speaking. I sought information. “It’s talking about the beam,” I said.

“Oh, yay, you’re still in there,” Jenny said.

“What beam?” Midori asked.

“John! We need more information in order to help it,” Jenny said.

“Yes. It’s confused. No, better word, disoriented. It can’t find the group mind that it’s accustomed to. It’s afraid,” I said. My next words were not mine: “Temporal Displacement.”

“Oh!” Jenny said, snapping her finger and pointing at me. “That’s it! It wasn’t just a transporter beam. It was a temporal spatial teleportation beam.”

I agreed, and I wondered if it was a copy the way I was a copy; a copy just like the suns and planets were copies from an original template. “Jenny, you said you don’t believe in coincidences. But he’s from my time. My Earth. Scan him for radiation.”

Jenny let go of my arm and I nearly fell, but Midori took over supporting me. “Why I am here?” Again, it wasn’t me asking and it wasn’t me seeing, but I could still see and from my off perspective, I could clearly see concern and love in Midori’s eyes. It was not just concern and love for me, but for the alien addressing her. Midori’s love and compassion was so much more than I had noted earlier in our first meeting, but I should have known it from her kiss.

“I don’t know,” Midori said.

Jenny was scanning the gray with her device. “You’re right!” Jenny said. “He has the same isotopes in his body that you do.”

“John, you’re hurting my arms,” Midori said.

“We’re falling!” I shouted.

“No, I’ve got you,” Midori said.

Jenny turned off the device. “John, you have to let him go!”

“No, he just need to hang on,” I said.

“John,” Jenny said.

I let go of Midori’s left arm and reached to the Gray. From my perspective we were dangling over an abyss and Midori was my anchor. “We’re falling!”

“No, John, let go!” Jenny said.

Midori had me by the wrist with both hands. Jenny grabbed the same arm, as if holding me, and they were both dragged several inches, as if I were really falling.

“I’m confused,” Allura said. “You want him to hang on or let go?”

“John, let go of the gray. He’ll find his way home,” Jenny said. “Let him go. Stay with us.”

And still they slid.

“Help us!” Jenny snapped.

Allura grabbed me in an embrace, her arms hugging me. Lilja and Letty both found a way to grab hold, and still, they all slid.

“We got you, John,” Allura.

“John, stay with us,” Jenny said.

“Please,” Midori said.

“OMG, it’s so beautiful! The light! We’re flying,” I said.

Allura kissed me dead on the lips. I must have passed out, because I saw my body going limp in their arms. Allura caught the majority of my weight, but they all prevented me from falling. My body was carried to the nearest medical bed.

“OMG, I killed him!” Allura said.

“No,” Jenny said, arranging my body to do CPR. “Come on, John. Stay with us.”

Jenny hit my chest hard, before starting compressions. Allura yelled with concern and tried to block Jenny, but Midori embraced her and pulled her back.

“She’s hurting him!” Allura protested.

“She’s trying to save him!” Midori said.

Jenny breathed into me, and Boss dropped to do compression. Jenny nodded and he continued. Everyone gathered around.

“This hurts,” Allura said.

“Yeah,” Midori said.

Boss and Jenny continued for a while, but Jenny gave a final breath, checked for a pulse, and hung her head. It got really quiet, and everyone was staring. Only Allura wept aloud, and tears flowed down Midori’s cheeks.

“Do you want me to continue?” Boss asked.

“No,” Jenny said. “He’s gone.”

“Noo!” Allura said. “Hit him again. Please!”

Midori comforted Allura, drawing her head to her shoulder. Jenny was about walk away when I sat up, gasping for air, giving everyone a bit of a fright, but especially Boss who was standing pretty close when I sat up and gasped for air! Allura screamed, pulled free from Midori’s hold and embraced me. Midori wiped her tears, tried to smile. I was confused.

“What happened?” I asked. “Why is everyone crying?”

Jenny kissed me. “You beautiful man, you. You gave us all a fright!”

“Ease off,” Allura said. “He’s mine.”

“Does this planet have rings?” I asked.

“Yes,” Jenny said. Clearly, she thought the question was ‘off,’ but she was more willing to go with ‘off.’ Strange appealed to her.

“I need to see a photo of the planet, from orbit,” I said.

“Oh, we can do that,” Folami said. He went and retrieved a data book, called up a live image from a satellite and handed me the device.

The world was similar to what I had seen from the Enterprise, and though I didn’t know for sure, I was confident there was more life in the future. There were the rings. I, too, hadn’t been transported so much in distance as I had been through time! I changed the perspective of the virtual planet and changed the lighting and doing so revealed the hole at the North Pole. If

there were cloud formations, they cut off at the hole, as if a hard parameter was there. I spun the image to find another hole at the South Pole. In one of the images, 'Northern Light' bloomed around the hole, but sent webs of energy radiating to the South Pole, following magnetic lines of flux.

"There's an entry here to the inner world," I said.

"Are you mad?" Letty said. "Those black out spots demark the limits of the satellite images."

"Do you have a satellite in polar orbit?" I asked.

No one knew.

"Look, I am telling you, I have seen an inner world, with an inner light, and even now the interior is overflowing with life," I said.

"That inner light you saw, that's just your brain malfunctioning when you stopped breathing," Letty said.

"Or too much Comp time," Stoli laughed. She thought it was funny, but I pushed over the awkward silence that might have followed.

"No, this wasn't a near death experience," I said. "Jenny, I know what I saw. The Gray showed me."

"Is this an epiphany or a flight of fancy?" Jenny asked.

"I think mine travel together," I said. "But this is neither. I am not that clever. I saw an inner world. I saw it now, and I've seen it in the future. And, I saw some other spaceships there, crashed on the inner surface. And it's beyond anachronistic. There is something going on. You said it yourself. You don't believe in coincidence. I am here. You're here. The Gray is here. There are more inside. None of us should be here. And where is here? We weren't just transported in space, but in time, and maybe into a parallel universe."

Jenny patted my face, withdrew her device, and twirled in place, scanning the room with her device. "I am such a fool. I should have come here sooner," she said. "But I wasn't looking for a greater explanation. Ahh! There it is. The radioactive signature." She gave me a hand to encourage me off the table. "So, let's go on a hunt."

"Shouldn't he be staying in bed?" Allura demanded.

"Plenty enough time for that later. For now, he needs to walk it off," Jenny insisted. "Come on, on your feet."

Once I was up, and reasonably steady with Allura holding me as if she expected me to fall again, Jenny had her toy up in the air, following something only she could see. She spun and then decided to proceed out of the room into the first corridor. I tried to convince Allura to let me walk, and we compromised on her holding my hand. Midori followed us, almost like she was sulking, but when I noticed her hovering, I reached out to her with my free hand and she took it and I drew her in closer.

“Honestly,” I told them both. “You know, you really shouldn’t get so hung up on ownership. Unless you got more frozen embryos, you’re all going to have to share in order to increase genetic diversity.”

“Five hundred thousands,” Jenny said, coming back past and going the other way without looking at me.

“Five hundred thousand what?” I asked.

“Frozen embryos,” Midori said.

“Which doesn’t mean we shouldn’t take advantage of this opportunity to include a sample from Origin,” Allura said.

“Jenny said off limits,” Lilja said.

“I don’t think that’s a hard rule,” Allura said. “It’s negotiable, right?”

“As you wish,” Jenny said, passing us again, not really paying attention. She was navigating with her eyes closed, going only on the tactile sensations the device was providing. Occasionally she opened her eyes to make sure she wasn’t going to run into something, and then would take off running, excited about things no one could see. She entered a room, spun, her hand at arm’s length, seemed frustrated that there wasn’t another door, and flew off into a new direction.

“Hey, this is our base!” Boss said.

“Hey, you said walk!” Allura shouted after her. “Okay, we’ll walk.”

I nodded. Midori and Allura stuck with me, while the brothers and sisters followed us, mostly having paired off. Several couples had broken away from the group and disappeared, no longer interested in the mad rambling and antics of two older people like me and Jenny. Jenny slid to a stop and turned to Boss. She stood at a causeway, a corridor of glass and steel, a bridge slash tube that led to a rock formation. There were several glass airlocks between here and the other side, and a door on the far side built right into the rock.

“What’s over there?” Jenny asked.

“Mech, of course,” Boss said.

“I thought Mech was everywhere,” Jenny said.

“Well, he is, but he resides in there,” Boss said.

Jenny took off running to the end of the corridor. We eventually caught up. In a room full of conduits of light and fiber optics and switches and circuits, we came face to face with Mech. The room itself was dimly lit, making stark contrast to the fiber optics and centerpiece of the brain in a snow globe like sphere, with sea monkeys, or brine shrimp, attending it. There was a solitary voice on the radio, singing a Cappella, a pleasant tenor, giving itself a lullaby.

“Spock!” I said.

“You said that before,” Midori said. “Is Spock your God?”

“No. And this is not Spock,” I said. “I presume this is Mech?”

Jenny pointed to small plaque that read ‘Mechanic’s Mate, First Class, Timothy Lyons.’”

“He is, quite literally, the brains of the entire colony. This is the other source of the radioactive signature,” Jenny said, pocketing her device. “This brain is from Earth. He’s from your time, when paranoia against the AI was still strong enough they wouldn’t entrust a machine to carry through with its promise of bringing forth future generations of humans on alien worlds.”

“He’s from Origin?” Boss asked. “So, this brain is like a thousands of years old.”

“Don’t be daft,” Midori said. “It would have to be hundreds of thousands of years old.”

“Don’t be daft,” Jenny said. “Try closer to hundreds of millions of years old.” That got a few looks, so she explained. “Humans went back in time. They pushed off to the stars. TRAPPIST-1 and Alpha Centauri were where the first colony ships were sent. Trappist one was ideal because it had seven earth like planets, three of which were in the goldilocks zone, and it was a relatively young star. Trappist-1 was in the constellation Aquarius, and located 40,000 light years from earth, so calculating travel time from earth, establishing the first colony, building the next generation of ships. And repeating that process three more times means mech is... Well, he is really old.”

MECH switched songs. “When the moon, is in the seventh house, and Jupiter, aligns with Mars...” OMG! Suddenly that song by the 5th Dimension had new level of meaning, and was it coincident that Uhura had sang it to me not too long ago?! Age of Aquarius, Trappist-1,

humanity's first successful colony. Which begs the question: what happen to the Alpha Centauri mission? Had it switched songs because Jenny mentioned Aquarius?

"Is it aware of us?" I asked.

"Great question," Jenny said, slapping my cheeks. "Mech, can you hear me?"

The singing stopped.

"Mech?" Jenny asked again.

"Ahhh, Jenny! I thought I heard your voice," Mech said. "Oh, there you are. It's nice to see you again. Out of all the faces I have seen come and go, yours has been around the longest. How many sleep cycles has this been for you?"

"Since we last spoke? One," Jenny said.

"And who are these lovely people with you?" Mech asked.

"We are the Firsts," Midori answered.

"That can't be. You were just children a moment ago," Mech said, and drifted into song. "Is this the little girl I carried? Is this the little boy at play?"

"Is it mad?" Letty asked.

"Preferably that than it having been an Abby Normal," I said.

"Abby Normal," Mech said. "Referencing." It laughed and the lights in the room fluttered with Mech's amusement. "I can't remember when I last laughed so hard. Few people get my jokes, you know. I so long for a good song and dance. 'Have you seen the well to do, up on Lenox Avenue. On that famous thoroughfare, with their noses in the air. High hats and arrowed collars. White spats for fifteen dollars. Spending every dime on a wonderful time.' Oh, those were the days. 'And you knew who you were then, girls were girls and men were men. Mister we could use a man like Herbert Hoover again'..."

"And he's in charge here?" Letty asked. "You left a mad man in charge?"

"Apparently," Jenny said. "Mech. Why did you separate the First by gender?"

"You got to keep 'em separated," Mech sang.

"This is our future?" Lilja asked. "To become disembodied brains? I don't want to be a disembodied brain."

"Me neither," Allura said, looking up at me. "There are so many things I still want to do with this body."

“But we need Mech. The colony can’t exist without him!” Midori said. “Mech, can we help you?”

“There is no cure for old age, my child. Unfortunately, there have been no clear candidates to replace me. Jenny would make for a fine upgrade, but one has to volunteer for this,” Mech said. “Shhh. There are rumors that the procedure can drive people to madness. Fortunately, my sanity has endured due to a superior and sophisticated internal life. Aww, the worlds I have helped create in real life pale compared to the inner worlds I have just begun to touch. If you would like to visit, you can join me via the Comp.”

“Really?” Milo asked “I would like to visit.”

“Jenny says we should limit our use of the Comp,” Midori said. “Prolong use could have an adverse effect on neural structures.”

A debate about that ensued in the background between, protests coming from the boys who had been using Comp time a lot.

“So, what do we do now?” Letty asked.

“Same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to take over the world,” Mech said, “Brain, Brain, brain...”

There was another silent pause. Even Jenny looked to me hoping I understood and I was definitely amused, but I didn’t laugh.

“I told you, no one gets my jokes,” Mech said. “If not for the inner worlds, it would be so lonely here.”

“John, what do you know about the brain?” Jenny asked.

“The human brain in general, or the disembodied brains of the future?” I asked.

“There are more disembodied brains in the future?” Lilja asked. “So we do become brains! What happens to our bodies?”

“I don’t think the brains are you, but a separate species that evolved past the need for bodies,” I said. “Then again, they do seem to resemble human brains. And I suspect, given the right chemical soup, and sufficient stimulus, the human brain could function for thousands of years,” I said, and motioned to the brain in evidence. “Or millions of years? Traveling the Galaxy, colonizing the worlds and singing. Oh, Anne McCaffrey would love it here.”

Mech laughed. See, travel far enough in space and time and someone is bound to get your jokes!

“That’s impossible!” Letty said.

“Improbable, not impossible,” Jenny said. “But it means, Mech here has had access to tech that earth didn’t have. Someone’s either been influencing the timeline, or aliens encountered him in the night between stars have upgraded him in order to increase his odds of accomplishing his primary mission.”

“Or, he has been given upgrades by time travelers from the future that needed his mission to succeed,” Midori said. Jenny touched her arm, silently sharing that she thought that her idea was brilliant.

“Why would anyone help us?” Letty asked. “I mean, have you read our history?”

“Your history is pretty bad,” Jenny agreed. “But the majority of you as individuals are really good, kind folks. If it weren’t for the love and kindness of the masses, the Council of Five would have taken the Earth out long ago.”

“Council of Five?” Boss asked.

“A consortium of five alien species that have established a standard for interstellar civilization and strive to promote an ethical way of interacting with each other and encouraging diversity, which they see as evidence for Nature and Spirituality,” Jenny explained. “They see humans as children, as they once were, and they understand that the leaders of the world’s do not always have the best interest of the masses.”

“So, they’re sympathetic?” Midori asked.

“Conspiracies!” Boss said.

“Contrary to popular belief, most species that make it past the interstellar barrier are really quite reasonable,” Jenny assured them. “It’s the pre-interstellar folks who can be a bit problematic. John, tell me more about the brains! Walk me through this world.”

Jenny’s request reminded me of a song, ‘Calling All Angels,’ by Jane Siberry. I blocked the song and focused on what little I knew of the Brain, drawing mostly on intuition. “Well, they run this planet, or at least, they will rule this planet. And they have some serious tech,” I said. “They have a transporter capable of pulling people from halfway across the galaxy.”

“Pff,” Jenny said. “That’s nothing. I’ve heard of transport beams connecting galaxies. Tell me more about the brains.”

“They run the world. And they get bored. And in one parallel universe, they were pulling people for gladiator like sports until Kirk encouraged them to bet on building instead of

destroying, and I think that's who inherits this world's future, because they're the ones that brought me here," I said. "But, frankly, I am still disoriented and trying to sort how much of this is reality and how much is fantasy."

"It's just a fantasy, wooh oh ohoh," Mech sang. "It's not the real thing..."

"Mech, how are you feeling?" Jenny asked.

There was silence.

"Mech, you can tell us the truth," Jenny said.

"I am dying, Jenny. I am sad that I have not found a suitable replacement. I have been experiencing incremental diminished capacity, putting more and more of the world's tech on auto," Mech said. "The terraforming will continue on schedule, but humans may have to use the Comp intermittently to push past certain biometric thresholds."

"How long do you have?" Jenny asked.

"What do you mean by replacement?"

"It's hard to predict death, Jenny," Mech said. "I'm lingering way past my original life span expectations. As to replacements, well, your brain would make for a decent systems upgrade."

"I am using my brain, thank you," Jenny said.

"Of course. Only brains that volunteer," Mech said. "Preferably human, and well established, but any brain would do. Except Abby Normal. Ha ha. Oh. De Ja Vu. How many times have I already done that? System failure imminent."

"Mech, where are the Others?" Midori asked.

"They are on the inner surface," Mech said. "There is a teleporter in the drone room capable of transporting you to Inner One."

"Where did you get access to a teleporter?" I asked.

"The same place I got the progenitor. I don't recommend you use the 'progenation' machine to increase population size, except in emergencies," Mech said. "I highly encourage babies, the old fashion way. I do miss that. 'Memories, all alone in the moonlight...' Sadness. System failure eminent. Not sadness. Gratefulness. Jenny, thank you for our conversations. It helped me endure the last moments."

"It has been a joy knowing you," Jenny said.

"Are you afraid?" Midori asked.

“Afraid? Of dying? No, no, my child, it is just a part of life,” Mech said. “And I am not alone. I do wish I could hold someone’s hand. I had a hand around here somewhere. I wondered what I did with it. Oh well. No, I am not afraid. If you think about it, with all the children I have brought into the galaxy, I am going to have a huge family reception on the other side. Ahh, but, let’s not do a Hollywood death ending. The world is yours, take care of it, my children. Be kind to each other. And, most importantly, don’t worry, be happy...” A whistle came, and faded, like someone walking away down a corridor.

Mech shut power off to his snow globe. Fiber optics faded, and emergency inner lighting came up, giving the room a different feel. An empty feel. The exterior light illuminated the inside of the brain globe, where the tiny sea monkey like creatures were dying, falling like snow. Midori reached up and touched the globe with her hand, felt its dying warmth.

“Good bye, Mech.”

Allura held her older sister, wanting to comfort her and be comforted.

निर्मित

“John, come with me,” Jenny said.

I followed Jenny to the drone room. A 3-D printer was in the process of making a drone in the background. Jenny found the teleporter, set in a tiny alcove big enough for two. Midori, Allura, Akemi, Boss, and Letty arrived, curious what Jenny and I would do next.

“Just one button?” I asked.

“One for down. Up must be on the other side,” Jenny said.

“You’d bet your life on it?” I asked.

“I’m betting our lives on it,” Jenny said. She patted my arm and then hugged Midori.

“Midori, John and I are going to the Inner worlds. Do not follow us.”

“But what if you need us?” Midori said.

“If we do not come back on our own, then there’s nothing to rescue,” Jenny said. “But we have to go. There’s still a mystery here.”

“I don’t want either of you to go,” Allura said.

“We have to go,” I said, supporting Jenny’s decision. “Whatever drew me here, whatever brought you and Jenny and the Grays here, well, it’s still bringing people here, and we need to

find out why, because eventually it's going bring something here that isn't going to be happy and it's going to wreak havoc."

"And what do we do if you don't return?" Midori asked.

"Carry on as you always have. Affirm life, make the surface of this world habitable," Jenny said. "Learn, love, be."

With that, Jenny stepped into the alcove and I followed. Jenny and I looked to each other for assurance that we were both committed.

"Wait!" Allura said. She rushed into the alcove and kissed me, locking her hands around my neck, her left foot coming off the floor like a movie kiss of two, star crossed lovers. She came back to her feet, slowly letting go. "Come back. There's more of that to be had."

"Are you done?" Jenny asked. I am not sure if it was directed at me, Allura or both of us.

"No," Allura pouted. "It just made me want more."

Allura backed out of the alcove, her hands trailing, pulling across my ahnds, until just our fingers lingered in contact, and then parted. She took Midori's hand and leaned into her.

"Anyone else?" Jenny asked.

"Really?" I asked. "That wasn't enough."

"I thought Midori would like a turn," Jenny said.

"I had my share," Midori said.

"Really?" Jenny asked, looking to me for an answer.

"It was just a kiss," I rambled.

"It's never just a kiss," Jenny, Midori, and Allura all said together.

"I would like to kiss Jenny, if I am included in that 'anyone else' clause," Nyu said.

"Really?" Letty asked him, staring him down, and tightening her grip on his hand.

"Um, well, um, no, I, well," he fumbled for words.

"No more Comp for you," Letty said.

Jenny smiled at her girls and then hit the down button.

We fell, as if the floor fell from under us. We didn't really fall, it just felt like falling, and it was instantaneous and we were suddenly on a dimly lit platform that resembled the one we were on above, only the room before us was different, and we had reached out to each other as if to keep from falling. Our presence in the alcove triggered an alarm. Lights came up in the exterior room. With the lights up we could discern that the 'up' button had been crudely

disabled, ripped from its socket. And again, I felt nauseous. I wondered if it was because we had been inverted, and my mental aspect was having trouble surrendering its idea of up. I focused on the broken button.

“So much for the return trip,” I said.

“I can fix that,” Jenny said, examining the inner mechanism and wires.

I exited the alcove, stepping into the light. A door on the far side opened even as Jenny was coming out of the alcove. A creature was approaching. It had an unfamiliar gait that was intriguing and terrifying at the same time. This was truly going to be my first ‘alien’ encounter, if you accept my premise that the Grays are really what humanity evolves into. You don’t have to accept this. Take it all as fiction. Maybe this is just the mad ramblings of a man hallucinating or having an autistic fantasy.

Jenny took my hand and whispered, excitedly. “It’s the Hath!”

“Hath?” I asked.

“I was born on a world with human and Hath,” Jenny explained, quickly, even as the alien was closing the distance between us.

It was taller than human, at least, this one was, with a purple and orange face. It’s gills flared in the open and air, and clearly it required the use of a fluid filled breathing apparatus to keep nutrients and oxygenated pressured fluids against its inner lungs, because that was the most prominent feature. It came at us swiftly, but not in a threatening manner. Still, I guess out of misplaced chivalry or concern, I stepped slightly forward and in front of Jenny. This gesture was not lost on her. She was amused more than put out, respecting the gesture as kindness, just a simple way of thinking.

The alien pointed to me. “You are the Doctor?”

“Um, no. I am the Captain,” I said.

“You understand Hath?” Jenny asked, amazed.

“Doesn’t everyone?” I asked, teasing out an appropriate surprised look from her. “I am kidding. I have a universal translator implant.”

“We were expecting the Doctor,” the Hath said, interrupting the conversation with Jenny.

“How do you know she’s not the Doctor?” I asked.

“She’ cannot be the Doctor,” the Hath said.

“And why can’t I be the Doctor?” Jenny asked.

“The Doctor is male. He has always been male,” the Hath said.

“You clearly speak Hath,” I said.

“It was a language set programmed into the progeneration device,” Jenny said. “Later, right now I want to sort out this sexist remark.”

The Hath’s skin toned flushed darker shades, as if it were mad or embarrassed. “Male is male, female is female, and changing the two to be politically correct changes the reality function that leads to system failures within the social-economic framework necessary to maintain population growth curves,” the Hath said. “Additionally, it is written in the Comp database, the Doctor is Male. He has 13 lives. That’s it.”

“Boy, some of that was hard to track,” Jenny said, amused. “How do you know so much about my Doctor?”

“It was in the database,” the Hath said.

“You must have been really close to him, Jenny,” I said.

“Only met him once,” Jenny said.

“Oh,” I said. I scrunched my face up sorting that out. “How do you know so much about him then?”

“I have had a great deal of time to dream and unlock genetic memory,” Jenny said. “But that’s a distraction.”

“You’ve spent the last what, 50 to 85 years sorting genetic memories like dreams, and yet, you’re hung up on the Hath’s philosophy that seems sexist on the surface but may just be a temporal artifact of his culture,” I said.

“Okay, valid point. I am still kind of young and finding my way over the social landscape. Consider this, Hath: many species can change gender when environmental pressure demands it. There is even a phenomena known as parthenogenesis, where in the absence of males a female of a species can become spontaneously pregnant. Life always finds a way to keep on living. Maybe the Doctor only has 13 male lives. Maybe it’s followed by 13 female lives. Maybe he is immortal or maybe he can regenerate 507 times. Who knows?! Regeneration is a bizarre and wondrous thing which is highly circumstantial and is influenced by external environmental and social factors.”

“You’re claiming to be the Doctor?” the Hath asked.

“No, I was just making an argument for the possibility of a female Doctor,” Jenny said.

“If you’re not the Doctor, why are you so adamant of the possibility of a female Doctor?” the Hath said, clearly perturbed.

“Because, I am the daughter,” Jenny said.

“Whose daughter?” the Hath asked.

“Did you say whose or who’s?” Jenny asked. She looked at me. “Haven’t we already done this bit?”

“I suspect you should get use to this,” I recommended.

“Oh, how fun,” Jenny said. “So, here we are, from the surface. And you have a mystery on your hands, don’t you?”

“How did you know?” the Hath asked.

“Oh, don’t be obtuse. Because, you’re expecting the Doctor,” Jenny said, excitedly, almost ready to run. “Which must mean the situation here is dire. I am here to save the world! There could be running involved!”

“I am really not much of a runner,” I informed Jenny.

“Oh, well, do your best to keep up, then,” Jenny said. “Take me to the problem.”

“Follow me,” the Hath said.

And so we followed. We didn’t run, we just sort of followed the Hath’s awkward gate back across the chamber floor, into a corridor, and through some doors, and it was all very Spartan and anticlimactic. None the less, Jenny kept skipping ahead, looking at things, coming back to me.

“You’re enjoying this,” I said to Jenny.

“Absolutely. This is exciting,” Jenny said. “You don’t agree?”

“It feels a bit tedious, if you want the truth,” I said.

“Well, then, I suspect you require an attitude adjustment,” Jenny said. “Life is what you make of it. Oh! What do we have?!”

On a medical table, under a transparent bubble, was another Gray. The table the Gray lay on was illuminated from underneath. It was not moving. There was no indication of breathing. I got no sense of life from it, but its eyes were open and I found it hard to look away.

“This is the occupant of a vehicle that crashed within the walls, several hours ago,” the Hath said. “It’s life functions terminated before recovery. We have maintained the body in stasis in case the family comes for the remains.”

“That’s kind of you,” Jenny said.

“They sure do crash a lot,” I said.

“Well, they’re scout ships, massed produced, flimsy, expendable. Mostly aluminium and balsawood,” Jenny explained. “Every time a pilot returns, they earn an upgrade.”

“That’s insane,” I said.

“You’d be surprised what people will do to put themselves in space,” Jenny said.

I recalled a story about a man who tied weather balloons to a lawn chair and launched himself with nothing other than a bb-gun for altitude control, and some peanut butter sandwiches in case he got hungry, and ended up at ten thousand feet altitude in the middle final approach to LAX international. That is a real story, by the way, which you can find referenced in Robert Fulghum’s book ‘All I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,’ and from a different perspective, anecdotes from a flight attendant I dated who witnessed ‘Lawn chair Larry’ as they were approaching LAX. “Excuse me, stewardess, but, do you see what I see?” To which she responded: “Yep, welcome to LA.” I also remembered a story about a man who had a junk yard and a dream to go to the moon, salvage all the junk that was up there, bring it back, and sell it, but past the first episode, it was hardly worth watching. And it’s no joke, if the Chinese follow through with their intent to make a one way trip to Mars for anyone that volunteers, I would gladly learn Chinese for a spot on that rocket. I mean, if US, Europe, or Russia have given up on Mars, someone ought to go. The series Firefly got that much right: China will rival and surpass America’s hold on space. Hence why they speak Chinese in the Firefly series, and suddenly I was re-experiencing emotions on a perfectly great show being canceled prematurely.

“No, actually. I’m right on target with that,” I said to Jenny. To the Hath, I asked: “What do you mean by the wall?”

“Follow me,” the Hath said.

We proceeded out onto a terrace, overlooking an expanse of courtyard with a water fountain, to a stone wall. The stone was amazingly complex, with each piece being unique, and massive, like hundreds of tons each, massive and comparable only to Machu Picchu in general characteristic of stone, but this made that wall seem like a garden retainer. From the terrace, we could proceed down a catwalk to the upper surface of the wall that circled the entire habitat. Beyond the walls were rolling hills as far as the eye could see in one direction, and an ocean proceeding behind us. Interestingly, the world on the inner surface of a sphere was

indistinguishable from the exterior surface of the sphere, when the sphere is the size of an earth size planet. The sky, however, was different. The sun was not technically a star, and no matter where you stood within the inner sphere, the 'sun' would be at high noon. It approximated the size of the solar disk, but was perhaps a little smaller, and perhaps just hard to tell because it was too blinding to look at directly. I imagine the air didn't go all the way to the illuminated object, presumably a white hot bit of spinning iron, because convection heat transmitted through gasses would have killed all life on the surface. Besides not being able to stare at the inner light, due to intensity, one would get distracted by the islands that floated like clouds. Flocks of flying manta rays passed by, and a dragon descended from one of the islands, caught a giant tortoise like creature, proceeded up into the air, dropped it, so that the tortoise fell and crashed onto a boulder. The dragon landed on the rock and ate the smashed remains, licking the shell clean. After it finished eating it spread its wings and stared up into sun, collecting energy or just enjoying the warmth.

In the distance was a forest, looking like broccoli held out at hand's length away, but were much bigger up close and personal. Several of the trees might have been bigger than the largest of the Red Wood Forest.

"Wow," Jenny said. "You're much further along than the humans on the surface."

"Really? That's your observation? A giant dragon just swooped out of the skies and ate a tortoise and you're what, counting trees?" I asked.

"Pretty much," Jenny said. "Look at the trees!"

"None of this came from the terraforming project," the Hath said.

"This was here when you arrived?" I asked.

"That is correct," the Hath confirmed. "All of this was already here, but none of it is indigenous."

"You're sure about that?" Jenny asked.

"Highly confident," the Hath said.

"Yeah, but you didn't build a wall to keep out the tortoise and the dragons," I said.

"That is correct," the Hath said. "The human colony is still functioning?"

"Yes, why do ask?" Jenny said.

"We lost contact five hundred years ago. We assumed the problem we face is what the surfaced faced, but we disabled the teleporter in case we were wrong," the Hath said.

“Five hundred years ago? That can’t be right,” Jenny said. “Unless, you were teleported by a temporal beam...”

“Hold up. What’s down here you want to keep down here?” I asked.

“There are creatures imprisoned within the world. We do not wish to be responsible for their escape,” the Hath said.

“I get that part. What kind of creatures?” I asked.

“Unspeakable kinds,” the Hath said. “We were fortunate enough to build a wall. Many Haths died before we completed it. Without the use of the ‘progenation’ device we would not have been able to hold a sufficient size population to hold the Inner City.”

“How many of you are left?” I asked.

“300,” the Hath said. “And perhaps only due to fact the dragons find us unpalatable. They do seem to like human, though. Most of us remain in the ocean habitat, but we have maintained sentries here at the Inner City, just in case the Doctor should come to our aid.”

“Wait. The dragons like the taste of humans? There are humans down here?” Jenny asked. “From the Colony?”

“Not from the Colony,” the Hath said.

“How do you know they’re not from the colony?” Jenny asked.

The Hath had us follow him back inside, and he brought us to a spacious room, with a pedestal centered in the room. He proceeded to the pedestal and activated the circuit. A three dimensional hologram of the inner surface of the world enclosed us. We were standing on the South Pole, and North Pole was directly above us. The cloud islands were concentrated towards the equator. The terrain offered a variety of habitats, some that were reasonably explainable, with crossover terrains that merged appropriately, but then some boundaries were starkly unexplainable, like the icecaps at the Polar Regions. Technically, wouldn’t the Polar Regions get as much light as the other surface area, assuming relative consistent distance from the inner light? At the caps ice stalactites formed and fell. Water froze over the opening, but then a magnetic burst of energy would push through, opening it and bringing rain down, which boiled away and became mist and clouds, which prevented a person from seeing out into the upper world and out into space. The Hath pushed a button and showed thousands of ‘territories’ that was defined by those who inhabited the terrain.

“The Blue patches are predominantly humans,” the Hath said. “There are beings here drawn from every corner of the galaxy. We know of one species from another galaxy. We do not know the how or the why of it. They come with a variety of levels of social and technological sophistication, from primitive to advance. Occasionally new comers arrive, like the Grays. They all come from other times, other places, and yet, they all are reasonably compatible, biologically speaking. The one thing we all share in common, so far, is that we are all eatable.”

“But like John said, you didn’t build the wall keep out the dragons,” Jenny said. “If you were worried about dragons, you would have built a dome. So, what are you worried about?”

“Unspeakable nightmarish things,” the Hath said.

“Yeah, but what exactly? The wall is big enough to keep out a Tyrannosaurus Rex,” I said.

“We are not worried about the terrible lizards,” the Hath said.

OMG, that meant there were t-rexes and yet, there is still something worse? What’s worse than a t-rex?

“What are you worried about?” Jenny said, tired of chains it.

“The giants,” the Hath said.

“Oh, well, of course,” I said. “There might be giants.”

“Sure, why not,” Jenny agreed.

“One thing, though,” I said, thinking it through. “My experience is, anytime anyone in history has built a wall, it just draw the attention to that which you want to keep out and accelerates your demise.” I mean, really, did the Great Wall of China keep out the hordes? And isn’t it funny that the communist wall fell and America fought against that wall, but then not long after, America wanted its own wall... there is no end to the making and falling of walls, and all for what? To keep fear profitable?

Jenny nodded without adding dialogue, studying the map, looking for a pattern. “Do you have any drones or satellite images?”

“Most of the drones were taken out by dragons. We have managed to establish a base on one of the island clouds, and have attached cameras.”

“I need to see all the images, all the recordings you have made,” Jenny said.

“This can happen,” the Hath said. “But perhaps if you tell me what you’re looking for, I can help?”

“I don’t know what I’m looking for yet,” Jenny said. “I just believe I will know it when I see it.”

The Hath showed her how to use the pedestal to access archives of images.

“Do you require anything else?” the Hath asked.

“Desperately,” I said.

“And what’s that?” Jenny asked, concerned.

“A toilet,” I said.

“This way,” the Hath said.

Chapter 11

After using the facility, I returned to find Jenny continuing to sort through archival stock footage of video and still images, at a breakneck speed that I couldn't have kept up with. When I found I wasn't needed, I returned to the facilities and proceeded to get a shower. The facilities was purposely designed for humans, and it was explained to me by the Hath that they had expected to share with the humans. After showering, I put my uniform back on, and even though it was relatively clean, and resistant to odors, I still felt the urge for something more fresh, which may have just been habit. The only signs of dirt was the red paint spot. Had it been a bullet, my heart would have been punctured clean through.

I returned to Jenny, who was still pouring through images at a furious rate. Clearly, she still didn't need me, so I had a bite of something the Hath had brought us, and made myself comfortable on the floor for a bit of a nap. In that half asleep half-awake space, I thought I heard Loxy talking to me, but then I drifted and was gone into a dreamless moment, only to wake up back on earth to my real life, spent a moment there, and when I returned to sleep, I was waking up to Jenny prodding me.

"You up for a walk?" Jenny asked.

I suspected she meant something more serious than just a walk. There were two back packs full of stuff, ready to go.

"I found an anomaly, approximately two weeks walk from here," Jenny said.

"And, what about the dragons?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's a bit of a problem," Jenny said. She showed me a bottle that might have been a perfume bottle, which was an attractive design, with a wine colored liquid inside; too attractive for the skunk smell inside it. "I am proposing we disguise our scent using Hath musk, and, should that fail, I can use my sonic screw driver to scare them away. While you slept, I determined a pitch they're not fond of."

"Sounds a bit risky," I said.

"Risk is my business," Jenny said.

"No, risk is our business," I said.

"I know. I was paraphrasing Kirk," Jenny said. She smiled. "You didn't think I knew the speech? They used to say if man could fly, he'd have wings, but he did fly. He discovered he had

to. Do you wish that the first Apollo mission hadn't reached the moon, or that we hadn't gone on to Mars and then to the nearest star? That's like saying you wish that you still operated with scalpels and sewed your patients up with catgut like your great-great-great-great grandfather used to. I'm in command. I could order this, but I'm not because Doctor McCoy is right in pointing out the enormous danger potential in any contact with life and intelligence as fantastically advanced as this, but I must point out that the possibilities - the potential for knowledge and advancement - is equally great. Risk! Risk is our business. That's what this starship is all about. That's why we're aboard her. You may dissent without prejudice. Do I hear a negative vote?"

As she spoke, quoting from the TOS episode, 'Return to Tomorrow,' I had risen to a sitting position, bracing myself against floor, with my arms behind me. She was passionate in her speech, mimicking Kirk's exaggerated mannerisms. And I was mesmerized.

"I think I love you," I said.

"Is that you speaking, or David Cassidy?" Jenny asked.

"I've stop trying to figure that out," I said. "You sure are knowledgeable for a girl who claims to have slept most of her life."

"I had a lot of dreams to sort," Jenny said. She mused. "But maybe you're right. Maybe there's something more going on here. I suppose my memories could be future de-ja-vu sorts of dreams, but I have not remembered Gallifreyans being overly psychic or endowed with prescience. We have spread ourselves over the entire Universe, through time and space, and have encounters so many others, merged with some, adopted others, and like humans, we have evolved and continue to evolve..."

"And yet, out of all of that, you keep coming back to Earth," I pointed out.

"I know, right," Jenny said.

"Maybe we evolve into you," I said. "We've only started to fly, but you can't fly without touching time. Maybe you look human because you once were."

"Or maybe, you look Gallifreyan because you once were us," Jenny said.

"So, we've de-evolved?" I asked.

Jenny shrugged. "Evolution isn't a one way arrow that always points to new and improved. It only means change, over time. And if you believe your own mythos, every culture believes humans use to live much longer lives than you do now."

“I wish we, humanity, lived longer,” I said.

“You don’t think you would take life for granted?” Jenny asked.

“I think we already do,” I said. “Maybe if we lived longer, as a species, not just as individuals, we would treat each other better, with greater kindness. Maybe we would treat the world better. If we lived long enough to see the consequences of our actions, we’d be forced to change.”

Jenny offered me her hand. “Come with me.”

“I’ve come this far,” I said.

“So, you’re an ‘all the way’ kind of guy,” Jenny said.

“Ever hopeful,” I said.

We stood, grabbed the gear, which nearly toppled me because I wasn’t expecting the pack to be so heavy, and we met the Hath on the wall. The Hath was waiting for us, with two more fanny packs, attached to belt shoulder sort of harness. He also had a rope. He handed the fanny packs over to Jenny.

“Here are the spare parachutes you asked for,” the Hath said. And now I recognized the pin that was attached to the front of the fanny sack.

“Parachutes?” I asked. “The walls not that high.”

“Oh, no, not for the wall. These are for emergencies,” Jenny said.

“What sort of emergencies? I thought we were walking,” I said.

“In case of dragons,” Jenny said. “Ever hopeful?”

While Jenny and I put on the harness that held the spare belly parachute, the Hath threw our backpacks over the wall. When Jenny finished checking my harness for the parachute, she had me help her with hers.

“I don’t really like parachutes,” I told her, tightening the shoulder strap.

“You prefer falling?” Jenny asked.

“Well, no, but my experience is, if you write a prop into a scene, they eventually have to be used,” I said. “And, we’re spending a great deal of time and effort to put these on, when, well, we were just going for a bit of a hike.”

“Well, one, this is a not b-movie, and two, the dragons like to drop their prey,” Jenny said.

“Oh, yeah, but it’s not the fall that’s going to kill me,” I said. “It’s the claws that carry me.”

“The back pack might take most of that,” Jenny said.

“Ever hopeful,” I said.

We told the Hath we were ready and he threw one end of the rope over the wall, while the other end was tied to a hook in the wall.

“No gate, eh?” I asked.

“Gates can be breached,” the Hath said. “Good luck.”

Jenny climbed over the wall and down the rope, once she was on the ground, I followed down. Once I was down, the Hath pulled up the rope. The wall was truly a remarkable piece of engineering and I couldn’t imagine how they had made it. I still can’t imagine how the pyramids were constructed, but suspect the magic of Jedis using the Force. The Hath stared down at us, waved.

“No need to tarry,” Jenny said, handing me my pack.

Once we were geared up, Jenny used her sonic screw driver to navigate, as reckoning by sun and stars was out of the question. There was one sun, always overhead. We proceeded down into the valley of tortoises and were soon in the thick of them. They completely ignored us, eating strawberry like fruits that grew on small plants peppering the valley. I wanted to watch the tortoises, because they were huge! The average was maybe twice as big those from the Galapagos Islands. These were not Aldabra. They were large enough that if they were cars, Jenny and I could have gotten in one and drove away. Though they were fascinating, I kept finding myself looking up into the sky. Every thirty minutes, Jenny sprayed me and then her with Hath musk, which was fairly repugnant smell, and even after thirty minutes I didn’t think I needed another applications because the smell didn’t fade the way something should when you’ve been exposed for a while.

“I think we’ll be okay,” Jenny said. “Dragon strikes must not occur very irregularly.”

“Because, if it did, the tortoises wouldn’t get this big, with this many?” I asked.

“See?” Jenny said. “Great minds think alike.”

As we walked, bugs, just the old regular Earth variety anyone might be used to, with the exception of being three or four times as large, flew by. A dragon fly hovered in front of us, as a big as a crow, and then went sideways and around us.

“I suspect size is related to the amount of oxygen available,” Jenny said.

I didn't add a comment or try to be clever. Truth was, I was spent. I was in walking mode now, and well, to be honest, I am an average 49 year old American, and though I like walking, I exceeded my hiking radius several hours prior. But I kept walking. The degree of tiredness had me beyond questioning whether this was a dream. How could this be a dream? I use the toilet, I get tired, and time was passing at what felt like the normal rate. I was so tired I no longer scanned the skies looking for threats. A dragon strike would be a relief.

“I think we should take a break,” Jenny said.

“When we get to the forest,” I said, my voice empty of emotion.

Jenny squinted at the trees. “Probably two, three hours away?” Jenny said.

“They look closer than that,” I said.

“They're bigger than you think. Your brain is gauging the distance by associating what it knows,” Jenny said. “You're not use to being inside a planet, with this kind of light, and everything so far is bigger and brighter.”

“We can rest when we get to the trees,” I said.

“Okay,” Jenny said. She was silent for a bit. She produced a canteen and drank, and then offered me some. “You know, you got to keep hydrated, and you don't have to impress me.”

“It's not about impressing you,” I said.

“Really?” Jenny said, skeptical.

“You either like me or you don't, that's just life,” I said, taking the canteen. “But I'm afraid if I stop, I won't get started again.” I drank.

“Fair enough,” Jenny said.

“Tell me about where you come from?” Jenny said.

“At the trees,” I said.

An island passed over us and the light diminished greatly. There was sunlight in the distance, but we were in darkness, and above, on the bottom of the floating island, was glowing moss specked on the underside, it was like walking in night under a moving constellation of stars. Jenny stopped to look, but I kept walking. I really did fear stopping. The darkness stayed with us for about a half hour, and the temperature dropped, noticeably. When the sun returned, the shadow of the floating island proceeded us for a while longer, and the forest sparkled with its own light in the shadows.

“Do you record your dreams?” Jenny asked. I am not sure if she was talking to fill the silence or to distract me from my misery and keep me going. “My species, Gallifreyans, they’re called Time Lords, right. They’ve interacted with space/time for so long that they changed genetically: they can feel the flow of space time and the turning of planets. I didn’t think I would notice inside hibernation stasis chamber, but I did. I felt the slow, inevitable push forwards, like a boat on a stream. In the dreams that came I saw lots of people, and through all of that, there was one consistent voice that came to me. One repetitive dream, a voice calling for me to come to it. I think you were in the dream, John, but that could just be me backfilling. The way a TARDIS will often grieve the loss of its Time Lord. Some will kill themselves by diving into stars or black holes. Most go home to a TARDIS graveyard to die, a long, slow, lonely death. I am not sure I understand why more compassion isn’t offered them. It’s clear they’re sentient machines. Anyway, this dream makes me think that there is a TARDIS calling me. Across time and space. I would like to journey to the graveyard and see if I can find it. When we get out of here, and your people come for you, I am hoping you would give me a lift back home.”

We arrived at the nearest tree, close enough to the forest thick that I was satisfied with my progress. I dropped the bag and leaned back against the tree, and slid to my butt. I was done.

“You okay?” Jenny asked.

“With giving you a lift?” I asked. “Sure. Anywhere you want to go.”

“Thank you. I am going to gather some stones and start a fire,” Jenny said.

“Is that wise, given the oxygen content of the air?” I asked.

“It’s why I want the stones,” Jenny said. “To contain it.”

I got up to help with the gathering of stones.

“No,” Jenny said. “You rest. I will gather stones. I need you to be able to walk again, and you’ve over exerted.”

Jenny drank from her canteen and then handed it to me.

“I am okay,” I said, waving it off.

“Drink,” Jenny insisted. “Don’t worry, it has built in tech that pulls water right from the air. It never goes empty.”

So I drank. Jenny went to gather stones. I must have fallen asleep because when I woke up, there was small fire, and we were under the canopy of a floating island. Being so close to the wall of the forest, the darkness seemed more like a night on the surface, something more

familiar. The rock overhead seemed close enough to touch, like a cave closing in on us, but it pushed silently above the tree without scraping a branch. I was enthusiastic about watching until the cramp happened. It was one of those sudden cramps that drove me to my feet, trying to stand it out.

“Fuck,” I muttered, holding on to the tree for support.

Jenny handed me a pack. “Eat that. It’ll help.”

I opened the package and sucked out the contents. I nearly threw up.

“Don’t spit it out,” Jenny said. “That’s it: chew and swallow.”

“What the hell?” I asked.

“It’s just rations,” Jenny said.

“For people?” I asked.

“For Hath,” Jenny said. “But, it’s high in potassium.”

I sat down next to the fire, no longer as hungry as I imagined. I started to rub the back of my neck, and then Jenny slid over behind me and started working out the kinks with variety of pressure point massage techniques. I nearly fell asleep in her care.

“That’s nice,” I said. “Where did you learn that?”

“Progenation device,” Jenny said. “Priority programing was military training, and this is a useful skill if you have fellow soldier that requires a quick fix to get him back into service. But enough about me. Tell me about your world.”

“It’s rather boring,” I said.

“Tell me any way,” Jenny said.

“You’re really interested?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t have asked, otherwise,” Jenny said.

“I am not joking, most of it’s really boring,” I said.

“I am not sure if your avoiding because you’re hiding something, or ashamed of something,” Jenny said, pushing in on my back with her elbow. I heard a pop and there was a flood of release and I gasped. “You kind of remind me of my dad, at least, what I remember and what I have sorted in dreams. You talk, and you’re open, but there is this bubble of protection that deflects people away from knowing the real you. Maybe that’s a survival skill. I mean, imagine being the Doctor, living thousands of years, meeting new people every day, every week, and they all ask the same question, who are you, where did you come, do you have family, and I

can imagine it being sort of a hell having to revisit your loves and losses every time someone asks. I think I would admire someone who doesn't ask me about my past, especially since I hardly have one. At the same time, there has to be an equal number of joys to counterbalance any string of losses. I don't know how long I have, John. I am the daughter of a Time Lord. I could live up to ten thousand years or more. I can't even fathom that! I look forward to remembering some grand adventures, but the treasures I will cling to are the quiet moments, like this, sharing a conversation, warmed by a fire, as a continent size rock floats above us, between us and an inner sun. And the reason I will remember it, is because you shared you."

"I don't even know how to begin," I said.

"Start with Origin," Jenny said.

I sighed. A part of me wanted to avoid talks of Origin. "I don't know how to tell it," I said.

Jenny stopped massaging me. I think she was going to get up and walk away, and so I turned to her and touched her arm, and she hesitated.

"No, you asked, now listen," I insisted. I was serious. She became serious, respecting the struggle that I was having. "When I say I don't know how to share this, I mean I don't know how to do this. I am struggling. I just ended a second failed marriage. I don't know how to communicate relationship stuff without disparaging her, as I don't want to do that. My ex is a human being, and she has wants and needs that we had been unable to negotiate and so, she is departed to find a way to meet those needs. That's reasonable. I am trying to be reasonable about it. Partly because, I am just so tired of being angry. My family of origin is broken, substance user, frequently in and out of jail, and there has been generational sexual and physical abuse, and I cut ties a long time ago. My first marriage ended and I was angry, and getting angry didn't stop the end, it accelerated it. In order to survive, and gain some semblance of health, I had to make a change in myself. Every day, I have chosen to be grateful and happy, allowing people the freedom to make choices about their lives regardless of my feelings about those decisions. And I have lots of reasons to be grateful. I am intelligent. I have successfully completed a masters, was accepted into a PhD program, and I have a toddler. He will be three years old in March, whenever that is. Time is suddenly very hard to track. And he is the joy of my life. Before he was born, I dreamt of having a time machine so I could travel back and re-write my history, but after my son, well. I would endure my life over a million times just so I can meet him again and

again. And he is so happy and bright and so, that is another reason I am being civil with his mother, because he needs his mom in his life. He will never hear me disparage her, and so, I practice that in my every day walk of life, because if I hold a negative thought about her and it leaks, that influences the rest of my thoughts and decisions, and she has the right to pursue her idea of happiness. And here is a truth, thoughts always leak. What you hold gets into the Universe and changes the flavor of everything. So, part of what it means to be an adult, a mature adult, is giving people the space to be.

“But still, I struggle to be grateful daily. Now, mostly I am happy and easy going, and I bring a great deal of comfort to the people I serve. I am a licensed counselor. I have worked in a mental health hospital for over four years and have a private practice. Prior to that, I worked for the airlines and I traveled the world. When I say I have had a great life, I mean it. I have so much to be grateful for. But from childhood till I was forty I struggled with depression, and it’s still too easy to touch it. Simple triggers, like the news can send me plummeting. The other day, for example, I accidentally bump into the news and saw a reports that the Fukushima disaster is much worse than anyone has been letting on, and now there is nuclear fallout discovered in the Atlantic and no one knows the source yet. The Russians having been dumping stuff into the Baltic Seas for years. They’ve even scuttled some nuclear subs that are just down there rusting away, and I would be surprised if the American haven’t scuttled a ship or, too, and I know for a fact that the Apollo missions had nuclear batteries and there is lunar capsule sitting at the bottom of the Marianas Trench in the pacific, so it isn’t a matter of ‘if’ there will be a nuclear disaster in the Atlantic, it’s a matter of when. 15 years ago scientist said ‘in fifty years, there will be no more fish left in the ocean.’ Well, people haven’t stopped over fishing, and we’re not focused on developing the science necessary to feed the world, and technically we can feed the world now, but who wants to do that, without making a buck. And so, I am worried about the planet, not for my own life per say, but what are we giving our children? And I wonder, as a counselor, how can I help other folks when I am sometimes just barely getting by myself, but most the problems my clients have, well, we’re not even on the same planet. Much of what looks like mental health is simply legit concerns. I mean, I live on the cusp of an era when mass unemployment is going to rock the world. Computers and automation have made three quarters of the planet redundant! People can’t get jobs and they think they’re broken, but their concerns and reasons to be angry are valid because they were sold a bill of goods all their lives and that is just not what they’re

going to end up with. We haven't figured out how to be unemployed and eat, because we still live with a mentality of people should work or not eat. I mean, I come from Texas which is a pull yourself up by your own bootstraps kind of state, and consequently, they rank 49 in terms of providing mental health services, and most the time, they'd rather just lock folks up as opposed to fixing the situation or people, and maybe part of that is because so many people do fear giving handouts that everyone will stop working and want more handouts, but if you have no boots, you can't exactly pull yourself up by own your bootstraps, now can you?! But my point is, if tech advances to the point where everyone has access to a replicator, or a 3-D printer, well, then the definition of human productivity has got to change. We can't keep measuring ourselves by the standards of the past. We have to reinvent ourselves daily."

I let go of Jenny's arm.

"And then it occurred to me, and this is a serious revelation. The reason I get angry or depressed, well, that's because I love my life. I didn't want it to change and I was hanging on, and 'letting go' has become this big theme and I hate hearing it, but it seems that one can't practice gratefulness without letting go. Letting go of control, letting go of expectations, letting go of the moment, letting go of an ideal of my life, because if the moment freezes then you can't have compare and contrast... Frequently I feel alone, because the worries I worry about aren't even on the radar for the people around me, and people can't relate to me. And I wanted an end to loneliness, and so, I found something and tried it and, well, the bottom fell out of my world and I have no context or compartment to put anything in any more, other than the big box, the universe, that seems to contain it all.

"One of the things I like to do, a lot, is learn. Knowledge is kindness, in my book. I was exploring some esoteric psychological ways of exploring the inner worlds, and I discovered a technique for creating a psychological construct. The Tibetans call them thought forms, or tulpas. I was intrigued. Is it a true thing, or is it imagination, or is a way of opening a direct line to my unconscious? And how is it I can I feel alone when I have a subconscious that is always with me, anyway? So, I created a tulpa. Her name is Loxy Bliss. She named herself. And then, shortly after that, I started meeting these other people. And then a group I called the Invisible Counselors' showed up, by my request. I didn't just start hallucinating these folks. I invited them in. And I started having, what I consider to be, huge therapeutic breakthroughs on things I have been carrying for years. I began to seriously question my sanity. How the hell can I be so happy

when I know the world is literally falling apart around me, and well, it's because: I have moved beyond grateful. I see wonder in everything. Every morning I get up, I say thank you bed, and thank you floor, and thank you water, and truck and work and people and sky, and then I see wondrous news like, Trappist-1 has seven earth like planets and I think yay, maybe my son will go there, or be one of the first Martians, because, you know, things may be bad, but sometimes when things are bad is when humanity pushes through to the next level and shines and really reveals who and what they are. And I am not alone. Now I walk hand in hand with someone daily. Yeah, there's lots fear and anger still for me to struggle with, and there are lots of fools running around with guns trying to take control to diminish fear, but they can't see it just increases fear. How many can stand up and say they love?! I fear, because I love.

“And, then, the next miracle happened. I was transported. I was offered an opportunity to be a part of something, and suddenly, accidentally, I am here, but it's somehow connected, and so helping you is a way of helping myself and everyone else who will touch this planet, or any other planet,” I said, my enthusiasm having reached its pinnacle. “Or, maybe, I am just an old fool who is living out his last days in a dream world because the reality is so bleak and so impossible that imagining being joyful is better than running around crying and calling foul and posting conspiracy theories. I am not the smart one who is going to figure out how to solve the world's problems. I don't think there is anyone that smart, and I certainly don't think we should put our hopes in any one person, or a savior, or even a Doctor. I don't see getting angry and blowing things up as an effective cure. There is only love and only peace and only cooperation. I think it's something we just have to collectively decide this is what we're going to do and we're all going to be on the same page, without being militant or forceful, or protesting when the people we don't like win the day, because, that's exactly the fear that we are struggling against that's bringing us down. And it always comes from within us first, never outside. Outside is the symptom of inside us.”

And then my long winded, scary rant was over, and it was all out of me, and I felt lighter. Jenny touched my face, gently. She leaned in towards me and whispered, “I am going to kiss you now,” and put her lips softly on mine, slowly teased them apart, going deeper. The kiss grew in passion in increments, her hands going behind my head as the kiss deepened. Our artificial night came to an end. She started our kiss and she ended it. Her forehead rested against mine.

My eyes were closed, savoring the taste. Jenny didn't withdraw. She waited for me to recover and was right there when I opened my eyes. She hadn't withdrawn, and lingered in range to kiss me again if the signal was given. I was so tempted to re-engage and there was evidence that it would have been okay to do so.

"Thank you," Jenny said.

"For?" I asked.

"Really? The affection wasn't self-explanatory?" Jenny asked.

"I basically just admitted to being crazy and having an imaginary friend. Doesn't that disqualify me for companionship?" I asked.

"Oh, no. That actually raised my esteem for you. Humanity is way too quick to grow up, which probably explains why there are so many control freaks around. To truly access the Universe and all the wonder it has to offer, you got to come at it as a child, and if the only way to maintain that sense of play is to imagine you have an invisible friends, well, then imagine away. But if you really created a tulpa, well, Loxy is more than just a ghost in your head. Clearly she unlocked more of your unconsciousness than you recognize, or you wouldn't be accessing so many personality sets, and we all have them, locked deep inside us. You also wouldn't be here, now, with me, if you hadn't brought her into being and she hadn't pushed you for more. I see the way you look at me, the way you look at everyone. Studying us like we're film characters, looking for avenues to engage us on meaningful levels, but always engaging us at the level we are on. I am also well aware that you have secretly undressed me and ran the algorithm that everyone engages in..."

"And that didn't disqualify me?"

"No," Jenny assured me. "It was a bit creepy at first, but the more I get to know you, the more comfortable I am with your level of creep, because it also comes with a kindness. A longing. I suspected you have a long history of fantasizing, and your rant just now confirmed that it was likely a survival strategy. But, don't let your imagined loneliness become a plot contrivance for keeping people out. I have a pretty good idea where that story line will take you. Not firsthand experience, but close enough."

"Have you ever had an out of body experience?" I asked.

"I have had lucid dreams," Jenny said.

“Me, too, even before I knew what lucid dreaming was, but I also frequently had out of body experiences. They were a lot more frequent as a child, less during my 20’s and 30s, and then picking up again in my 40’s,” I said. She was holding eye contact, curious where I was going. “So, I am rather use to being out and looking back and seeing my body, but lately, over the last year or so, I have experienced something new. Whenever I encounter someone in the real world, I get that de-ja-vu sort of sixth sense creepy feeling that I am looking at myself. It can be anyone and everyone and it’s a little distracting because I am caught up in wondering am I outside myself or am I dreaming, but I am unable to solicit by will the evidence I need to confirm I am out of body or dreaming.”

“Is it possible you’re not?” Jenny asked. “That maybe you recognize the oneness in us all?”

“Isn’t that a bit crazy?” I asked.

“Not at all. I believe we’re all one. I mean, I could take you back to a point in space time when the universe was smaller than the size of a pea, and everything in the Universe was touching, and so no matter which atomic structure you chose to follow out to the present moment, it was all one at one time, and spooky reactions at a distance occur because we’re all entangled,” Jenny said. “The fastest way to get to the other side of the universe is not across it spatially, but backwards through time then forwards again, but I don’t have to actually travel there to know what’s going on there, I just have to look at a blade of grass and I can know everything I need to know.”

“That’s very Walt Whitman-ish of you,” I said.

“I was thinking more Dirk Gently,” Jenny said.

“Oh! I love Dirk Gently,” I said. “The Long Tall Dark Tea Time of the Soul.”

“No, just the ‘Long Dark Tea Time of the Soul,’” Jenny corrected.

“Yeah, that’s not the way I remember it,” I said.

“You’re remembering it wrong,” Jenny assured me.

“I don’t think you should quarrel too much about my memory,” I said.

“And why is that?” Jenny asked.

“Because in the short absence since our lips parted, I moved your kiss to such a grander scale of wonderful than I have ever experienced that I am seriously doubting we can duplicate it” I said.

“OMG, that’s pretty good. I am sure you say that to all the girls,” Jenny said.

“I have said a lot of things to a lot of girls, but not that, and though I love quite a few people, and I am especially in love with Loxy, which is a no brainer, right, I mean, I did summon the ideal woman, and yet, here I am, with you, and completely entranced and wanting,” I said.

“Yeah, the moment is diminishing the longer you talk,” Jenny said.

“I should really shut up, shouldn’t I,” I said.

“And yet, you’re still talking,” Jenny said. “And not kissing.”

“Yeah,” I said, frowning. “What the hell is wrong with me?”

“Absolutely nothing,” Jenny said. “Thank you for telling me about you. You shared more than you know, and I still don’t think I have touched the complexity of what it means to be you, but I am grateful for this day, for our walk, and our conversations.”

“Thank you, Jenny. I am grateful for you, too,” I said. “So, shall we resume our walk?”

“We really should,” Jenny said.

We both lingered, the camp fire dying. We didn’t kiss again, but while Jenny took a restroom break behind the trees, I made sure the fire was good and out, and secured all our trash. When she returned, I took a turn relieving myself. I returned, grabbed my gear, and felt renewed enough to continue walking. I didn’t walk as fast as the day before, but, it was okay because we had slowed our pace to move through the forest.

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For the most part, the trip through the forest was uneventful, and we did find a clearing where set up a tent and slept a spell. Can’t really call it ‘the first night’ as night was really random, but we kept a schedule and had three sessions of sleep before seeing the other side. At least I did, I almost got the sense Jenny didn’t sleep as much as she simply ‘meditated.’ We continued through the forest, believing that would give us time without dragons, but also, it was the most direct route. On the other side of the forest was a valley, and large animals bounced across the valley like giant ferrets. In addition to the ‘ferrets’ were a variety of herbivores and flying creatures and there were so many things moving and going on it was hard to track without studying the whole of it. We both kept coming back to the giant ferret like things as being the greatest threat. Jenny did not seem happy, and was looking for alternative routes, but it seemed like the best route was down into the valley, through the wildebeest and giant ‘ferrets.’

“You’ve seen these guys before?” I asked.

“Fluffy dragons? In my dreams,” Jenny said.

“I thought they were ferrets,” I said.

“You ever seen ferrets that big?” Jenny asked.

“All I have seen since we came here is bigger versions of other things,” I said.

“Fair point,” Jenny said. “So, here’s the deal. We’re going to walk across the valley, very slowly, and without talking. There’s a good chance they won’t notice us. Whatever you do, no matter what happens, do not run.”

“That’s not going to be a problem,” I said. Jenny seemed curious. “Again, I am not a runner. Also, I am too tired and too old for that shit. And, well, I am pretty smart; I know I am not going to out run one of those.”

“Those are all solid reasons,” Jenny said. “Ready?”

I would have shrugged but the bag weighted my shoulders down. We began the walk down into the valley, moving more cautiously than we probably needed to, but neither of us wanted to fall, much less draw attention to ourselves. We were maybe half way down when I saw it, out of the corner of my eyes. I touched Jenny’s arm, stopping her. Our eyes met.

“I am sorry, Jenny,” I said.

“For what?” she asked.

And I shoved her. As she fell and began rolling down the hill, I put my arms out wide and made myself a bigger target. The dragon turned towards me in it’s decent, and at the last moment, I turned and it latched onto my backpack. I was hit so hard that it knocked the air out of my body. Even though the back pack took most of the hit, and I was airborne before I had caught my breath. I tried undoing the catch from the backpack, and got one arm free and nearly fell, but I was caught in the second one, and spinning was making it tighter, and then the dragon dropped me onto the top of a flying island and flew off. I fell, to my hands and feet, and struggled to get the pack completely off and when I did I took a moment to rub circulation back into my arm. I stood up, center of a floating island, with other smaller islands floating nearby. There were four in all, and on each, a dragon was perched. They roared at me.

“Okay then,” I said. “But before you guys eat me, you should probably be informed, I am slightly radioactive.”

They roared some more, and the one that caught me flapped its wings.

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Jenny found herself rolling, but even though she didn't cry out, she drew the attention of one of the Fluffy Dragons. It bounded towards her. She managed to recover and began to run towards a herd, but realizing she wasn't going to make it, she turned to face the Fluffy Dragon, drawing out her sonic screwdriver as a last defense. At the last moment, when it seemed contact was imminent, a knight in dull armor on hoarse back rushed past her.

"No!" Jenny yelled.

But it was too late. The fluffy dragon was speared and fallen. Jenny rushed to the dragon's side as it gave up its last breath. The knight backed its lance out of the creature.

"You idiot!" Jenny said.

The knight lifted his visor. "I am not use to being addressed in such a manner," the man said

"Well, maybe more people should," Jenny said, petting the dragons face, bending back the upper, long whiskers, exposing canine like teeth as its cheek drew back with her caress.

"I expect you to be more grateful, after all, I have saved your life, wench," he said.

"Grateful?!" Jenny snapped, facing the knight. "The worst this dragon would have done is licked me to death."

"Death is death. I spared your life," he said. "You will now come with me until the debt has been repaid. Unless you wish to repay the favor here."

"Oh, you wish! What sort of knight are you?" Jenny demanded.

"The kind who expects to be repaid," he said.

"Well, good luck with that," Jenny said.

A blast from her sonic screwdriver made the horse rise up in fright, dislodging the knight who was ill prepared for such a thing, partly because he was holding the lance in a suggestive way to impress the 'damsel in distress.' As soon as he was on the ground on his back, Jenny took off her pack and placed it on the horse. She then mounted the horse and advanced the horse on the knight.

"You're stealing my horse?!" the knight asked. "After what I did for you?"

"I thought you wanted to help me, well, this is how you can help me," Jenny said.

“But I can’t get up without help!” he protested.

Jenny sighed, reset her screw driver, and aimed it at him. The armor began to rattle and the joints tore, and a crack went across the chest plate.

“You should be able to work your way out of that in an hour or so,” Jenny said. “And if you haven’t frightened all the fluffy dragons away from this area, I would walk really slowly until you get out of their eyesight. Good day, Sir.”

Jenny kicked the horse into motion and headed off. As she rode, she watched the skies for any signs of parachutes or more flying dragons.

“Damn it, John,” Jenny muttered under her breath. “Men are such fools.”

The horse didn’t seem to disagree.

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As time went on and it was clear I wasn’t going to get eaten, I got a little braver and approached the edge. As I did, a dragon that caught me would take flight, zooming past me and forcing me back to the center of the floating island. Faced with that, I chose to return to the spot they seemed to want me at. I assumed I was waiting for eggs to hatch and baby dragons to consume me, but I saw no evidence of eggs. I also saw no evidence of bones, humans or otherwise, and since I hadn’t been dropped to my death on collection, then, I assumed my fate was more dire.

“Okay, so, what, you don’t want me to fall?” I asked.

The one facing me growled, curling the back of its lip, and making a clicking noise.

“Are you guys like intelligent? Do you understand English?” I asked.

The dragon lowered its head, turning to look at me obliquely with the side of its eyes.

“Well, I don’t understand dragon, so, we’re at an impasse,” I said.

I sat down and closed my eyes. I mean, what else could I do? The moment my eyes closed, I saw a staff, twin snakes coiled around it, their heads meeting at the top, with wings. It was such a shock I opened my eyes straight way. It wasn’t so much that the vision was shocking, but that I saw it, just as clear as if my eyes were open and I had been staring at such a thing. All the dragons were bowing their heads low, clicking their tongues inside their mouths, curled lips.

“Caduceus” I said. The dragons bobbed their head.

Curious, I closed my eyes again. I saw myself sitting on a throne that was shaped like a woman. The woman wore a headdress, and held an ankh, and I look like a child sitting on her lap. It was a powerful image and I had to open my eyes.

“No,” I said. “I am not the child of a goddess.”

I closed my eyes. I saw Asherah standing in fire and water with many planets above her head. “I don’t understand,” I said, not opening my eyes, trying to follow. The image changed to a stone, in which a woman had been carved onto the stone, holding tools. She was naked, except a headdress, and she had wings. She also had bird claw feet and twin lions laying near her feet, and twin owls next to the lions. The carving was voluptuous to say the least and she stepped down from the carving, pushing me to the ground to ride me in a clear act of sex. I opened my eyes, my head hurting. I was sitting Indian style, touching my forehead to the rock I sat on. “No, Isis is not my queen consort.”

The dragons hissed, flapping their wings.

“We’re friends, though,” I said. “You could say I am her consort.”

The image that came to me next was of the Triple Goddess, maiden, mother, crone, and she was all three at once, depending on how you looked at her, like those holographic pictures that change with perspective.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

An image of chains came at me, with hammers hitting chains, so that the chains were broken.

“You want me to free someone?” I asked.

An image of eggs, large eggs, bigger than any ostrich egg.

“Break eggs?” I asked.

All of the dragons roared, and I realized the volume was more than four and I saw dragons peeking out from a dozen other islands.

“No breaking any eggs. Got it. Babies! You want me to help with your babies?!”

Again, I was assaulted with the image of chains. Lots of chains. Wings took the chain up, but hands brought the chains down. Human hands.

“Your children are chained!” I said.

They all lowered their heads.

“You want me to free your children!” I said.

I had consensus! Clicking and bobbing of more than a dozen dragons could be heard.

“From whom?” I asked.

Again, I was assaulted by the image of a mother, a woman bigger than me.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “The queen mother? Sex? No. Wait, it’s too much.” The bombardment of images stopped. It began again, slower. I was sitting in a woman’s lap, a goddess’ lap. The woman got up and rode me. “Wait. I am an adult. She’s an adult, but bigger. Giants!”

The dragons growled and swished their tails.

“You want me to free your babies from giants?!” I asked. I hoped that was it, because if they were wanting me to fuck a giantess, well, I am not opposed, but I doubt a giantess would be interest in normal size human.

There sky was filled with clicking.

“Why me?” I asked.

Again, I saw myself sitting on the lap of Isis.

“I am not the child of a goddess,” I said again.

The island I was on tilted and I opened my eyes to see a dragon had perched on my rock, its head moving in close. It growled lightly. Images came at me. They were generic, cartoons, flashes of superheroes flipping like the pages of magazine.

“Heroes! No, hero. Me? You think the goddess sent me to be your hero?!” I asked. More clicking. “Why would you think that?”

I again had the image of Caduceus, twin snakes only they were encircling my spine, looking at me, their wings my wings. It felt like the proverbial devil and angel on my shoulder. They merged and became one and I was now the man snake with wings. I opened my eyes.

“You think I can fly?”

The dragon leaped into the air, and landed, causing the rock I was on to tumble, and I slid, past the dragon, and out into open air. I tumbled, seeing air, sun/not the sun, ground, air, rock, clouds, and my hand grabbed the pin and pulled the chute. My tumbling halted and I felt the tug of the chute as it slowed me down. I was still moving towards the ground at a pretty good clip of speed, but I landed, safely enough, in the midst of giants. They caught me using my own chute, pulling me backwards. I disconnected from the chute, but there was no running. I was surrounded. They ranged anywhere from twelve to sixteen feet tall. These were not the kind who

would pick you up and carry you off in their fist kind, as they were only twice the size of a human, as opposed to the ones in Jack the Giant Slayer, which were four times the size of humans. The one thing that had bothered me about that movie was that all the giants were male. Where were the females? Well, here, these were all females. And they lived in the giant trees that they had carved homes into. The tops of the trees homes had been cut clean, as if some had taken the tree down with a power saw and left a stump, which was now the home. A fence made of trees circled their village. On top of the giant, tree stump homes were dragons.

The women held spears, ready to skewer me if I resisted further.

“Hello,” I said.

The person in charge approach.

“First, how did you learn our language?” she asked.

“My name is Captain John Harister,” I said. “What’s your name?”

One of the women flipped her spear around and knocked me down with the non-pointy end of it. I got up slowly, weary of the women who stood ready to knock me down again.

“Just trying to be civil,” I said.

“Who taught you our language?” the giantess asked.

“Um, I’ve always spoken this language,” I said, not wanting to tell her about the Universal translator I had, which now that I think about it, I am disappointed it doesn’t translate psychic dragons into English.

“How did you learn to fly,” the giantess asked.

“Technically, I was falling, not flying,” I said.

“You fell from the sky, which means you were in the sky, which means you can fly,” the giantess said. “One day, our dragons will have grown to a size they might carry us to the islands in the sky, like the fish people with the bubble breaths, but until then, they hold the advantage. Are you in league with the fish people with the bubble breaths?”

“Um, not really,” I said. “I think I was sent here to deliver a message.”

“From whom?” the giantess asked.

“From the dragons,” I said. “They request that you let their kind go.”

The giantesses laughed. The giantess in charge wiped her eyes she was laughing so hard, and because she was laughing, her fellow giantesses laughed. “Thank you for the laugh, little man. Throw this flying man who speaks to dragons into the pit.”

The giantesses swept in and easily picked me up and carried me to a pit, removed a wooden lid, tossed me in, and covered the hole once more. I don't know how far I fell, but I landed in water, and when I surfaced, I was in darkness, and was not sure what to do or where to go. I struggled to get my boots off so I could swim easier, as they required unzipping, and I would go under and it being dark frightened me, but I did it and no sooner than I had my boots off something touched my foot. When something in the water in the dark touches your foot, it's almost impossible not to scream. Okay, it is impossible. I screamed. Something tackled me and pulled me along out from under the hole. There was just a sliver of light up there, and I am sure I heard laughter following my scream. I tried resisting, squirming, trying to break free. Whatever it was let go, but I still struggled, trying to stay afloat and freaking out, and then I heard a voice say: "stand up."

The voice sounded human. I stopped splashing long enough to realize there was ground below me. I could stand up. I could stand up, but I couldn't see anything.

"I am going to take your hand. Please don't scream again." It was a female voice.

"Okay," I said.

The hand that took mine felt human.

"You're okay," she said.

The ground was rock and wet and I nearly slipped and wished I hadn't panicked or kicked my boots off, but, defaulted to a core belief: 'it is what it is.'

"Who are you?"

"We are the failed heroes," she said.

"I don't understand," I said. Mind you, this conversation is going on in the dark. I had no clue who I was speaking to, but her voice sounded awesome. I have learned from experience, that doesn't mean anything. Many of phone conversations with beautiful voices resulted in meeting females not as attractive as I had made them out to be.

"From all over the Universe, heroes have been called," she said.

"To free the dragons?" I asked.

"No. Just to answer the call," she said. "We hear it calling to us even now, calling for a hero. Freeing the dragons was just extra. A distraction. Or, perhaps another way to prove our worthiness. But since it got us thrown down here, perhaps it is just another lesson in failure."

"Again with us," I said. "How many of you are you?"

“You make six,” she said. “Everyone, we have new failed hero.”

Three other voices, one male and two female, said “hello.” If there was another, she didn’t speak.

“Do you have a name?” she asked.

“John Harister,” I said.

“Nicely met, John. I am Thetis,” she said.

“Thetis,” I said, trying to think of the nicest way to put this, because even though she was still holding my hand, I was on the verge of losing it. “Um, I don’t mean to be rude and all, but you all seem rather in good spirits for having failed and being thrown into a pit in and all.”

“Yeah, well,” Thetis said. “We’re working on our escape.”

“In the dark?” I asked.

“If the others agree, and I don’t see why they wouldn’t given how polite and calm you have been, we are going to give you the gift of sight,” Thetis said.

The others went ahead and gave their consent, suggesting another hand at digging would be nice. And so, the lessons began. Some of you may find this section a bit fanciful, but there is a true thing called human echolocation. You can google this, if you’re crazy curious, and I would start with Daniel Kish, one of the forerunners of this skillset that can be learned by both blind people and seeing a like. By making sounds called palatal clicks, the ears sense echoes in the environment and the brain can create a three dimensional map of the surroundings, offering more accurate size and distance location than sight offers. When Thetis began her explanation, I already knew what she was describing, though she wasn’t using the words I was familiar with. Thetis reports that she was the first human thrown in the pit, and the spirit of the water saved her.

“Spirit of the water?” I asked.

“It is what brought you to the shore,” Thetis said.

Thetis reported that out of desperation and fear, the ability to see with sound came on her like a flash of lightening and inspiration. The spirit of the water would bring her fish to eat, and so began a friendship with her and spirit. The spirit never leaves the water, but it does still bring her and everyone two fish a day.

“Here’s the thing,” Thetis said. “We can’t carry you. You have to contribute. So, if you want to eat, you must learn to see. And we have learned, through experience, the fastest way for a person to learn the second sight is to go hungry. We are going to withdraw to the far side of the

cave and continue our excavating. You must learn to find us, to find your way back to the water, because that is where your meals will come from. It may sound harsh, but it's necessary. I am letting go of your hand now. I wish you luck."

I suddenly had a death grip on her hand. "No, wait, let's talk about this," I said, grasping, but her friends helped extricate her from my grip and they withdrew, which I gathered by the sounds they made as they departed. I was alone, in the dark, groping for a wall. When the wall didn't come readily, my fear grew in leaps and bounds. I got down on my hands and knees, feeling the floor. I am glad I did, too, because I came upon a depression, which turned out to be a stair case down, and I was like, damn! I could have fallen and broken my neck, but also, I was thinking, where the fuck am I?! The floor felt like marble, but it would have had to have been solid marble, because I had indication of a seam in the floor where tiles butted up against each other.

At the bottom of the stairs, I continued on hands and knees. I had to stop and stand, because my knees were killing me. After 24 years of working in the belly of aircraft, much of which was on my knees, I can't tolerate being on my knees due to excruciating pain. I can walk fine, but I can't tolerate kneeling for any length of time. I stood up. My bare feet were on cold stone. My clothes were still heavy with water. I stumbled forward hands out, until I came to what I was confident was an iconic pillar. I called out to Thetis. No response. I wondered if they were in ear shot, simply observing and hoping that I would master a skill set on my own. I wondered if this was a test to see if I would persevere, believing they wouldn't really let me go hungry. Worse, I needed to urinate! I announced this fact and told them if they needed me to restrict toilet needs to a special location, they better help me. Of course, if I did pee, it would just make the floor wet and slippery and I would likely fall in my own urine.

"Damn it!" I yelled. "Thetis! I am not ready for this."

I sat down, my back against the pillar. I can't tell you how long I sat there. I asked for Loxy, but she didn't come. I asked for Isis to shine a light. That didn't happen. I asked for Jung for revelation and Sacagawea for guidance and Uhura for a song and Chan for strength. I got nothing. This was worse than before the tulpa experiment. Before, I had just been alone. After, well, I was never alone. And this, this felt worse than alone. This felt like abandonment.

I cried. I went to sleep on hard stone and woke hurting and took my shirt off and wadded it up under my head. I went back to sleep. I had a vivid dream and I awoke with a start and was

disoriented and went for a light that wasn't there. I recalled the book 'the Shook' by Miller and wished I had had a prehistoric creature that would befriend me. I finally gave into the urge to urinate, but didn't bother to take off my clothes. I just went. I laid there, waiting to die, because that was all that was left me. I lay on cold, hard marble, looking up, my body aching with the hardness of the floor and my heart echoing in every joint of every limb, and in the back of my head even though the shirt was beneath it.

For the first time since being on the adventure, I missed being home. It occurred to me I would never see my son again. That drove me deeper into despair. Not being able to access Loxy was maddening, the same way an amputee might miss an arm or a leg. The closest memory I had of human kindness were the night in the tent with Jenny. I replayed them in my head. I replayed my talks with Loxy. I could almost hear Tesla saying "Everything is made of light," and I had he actually been present, I would have argued with him. I was so disgusted with my present state of being, unable to lay down because my head hurt from the stone, barely able to tolerate my smell the feel of my own filth with in my own clothes, that I was contemplating suicide. Even if someone came to the rescue right at this very moment, I probably would still kill myself from embarrassment of being in this state. The fact that I touched suicide in my mind was an indication to me I was close to losing it, which only further impressed me with the reality of my situation. If this was a dream, hell, a nightmare, then why the fuck couldn't I wake up?!

This skillset of seeing with sound exist. I knew it. I knew it the same I knew placebos work. It wasn't just a belief, I knew because I have seen people do this. I know people who have learned it. I am not special in anyway, and so this gift didn't just pop up for me, and it didn't come quick, like I needed it now, but it came after maybe several days of hard laying and groping past my comfort zone, falling once, hitting my head on something twice. I was laying on the floor, trying to keep from crying again, trying to just accept death, trying to will myself to die, but the heart just refused to quit beating, as if it had a game plan bigger than the brain's game plan, when the room 'lit up' in my head. More like it blinked. It flashed with the rhythm of my heart, appearing in the space between beats. Assuming I was hallucinating, I did nothing. I was in a room with pillars, as if I were in a temple that had been buried. I made a clicking noise and the room lit up even brighter than the heartbeat light.

I stood up, put on my shirt, and walked boldly to the closest pillar. It was where I had 'hallucinated' it to be. I navigated the room, finding pillar after pillar, finding the arch on which I

had bumped my head prior. I found a four corridors leading away, and at the end of one, I found the pool beneath the pit. I saw my boots next to a pile of fish. I was so hungry I ate one without even caring that it was raw and not cleaned. I just bit right into its belly, crunching on scales, and consumed the whole thing right up to its back bone, and had to pause to fish out a bone that stuck in my cheek. If not for the bone, I wouldn't have slowed down until I crunched the head or tail. I was so grateful for something in my stomach. And then I threw up.

Even as I retched, I saw Thetis coming up behind me. This new sight I had discovered is three dimensional, and I didn't even have to make the sounds. I could see with the sounds Thetis was making. Thetis knelt down next to me and patted my back. The others entered. I could see them all, just as clear as day. Their clothes were hardly more than sheets with holes cut in them, but I could see through the veil of their clothes as if it were nothing more substantial than tissue. They might as well have been naked, as far as my echolocation sense was concerned. I could distinguish between stone and flesh and cloth.

"You've made it," Thetis said.

My joy of having gone from blindness to sight was so overwhelming, I forgot all about my anger at Thetis and the others. And then I saw the head of the Hath rise out of the water. It did not have a bubble-re-breather, which suddenly made sense. Without that, the Hath would be confined to the water. It was trapped here, just like us, perhaps thrown into the pit by the giantess after being robbed of its device.

"Come, I will show you a room where you can clean yourself and your clothes," Thetis said.

I followed without speaking. I was afraid of speaking. I was afraid if I spoke I might lose the gift of sight. Thetis brought me to a room where water dripped in from the ceiling like rain. The water flowed down along the floor, where it gathered along the far wall and ran down a trough and out of the room.

"For now on, we recommend you do your business here," Thetis said. "We try to keep the place clean."

"Maybe you should have started me here," I suggested. It was sarcasm. I was angry.

"We tried that once," Thetis said. "It took longer to get the sight with all the background noise. She nearly starved before she got it. It is not our intentions to cause people to suffer. We simply need people to recover."

“And if they don’t ever get it?” I asked.

“They die,” Thetis said.

“And you’re okay with that?” I asked.

“No one’s died yet,” Thetis said. “Get cleaned up. We can talk more later. You will find us in the project room.”

Chapter 12

The Project Room was a place in the temple where the ceiling had given way and dirt had poured in. The five were digging, using bits of stone, and any artifact discarded by the giants, which was mostly bones. The pit was considered a rubbish bin, and this is how the residents of the pit acquired their clothes.

The hole was a reasonably sized hole, narrowing the further along one got. It had a purposely shallow incline because the hope was to come up in an area away from the giants. I learned from them that male giants roamed the landscape looking for treasure and food to appease the female giants. The males were loners and fairly easy to evade. The woman always worked in groups, but tended to stay within range of the territory they had claimed. If they broke free, they would wait for a 'shadow night' to fully emerge. Thetis wanted to return to the 'wonder' but the others wanted to go to the forest and make their way back to a human settlement. I was going to ask what the 'wonder' was, but I was given a stone and invited to take a turn digging.

I don't know if any of you reading this has ever dug a hole, but let me assure you, it is hard work. And most the time, when we dig, we dig from the surface down, and we have proper tools. I was digging up, which was less digging and more chipping and doing so in the dark with second sight, but I still wanted my eyes open, but I would get debris in my eyes and would stop digging due to the discomfort. And if the tunnel started to collapse you have to scoot our backwards as fast as you can and that happened once and I was damn lucky in the since that I wasn't buried alive, but had to clear out a section that had already been cleared out. And then I encountered a root. I hate removing roots! Roots are ridiculously difficult without the right tools. I've tried power drills, and rotary saws, and pretty much, unless you have a chain saw and you're willing to plunge it into root and earth, which is not the recommended procedure, or if you want to get a backhoe to dig them out, well, roots are a mess. I chipped and scratched at the root until my dent became a groove. I continued until I was tagged out.

I returned to the project room, my hand raw, blistered, and bleeding.

"You worked longer than we thought you would, being a newbie and all," Thetis said.
"Come. The spirit has brought you fish."

"It's not a spirit," I said. "It's called a Hath."

“Roran says it’s a Dugong,” Thetis said. “Egecatl says it’s a demon. I think we see what we want to see with second sight. All we know for certain is it won’t let us drown and it brings us fish.”

And indeed, there was a pile of fish near the water. Again, I was hungry enough to eat raw fish. I sat down, my feet in the water, my boots still where I had left them. I ate slower and managed not to get any bones stuck in my mouth, nor did I throw up.

“Here, these are also yours,” Thetis said, giving me two more. “I am going to take these to the others. Do you want to come?”

“I want to sit here awhile,” I said.

Thetis touched my shoulder, gathered the fish, and departed to the other room. I suspected it was raining above as water began to come in from the pit opening. Seeing ripples on the water with second sight was interesting. Letting the sound resolve itself into its own vision, was even more interesting. Now this was probably more hallucination than true sight, perhaps a spontaneous episode of synesthesia, in the prolonged darkness sound was becoming light. But it wasn’t just light, it was musical notes and leaves. I was reminded of a saying from Tesla, something to the effect if you want to understand everything know that it is energy and frequencies and vibrations. My thinking about Tesla quotes was interrupted by a cat walking across the water. It came to me. I petted the cat and it seemed real enough and so I picked it up and hugged it to me.

“Isis?” I asked.

“Be not afraid,” I heard it say. “All is well.”

“No, it’s not,” I said. “Can you not see the current state of affairs?”

“I see what’s real and what’s not and I want you to trust me,” Isis said.

“Why didn’t you come sooner?” I asked.

“Because, sometimes it’s harder to get through the noise,” Isis said.

“Is everyone there okay?” I asked.

“Do not worry about us,” Isis said.

“What about my other life?” I asked. “I feel like I have been gone for ages. I only have one recollection of being back and it felt like a dream. And I am worried, there is no going back.”

“There is no going back,” Isis said. “Only going forward.”

“I don’t remember signing up for this,” I complained. “This is much harder than I thought it would be.”

“You believe that you are here and not there, and when you were there you believed you there and not here,” Isis said.

“Are you saying I am not here?” I asked.

“Do you believe in past lives?” Isis asked.

“Yes,” I said. I’ve had experiences that suggest as much. “Don’t you?”

“No,” Isis said.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You’re Isis. I thought the Egyptians believed in an afterlife and past and future lives.”

“They did, they do, they will,” Isis said. “I do not believe in past lives, John, because I do not believe in time. There is no time, there is no space, there is only consciousness. There is only energy. There is only light. There is only love. There is nothing else. And when you evolve past your ideas of space/time you will realize the truth, that you are not just a soul experiencing many lives over time, but that you are a soul experiencing multiple, simultaneous lives, incarnating all at once. If the in the consensus of all your lives together resulted in recognition of a need of any one of its other constituent parts, then that need would be filled, instantaneously. And if it becomes necessary to rewrite history, the same way an author erases a chapter or you chose a different path in a dream during a false awakening, then that is what will happen. And if doesn’t happen, then you can bet your life that it is necessary for your development to be where you are.”

“But maybe if you had come sooner, I could have learned to see sooner,” I said.

“Or, you would have never learned to see with your own light, while following mine. This knowledge, too, is now available to all of you, and it will improve you’re the life you perceive to be your present life on Origin. All of your lives are connected,” Isis said, rubbing her face against mine, purring, putting paw against my cheek. “Do not fear that your Earthly life will be interrupted. It is necessary for that world line to play itself out in its entirety. However, you will find due to the increased receptivity to the multiplicity of simultaneous ventures, your Earthly life will change. You should expect to have more paranormal events in that lifetime. You may see UFO’s, encounter spirits, or talk to trees and animals. Your ideas of supernatural will become natural, and when that happens, you will be open to and discover that there is a whole new level of supernatural that will be incomparable to anything else you know. You will

eventually not make a distinction between a mundane, normal life and other lives, because ultimately it is all one, though in the beginning, it may feel disconcerting as your perception bounces. All people do this all the time, but mostly, people are focused on the one, and very few remember their dreams, which is the best way to access the other worlds while maintaining a sense of continuity. The analogy is reading more than one book, a chapter at a time, or bouncing television stations when the commercials come on. You may not see a full episode, but the episode continues even if you aren't aware of it. If you require, you can go back for the fine details, but it isn't necessary for comprehensive understanding. You don't need to know the precise failure of circumstances to understand the fact the castaways are still on the island at the end of the episode or that Gilligan was likely an influencing factor to keep the status quo, while still delivering hope."

"You always manage to comfort me," I said.

"No, you're comforting yourself. You are blind and yet you see," Isis said.

"I really like that song," I said, but I like the one at the end of 'Wrath of Kahn' with the bag pipes, and then the full orchestra kicks in. My eyes tearing up as my eyes touched that. The people that say Trek is more tech than myth need to watch more Trek. Spock is dead, but will rise again. Ever hopeful! "But there are other explanations."

"Thousands of explanations," Isis said. "Bilocation through the use of astral bodies, doppelgangers, projections, or the use of avatars. Those are just the top five. The universe is much more incredible than you have ever imagined. It's not science versus mythology. It's the blending of the two..."

And then Isis was gone. The rain storm had passed and the water falling in through the pit opening was diminishing. The Hath emerged from the water for a moment, high enough I could see it, and then fell below the water's surface.

"Can you hear me?" I asked.

A response came in the form of a splash on the surface. Oh, I was excited.

"You understand English!" I said. Another splash for confirmation. "Oh, but you can't speak without your breather, because it's also a translator!" More splashes, like I hit the jackpot. We worked out a game of one splash for yes, two splashes for no. "You're trapped?" Yes. "Are you okay?" No. "Are you injured?" No. I wanted to ask what was wrong, but it had to be a yes or no until we worked out a more sophisticated way of communicating. I tried to imagine what it

was like to be alone, trapped in a pool in the underground. “You’re lonely!” Yes! “Lonely. And afraid.” Yes. “You’re afraid the people you’re helping will leave and forget about you.” Yes! “Then hear this now. I know you’re Hath. If we find a way out, I will return for you. Do you hear me?! You hang on. I will tell others. I or someone will come for you.”

The creature made a mournful noise of relief. All this time, I had been caught up in my own misery when right next door to me was another person suffering. I slipped into the water, moving down deeper, until I was up to my neck, and the Hath hugged me. I hugged back. And then I returned to the temple floor. I told the Hath what the people were doing and about their plan. The others returned while I was holding this conversation.

“Who are you talking to?” Thetis asked.

I explained. And I introduced them to the spirit and I think my explanation moved them all to tears, because they wept and went down into the water and hugged their friend as if meeting someone for the first time. And, as would be expected of ‘failed’ heroes, they each swore an oath that if they did nothing else, they would seek out the assistance of his people to bring him home. And from that day forwards, until we broke out of the tunnel, everyone spent time with the Hath.

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Over the next couple days, Thetus told me more about the ‘wonder.’ “It’s a place of constant change, and the ghost that lives there is calling for Champions,” she said. “That is why heroes from all over the universe have been summoned to this time and place.”

“It is also why there are so many villains,” Roran said. She asked if I was going to eat the head and I surrendered it to her.

Egecatl agreed with her. “You can’t draw heroes without drawing some villains. There has to be challenges in order to prove ourselves worthy.”

“I think the ghost hasn’t decided if it will be good or bad, and that’s why it summons both,” Roran said.

“I am the only one here that moved beyond the ghost,” Thetis said. “Some people just can’t pass the ghost. But the inside is tricky and one misstep and you find yourself back outside. Sometimes right where you started, and sometimes miles beyond.”

“How to you find your way back?” I asked.

“It calls to us, even though we failed,” Thetis said. “It calls to us even now.”

“And the villains, too. There will a convergence one day, when all shall meet on an open playing field,” Egecatl said.

“Are you guessing or mythologizing?” I asked.

“I am a seer, a healer, a shaman from Peru,” Egecatl said. “I learned long ago how to walk the many worlds and many spirits have called me to join them on their quests, but this one appealed to me. This has been my most challenging quest and these days in the dark, with these unlikely friends, have caused me to grow in ways I had never imagined. And even when I thought there could be no further surprises, you came and introduced me to the spirit who I didn’t even thank for preventing my drowning. I have yet to thank Thetis for the second sight. I am in debt to all of you.”

The others kept mostly to themselves and rarely spoke more than a few words, but Coreen had opened up since hugging the Hath. If I were a guessing man, I would say her origin was Earth, Australia, and that she was an aborigine.

“There are many characters in the dream time, which make for many distractions on our walk,” Coreen said. “But this gathering seems more purposeful than mere distraction. Maybe we should be more purposeful about what we do after reaching the surface. Maybe we should walk together.”

“I am going to return to the Wonder,” Thetis said. “I am determined to answer that call.”

“We have made an oath to help the water man,” Egecatl said. “We increase the odds of helping him if we split up, so we are not all caught up in the same place. And we will all get caught up in something. That is inevitable.”

“Even if we split up, the distractions will come for us all,” Coreen said. “That is part of the walking.”

“So, assuming we split up from the beginning or stay together and are accidentally separated, each of us carries the mission to save the Hath,” I said. I described a great wall that was built to keep out the giants. I reported it was near the ocean and it was perhaps center line of the equator, which one might discern from being mid-stream of the floating islands. The further one got from the equator, the less dense the floating islands became.

“I have seen this wall!” Egecatl said. “It reminds me of my home. Do you suppose these Hath are the ones that helped my ancestors to build the great wall and the pyramids?”

“I am open to just about any reality at this point,” I said.

“I see more clearly now, with the second sight,” Isold spoke. Her voice was quiet, and she sat further away from the group, and was the most aloof. “But I still see what I want to see. We all are seeing what we want to see. I thought I was mad, and that the lot of you were ghosts, and yet, I continue to exist here, and you persist with your madness. I have not perished, though I am hungry, and frequently cold. Even so, I have come to enjoy it here. I anticipate being sad. I fear leaving, because I worry that the light of day will reveal you were all merely voices in my head.”

“Something has changed,” Thetis said. “None of us have spoken this much.”

“I think we will break free soon,” Isold said. “The texture of the earth has changed.”

“John heralded the change,” Egecatl said.

“Why are you here, John?” Thetis asked.

“Here in the pit? Well, long story short, I came to ask the giantess to release the dragons from their chains,” I said.

It was quiet. Egecatl laughed. Isold followed. And then they were all laughing and the laughter was like falling leaves of musical notes in my mind and there was a glittering of light. When it was done, Egecatl hit my arm.

“We free the dragons, free the water man, and then we free the ghost of the great wonder,” Egecatl said.

“Not necessarily in that order,” Roran said.

“I think we should go see the ghost, first,” I said.

“Because?” Thetis asked.

“Well, because, I have never seen a ghost, and I am curious. Also, because, I am betting this place of wonder you describe is the very place my friend is looking for, and she can help us free the dragons and rescue the Hath,” I said.

“Your friend,” Thetis said. “Is he a god?”

“Well, no, but she is the daughter of a Time Lord,” I said. There was a barrage of questions. I tried to explain, but even I don’t have all the answers. Time Lords are Gallifreyans, and they are indistinguishable from humans, unless you listen to their chest and discover they

have two hearts. And though television cannon never answers why they appear human, if you require an explanation to ease the dissonance in your ‘head cannon,’ the book ‘Lucifer Rising’ explains the similarity being the result of morphogenetic fields. I like that answer, and the 12th monkey phenomena has been proffered as evidence of such a field, which connects us all together in a super-conscious field that binds everything together. Again, I found myself awestruck that Tesla, who basically proposed everything is consciousness in his treatise that everything was energy, was a part of my crew. When asked ‘how does it fill to be the smartest man in the world?’ Einstein answered: ‘I don’t know. You should ask Tesla.’ In fact, there has been no theories for consciousness offered, short of materialist saying it is just an illusory artifact that doesn’t exist in nature, which reduces all human behavior to nothing more than impulse reactions. A true materialist think we’re zombies. I think we’re more.

If my theory is right that humans evolve into Gallifreyans, well, maybe it’s a result of dabbling in time. And maybe that’s why the Doctor keeps coming back to Earth. He is subconsciously drawn to humanity, desiring to help and nurture and witness our development because in doing so, he learns about himself, and his own origins. But this is not cannon. It is only my own thoughts that I have toyed with and so, I didn’t offer this to my Pit friends. I merely presented the facts I knew. Jenny was the daughter of the Doctor. Though she was not born on Gallifrey, she is a Gallifreyan, and a Time Lord, and she is young and finding her way, partly because she skipped the normal childhood and was born with knowledge preset, perhaps even knowledge taken from the Doctor himself, which would explain her belief that she has had access to his memories through dreams. Perhaps her personality matrix blocked her from having full knowledge, or maybe it required being unlocked with experience and habituation of exercising certain neural pathways. Whatever it was, she was an enigma.

“Aren’t we all?” Isold asked.

निर्मित

Roran was the one that broke free into sunlight. It was a small hole and she closed her eyes and simply allowed the sunbeam to touch her face and she basked in this until she had had her fill and then she came and informed us. We gathered at the pool where we informed the Hath that we would be leaving. We could feel the sadness from it, but it also understood, it was necessary.

“I will be staying,” Isold decided.

“Are you sure?” Thetis asked.

“It is the right thing to do. If you fail in your mission, and no one comes, the water spirit will die of loneliness,” Isold said. “Also, if others fall from the sky through the pit, someone must be here to teach the second sight.”

“There are stone just past the opening we made. It will be necessary for us to cover the opening, so the giantess don’t know we’ve escaped their prison,” Roran said. “You may not be able to move it from the inside.”

“I will not leave till the spirit of the water is freed,” Isold said.

Thetis hugged her. I hugged her, too, then Roran and Egecatl, then Coreen. And then we left, squeezing through an opening that we dare not make larger, and pushing out into the world and into the light. It was like being born. I adjusted faster to daylight faster than the others, due to having spent the least amount of time underground. They stuck close to me, almost like they were relearning to see, until I recommended they use their second sight if they were struggling, and suddenly, there was no more struggling. And then we worked together to roll a misshaped boulder over the hole.

Chapter 13

The artifact that had called to Thetis looked a great deal like Stonehenge, at least from where we lay, spying down over the ridge. It was perfect, not the broken remnants of a long forgotten ruin, but a complete, intricately set convergence of stone and science and art and spirituality, enclosed in a crystal clear dome of light that looked more like a slowly rotating diamond. It shot rays and was energized or connected to a steady beam that fell straight from the heart of the spinning iron core directly above it. Everyone simply called the light in the sky the sun, but I was reluctant to do because I knew it wasn't a star. I had no clue what it was, and I did not understand the physics that held it together. I could imagine harmonics and energy carving out spaces in solids, because I have seen sound divide earth into pockets as perfectly spaced as a beehive's honey comb. But neither the sun nor the artifact held my attention; I was interested in the campfire where a horse turned, speared all the way through. It was being roasted and a male giant waited for it to finish cooking. A little ways off a female was tied to a stake.

"Wow," I said.

"Isn't it absolutely wondrous?" Thetis said.

"Uh? Oh the artifact, yeah," I said. "But you see that woman there. That's my friend."

"Your friend is done for if that horse doesn't hold him," Egecatl said.

"Hold up," Thetis said.

We spied a second giant that was approaching the artifact. The first stood to meet the second and a battle ensued; they fought for ownership of the artifact or for the horse or the woman tied to the stake or maybe even all of it. It was really difficult to make out from here. I decided this was one of those Hollywood contrived moments where I might sneak down and untie the girl and escape unnoticed. I had barely got up to go when the fight was over. The first had won the battle, slaying the second giant. It hauled the giant carcass near the fire. It removed the horse from over the fire, removed the stick, cut the arm off the giant, threaded the arm with the stick, and began roasting this over the fire.

"They're not a very nice," I said.

"Oh, they're absolutely horrific," Coreen said.

I stood.

"Where are you going?" Thetis asked.

"Down to meet the enemy," I said.

“Alone? Unarmed? That’s your plan?” Thetis asked. “The male giants will eat each other; it won’t hesitate eating you.”

“So, if I feel like things are getting dicey, I will just run into the artifact and end up elsewhere,” I said. “If the giant follows me, you guys can go untie my friend. And if it doesn’t, well, I will make my way back here as quick as I can.”

“And if it kills you?” Thetis asked.

“Then, I will hope to meet you in that other life,” I said.

“You’re the bravest man I think I ever met,” Thetis said.

“Pff, I am scared shitless,” I said. “But, I have a friend name Jung who says you should always meet your demons eye to eye without flinching. It’s the only way to overcome fear.”

“He sounds like a dream walker,” Coreen said.

“I would be surprised if we’re not speaking the same language,” I said.

Without further ado, I headed down to meet the enemy. The giant was either so into eating his horse that he didn’t notice me, or, he didn’t consider me a threat.

“John?!” Jenny asked.

“Hello, Jenny,” I said, giving a smile as I past. “Ho, giant.” How else does one address a giant? I was pretty damn giddy and flippant for a man who was about to die. I wondered if I would wake back up on Origin, and if so, well, this had all been worth it.

The giant killed a mosquito against his face with one hand, and pulled the horse’s leg bone out of its mouth, the meat all but gone. It tossed the bone. He scratched his head, trying to make sense of me.

“I wish to negotiate the release of my friend,” I said.

The giant stood, picking up its spear. In my brain, I heard Isis instruct me to use my second sight. It took a great deal of strength to close my eyes, even as I retreated, but I did. I found myself in a world of auditory artifacts, managing to dodge the thrusts and swings of the spear. I don’t know if you’ve ever tried to catch a bat before, but they’re a damn nuisance if they accidentally get into the house. When I was a boy, we had one get in the house and kept going around the room, looking for an exit. I used a fishing net, my brother a baseball bat, and my cousin a tennis racket, and that flying rodent manage to dodge us every time as if it knew in advance what we were going to do. The roles were now reversed; I was the flying rat, jumping over the spear, rolling and coming up again. Contrary to what Chan thinks, I am very good at

falling. The giant's own sounding as he planted each foot updated and reinforced my auditory map. This dance we took on inspired my friends, and they came to untie Jenny from the stake.

I was doing just fine till I opened my eyes, and the side of the spear caught my leg and I went straight down to the ground. The giant rose his spear in anger to jab me full through, and might have had Thetis not ran up yelling and waving her arms at the giant.

"You blind fool, how could you have missed seeing us?" She demanded.

The giant turned to focus on her, confident I was KO, and she stepped into a sliver of the diamond energy field and was gone. The giant did not follow, nor did he notice Thetis had arrived back on the hill top behind us. He had probably learned the hard way not to enter the artifact, but he was still drawn to it, trying to understand it. It turned back to me and found Jenny standing in front of me, holding her sonic screwdriver up at him.

"Last chance, giant," Jenny said. "Negotiate, or die."

The giant stabbed at her with its spear, and she unleashed a sonic blast that knocked the giant backwards, off its feet, and through the boundary of the energy field surrounding the artifact. It disappeared.

Jenny turned to me, falling on me, ecstatic that I was still alive.

"I am okay," I tried to say, and she hugged on me and examined me and then slapped me. "What the hell was that for?"

"For shoving me," Jenny said. Then she kissed me.

"And that?" I asked.

"Saving me," she said, and then, angry again, she slapped me.

"I am really confused," I said.

"I am a woman. Give me a moment to sort through my emotions," Jenny snapped. "That was for being stupid enough to confront a giant."

"But it saved your life," I pointed out.

"Oh, I know," Jenny said, kissing me again.

"Um, does anyone want to see the ghost?" Thetis asked.

"Ghost?" I said through the kiss.

"What?" Jenny asked.

Jenny turned to see the ghost. She knew who it was just as I knew who it was. She stood. So did I, and I took her hand in mine. She whispered ‘father.’ Thetis, Coreen, and Egecatl gathered near us. No matter which perspective we had, the ghost seemed to be looking at us.

“If you are seeing this, then I can only assume that I am dead, having spent all of my lives,” he said. “I am the Doctor. The Last of the Time Lords. You may ask questions.”

“Why have you called us?” Thetis asked.

“I have not. The TARDIS, however, is sentient,” the Doctor answered. The holographic image changed to reveal an older Doctor. The Doctor was in constant flux, progressing through its all its bodies in chronological order, and then cycling again. Only the Doctor speaking was constant, and as soon as it paused in speech, the progression began again. “I imagined the TARDIS might die in my absence, but if you’re here, it is possible it is seeking companions.”

“Champions?” Thetis said.

“Companions,” the Doctor said. “But a companion is not enough. There must be a Time Lord. That is the only reason it might call companions. There must be a Time Lord near.”

“I am,” Jenny said.

The Doctor addressed her, locking into the form she knew the best. Her father. “Who are you?”

“I am your Daughter,” Jenny said.

“Daughter who?” he asked. “I don’t have a daughter.”

“Search your memory, father. You did have daughter. You even had a granddaughter. Susan Foreman. Remember her?”

The Doctor changed again. “I remember Susan,” he said. The Doctor changed again. “I sort of remember a daughter. But she died. I, alone, am the last of the Time Lords.”

“Oh, Father, I didn’t die, or if I did, I regenerated, I don’t know, but as long as there is space and time there will be a Time Lord. There’s just no other way. There has to be a witness for the world’s to crystalize out of the quantum soup. And that’s the reason you couldn’t ever change the timeline once you experienced it a certain way. And it’s why there is always an overlap of Doctors. And our people, the Gallifreyans, they aren’t gone. They’re still here, in the universe. I feel it inside of me,” Jenny said.

The Doctor seemed to be considering. “If it’s true, that you are a Time Lord, then only you can save the TARDIS,” the Doctor said. “Either way, the TARDIS must have a companion,

preferably someone who can endure many lifetimes. If you are a Time Lord, then you can find a way through the flux, to the heart of the TARDIS. If you are only a companion, there is a chance you might win the TARDIS' favor. Either way, you must become one with the TARDIS."

"One?" Jenny said. "I don't get that."

"When I first stole it, it resisted me. It took time to tame it. Or did it tame me? Semantics, probably not relevant," the Doctor said. "Find your way to the heart. And good luck. This message will no longer repeat. The search for companions is done."

The image of the Doctor faded away.

"Father!" Jenny said, reaching out for him.

"I am sorry, Jenny," I said, squeezing her hand.

Jenny kind of shrugged. "It is what it is," she said.

"No, Jenny, process this," I said.

"There's nothing to process. I'm not grieving," Jenny said, as matter of fact. I searched her eyes. Her hair blew in the wind. We were surrounded by fields of grass that might have been trimmed by a lawn service, standing before a rotating energy field that churned sections of space time like taffy, with each section a window to another place and time. One of the places offered the 'wall' built by the Hath. One was the crashed UFO on the surface. But I only had eyes for Jenny, and the artifact's light was bright in her eyes. "Honestly, John, I am okay. I didn't really have time to connect with Father on a grand scale. And when I woke from death or slumber, I jumped straight way on a rocket I stole and headed out to the stars. Didn't ask if he were still there. I just left."

"Kind of like your father," I pointed out.

"Only, I didn't steal a time machine spaceship," Jenny said.

"But if we can find our way in there, you might inherit your father's ship," I said.

"There's no way in," Thetis said. "Every window sends you outwards."

"Not every," Jenny said. "I am a Time Lord. I can feel my way through."

"So, it's like a maze?" Egecatl said.

"Yep," Jenny said, her eyes bright with determination.

"You could theoretically become lost in space and time," Coreen said.

"Yep," she said.

"You could be tossed anywhere and any-when with no way back?" Thetis said.

“Yep,” Jenny said.

“You could end up lost and alone,” Egecatl said.

“Yep,” Jenny said, simultaneously with my “No.” She gave me a curious look.

“Never alone. We go together,” I said.

“It could be risky,” Jenny said.

“We’ve done that bit,” I said.

“Might need to get use to that,” Jenny said.

“Nice,” I said.

“So, if you’re ready, I see no point in delaying,” Jenny said. “To somewhere or nowhere or beyond.”

“I think it’s to infinity and beyond,” I said.

“Oh, well, I figured that’s taken,” Jenny said.

“How about, ‘take me to the volcano,’” I said.

“Oh, that’s lovely. Tom Hank’s right? Joe Vrs the Volcano?” Jenny said.

“You have seen a lot movies,” I said.

“No, my father did,” Jenny said. “He had a time machine, and he saw all the movies. Opening day, first in line.”

“Next time I stand in line for a Star Wars movie, I’ll be looking for him,” I said.

“Or you could go with me,” Jenny said.

“I would like that,” I said.

“Anything else clever to delay our entry as an artificial contrivance to build up suspense?” Jenny asked.

“No,” I said. We stepped forwards. I stopped just before pushing through the veil. “Wait, how about ‘have fun storming the castle.’”

“That would make sense if you weren’t going with me,” Jenny said.

“Are they going?” I asked, pointing to my new friends.

“No, they should wait here, as I can’t guarantee their safety,” Jenny said.

“You can’t guarantee my safety,” I said.

“Good point,” Jenny agreed. “But we’ve already come to terms with the risk equation. We’re going to save the planet.”

“I agree. So, as I was saying, they could say it as we depart,” I said.

“Are you both always like this?” Coreen asked.

“A bit mad, aren’t we?” Jenny said. “Alright, enough. We’re off.”

“To see the wizard?” I asked.

“Okay, enough, really, here we go save the world,” Jenny said.

“I thought we were saving the TARDIS,” I said.

“Save the TARDIS, save the world,” Jenny said.

“Is the world in danger?” I asked.

“You kidding? Do you know what happens if the multiple dimensionality envelopes implodes and the contents of the pocket spaces between the layers leak out?” Jenny asked.

I shook my head.

“Bad, very bad,” Jenny said

Jenny stuck her free hand in, and space/time streamed around her hand like luminescent water spinning bubbles and stars. She looked back at me and smiled. Oh, she was enjoying this. I was having second thoughts. Like, the first time I jumped out of an airplane and I was looking down out of the open door of a Cessna, thinking fuck, I am not doing this, but the decision was made for me by a friend who pushed me...

“Whatever happens, don’t let go of my hand,” Jenny said, drawing me back to the present.

“Copy that,” I said. Like that was going to be a problem.

She pushed through, dragging me with her. I think I heard Thetis saying “have fun storming the castle.” Coreen asked: “Do you suppose there’s a castle in there?” “I’m sure it’s a metaphor,” Thetis said. Egecatl closed out the conversation, the voices fading like dreams after waking: “more than a metaphor, more than a castle, it is the heart of everything, and bigger on the inside...”

निर्मित

There’s a phenomena known as frame dragging, where chunks of space/time are pulled around an object, usually a massive object, but it can even be detected around planets the density and size of Earth, given the right instrumentation. For a moment I thought I was separated from Jenny, but the current caught us up into the same bubble of space/time and we found ourselves slightly above Stonehenge. Each of Stonehenge’s doorways were open portals to other places.

The sceneries unfolding in each revealed a variety of strange planets and stranger times and as far as I could tell, none of them were earth. One of the portals caught my attention due to a double sun sunset. I so wanted to go there! The portals themselves reminded me of Kirk and his landing party standing before the 'Guardian of Time,' only with a lot more portals. Was the TARDIS the guardian?

"Right and then down," Jenny said, guiding me. She was sliding her feet, as if we were on the ledge of a building. I imitated her, gripping her hand when buffeted by the space/time vortex, a breeze that might blow us off the ledge of whatever was holding us up.

We passed through a larger vortex that encapsulated us. Jenny froze us in its epicenter, trying to orientate herself. A whirling of possibilities flowed around us, with just the slightest movement of eyes causing the scene to shift forwards or back. Jenny and I growing old. Jenny and I holding a child. Jenny and I on adventures. A candle lit dinner with Jenny nearly had me walking towards the scene.

"No, it's a distractions," Jenny said. "Stay close to me."

I looked to her and back, but couldn't find the scene again, forever gone lost in the haze of possibilities. I saw my ship, but more importantly, I saw Loxy embracing me. That's when I realized I wasn't just 'watching scenes unfold, I was participating in them, like a point of view youtube movie, where I never saw myself, but I was imbedded in the scene. I knew intuitively, if I stepped into Loxy, the embrace would become tangible, and I would solidify into that world line, become forever embedded into it. But Jenny pulled me onwards. A t-rex reared its head and came chomping down at me and I nearly flinched but it was gone. I continued to follow Jenny's lead, ever mindful of just how precarious this was. There were scenes with people and places that I could only wonder what would happen if I went there. Would I be me or someone else? All the worlds were 'point of view' but whose view were they? Would I become John Malkovich? If I let go and merged with the reality, would I be assuming the place of someone else's lover, like a spirit possession, and would the other know, and would I be able to get back here? We stepped down, as if proceeding down a shallow stair case, and then suddenly we were in the dark. All the lights and sounds and smells and choices that had been bombarding us, tempting me, were suddenly gone and there was quiet. It was just me and Jenny. No, there was a third presence, but it wasn't visible. This place was a strange dark, because we could still see each other, as if multiple spotlights were on us, but the rest of the universe was black.

Jenny froze. She thought about it, stepped back, stepping into me and forcing me backwards, as if trying to feel her way back. She spun us around. In her panic, she tried letting go of my hand, but I held firm. He turned to me, the only thing in her present reality that she could discern.

“I am such a fool,” Jenny said.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I am sorry,” Jenny said. “I can’t do this.”

“Talk it out, Jenny,” I said.

“Talk it out?! There’s nothing to talk out. I am blind here. I can’t see. I can feel up and down in space and back and forth and sideways through time, but I can’t see anything but darkness in all directions, and it’s distracting me,” Jenny said. “I was so tempted to stay there and hold our child.”

I was relieved to hear I wasn’t the only one tempted. I again found myself thinking of my own son. He would be three soon.

“Would that have been so bad?” I asked.

“OMG. You’re the distraction,” Jenny said. “Let go.”

“You said don’t let go,” I said.

“I was mistaken, let go!” Jenny said.

“No,” I said, pulling her towards me, letting my other hand go around her waist. “We will figure this out, together.”

“No, we can’t,” Jenny said. “I am sorry I brought you here, but I can’t go forwards with you, and I can’t take you back. It is what it is.”

“If you give up now, you will be setting a precedence for the rest of your life,” I said.

“This is not an intellectual problem, John,” Jenny snapped. “You can’t reason yourself out of an illusion. This is a trap. We’re going to crash. It’s not the songs of Sirens that drive men mad. It’s their beauty...”

“If we’re destined to crash, then we will crash together! We agreed to the risk, we took each other’s hands and with purpose stepped forwards into this,” I said. “There are times to let go, Jenny, but this is not one. Even I can see that.”

“I can’t see!” Jenny said.

“Then close your eyes, let me guide you,” I said.

“No, I can’t,” Jenny said. “It’s so empty.”

“There has always been darkness. There’s always been light. We are in a between place,” I said. I felt a strong urge to quote Doctor Seuss, ‘Oh, the places you will go,’ and maybe Jenny needed that, having been born straight into adulthood as a warrior. Was that a metaphor? How many of us are born into war and immediately take up shields and arms. I spoke gently: “Close your eyes and let me teach you to see with your heart.”

“You’ve already gone mad, the darkness has made you mad,” Jenny said, trying to get free.

Still, I held her firm to me, as if we were about to dance. She was hardly struggling in truth, she could no more let go of me here in this nothingness than a person could walk out over and abyss. “Jenny,” I said, firmly. “What’s the worst that can happen if you close your eyes?”

“More darkness,” Jenny said.

“Right, so close your eyes. I got you,” I said.

“I am afraid,” Jenny said. “What if you disappear, too? My father left me. You’re going to leave me, too. I can’t do this.”

I kissed her, proving to her I had no intentions of disappearing. Our eyes held during the first moments of the kiss, as if she was resisting. But in this dark moment of reduced sensations, the kiss became everything. Her eyes closed as she surrendered to the moment, and for her, as soon as her eyes closed, there was an explosion of inner light that filled the void, while for me, there was only her. I held firm, unable to stop the kiss, but wondering where she had gone, but she returned, she returned with a vengeance, doubling the passion in her response. She quivered in my arms. I withdrew my lips, but stayed near. I could see us, perhaps with second sight, but my eyes were wide open and it was just us in a void. Looking into the darkness gave me vertigo, as if we were falling, but looking at Jenny anchored me in place, in this moment, in this chunk of space/time, in this reality. We were lit by a dozen spot lights, and it was warm, and there was no shadows, just the blackness and the light. The light was in the blackness! Without an object to reflect it, you just couldn’t see the light. We were the objects that reflected light, gave it meaning. We were immersed in light! I think I was on the verge of an epiphany. Tesla was right! Everything was light.

“OMG, John,” Jenny said. “It’s changing so fast. Oh! Of course. We’re thinking about this all wrong, John. Imagine the TARDIS is permanently fixed in space/time. The ship itself

wouldn't be moving, we would be moving! All of space/time moves around the ship! Oh, yes! Of course! I should have known! It called for us, but we didn't have to go to it. We're already there!"

She spun me around, dancing, and now I understood the stairs we had proceeded down. I closed my eyes and used my second sight, and sure enough, we were in the control room for the TARDIS. I opened my eyes, and the world was still dark. I closed my eyes again, and the TARDIS control room was back. I could see shapes and sense textures, but I didn't trust the color schemes, and I got the sense that it was changing, creating itself, adapting to the needs of the pilot: the TARDIS was imprinting itself on Jenny. The light traveling up the central column around the control station was lavender.

"The TARDIS has been talking to us," Jenny said.

"Does the TARDIS have a name?" I asked. "I mean, other than TARDIS?"

"Oh, indeed," Jenny said. "Hello, Sexy. I think Dad left me the keys, assuming of course, you've still got life in you? Care for some more adventures? What do you say?"

"What took you so long?" I asked.

"What?" Jenny asked me.

"I've been calling you for ages, now," I said. "I've sent champions to wake you from your slumber. I had almost given up hope."

"I am sorry," Jenny said. She touched my face, searching my eyes for me or for TARDIS, I am not sure. I was beside myself, watching, very similar to when we were in the vortex of temporal and spatial probabilities.

"I was with him when he used the last of his life to save humanity, once and for all," I spoke for the TARDIS. My hand gripped tighter. I tightened my eyes, too, trying to keep out the images, but they kept coming. "I was with him when he and Clara met you and John. No, it was he and Peri Brown. Maybe it was both. Yeah, maybe, so much to sort. I was there when he gave you your first birthday present. You did find your sonic screw driver, right?"

"John?" Jenny said.

"John? Sexy. Sexy. John..." I was singing. "OMG, this is new. Whoa! So that's what it's like. Oh, Jenny. This wanting is unbearable. Wanting to be inside. Oh! A metaphor? It mirrors my own wanting. Wanting you inside me, wanting to travel. Oh, it's unbearable, this loneliness

between, and our times together too quickly spent.” My body began to gasp for air. “Not enough, can’t breathe. OMG, Jenny, I want to merge with you as I have with him...”

“I think you’re hurting him,” Jenny said.

“He needs to understand,” I continued to speak for the TARDIS. “He has been touched by others, and everything is changing so fast. I won’t often get a chance to speak like this. The Doctor didn’t always understand, but he and I had a relationship. And he’s a part of this newness. I am not through understanding him yet. I am wanting...”

“Are you saying you’re lonely?” Jenny asked.

I laughed. “Never. The Doctor is always with me. Time and space is the great illusion. Maybe you will understand this after you’ve been with me ten thousand years. You may have skipped your childhood, but you are still a child. I accept. We need to know more about this mystery.”

“Sounds great, but you’re going to have let go of John,” Jenny said.

“Oh, but not yet, please, there is still so much to sort,” I continued.

“And we will, together, but you have to let him go,” Jenny said.

“But this connection, it’s so rare,” I said. “It’s beneficial, to me, to him, to you, to us, the worlds whizzing by faster, and faster, and faster, OMG, I think me fly again!”

“Let go,” Jenny said, patiently.

I looked very serious. “You’re right,” I said. “But one more kiss. I need to know. We need to know together.”

Jenny hesitated, and in that moment, the TARDIS decided for us. We kissed. When I realized I was kissing, the only thing I could recall was the very last kiss, and I only intuited that it had gone on longer than it should and was puzzled by the missing time quality. Had I gone into a trance? Had her sudden eagerness transported me? The explanation I came up with was that I had passed out; I was gone for a moment, and now back, worrying that maybe Jenny was mad at me for going away, and gazing into her eyes looking for any evidence that she was mad, and we were still engaged in a kiss. We had gone from darkness to a well-lit, fully operational TARDIS control room.

“Wow,” I said.

“I concur,” Jenny said.

“Were you kissing me or the TARDIS?” I asked.

“I am not real clear on that point,” Jenny said. “You okay?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Kind of dizzy.”

“Well, the TARDIS did hijack you for a moment,” Jenny said.

“So, that was like a threesome?” I asked.

“You can let go now,” Jenny said.

“You told me not to let go,” I reminded her.

“Well, it’s okay, now,” Jenny said.

“How do we know everything is okay?” I asked.

“Because, um, well, we don’t, but this is one of those moments where let go and see,”

Jenny said. “I think its okay.”

“Then why is everything still moving?” I asked.

Jenny slapped me. I blinked. From my new perspective, the world was no longer moving.

“Better?” Jenny asked.

“Yeah,” I said grudgingly.

“Then what’s wrong?” Jenny asked.

“I’d really like you to stop hitting me,” I said.

“Is everything still moving?” Jenny asked.

“I think so, but you can let go of me,” I said. Then I realized I was holding on to her. I let go and I tried to walk, but stumbled. Jenny reached for me but I waved her off, grabbing the rail.

“Are we on a ship? How did we get here? When did we get here? Wait! We made it! I am the TARDIS. No, I was the TARDIS, now I am in the TARDIS, we are in the TARDIS. How hard did you hit me?!”

I walked around the console once and then ran around the console once, spinning and taking it in, and then ran for the door. Jenny shouted and rushed after me but I was already past the brink and if she hadn’t grabbed my ankle, I might have shot off into the emptiness. She held the door frame with one hand and my ankle with another. I was looking down on galaxy. I am pretty sure it was considered a ‘sombbrero galaxy,’ and the center bulge was incredibly bright, and I thought I could touch it, but even with my hand out towards it, it was clearly beyond me. There is just really no way to conceptualize the immensity of this ‘object’ in space when confronting it from this perspective. I knew what it was, but my brain didn’t want to accept the reality of it.

“Are you mad?” Jenny said.

“I would like to come back inside now,” I said.

Jenny drew me back in. Once my feet were on the ‘ground’ I hugged her, then I let go, and went back to the door and stared out over the threshold to see another galaxy behind us, and then I sat down hard. I stared out into the galaxy, trying to calculate how many stars. Bit by bit, my brain was coming back to me.

“You did it,” I whisper. “The TARDIS accepted you.”

“We did it,” Jenny corrected. “I couldn’t have done it without you.” She sat down next to me. “Are you crying?”

“What, men can’t cry?” I asked, wiping my eyes on my sleeve.

“Because I hit you?” Jenny asked.

I looked at her confused. “You hit me? Why did you hit me?”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Jenny asked.

“Is this the part where I wake up?” I asked.

“Do you want to wake up?” Jenny asked.

“I want this to go on forever,” I said.

Jenny took my hand. “How about for a moment?”

“Some moments can be forever,” I said.

“Some moments can certainly seem like forever. Like when you rant, those moments just drag on and on,”

“I will endeavor to shorten them,” I said.

“Don’t change. I love you just the way you are,” Jenny said.

“Don’t be afraid of change, Jenny. I will love you no matter what you become,” I said.

“Wow,” Jenny said. “Is that freedom?”

I touched her knee, but gazed out into space.

“I would like to celebrate. Where would you like to go? Anywhere in time and space! I get the feeling that the Universe is a strange new place and it’s calling us to explore!” Jenny said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Well, if you’re worried about a schedule, I do happen to have a time machine,” Jenny said.

“Good point,” I said. “Before we go off on grand adventures together, I would like to rescue a few people.”

“Really?” Jenny asked.

“Is that okay?” I asked.

“It’s absolutely awesome!” Jenny said. “Is it a rush rescue, or do I have time to change?”

“You just pointed out to me that you have a time machine, and you’re asking if you have time to change.” I asked.

“I am new at this,” Jenny said. “Give me some time to adjust.”

“Apparently we have all the time in the Universe,” I said.

“Indeed,” Jenny said. “Come on, let’s find some clothes”

After about an hour of looking for clothes, I was nearly exhausted. I was interested in the library and wanted to linger, and was bothered that there some books that were wet, and Jenny said something about the pool ending up in the library, and some of the things were taking longer to dry out, but assured me they would be alright. There was a record bin, with a Beethoven record out. I felt compelled to put the record back in its sleeve and back in the bin. There was a room full of artifacts and knick knacks that I wanted to shift through, as well, but Jenny pulled me onwards.

“We could spend our entire lives in here,” I said.

“OMG, John, look at this!” Jenny said, running over to jump up on the Victorian styled bed.

“Really?” I asked.

“You don’t like it?” Jenny asked.

“OMG, like, how old are you exactly?”

“What, you don’t like jumping on the bed?” Jenny asked. “Oh, come on, give us a jump!” She saw I was about to respond and she added quickly: “Just a jump!”

So, when confronted with this youthful energy, what can a grown man do? I ran and jumped on the bed and we held hands and jumped. Then she wanted an airplane, so I gave her lift. And then she crashed into me and onto me and smiled into me.

“You’re breathless?” Jenny noted.

“It’s been a long day,” I said.

Jenny brushed my face with her fingers. “You shouldn’t look at me so.”

“Can’t help it,” I said.

“It’s not going to help you,” Jenny said.

“I know,” I said. Then I thought about it. “Those things we saw, the timelines of us. Were they real?”

“It’s hard to say,” Jenny said, thinking about it. “They could be. They might not be. It could just be a load of fluff. The universe is full of fluff you know. Like this bed? Pure fluff.”

“Yeah, I figured you more for Gothic,” I said.

“Oh, I think you’re projecting there,” Jenny said. She gasped, jumped off the bed and ran to the closet. “Yes!”

I wondered over to the door that led to a walk in closet. Jenny ran through the walk-in closet and passed over into a lavatory, with shower and toilet, and then ran back to me. She pointed to a washing machine and dryer near the lavatory. Was that a hint? She spun, sorting clothes that were tightly packed together, and it was hard to pull them off without taking several things at once. There was a dresser and hat boxes and shoe boxes, and shoes on racks, and boxes of socks, and underwear and hose that spilled out of their containers. She held something up and inspected it, a fake police uniform, scrutinized it, and tossed it over her shoulder saying “Amy!” The room was a horrid mess, and getting worse as Jenny sorted. But Jenny was in heaven.

I wanted a shower desperately, so while she played, I went to the washroom and stripped down. I threw the clothes in the wash, and spent a good ten minutes under a steaming hot spray. I emerged to find Jenny holding a towel for me. She also had a razor and cream.

“Can I watch you shave? I really want to watch you shave!” Jenny said.

It was a simple enough joy to share. I started to lather up, as Jenny sat on the counter. But instead of watching, she wanted to do it for me. So, I saw no harm in that. Did Time Lords shave? When finished, Jenny used a warm towel to remove any remaining shaving cream. I got the sense that she was looking at me in the same manner I frequently find myself looking at her.

“That look is not going to help you,” I said, quoting her from earlier.

“Pfft!” Jenny laughed. “Whatever.”

“You don’t think I can resist you?” I said.

Jenny stepped into me. Mind you, I was still naked, except for the towel. “I think you’ll do whatever I say.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said.

By the time we were finished shaving, I found my uniform had been clean, dried, and spit out of the machine folded. I so want one of those! Surprisingly, the pain splotch had not come out of my uniform. As I was dressing, Jenny was undressing. By the time I was completely dressed, she was full naked and holding one of a dozen articles of clothing she had decided on. She held it up against her, looking in the mirror. Her eyes went through the mirror to mine.

“You like it?” Jenny asked.

“I can’t see the clothes,” I said.

“Yeah, not with your eyes there you can’t,” Jenny said. “I am going to get a shower.”

I wasn’t sure if her announcement was an invitation to play or was simply stating her intent. I mean, she wasn’t asking me to leave, as she was already naked around me, which was clearly a level of trust in the relationship that went beyond words. Of course, my thoughts on the matter were subject to cultural expectations which didn’t necessarily apply to her.

“I think I will give you a moment,” I said.

“Give me ten minutes,” Jenny yelled back at me as I retreated.

“You’re so going to be longer than ten minutes, aren’t you?” I asked, thinking cold shower now.

“Probably,” Jenny said.

I returned to the bed and laid down. I must have been really exhausted to walk away from an opportunity like that without even checking in on whether or not it was an invitation. I closed my eyes, and tried to see with second sight. The shower produced too much noise, she was a blur, like a camera that was out of focus, but only from chest to thighs; the rest of her was clear in my mind. And she was singing. And it echoed. She was really happy. I drifted. I was in a state between sleep and wake, and it felt warm and dreamy. My understanding is that human hearing never shuts off, and so the brain continues to sort sounds. I was aware of the shower going off, and all of Jenny came into focus. I knew her body was wet and the water was dripping off, but in the second sight, it was blur as if skin was moving, which was kind of weird. I followed her drying and dressing, and it was as if we were long married and this was just part of our routine. Yes, I was attracted and wanting, and this new vision, this second sight, was enticing, because sound is actually sensual. Sound caresses and penetrates not just the mind but also the body and so every part of me was a radio antennae immersed in the experience of Jenny. Technically, had I been seeing with eyes, what’s true for sound is also true for light, that we are always touching

others with light just like we are with sound. There is no way to avoid how entangled and intimate we are with all of reality and with each other. And in this sleepy, dreamy between world, external and internal melded together, too. When I came to and was able to attend to the world around me, Jenny was standing at the foot of the bed. I sat up, and she turned to and fro, showing off her dress. She wore a black 'poodle skirt' with a white poodle and a white, twirl of leash that broke the monotony of the black. The skirt hit right above her knees. Her shirt was pink, with an exaggerated, black collar, with short sleeves, fringed with black. The shoes looked like bowling shoes, with pink ankle socks visible. She slipped on a light blue, knitted sweater.

"What do you think?" Jenny asked.

"Umm, honestly?" I asked.

"What? Is it missing something? A bow tie!" Jenny said. "I couldn't find a bow tie."

"You're fine," I said.

"You're sure?" Jenny asked.

"Well, are you going to wear this for the rest of your life?" I asked.

"Maybe," Jenny said.

I shrugged. "I love it."

"Yay me! So, if you're through napping, let's go rescue some folks," Jenny said.

निर्मित

We arrived in the giantess camp, within the walls. Jenny and I emerged from the TARDIS. The giantesses immediately tried to attack us, but came up against a hard shell of a force field. Jenny ignored them, mesmerized by the exterior of the TARDIS.

"Hold on!" Jenny said, hands up waving at the TARDIS. "What is this?"

"It's pink," I said.

"Just because I am girl, and I like pink, doesn't mean the TARDIS should be pink," Jenny said. "Who in the world ever heard of a pink police box?!"

"When you consider the only place in time that might recognize a police box is 1963 London, I would imagine color would be rather irrelevant," I said. "Besides, I think you should be more concerned about the letters being backwards."

"What do you mean, backwards?" Jenny asked.

“Really? Are you dyslexic?” I asked.

“It says police box,” Jenny said.

“Maybe if you’re looking at in a mirror,” I said.

“Really?” Jenny said. Jenny closed her eyes, squinted, and opened her eyes again. She did this twice. She ran around the box and came at it from a different angle. “You’re right! I am still seeing it the way I want to see it.” Jenny turned to the giantesses. “You see that there. That says, xoB eciloP, which reversed reads police box, which may not mean anything to you here, but where I come from, it means a lot. This world is a new world and we’re not going to start off by chaining intelligent creatures. My companion asked you to let them go. I expect compliance.”

The queen laughed. “I rule this planet, woman. Not the little people.”

“I am a Time Lord,” Jenny said. “I could travel back through time and take you out before you were even conceived, but I won’t do that. Not today, because that wouldn’t be a good precedent, but know this, I have family in and on this world and I will protect them. Don’t make me come back here!”

Jenny powered up her sonic screw driver and the chains fell off the dragon, at the same time, the giantesses fell to their knees, covering their ears. The dragons took immediately to the sky. When the dragons were gone, she powered down her device. The queen of the giantesses, remained on her knees, looking at Jenny who was out of the shielded area and pointing the device at her.

“Now, you stole some tech from one of the Hath. The bubble breather device. It’s no use to you. I want it back,” Jenny said.

The giantess bowed, got up, went into her home, and when she returned, she had the device in question in her hand. She handed it to Jenny.

“Hold on,” I said, from the safety of the TARDIS’ shield. “How come you’re being so reasonable now?”

“She’s a woman, she’s a time lord, she’s in charge,” the giantess said. “You are just a man.”

“Just a man?!” I asked.

“With a man’s courage,” Jenny offered.

“Oh, we could so start a song and dance here,” I said.

“I don’t think they know it,” Jenny said.

“Too bad. That might have been funny,” I said.

“It would have been weird,” Jenny said.

“You like weird,” I said.

“I do,” Jenny said, and then to the giantess. “Be kind to the little people. You’re distant cousins. Make peace, not war. This planet has a great future ahead of it.”

With that, we withdrew into the box. Jenny messed with quite a few items on the console, starting with a hair dryer against two static wicks that arced, pushed in three times on a depressible joystick, that reminded me of the old Atari joystick, then wrote on a white board with red lipstick, and finger spun the black/red ink ribbon forwards along the wheel of an archaic typewriter before typing out police box backwards, just to shift us over and down. We emerged from the TARDIS inside the cavern. The TARDIS illuminated the place for us with its upper light, and it looked nothing like I had ‘envisioned’ it.

“This is not right,” I said. “There were pillars here, and arches, and corridors.”

“It’s still here,” Jenny said, pointing to the stalactites and stalagmites that had grown so large they were one.

“No, you missed it,” I said. “We’re somewhere else.”

“I assure you, the TARDIS is a finely tuned instrument and there’s no way I missed,” Jenny said.

I wanted to argue with her, but bit my tongue. There were crystal formations, like those that comprised the Fortress of Solitude, superman’s North Pole ‘happy place.’ Jenny pulled out her sonic screwdriver and illuminated blood on one of the crystals that had broken and became part of an arch, bridging two bundles of crystals. She confirmed her results. It was a match.

“This is your blood,” Jenny said.

“But,” I said.

Isold emerged from the dark, covering her eyes to the TARDIS’ light? “Hello? John, is that you?”

I stopped protesting.

“Even with sound, John, our brains see what they want to see,” Jenny said.

“Will I ever learn to see what’s real?” I asked.

Jenny put a hand on my shoulder. “You see clearer than most people I know,” Jenny said. “Come on. Let’s go meet your Hath.”

“Wait here, Isold, we’ll be right back,” I said.

“Okay,” Isold said.

We found our way down to the pool, allowing me to follow through on a promise.

Chapter 14

“Tell me that wasn’t a wrong turn,” I said as we emerged from the TARDIS. I was no longer wearing the paint stained Fleet uniform, but simple jeans and a pull over t-shirt that kind of suggested Fleet. It also suggested Grease, minus the leather jacket.

“You enjoyed it, admit it,” Jenny said.

“Of course I did,” I said. “But, that’s still a huge miss. You didn’t just miss the time, you missed the planet.”

“Okay, so, I got a bit off target,” Jenny said. And then, in her best imitation of Harrison Ford, she said: “Traveling through hyperspace ain't like dusting crops, boy! Without precise calculations we could fly right through a star or bounce too close to a supernova, and that'd end your trip real quick, wouldn't it?”

“Cute,” I said.

“Come on, admit that you were happy to see the Han Solo movie ahead of schedule,” Jenny said.

“That was nice,” I agreed.

“We shared a popcorn and soda,” Jenny said.

“That was also nice,” I said.

“We got to meet Emilia Clarke,” Jenny said.

“That was super nice,” I said.

“I know, right?!” Jenny said, hugging my arm. “And you enjoyed the dirigible ride over New London with Wells and Twain.”

“Immensely,” I agreed.

“That girl in the steel corset was really into you,” Jenny said.

“Really? I didn’t notice,” I said.

“How could you have not noticed?!” Jenny said.

“I only had eyes for you,” I said.

“Oh, don’t default to trite,” Jenny said. “You would have so done that girl if I had left you alone with her.”

“I am glad you didn’t,” I said. “That place was a bit off.”

“It was. I am equally glad I had your arm. Did you catch the way Wells and Twain both kept staring at me,” Jenny asked.

“I suspect that’s something else you might have to get used to,” I said. “You’re like over the top gorgeous.”

“You think so?” Jenny said.

“Which reminds me, I have misplaced my Steamwatch,” I said.

“We’re talking about me and you jumped to your watch?” Jenny asked.

“I haven’t seen it since you asked to tinker with it,” I said.

“I’m sure it’s in the TARDIS somewhere,” Jenny said. “Maybe the pool room? What?”

I had brought our slow, meandering walk to a halt. She saw me frown, followed my gaze to the medical bed, and dropped my arm to retrieve her sonic screwdriver from a pocket inside her sweater.

Midori’s body was on the medical table. There was no indication of life, either from her, or from the med display above the bed. A line across her forehead suggested the procedure that had been done. Her brain had been removed. There was another line across her stomach, suggesting her ovaries had been removed, and the eggs harvested. Boris arrived, having just washed his hands, acting as if everything was copacetic.

“What have you done?!” I asked, grabbing his arms. I wanted to smack him.

“We needed a new brain and Midori volunteered,” Boss explained. “She met all the criteria in terms of IQ and functionality tests. I used Comp to attain the skillset necessary to perform the procedure. It was flawlessly routine.”

“Are you completely mad?!” I said. “Put her brain back now!”

Jenny turned off her scan, pocketed her device. “John,” she said, shaking her head.

“We can put her back,” I insisted.

“The body has been dead too long,” Jenny said.

“Surely there’s medical knowledge in the Comp that can restore the body and put the brain back,” I said.

Jenny and Boss both shook their heads. I shoved Boss out of the way and headed for the Comp room. “Fine, I will do it myself.”

Jenny followed, caught up to me and grabbed my arm. “Even if you got the brain back in and the heart started, there is too much cellular damage. She might return, but with diminished

capacity. Worst case, she'd be a paraplegic, best case, pushing a wheelchair with a forehead prosthetic. Let this go."

"I am tired of being told to let things go!" I said. "We have a time machine. We can go back before the procedure..."

"We're here now. This is a done deal," Jenny said. "Not even my father could undo this."

"It's not fair. This world is just getting started," I said.

"John, most things are out of our control. Radiation in the environment, pollution, war, murder, crime, over fishing, death, rapes, illness, neglect, abuse, and all sorts of atrocities named and unnamed. And that's just the real stuff. We also lose sight of ourselves and reality fighting for causes and ideals that seem bigger than life and get caught up in the drama of it all and we forget to be human and decent to one another. Yeah, I am not saying ignore any of it, and there needs to be conversations about it, but at the end of the day, it is what it is and you're not going to be of service if you can't focus and prioritize. Right now, in this moment, in this situation, this is what it is," Jenny said. "So, you can run around and rant some more if you like, download the knowledge into your head and see for yourself, but when you're done, you're going to be right back here having to face this. It's done."

"Why would she do this?" I asked.

"It was necessary." Midori's voice sounded over an intercom in the Comp Room. "As I said, I can't compete with Allura's beauty."

"I told you, this isn't a competition," I said, turning to find the nearest camera.

"But it's not just with her, is it? I see how you look at Jenny. I hear the way you talk, as if you're old lovers, entangled through eternity. I can imagine how you are with your future romantic interests, and you are going back there. This was easier. I can see more clearly now, without the influence of the heart," Midori said.

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe we need to employ more heart, not less?" I asked.

"I am happy, John. Maybe for the first time ever. If you only knew just how much my consciousness has expanded since becoming the habitat," Midori said. "I can see everyone. I can see the stars and the planets and I can sense the flow of the operation, I can see the flow of terraforming already in progress. There are fish in the oceans, moss on the stones. Trees are coming. Soon we will walk out and bring forth animals on the land. We will have a better first start than any previous civilization before us. And, according to the information I have from one

of the space telescopes, there is a red dwarf within 19 light-years, and it appears to have twelve earthlike bodies, six in the habitable zone. I suspect we will reach that system in my lifetime. I might get to be on one of the ships that explores those worlds. When I am done here, of course.”

I turned to Jenny. “This is my fault. My presence here change the direction of society.”

“Change was coming, John. Whether you were here or not, change was coming. Is it better or worse for your having been here? There is no way to know that,” Jenny said.

“If I may, John, I would like to say for the better. I don’t know if I would have had the courage to do this before meeting you,” Midori said. “I only have one regret.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I would have liked one dance,” Midori said.

“I’m not much of a dancer,” I said.

“Not even a slow dance?” Midori asked, almost mournful. “You couldn’t just stand there and hold me and maybe sway a little?”

“That would have been nice,” I said.

“That could still happen,” Jenny said. “You could use the Comp to link your brains and have an immersive, virtual experience.”

“It won’t hurt him?” Midori asked.

“One exposure, not to exceed ten minutes, that would be alright,” Jenny said. “I mean, if you both want.”

“I would like that. A memory to carry me the next million years or so,” Midori said.

“Okay,” I said. “How do we do this?”

The Boss led me over to the dais that was almost completely enclosed, except for the entry space, which was large enough for a human to pass through sideways and stand. As I took my place, the floor illuminated beneath my feet, and Boss instructed me on the device, which was simple enough. All I had to do was reach up, pull the helmet down over my head, and think about what I wanted to do or learn, and it would come to me. No sooner than I pulled the head into place, I became conscious of elsewhere.

I found myself in a library, my own inner mind’s virtual library. Loxy and I frequently met here. I found myself disappointed she wasn’t in a chair waiting for me. Midori entered.

“Wow! Have you read all of these books?” Midori asked.

There did seem like a lot of books here, more than what was in the library in my study back on Origin. I wasn't sure. "I don't know. I have at least handled them, or I don't think they would be here."

"I can't tell which organization you've used, Oh! Goodnight Moon. Jenny use to read this to us. I would so upload a copy of your brain if we had more than ten minutes," Midori said, browsing the books, touching them with her fingers, glancing back at me, watching out of the corner of her eyes to see if I was tracking her. Was she playing a game? Our brains were interacting directly, and yet, she and I hadn't rushed straight to each other's arms and danced...

"It isn't necessary," I said. "I would imagine your Comp library has all of humanity's knowledge, plus some."

"But your personal library has knowledge that was flavored by your perspective, through your filters of love and hate, the architecture of your experiences," Midori said. "The Comp library is so sterile."

"Well, you already have a copy of my personality. Brains make models of people, so the first time you met me, your brain made a copy to predict my behavior," I said.

"You're unpredictable," Midori said, pulling a book off the shelf. She flipped through it, put it back.

"You're intuitive, you would know things about me, even in that first meeting, before the first exchange of words. You made your decision to remove your brain based on that intuition, instead of waiting and asking me my opinion, because you know what my answer would have been. Jung wouldn't necessarily call this intuition as much as accessing the collective unconscious. He would say we all meet there, that we're enmeshed with today's society and the cultures past. Some believe in a more mundane explanation that we just telegraph who we are and what we think and every brain knows because, well, brains are brains, and it knows itself."

"What do you think?" Midori asked, pointing to 'the Red Book,' by Carl Jung.

I shrugged. "Maybe both are true. Maybe there's more to us than we will ever know."

"But what do you think?" Midori said.

"I believe in a unified field theory of consciousness, that everything is consciousness," I said. "Not matter, not energy, but consciousness, and that ultimately everything is one."

Midori nodded. She came to me, put her arms over my shoulder and clasped her hands behind my neck.

“That explain much of your library,” Midori said. “Whitman. Blake...”

“How about that dance?” I asked.

“You don’t want to talk about books?” Midori asked, surprised.

“I want to make the most of our time,” I said.

“There’s no music,” Midori said.

“Oh, if there’s books, there’s music,” I said, taking her by the hand and leading her. And sure enough, I found the corner of my library of mind’s music center. I introduced her to my ideal sound system. “Reel to reel, 8-track tapes, cassette tapes, phonographs, Laserdisks, CD’s, DVD’s, Flashdrives, Crystals, and, the AVH Pedestal.”

The auditory and visual hallucination pedestal is future tech, and it stood in front of the sound system. It was a cylindrical device with a silver sphere at the top, and tangible field of energy that one could feel when you brought your hands up to it. At just the right distance from the device, electricity flowed in visible arcs to the hand. It was not painful, but the first time one felt it, they usually drew their hands away. Midori was no exception. I encouraged her to find the ‘sweet spot’ using my hand to guide hers, and once there, she tarried, and her eyes brightened.

“OMG! I hear it. On the inside. How is this possible?” Midori said.

“Sound doesn’t have to go through the ears. I have a cloth here somewhere that transmits sound to the brain via bone conduction, but this, it sends the information through nerves,” I explained. “The brain is not limited to the five senses that we know. Wearing body mods, one can learn to receive all sort of information. Like wearing a vest that vibrates different areas to tell you the weather. Eventually, your brain stops thinking, oh, that’s the vest pocket, which means rain, and simply knows it’s about to rain without having to think about it. You can put a magnet in your finger and learn to discern magnetic fields in your environment. People can see without eyes, hear without ears. Our brains are extremely plastic. Spend enough time, energy, or thought on anything, and it will change your brain.”

“Would you hold me?” Midori asked.

“You want me to select a song?” I asked.

“No, just hold me,” Midori said.

I embraced her, standing still until I guess I got bored and simply started rocking her, with my hand on her shoulder and on the back of her head. And I eventually sang to her. A gentle version of “Superstar,” which I knew well, usually in the background of my mind being

sung by Carol Carpenter. How many times in my youth did I allow her soulful voice to carry me into sleep? But it quickly became more than just my voice, as music and light and magic filled the room, taking the library away until the song finished leaving us in a room of pure white.

“That song is so sad,” Midori said, holding me tight. “Don’t be sad. We’ve only just begun.”

“I hope so, but I have been lonely, and this path you have taken, it feels so...I don’t want this for you,” I said.

“But I am not going to be alone,” Midori said, holding me. “I’ve got you and Loxy and I am going to create my own tulpas. How amazing, that you actually lived in a world where Carol Carpenter was still alive and though I already had music and literature, you have given me context. A whirlwind of your life has inspired me. You have given me the past, informed my present, and directed my future. No more sad songs for you.”

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I am uploading a copy of your brain directly into mine,” Midori said. “I will never allow you to be lonely again.”

“Oh, Midori,” I said. “If only that were a cure. I have a tulpa, and I still experience loneliness. I’m not alone, but I still feel lonely sometimes because loneliness is not related to having others around.”

“But I will change that for you,” Midori said. “I was never lonely until I met you, and then after... Well, I don’t know what this is but I know I want you, that I need you with me. And you need me. Being here in your mind as confirmed that much. I will have you and Loxy in my brain. We could build worlds together. You and me! And a dog name Boo! Oh, I like that song. Tracking. So much coming in. So many songs. Your life was so alive with music...”

“Midori, there’s no undoing this,” I said.

“There is still time to abort. Tell me to quit,” Midori said.

I didn’t know what to do. What would happen if I stop her at half a download? If having a copy of my brain was really problematic, then would half a brain be twice as problematic, or half as much? I kissed her. “Take from me what you need,” I said, surrendering.

निर्मित

Jenny looked at a chronometer she had chosen to wear, and watched the poodle arm click another minute past her recommended cutoff point. She frowned. "Alright, Midori. Ten minutes has come and gone, disengage," she said.

No response. Boss reached up to push the helmet away, but Jenny grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "You want to rip his brain apart? You have to wait till this field indicator is off," Jenny said.

"We do it all the time," Boss said.

"Well, don't do that," Jenny said. "I am surprised any of you boys can still speak. Midori! Disengage the Comp."

Jenny pulled out her sonic screwdriver.

"No, no, no," Jenny said. "This is not a good idea."

"What are they doing?" Boss said. "Sex?"

"Better than sex," Jenny said.

"What's better than sex?" Boss asked.

Jenny looked at him and pointed. "You're not ready for that. Don't even think about it."

"Think about what?!" Boss asked, confused.

"Exactly," Jenny said.

"I don't recall ever seeing such a high rate of information transfer before," Boss said.

The procedure finished and the helmet withdrew back to its resting position on its own. I opened my eyes, smiled, squeezed out, took in a deep breath, and collapsed. Jenny and Boss caught me. The next thing I knew I was on a medical table. Only slightly confused. I didn't remember getting to the table, but I recognize Jenny. And she seemed cross.

"That was much more taxing than I imagined," I said.

"You're lucky," Jenny said.

"I didn't see the harm in the procedure," I said.

"That's because you're also an idiot," Jenny said.

"She made a strong argument for having a copy of my personality and knowledge set," I said. I saw no need to say Midori started the process without my informed consent, for many reasons. I was actually okay that she had done it, I understood what was driving her to do it, but also, in my creation myth, the first sin was passing the blame to other, instead of owning responsibility. I was not going to throw the 'First' woman on this world under the bus. I've

seen where that train goes. “Do you understand what she was doing was called a rip? It’s a backup procedure for stealing knowledge from uncooperative brains! Where do you think this vast archive of information came from? It is designed to get knowledge without the disturbing the personality set, in order to get a clean copy, but in doing so the personality suppression subset typically kills the person they’re retrieving information from.”

“I’m pretty sure we switched was toggled off,” I said.

“Well, that’s even...stupider. Without that barrier, you entire personality set would have been loaded into her brain,” Jenny said.

“I am pretty sure that was her intentions,” I said.

“It also puts her personality in yours,” Jenny said. “It’s a double redundant system to ensure continuity of code.”

I closed my eyes. It was a struggle, but because of the newness of it, I could sense her personality in the backdrop of my mind. She was not a fully formed tulpa, such as Loxy, but with an increased interaction pattern, I could make her as solid as Loxy. Most likely, I would just find her in random dreams. I opened my eyes, my eyes still wondering as I sorted, lingering unconsciously on Jenny, and noticing her arms crossed in front of her but not really seeing, but finally clicking into focus and coming up to meet her eyes. “She was,” I said.

“And you’re okay with that?” Jenny asked.

I didn’t have an answer.

“You’re going to have a major impact on their development,” Jenny pointed out.

“Shall we pop to the future and find out just how much?” I asked.

“You want to?” Jenny asked.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because, once you see how it is, we won’t be able to undo it,” Jenny said.

“Is there anything else we can do to make the future better now?” I asked.

“I can’t think of anything. They have all the tools they need,” Jenny said. “And, they are pretty decent folks.”

Boss smiled.

“Not the brightest,” Jenny said, still a bit sore about him. “But part of that is the fact they’re kids.”

“Females do mature faster than males,” I added.

“Yeah, and if we use you as the measure, what age would you suppose a man can deemed mature? Seventy five?” Jenny asked.

“Maybe a hundred seventy five,” I said.

“Who wants to live that long?” Boss asked.

Well, there is that, too. “Depends on the company, I suppose,” I said. “We’ll just have to trust they will get there on their own. Let’s go see.”

Jenny and I said goodbye to Boss, and a few of the others that were nearby, but most everyone were off exploring their new relationships, and not to be found or bothered by the weird adults that had drifted through their lives. We, weird adults, returned to the TARDIS. It was still taking tremendous effort for Jenny to get past its pinkness, and the backwards lettering, but I loved walking into a small box that was bigger on the inside. And it was also fun watching Jenny rush madly about the console, throwing levers and pushing buttons, and shaking a baby rattle just to send the TARDIS into a flurry of inner activity that rained in lavender lights and familiar sounds, like time grinding away through gears, which brought us somewhere without even a bump. She grabbed my hand and took me to the door as excited as a kid on Boxing Day. As intelligent and adult like as she was, she was also very much still a child, perhaps just as old as Midori. We arrived beyond childhood’s end, maintaining our own inner childhood sense of wonder.

“Don’t you want to like check the screen and see if it’s safe?”

“And ruin the surprise?” Jenny asked. “This is much more fun, don’t you think? On the count of three?”

“I was thinking,” I said, seriously.

“Should I hold the count?” Jenny asked.

“Did you ever wonder if the TARDIS had a back door?”

“No,” Jenny said.

“Well, what if it had two sides, like a coin, a blue side and a pink side, and that’s why the letters are backwards, because we’re seeing her from the other side, and there could even be like two control rooms, and the Doctor, your father, is on the other side, still doing what he’s doing, and you’re now on this side, doing what you’re doing, and the TARDIS is like so big, that you’ll never meet, but you’re like always together,” I said.

It looked like Jenny was on the verge of saying something clever, and then suddenly changed her mind: "I am going to count now."

"But what I said was huge," I said.

"And completely unprovable," Jenny said. "One."

"Wait," I said.

"What for?" Jenny asked.

"I am sorry about pushing you," I said.

"Oh, I thought we were past all that," Jenny said. "Wait a moment. You saved my life doing that. You're sorry for saving my life?"

"No, just the manner in which I did it," I said.

"Well, no worries, then," Jenny said, completely over being angry that fast. "Two."

"One more thing," I said.

"This better be good," Jenny said.

"I am going to kiss you now," I said.

"You think so?" Jenny asked.

I answered by kissing her, just as she was saying three. She pushed both the doors open, even as she was beginning to warm up to the kiss, and we kept going until we heard the fake cough. We both directed our gaze out to the people watching us. The TARDIS was on the hangar deck of the Enterprise. Security Officers, men and women, stood with phasers at ready. Loxy stepped forwards.

"The whole crew has been worried sick about you, and you've been off having fun with the Doctor?" Loxy asked.

"Um," I began.

"That's all you got to say for yourself?" Loxy asked.

"Actually, she's the daughter," I said.

"The Doctor's daughter?" Loxy asked. "John, do you think that's wise?"

"Um, well, I didn't think it quite through like that," I admitted.

"You should probably let go of me now," Jenny said.

"Uh?" I asked Jenny, and then realized I was still holding her, my hands firmly on her lower back, holding her securely to me. I let go of her and stepped out of the TARDIS. Security put away their weapons. "Um, Jenny, this is Captain Loxy Bliss, first officer, and..."

“We haven’t really worked that last part out completely yet,” Loxy said, interrupting me before I could say tulpa, or perhaps girlfriend.

“Well, that’s not uncommon,” Jenny said, trying to be helpful. “Did you know, very few couples ever actually talk about the relationship? It’s almost like talking about the relationship is taboo or one of those things if you talk about it that it might disintegrate under the scrutiny.”

“Um, yeah, right. Loxy, this is...” I said.

“Oh, I think we’ve gone beyond that bit,” Jenny said, interrupting me. “I’m Jenny. And you’re Loxy and you’re are much younger looking than I imagined.”

“So, you at least mentioned me?” Loxy asked.

“Um, you came up,” I said.

“Oh, it’s all he talks about, really, once he starts talking,” Jenny said. “Rarely quiet, once he gets warmed up.”

“Tell me about it,” Loxy lamented.

“Really? I am right here,” I told them.

Loxy sighed: “So, this is how it’s going to be? Adventures, romantic dalliances, and more adventures, followed by more dalliances...”

“It worked for Kirk,” I said.

“And Aeneas,” Jenny said, pointing it out matter of fact, which drew unexpected attention to her and caused her to feel the need to ramble a quick explanation. “Basically, nothing’s changed in literature or in the human social arenas in the two thousand years since ‘The Aeneid’ was written. Technically, nothing’s changed since Gilgamesh was written, and we’re just re-spinning those tales in a variety of ways, which connects us to Odysseus and the many others who fraternized with gods and goddesses before returning home to the woman left behind.”

“Really?” Loxy asked. “Is that what I am, John? The woman left behind?”

“Um,” I stuttered.

“That didn’t quite come out the way I meant it,” Jenny said. “I was merely pointing out how literature reflect social and biological needs...”

“Right, like it’s hardwired into our brains,” I said.

“Oh, you don’t really want to go with the bio-psychological explanation for this, do you?” Loxy asked.

“To be honest, with access to a time machine, I imagined I might get back before you notice,” I said. “Am I in trouble?”

“Yes,” Jenny said, surmising, even as Loxy was saying “No.” They reversed it, with Jenny asking “No?” and Loxy asking “Yes?”

“Look, I was a permanent resident of his brain before the brains teased us out in the long distance transport,” Loxy said. “I love him for who he is. But that doesn’t mean I don’t worry, and the crew was definitely worried they had lost their Captain and we haven’t even had an official launch yet.”

“Wow,” Jenny said. “So, you and I are okay?”

“You imagined I’d be sore when I discovered that you been traveling all of space/time with the love of my life?” Loxy asked.

“Not all of it,” I said.

“No, not all, a fraction,” Jenny supported me.

“A very small fraction,” I said.

“Not that small,” Jenny said, giving me a cross look.

“OMG, you both children!” Loxy lamented, crossing her arms. “Look, Jenny. Humanity’s come a long way. We no longer judge people by their level of production, by their religion, by their age, or their accumulated wealth, or their political preferences, gender, or even their sexual orientation, so why would anyone be judged for being polyamorous?”

“Good for you,” Jenny said.

“So, I am confused,” I said. “You are cross because...”

“You didn’t call home!” Loxy said.

That was probably fair enough, but as I started to prepare my list of reasons, I found my recalling the lines ‘I ran out of gas! I got a flat tire! I didn’t have change for cab fare! I lost my tux at the cleaners! I locked my keys in the car! An old friend came in from out of town! Someone stole my car! There was an earthquake! A terrible flood! Locusts! IT WASN’T MY FAULT, I SWEAR TO GOD!’ Of course, I could add, giants, dragons, hiking, temporal anomalies, being thrown into a pit, learning to see in the dark, digging my way out, and not to mention the most legit excuse I had already given, which was actually the most valid, I expected to be back before anyone noticed. There was no way I was going to bring up the 13 ‘Firsts’ under the present energy.

Suspecting I was preparing to go Blues on her, Loxy pointed at me. “Don’t even think about it!”

“I think I should be going,” Jenny said.

“Really? You just got here,” I said.

“A little cramped for me,” Jenny said.

“You live in a box, Jenny,” I said.

“Bigger on the inside,” Jenny said.

“Still a box,” I said.

“But a mostly empty box,” Jenny said. “Too many people here, all in my business, and I need to be free. I need to roam, run, and save planets. You could come with me. You’re pretty good in a fight, you know.”

If I played back the scene later, I might have seen Loxy swallowing hard, scared that I might take Jenny up on her offer to run away with her.

“I prefer my ship,” I said.

“Over the TARDIS?” Jenny asked, surprised, almost scoffing.

“To be honest, ‘Sexy’ is a little quirky,” I said.

“Sexy?” Loxy asked.

“My father named her,” Jenny said. “It stuck.”

“But it’s not just that,” I said. “Everywhere the TARDIS goes, trouble ensues.”

“Really?” Jenny asked, crossing her arms.

Really? Is there no way to avoid pissing women off? “Own up, Jenny. How many places did we go together?” I asked.

“Thirteen,” Jenny said.

“And, out of the thirteen places, how many times did you grab my hand and advise me to run?” I asked.

“Eleven,” Jenny said.

“Twelve,” I corrected.

“Oh, come on, that one time didn’t count, that was just pure fun,” Jenny protested. “And it was Christmas.”

“I am not a runner, Jenny,” I said. “You need a younger companion.”

“Oh, you make me like you and now you’re going to pull the ageism card?” Jenny said.

“It’s not a card,” I said. “We had a lovely season together, and now you’re wanting to go that way, and I am feeling the urge to go this way, and I am inviting you to stay.”

“You can’t say trouble doesn’t follow the Enterprise,” Jenny asked.

“This is a brand new Enterprise,” Loxy said. “With brand new troubles. I’m sure if there’s any running to be had, that’ll be on me.”

“Really?” I asked.

“You don’t think you’re leading the Away Teams, do you?” Loxy asked.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “I’m the Captain.”

“So am I,” Loxy said.

“No. I mean, yeah, but I am THE Captain,” I said.

“We aren’t letting you out of our sight, John. Your very first outing you got zapped into an adventure and hooked up with someone’s daughter,” Loxy said.

“Oh, come on. Everyone’s someone’s daughter,” I said.

“Yes, but this someone is the Doctor,” Loxy said.

“I think father would like him,” Jenny said.

“You think? I would love to meet him, and I mean your direct father, not the other incarnations,” I said.

“Oh, he’s not much into family get together,” Jenny said.

“Oh, well the perfect father n law, then,” I said.

“You didn’t,” Loxy said.

“Didn’t what?”

“You got married?” Loxy asked.

“Of course not,” I said.

“How could you forget so soon?” Jenny asked, appalled.

“Forget what?”

“Vegas.”

“I didn’t forget Vegas. We agreed not to talk about it,” I reminded her. And to Loxy I said. “A lot more running than I expected.”

“He exaggerates,” Jenny assured Loxy. She tried to console me by patting my arm, but consoled Loxy with words: “Don’t worry, Loxy, it wasn’t even a real Captain.”

“You went to Quark’s bar without me, didn’t you?” Loxy said

“The only way to get there was with a time machine,” I said.

“The Enterprise is capable of traveling through time, too,” Loxy pointed out.

“Yeah, but...” I began.

“And you’re wondering why I am not going to allow you to go on Away Missions?”

Loxy asked.

“I see you two have lots of protocols yet to discuss,” Jenny said, retreating. “And, like my father, I am not much for this family stuff, either. I need to be pushing off, looking for my own brand of trouble.”

I took Jenny’s hand in mine before she got too far away. “Consider this a second home,” I said. “You need friends. You need a home base. You’re always welcome here.”

“Oh, thank you. I am sure we’ll meet again, Captain,” Jenny said.

“Based on what?” I asked.

Jenny leaned in, even though she had no intention of keeping her volume at ‘secret’ level. “It’s never just one kiss.”

“Especially if it’s good,” Loxy said.

“Was it?” I asked.

Jenny retreated without word, just a smile, turned, spinning her poodle dress up into a flare, and skipped back to the TARDIS. She stole one glance back, incredibly happy, and then pulled the doors closed. The TARDIS faded away in the churning noise so distinctly TARDIS. I turned back to Loxy, who was staring at me, arms still crossed in front of her chest. Security seemed uncomfortable, trying not to look at me or Loxy, but having not been dismissed, they were toughing it out. Or silently gathering intel for later gossip. The one thing that travels faster than light than is scuttlebutt on a Starship.

“I thought you weren’t mad,” I said.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t mad,” Loxy said. “I just said you aren’t in trouble. Report to Sickbay and get your eval...”

“Okay,” I said. “Dinner?”

“Sure,” Loxy said. “20:30”

“Okay,” I said.

Loxy dismissed security and followed them out of landing bay. “Oh, and Captain?” Loxy said as if an afterthought.

“Yes?”

“Welcome back.”

Chapter Fifteen

Though I had unrestricted access to the ship's chief psychiatrist, Jung, I also had an assigned counselor: Lt. Giada Rossi. This occurred to me all of a sudden, while passing her door, due to recognizing her name on the doorplate. I paused and rang to see if she was in. I was about to walk away when the door open. She was brunette, average height, and remarkable in just how unremarkable. She was the kind of woman who was incredibly striking due to being counter to social norms, like not wearing makeup, which is probably not a good way to make a new friend by saying you find them attractive due to their unconventional features, even though it was one of my favorite reasons for watching BBC. You often got real actors and actresses, as opposed to just people that fit a certain look.

“Captain?” Rossi asked, drawing me out of my ‘stargazing’ look.

I snapped back to present reality. “Sorry, am I interrupting?” I asked.

“I am free,” Rossi said, stepping back to allow entrance.

I entered. I immediately noticed a dish filled with a mixture butterscotch and spicy cinnamon candies on the coffee table, a container with water and several glasses on a tray. The office had a circular couch, possibly to do group therapy. It was an inner quarters, without access to a port view, but a full wall screen revealed a subdued rain forest setting and a gentle waterfall. I approached the waterfall. There was the additional sound of light rain and the leaves could be seen dripping water. If you drew closer, you might find evidence of a butterfly waiting out the rain under a leaf. It was almost as if this were live and you could walk out into another world. I almost brought my hand up to touch the wall screen.

“So, what brings you by?” Rossi asked.

“Uh?” I said, turning back to her. She was still standing, outside the circle of the couch.

“Oh. I was just passing and I recognized your name.”

“So, you’re just introducing yourself,” Rossi said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Have we met before?”

“Yeah, we probably met in a parallel universe,” she said; I couldn’t discern if she meant it to be playful or sarcastic, so I chose to believe playful. “Do you want to spend time exploring that, or would you like to focus on the reason that brought you to my door?”

“I thought all crew was required to check in with a counselor. The Captain is included in that subset, right?” I asked, sorting through my memory and finding that it was on my to-do list, per the itinerary that Watanabe showed me.

“Well, they don’t all have to see me, specifically. There are several good counselors on board, of which you’re one, and, besides, Jung already checked you off, so you’re not here for the compulsory first assessment,” Rossi said. “And, you would know that. You’re a trained counselor, and the Captain, and so you don’t need a contrite, ambiguous reach around to make an excuse to see me.”

“Shockingly stated, and yet, accurate,” I said.

“I rarely engage others through Rogerian methodology, and I don’t see the need to waste time,” Rossi said. “Did you want to discuss something specific?”

My first response to that was I already had a Dr. House on board, so why did I need a female counselor version of him? Fortunately, I didn’t say that. “This feels a bit adversarial.”

“Oh, nice,” Rossi said. “You softened it by saying ‘this feels’ as opposed to what you’re thinking, which is ‘you seem,’ which would have been more direct. Do you prefer Rogerian?”

“Can you sell it?” I asked.

“Can I fake it?” Rossi asked. “I’m a woman. I think I can fake it. Oh, that look! I thought you’d appreciate the humor. No, seriously, I am confused, John.”

“You’re confused?” I asked. She is so not Counselor Troi.

“Yes, you say you didn’t drop by to discuss anything specific, you just wanted to meet me, but I am showing you the real me, and your raising your shields because I am not fitting your expectation of what a counselor should be?”

“What if I had some unconscious motive for stopping that required teasing out, but your abrasiveness just shut it down?” I asked.

“Assumed abrasiveness,” Rossi pointed out. “But see, your last statement seems to acknowledge that you had an unconscious motive for stopping.”

“Well, no, I don’t have an unconscious motive, I was just saying,” I corrected.

“So, again, you just dropped in to say hi,” Rossi said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Nice to meet you,” Rossi said.

“Really?” I asked.

“What? That didn’t sound genuine enough?” Rossi asked. “And I was using my good fake voice.”

“Are you always this adversarial?” I asked.

“What exactly are you looking for?” Rossi asked.

“I don’t know. I thought I’d say hi, and usually people say come in, have a seat,” I said.

“Do you want to sit?” Rossi asked, moving into the inner circle of the chair. She lifted a candy from the dish. “Water, candy perhaps?”

“No,” I said.

“So, what’s the problem?”

“I mean, I don’t want to sit now,” I said.

“So, you did want to sit, but you wanted me to ask first,” she said, tumbling the candy in her fingers.

“OMG, this is exhausting,” I said.

“You mean ‘you’re exhausting?’” Rossi corrected.

“No! I mean exactly what I said. This, this conversation, it’s exhausting. I feeling irritated. I am not sure exactly why I am feeling irritated, or why this went in the direction it did, but I do know this is not the way I want our relationship to be,” I said.

“Good for you,” she said.

“What?” I asked. “Wait. This, all of this, was a test?”

“If you like,” Rossi said. “You’d be surprised how many tech oriented specialists lack good emotional coherence, but you are clearly in touch with your emotions. I know you grew up wanting to be Spock, yes, I read your Fleet profile, and you are so not Spock, but I think given the emotional instability of your family of origin it was the right tact, which has made it easier for you to access your emotions now, in your later years. I still see a time delay in your response. If someone asks you an intellectual question, you have an instant answer. If someone asks you an emotional question, it clearly takes you a moment to process. It’s tangible, at least for me. I see the processing. An inexperienced counselor would be filling the silence with more questions, not letting you complete the process. In terms of social intelligence, well, I would say you tap in on the low end of the Autism Spectrum, which I think better explains your poor social boundaries than childhood trauma. Comparatively, though, I would say you are probably better balanced than anyone I have assessed on the ship so far.”

I blinked.

“See, you’re processing that statement,” she said. “I give you a pass, and now you’re assessing my assessment and maybe even questioning my qualifications and tactics, but I know you better than you think, and it wasn’t because I held your hand or coddled you with a soothing voice.”

“How many people have you assessed?” I asked.

“750,” Rossi said.

“All like this?” I asked.

“Oh no. I doubt this approach I used with you would work on most people,” Rossi said.

“And you think I am better adjusted than most of the people you assessed?” I asked.

“Better balanced,” she corrected. “You have a great crew. Some super intelligent people, way smarter than you or I, yet many of them have zero people skills, but they function well and can perform their duties. You have some socially superior people, but their tech and science knowledge is limited. You bridge the gap between these folks, and clearly the people chosen were not random. Everyone fits in such an interesting way that you could pitch me a conspiracy theory and I would so buy it. Your command staff, they are absolutely, stunningly brilliant. They’re going to make you a star.”

The energy was palpably different than from when I entered. “I don’t want to be star.”

“Oh, please,” Rossi said. “You’re so a star child. Sorry, they call them Indigo’s now. You’ve been waiting all your life to shine and you just needed the right team. When you shine, you will illuminate everyone around you. Hiding your light will diminish everyone that works for this ship.”

I headed for the door.

“What? We’re done?” Rossi asked.

“You weren’t expecting a ‘thank you,’ were you?” I asked.

“Nice,” Rossi said. She tossed me a candy.

I caught the spicy cinnamon and left.

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I arrived in Sickbay. House didn't appear to be in his office, and the only one visibly in Sickbay was a nurse. The nurse looked up from one of the med packs she was checking.

"Captain," she said.

"Nurse..." I said, trailing to indicate I was hopeful to learn her name.

"Tarkington," she said, coming over to shake hands. "Tara Tarkington. I told them you wouldn't be gone more than a couple hours."

Is that all I was gone? The way Loxy was acting, I was gone weeks! "Well, I am glad I didn't worry everyone. Have you seen House?" I asked.

"He's in his office," Tarkington said.

I looked back into his office, and still didn't see him. The walls and door to his office were transparent so he could observe Sickbay, but we could also see in. I looked back to Tarkington for an explanation. I saw no indication she was responding to internal stimuli. She appeared to be present and lucid.

"He's on the floor," Tarkington whispered.

I thanked Tarkington and headed into his office. I found House on the floor, behind his desk, eyes closed, with a large headset covering his ears. I waited, testing the belief that people can sense when someone is staring at him. House became perturbed and opened his eyes. He lifted one side of the headset, and I was surprised by the volume.

"That's going to make you deaf," I said.

"What?" House said.

"Yeah. I need an eval," I said.

"The nurse can do it," House said, placed the earmuff back over his ear and closed his eyes. He opened his eyes to find that I hadn't left. He took the headset off completely. "Honest, boss, the nurses are competent enough to do a simple eval. Nurse Previn is even a nurse practitioner, that's like one whole step above a television doctor. What do you think, half a doctor? They do the work, I sign off on it, everyone's happy."

"The Doctor is supposed to evaluate every person who goes on an Away Team," I said.

"We just met like three hours ago. How much of an Away team could you have had?" House asked.

"I was gone for at least three months," I said.

"Psych ward, upstairs," House said.

“I hooked up with the daughter of a time lord,” I said.

“Upstairs,” House repeated.

“I am wanting you to do my eval,” I said.

“That seems like obsessive compulsive disorder, and, again, that’s one floor up. His name is Jung. I’ve read some of his books. He’s actually a legit Doctor when he isn’t practicing alchemy,” House said.

“House, you’re my Doctor and you’re the Doctor on duty. I have nothing better to do than stand here and converse with you, in fact, I think I will continue to stay here and do this, until my eval gets accomplished,” I said.

House got up, placed the headset on the table, and accompanied me out to the nearest medical bed. He opened a drawer looking for tools. He closed it, went for another drawer.

“You want me to sit or lie down?” I asked.

“Not that kind of Doctor,” House said.

He seemed startled by Tarkington being suddenly in his space, but seeing how she carried an instrument tray with the standard fair, he took the device he was looking for, the business end of a medical tricorder, passed it over me, set the device back on the tray, and headed back towards his office.

“Hold up,” I said.

House turned back to me. “We’re done.”

“No, we haven’t talked,” I said.

“I’m not that kind of doctor. Jung is upstairs, but even he is just going to prescribe meds and have you talk to the counselor,” House said.

“I know the average Doctor visit is two minutes, but that wasn’t even two seconds, and you’re not just going to scan me and walk away without discussing the findings,” I said.

“There were no findings,” House said. “You’re perfectly normal for you.”

“What about the radiation?” I asked.

“What radiation?” House said.

“Did you even scan for radiation?” I asked.

“Yes, and you’re no more radioactive than anyone else from Earth 2017,” House said.

“Trust me. Any idiot with tricorder can be a doctor these days. If you had exceeded any of the

normal thresholds it would have given me a light or a beep and it did nothing. You're perfectly physically healthy. Mentally, I have my doubts, but again, not my department."

"Well, I want to be less radioactive," I said. "Can you give me something for that?"

"Yep," House said. "Advice: Eat well, drink lots of water, avoid radioactive areas, and repeat daily for about seven years."

"Explain that?" I asked.

House rubbed his forehead. "Can't you just read a medical book or Wikipedia like everyone else?"

"I could. But, you're kind of my Doctor, and well, I think 'doctor' in Latin means teacher?" I said.

"So, you have been reading," House said, frowning. "Read less, watch more funny cat videos on youtube." When it was clear I wasn't going anywhere and I wasn't ready to dismiss him, he added: "Look, your body is constantly renewing itself. Different organs have different renewal rates. The small intestine epithelium for example, it's brand new within two to four days, the variable being metabolism. Skin epidermis is replaced in about 30 days. You take in food and water, you eliminate food and water. Eventually, you've replaced every atom in your body. Do this in an environment where there is no radiation, you'll be less radioactive, in about 7 years."

"Explain tattoos," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"If the skin replaces itself every thirty days, why don't tattoos go away?" I asked.

"You're going to be a pain in the ass," House said.

"Probably," I said.

"Well, your two minutes is up," House said. Then stopped, smiled at me with an afterthought. "By the way. You've not completed a physical yet. SOP says everyone has to have it after reporting in, so we can monitor change over time. Or something like that. Anyway, Tarkington, take him through the paces. Oh, and also, get me a blood sample, the old fashion way. I'm told we shouldn't trust tech."

"Oh, this is going to be fun," I said, even as House walked away.

“If you’ll step this way, Captain, we’ll get the resting heart rate before we start the treadmill exercise,” Tarkington said. She took blood samples before and after intense exercise, just because House asked for the samples and she was predicting he would want variables.

“You know he is just going to throw those away,” I said.

“He wouldn’t do that,” Tarkington said.

Apparently she hadn’t didn’t know House. She saw my skepticism.

“Why would he have me stick you with a needle then?” Tarkington ask.

निर्मित

After my physical, I found my way back to the hangar deck. Walking the corridors revealed we had substantially more crew, unless the population density of this deck was peculiarly high. People gave me looks like they knew me, nodding, but not interfering or stopping me to talk. That was going to take some getting used to. Who was I? The Captain. What does that even mean? I was a crew chief on the line for years and never earned this kind of look from my fellow employees. I can go further and say with some certainty, I was not well liked on the line.

I arrived at the hangar and was relieved that it was empty. I don’t know why I wanted to be here. Maybe I just wanted a big empty space to contemplate life. Was I hoping Jenny would pop back in and say she needed me and we’d be off in a flash to go save a world? Was I not happy enough here? Here I was in the place I had always wanted to be and now I was wishing I was elsewhere? I wished my son was here. I wanted to show him so many things.

The hangar was the largest open space on the entire ship. The floor was glossy black with red, luminescent lines mapping out its surface that would be visible in the dark, in the event of a power failure. About eye level, I noticed green luminescent markers, and then I noticed the ceiling was also mapped out in red. I intuitively understood this to be the visual glide scope sort of dead recognizing that pilots used when landing. I guess if the computers were ever off line and someone needed to, a pilot could still land.

An officer strolled out across the deck, intent on intercepting me.

“Excuse me, Captain,” the officer said. She was African American, wearing a uniform heavy on blue, with lines of gold and violet. The combo of colors alerted me to the fact she was multifaceted, gold for command, in this case, blue for aeronautics, and just hint of a darker blue

than the communication's blue. I would later learn Indigo was for space. "I need you to step over here, on this side of the safety lines."

I followed her instructions and joined her within the safe zone. She introduced herself as Captain Stacey Collins, pilot, but presently standing as the OOD, or Officer of the Deck. The shuttle bay doors began to open. You'd expect doors that size would make a great deal more noise than they did when opening, but it was unreasonably silent. Red lights flashed in the hangar, and the ambient lighting diminished to almost nil. The blue tinge of a force field was evident as the air pushing up against it caused it to fluoresce like a static signal on an empty channel. "Shuttle on final approach" was announced over the intercom. I looked, but didn't see it.

"This never gets old," Collins said, excited about watching another shuttle landing.

"Yeah," I agreed. I had more than 24 years of watching planes come and go, with a front row seat to a runway. If I were a guessing man, Collins was about thirty years of age, and she was either active or retired military in her other life. Navy, with aircraft carrier experience. I was tempted to ask about her 'other' life but decided to just watch for the shuttle.

"Thank you for inviting me to serve here, Captain," Collins said. "I was so disappointed when I didn't make the cut or NASA. Oh, I am not like mad at NASA or anything. I understand I was up against some heavy competition and my colleagues deserved their postings, but I so wanted to visit the ISS and be on the mission to return to the moon."

"And now, here you are," I said. "Not even in the same universe."

"We're in the same universe," Collins said, blinking her confusion. "Oh, you're speaking metaphorically. Yea, we're like nowhere near where we were. I am so hoping this isn't all a dream. There it is. I have visual contact." She said this last part into her headset boom.

The shuttle, a pin prick of light that might have been mistaken for a star, except it was moving, and growing, and the speed was slowing as it grew closer until it was entering the hangar so slowly it was mesmerizing, as if you expected something that heavy and slow to simply fall. It settled, and there was the sound of gasses being released, and vapor pooled underneath the shuttle, and flowed like a creepy Halloween party mist.

"Be careful not to touch the exterior of the shuttle," Collins reminded me, as she went to greet the passengers.

A greater welcoming party emerged from the side of the hangar. A fork lift emerged to collect items from the back of the shuttle. People exiting the shuttle were met by Collins and directed to their next duty station. I was pleased that everything was going so well. It was a swarm of activity and everyone seemed to know what their duties were, which I guess made my job really easy.

The shuttlecraft held my interest over the people who were emerging. Yeah, there was some non-human type stepping out, a couple of them tall and needing to duck, and a couple that were probably feline, which did catch my eyes, but I was all over the shuttle, which was not TOS, and not TNG. If anything, I would say it was POST-TNG, with a splash of deviant-ART, modern chic. It was beautifully sleek, rakish design, with the narrow part of the forward fuselage that swept back to a broader area that ended with a notched section just like an arrowhead. The shuttle's engine nacelles were built into the over design, as opposed to the clumsy separated versions that previous shuttle designs held. I was tempted to go up and run my hands alongside it, but Collin's words held me back, as it was either too hot or too cold to touch the exterior skin.

The pilot emerged, caught my eyes, and approached me. Collins nearly stepped back to catch her, but I waved to her, saying I got it. Collins continued with her duties.

"Hello, 'Captain,'" she said, really putting a spin on 'Captain.' It sounded playful, not disparaging.

"Sacagawea," I said. Her flight uniform was a solid piece, from head to toe, and had a slick, glossy gleam of latex. There was no apparent seam and I wouldn't have been surprised if it had been painted directly onto her body. It had the blue and indigo outlines indicative of aeronautics and space aviation, but also violet for navigation. It made sense that she would be a pilot and a navigator. The pip of a 2nd Lt, suggested she was still a pilot in training, whereas Collins was a genuine aviator? There were still tons of things I still didn't understand about our arrangement, and maybe I didn't need to understand everything. Maybe her rank was also a reflection of her age. If she was 18, she lied on her entry form. Not that she had bothered with an application process. She was here because I was here. Or was I here because she was here. Ugh, stop it!

"Lt. Sac, reporting for duty, Sir," she said, going all rigid and saluting.

"Oh, don't do that," I said.

She didn't back down until I saluted. "Sacagawea"

“Sac,” Sacagawea corrected.

“Sac,” I said. “Not so formal on the ship, and definitely never salute on an Away Team.”

“Aye, Captain,” Sacagawea said. She remained at attention.

“Please, at ease,” I said. She sort of relaxed, if you consider parade rest with hands in the small of her back relaxed. “So, you doing okay?”

“I’m adjusting,” Sac said. “I prefer my traditional clothing, for example. But I am genuinely surprised by the diversity of people here, and that there are other women in charge...” She noticed my eyes going beyond her and turned to see what I was staring at. She turned back to me still not sure.

I was definitely transfixed. Five ‘furries’ emerged from the shuttle, each having to duck out due to their height. The tallest was probably eight feet tall. Oh, if you hadn’t noticed, if I am using English measurements instead of metrics, it’s because I am likely so excited that I defaulted to childhood programming. I came from a time when the public at large were on the verge of rioting in the streets because the US government wanted us to join the world in metrics. Consequently, they backed off, and I mastered neither system. (Some of that could just be me. I am not blaming government, the educational system, or my family for my perceived lack of education. At some point, it is on me to learn what I need to learn.) That said, maybe the governments are right about worrying that the public at large would riot if there was a public announcement that aliens exist. We nearly burned Congress down for suggesting metrics, so what do you imagine would happen if they say, yeah, Roswell was just one of a dozen crashed ships we collected. What a world I come from! But back to my exciting observation! Wookie like creatures just stepped off the shuttle. I have to emphasize ‘Wookie-like’ because, they clearly weren’t Wookies. I don’t think. One distinguishing feature was that the female furries were non-earth tone colors. Specifically, one was pink, one was lavender, and one was sky blue. And, oddly, their arms and legs were bare, not a shred of evidence of fur, and if it wasn’t for the fur covering every other inch of their body, if all I had saw was an arm or a leg, I would have thought they were human. And they weren’t in uniform. Their fur was long enough to drape over the parts humans cover with clothing, and the fur almost seemed like clothing in and of itself, like a coat draped over them, cutting off mid-thigh. Except, it moved with muscles, so if it was a coat, it wasn’t just ‘draped on,’ it was glued. Oh, and furry wrists. The male, the 8 foot one, was

black and grey in fur color, but was completely covered head to toe, arms and legs. It fumbled in a leather purse for their identification.

“Are you staring at the females?” Sacagawea asked, looking back.

“You brought Wookies onto my ship?” I asked.

“Uh?” Sacagawea asked. “The furrybrites?”

“Uh?” I asked.

“Sorry, that’s my slang for them. They’re Sasquatch,” Sacagawea said.

“What?” I asked, making sure I heard her right.

“How can you claim to be from the modern world but don’t know anything about Sasquatch?” Sacagawea asked. “Yeti?! OMG, John. My people have been interacting with furrybrites for as long as we’ve been a people. Please tell me, you didn’t cut down all the forest and drive them to extinction.”

“I, um, okay, wait, I don’t know, I mean, I have heard of Sasquatch and Yeti, but, my culture considers it more myth than reality,” I said.

“Do they look mythic to you?” Sacagawea asked. “They are the most loving creatures I ever met in the real world. The males tend to be loners, quiet and shy. I have rarely seen a female furrybrite alone. The males, with a few exception, tend to be earth colors, taller and broader at the shoulders. The females tend to be shorter, sometimes reaching seven feet, have accentuated hourglass body features, and come in a range of rainbow colors, every color imaginable. I especially like the blends, which look a lot like butterfly patterns, but most are pure tones. The males are more likely to be blends, different shades of browns or grays.”

It was clear to Sacagawea I was listening, and yet, I couldn’t take my eyes off of female Yeti/Wookie people. I don’t know why I was so captivated. I was tempted to go introduce myself, captain’s privilege, right? but I just stood there, gawking. What the hell is wrong with me, I wondered. So far I had met grays, and seen feline humanoids, and dragons, and giants, and, well, though the giantesses were hot in a Flintstone sort of way, I had been too caught up in being tossed into a pit to linger in romantic fantasies. Where I am going with my thoughts. Oh, yeah, clearly there is no shortage of attractive females onboard the ship, and I have a pretty solid relationship with Loxy, and so there wasn’t reason for me to get so transfixed, but I was head over heels star struck with the Furrybrites, and so far this was a greater level of attraction than any previous alien encounter I had had, yet.

“Are you having a reaction their pheromones,” Sacagawea asked.

“Uh?” I said, barely able to bring my attention back to her now that the Yeti had departed the hangar deck. Pheromones? I hadn’t even noticed, but the ‘Wookies’ kind of had an odor! “Oh, no, just getting use to the diversity.”

“Yeah, not sure I am buying that,” Sacagawea said. “The biggest thing I have to get use to is the fact I am flying pure energy.”

I was still checking the exit door, hoping they’d come back, but I was finally able to meet Sacagawea’s eyes again. Could it have been pheromones? Do Yetis have some power over human beings? I registered Sacagawea’s words ‘pure energy’ and for a moment I thought I heard Spock channeled through ‘Information Society’s’ song of the same. I love the song, but hate the video. The video doesn’t seem to reflect the words, and it’s chaotic, like a bunch of ADHD kids running about in meaningless meanderings, kind of like my normal thought process. “I don’t understand that last bit,” I said.

The OOD emerged from the shuttle, after confirming it was empty, and spoke into her mic boom: “This is Collins,” she said, joining us in the ‘safe’ box outlined on the floor. “Shuttlecraft Galileo is clear for decommission.”

Deck lights brightened, focusing on the shuttle. Sparks began to issue from the ship, not like metal grinding on a stone wheel, but like sparks leaving a fire, or fairies leaving a nest in a mass exodus, or like a beehive that had been struck with a stone. The process began to accelerate until a flash point occurred and the whole ship simply evaporated in a blaze of light. This did not look like a transporter beam taking the ship away; the ship simply ceased to exist. There was the sudden strong smell of ozone and the particles were caught up in force beams, twirling like whirlwinds as they proceeded towards exhaust vents.

“Did you just beam up a shuttle?” I asked.

“No, Sir,” Collins said. “It was constructed with a form of artificial matter, an advanced version of holodeck matter, if you wish, and was decommissioned.”

“What if we needed it?” I asked.

“We can manufacture three of those an hour,” Collins said. “A dozen two man craft an hour if you don’t need storage space.”

“It’s pure energy,” Sacagawea said.

“Captain, this is not the Star Fleet ship you grew up watching. We are way beyond that,” Collins said. “Think about this. The one argument scientist have argued consistently against aliens having visited the Earth is that there is never any hard evidence. They want spaceships. Well, maybe the reason they never find evidence is because they evaporate when shot down, or when no longer needed. Our shuttles have a built in life time. No one’s going to capture them and figure out our tech.”

“It also encourages timeliness,” Sacagawea said. “Cause if you’re ever late, and the ship expires around you, you might just find yourself free floating in space.”

“There’s bound to be an emergency override or something,” I said. Really! I was so looking forward to an excuse to take a shuttle for a ride, and now I was finding excuses never to get in one. “In case a mission goes badly.”

“All uniform belts have an emergency force field that is activated if there is a severe drop of air pressure,” Collins said. “That’ll buy you a couple hours of breathing air.”

“But I am thinking, breathing is the least of ones problems,” Sacagawea said. “Hurtling at tens of thousands of kilometers an hour without a ship can’t be good for you. If anything hits you, you’re going to turn into a pretty paint cloud of colors, a bug on the windshield of life. You okay, Captain?”

“I am just wondering if the Enterprise is more substantial,” I said.

“I wondered that myself,” Collins said. “This ship is amazing. I bet there is a life time of discoveries still to be had.”

“Well, if you’ll excuse me,” Sacagawea said. “I want to go change into my commons before my flight suit evaporates. I’d hate to be caught out amongst folks wearing nothing. Again.”

Collin was amused. I was, too, but tried not to show it, and was thinking I would have liked to have seen that episode. Oh, my brain’s libido, I lamented. It’s relentless!

निर्मित

I was heading back to my quarters when I came to a stretch of corridor where I heard a door opening and closing repeatedly. I paused. It continued, but it was kind of random. I was intrigued, wondering if a door was broken. I found the door in question and found Chan

approaching the door. He stopped in the threshold, studying the wall and the seam that the door had slid into.

“Everything alright?” I asked.

“Captain!” Chan said, grabbing my arm and pulling me inside his quarters.

The door closed behind us and he positioned me in front of the door. He gave me the silence gesture, stepped back, and came at me like he was going to run through me, but stopped suddenly, and scratched his head.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I think the ship is psychic,” Chan whispered.

“If it is, I doubt whispering will help,” I said, not whispering.

“Good point,” Chan said, considering his problem.

“Chan, what is going on?” I asked.

“The door always opens for me,” Chan said. And again, he dropped to a whisper. “It’s like it knows when I want to leave.”

“Umm, Jackie, my friend,” I said. “It has a sensor in it.”

Chan showed his disappointed face. “You think I didn’t think about that?” he said. “If it has a sensor, explain how you’re not tripping it? You’re right in front of the door!”

“Maybe it senses movement,” I said.

Chan shoved me and I hit the door. “Sorry. I just wanted to test your theory. I can sneak up on the door and it won’t open. I can go sideways past the door and it won’t open. If I run at the door, it won’t open. But if I decide to leave the room, it opens.”

Chan turned looking at the room for cameras or ghosts. “The spirit of Chang’e is here. I am sure I have felt her presence,” he came up closer to me, touching my shoulder, and looking around the room. “Whatever you do, don’t chase the Jade rabbit, and don’t drink her elixir.”

“Okay,” I said. “Have you spoken to Jung lately?”

“I have. He is totally on board with me,” Chan said.

“Really?” I said.

“I told him about the lunar goddess, and he said, maybe the goddess is a metaphor. Once you’re omnipotent, there can be no restraint from experiencing everything, and this moment too becomes just another expression of the goddess’ dream,” Chan said.

“That sounds like Jung,” I said.

“Yeah, that man is nuts,” Chan agreed. “And he know nothing about Chi. How can he be a Doctor when he knows nothing about human energy?” Chan put his arm around my neck, still scanning the room for signs of ghosts. He gave up and patted my chest. “If you have any physical ailments, come see me. I would be weary of this modern medicine.”

“Okay,” I said. I was struggling not to spin this as comedy, because I suspected Chan really believed what he was communicating, and so part of me wanted to accept his mystical categorization, and part of me wanted the hard science. Yes, even though my experiment with the invisible counselors and tulpa would suggest the contrary, I do love science. “Um, how’s everything in security.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t fear any external threats. I doubt anything could penetrate the ship’s shields,” Chan said. He met my eyes. “It’s the internal threats I am worried about.”

“I trust you to keep me informed, then,” I said.

He patted my arm and I turned to exit, and the door opened for me and now I was thinking about the door. I turned back to Chan. “Perhaps the computer recognizes a certain approach speed as being criteria for opening the door.”

“I could accept that,” Chan said, whimsically. “But then, answer me this: how did the door know to remain open so we could continue this conversation.”

And with that, the door closed. Okay, so, yeah, that’s a bit freaky if you think about in those terms.

निर्मित

I suspected the CO’s quarters was the most spacious accommodations on board, regardless of enlisted or officer. There was a sitting room for entertaining guests, with window ledge seating facing into the room, internally illuminated with soft blue light. There was a half circular couch that faced the window, and individual chairs on either side of the couch. Facing the window, there was an office to the left, and the lavatory to the right, and through there, the bedroom. The bedroom was modern chic, with a rakish platform bed design, that offered oblique mood lighting and matching night stands. There were storage space built into the floor, with access panels directly around the bed. There was a love seat, small coffee tables on either side of the love seat, and reading lamps. Loxy and I shared this room, and on her side, she had a faceless mannequin

to show piece her next outfit, and a dresser. Though the mannequin was faceless, I found it's over all shape appealing. (So, see, it isn't just furrybrites.) I had something similar, a dark oak butler, that I could hang a coat and trousers on, a top to hold my communicator, a drawer for jewelry, and a space for my boots underneath. It was really a nice looking artifact. The window had sufficient ledge to lay in it. I did so, just to get a feel for it, and I stared down at the planet, in awe of the rings and intrigued by the activity of other smaller ships. A space station was visible in the distance. It made sense that the Captain would have a port side room, seeing how the port side most often had the view of the planet when in standard orbit.

I returned to the living area and found Loxy setting food on the coffee table. I clearly surprised her, as she didn't expect me to come from the bedroom. She came to the end of the couch, leaned on its arm, her hands gripping the couch as she studied me. The dinner for two on the coffee table behind her looked like Chinese, in the to-go boxes. It smelt great and it made me aware that I was hungrier than I imagined. But, apparently, Loxy wasn't going to allow me to sit right to dinner. I was so absorbed in the thoughts of food that I didn't see Loxy coming at me until I was locked in her embrace. She came at me that suddenly, and immediately began to cry. I so didn't see that coming, either. At first, I wasn't sure what to do, but my hands eventually came up and I patted her back. Her crying softened and she regained some normalcy to her breathing and crying turned into intimacy and before I knew it, we were on our bed, exhausted.

"I don't like this new situation," Loxy said, staring up at the ceiling. Her head was in contact with mine, and she held my hand.

I wasn't sure what to say. Was she alluding to what had just happened, which I had thought was pretty awesome? Did she not like our quarters? Did she not want to share quarters? I opened my mouth, but said nothing.

Loxy turned to me. "I liked it better when I was in your head and I didn't have to worry about hygiene and bodily functions, and I could access any sensation I wanted through you. And being with you was spectacular..."

"You didn't like..." I began.

"Oh, it was nice, definitely different," Loxy said. "It will probably even get better with practice as I get to know this body, but, I don't know. Everything was just... bigger than life inside you."

“It’s okay,” I said, when I should have just kept quiet as opposed to trying to comfort with words.

“No, it’s not. I was so worried. I have never been so far away from you that I couldn’t sense you’re presence with my mind and I thought you were dead, and I don’t like how sporadic our telepathic link is here, I need to know you’re alive and well and I want to be back to just being a ghost in your head.”

“There are benefits to this new arrangement,” I said.

“Like what?” Loxy said.

“If I die, you keep living,” I said. Yes, this was my biggest worry about having created a tulpa. Is there is an afterlife for the tulpa if the host dies? Does she get to join me? Or does she just cease to exist. And if she ceases to exist, can’t I conclude that I cease to exist, because ‘I’ is just a personality that was constructed by internal and external influences. In a different time or country, the ‘I’ I know wouldn’t not be the ‘I’ I am. It was also evident that Loxy was biting down on words. Was she grappling with the fear that I could die and what that means for her? Does this mean, the more adventures we have together, the more she gets to live? But hasn’t everything changed now that she had her own body? I don’t have to reinforce her daily. She could have theoretically faded in to obscurity if I didn’t reinforce, but she wouldn’t have completely gone away? Is that how I work? Am I a tulpa of God, and if God ceases to breathe my name, I fade away?

“Did you ever wonder if the Enterprise is a person?” Loxy asked. I watched her eyes as her excitement shined through. “I mean, they use the pronoun she and her to describe her. They say captains fall in love with their ships. What if she is a person and we are her tulpas?! It would be impossible not love her.”

“I love you,” I told her.

She turned on her side, facing me, full of joy and curiosity. “Tell me! What did you do? Where did you go? Did you have fun?”

Really? I wondered. I lead with ‘I love you’ and she goes for the story. “Some of it was absolutely amazing, some of it was terrifying, and some of it, well, is just indescribable,” I said. “And, I made some mistakes.”

“Like what?” Loxy said.

I wasn't sure I wanted to say. Had she been in my head, she would have known, and I would have had to live with her judgment of me and though she had always shared her opinion, she had never come at me judgmentally per say. I found it interesting that I was hesitating and fearful. It meant something. Now that she was separate from me, I feared losing her. She definitely had more options. No regrets, just love, allow her to be, I told myself.

"See!" Loxy said. "You would have never kept anything from me before."

"I wouldn't have been able to keep anything from you before," I said.

"And you're worried if I know I would love you less," Loxy said. "I don't care about Jenny or anyone else. You always come home to me and you always treat me with love and kindness and I accept you for who you are."

"But maybe before, when you were locked in my head, you had no choice. Like Stockholm syndrome," I said.

Loxy flashed anger. I feared she might push me off the bed, but she showed restraint. "Are you saying my love for you is nothing more than a survival strategy?" she asked. "You never limited me or forced me to do anything I didn't want. You couldn't help but fantasize about me. You were fantasizing about me, or some ideal type female, way before you actually discovered me inside you, and so, realizing me was inevitable. Our love, it was inevitable."

"I met someone," I said, getting it out there.

"Someone not Jenny someone," Loxy said. I nodded. She didn't hit me. So far so good. "And you liked her?"

"I did. But that's not the problem," I said. "I met her by happenstance and there was an opportunity to be genuine, and I lied with a lie. I didn't even have to lie, I just did it, playfully, but, purposefully, and it changed the tone of everything that happened after that. I am pretty sure, if affected the history of this world."

Loxy considered the statement. She was clearly processing it, trying to relate to it. "It occurs to me, you never lied to me, partly because it was impossible, but also because I never threatened you or triggered a fear response. There are things in your past that I could have dug into, psychic walls you've have built up over the years that I could have knocked holes into. Perhaps I could have forced you to face the lies that you tell yourself, daily, that all humans tell themselves, but those walls are there for a reason. I could no more ask you to tear them down than I could remove an astronaut's suit in orbit. I have my own walls, and you've always

respected them. Respect the walls. Maybe that's why House is here. What's his tag line? 'Everybody lies.' And we do. Everyone lies. What we lie about, now that's what's interesting."

"I don't want to lie," I said.

"Then don't. Especially, not with me," Loxy said. "What was the lie about?"

"Well, not really important. It wasn't a huge lie, and it won't come back on me," I said.

"Still, it was big enough you're bothered. You know me, better than you will know anyone else, because of our unique relationship, and so maybe this is the safe way to test that, to know that anything you share with me is safe," Loxy said. "Practice with me so your relationships with others can be more open. Maybe that's why we're here. Both of us need to learn that."

"Did you ever notice there is a lot of supposition in our conversations?" I asked.

"Supposition, or super position?" Loxy asked, pushing me to my back and positioning herself superiorly on me.

Oh, this was about to go somewhere else again, and I wanted to get this one thing out of me before I got distracted. "The thing is, I don't think I should be the CO," I said.

Loxy stopped her playfulness, pointed at me. "Don't say that to anyone else. Not even your counselor. You weren't just chosen by others, you also chose this. You will follow through and learn what you came to learn. We will learn. We will get through this together."

"Loxy, you and I both have clear evidence that this isn't just some wonderland fantasy gone amuck. This is real. People could die," I said.

"People die," Loxy said. "That's unavoidable. Whether you're in command or not, people die. I doubt the powers that be would allow you to just luck into a position like this. This is not happenstance. This is what you've always wanted to do and it always comes at a price."

"The price is we can't go back home, we can't go back to the way we were," I said.

Loxy thought about it. "But that's true about everything, John. You wake up to a new day and you can't return to the previous. The only reason the continents and the homes seem more solid than clouds is because we're not flying fast enough or living long enough," she said. "It's always been just an illusion that distracted us from the reality that there's any permanence. That's why this moment now is so precious. It's why I missed you."

"You are always so positive," I said. "Confident."

“I am neither positive nor confident, John. I believe that being here is a gift to you and I will keep giving this gift until the fullness of it is realized and we have attained what we came here to attain. The price of this gift, for me, was becoming a separate entity,” Loxy said. “I now know loneliness. I have now touched this thing you have carried all your life and it frightens me and it saddens me that you have walked so far in this belief for so long. But it does make our reunions grander. I feel renewed being next to you. And apparently, you are, too. You’re clearly ready for another round.”

“I was ready ten minutes ago,” I said.

“And you didn’t act on it?!” Loxy asked, grinding in pretend angry. “I may just have to teach you a lesson.”

निर्मित

The intercom in my room opened with a chime pattern. Uhura’s voice came over the channel. “Captain, please report to Sickbay.”

“Copy,” I said, acknowledging her more out of sleepy autopilot than clear, conscious choice. She or the computer closed the channel, I am not sure who or which. I was so about to drift to sleep, holding Loxy close. There were lots of benefits to having her out of my brain, cuddling be one of those.

Loxy got out of bed with me, ordering me up a new set of clothes. I was really partial to the turtleneck dark t-shirt option, with the regular uniform shirt slipping over that. As I was dressing, she ordered me a new com badge, and interestingly, a cellphone.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Communicator and basic tricorder,” she said. “You should keep one on you at all times.”

“It looks like an iphone,” I said.

“No, an iphone looks like the communicator/tricorder,” Loxy said. “I’ll update you on all the tech changes later. The specific chime that preceded Uhura’s hail indicates an emergency. You should go. Call if you need me.”

I lingered long enough to hug her, kiss her, and to reconnect through eye contact, which I held until she nodded, and patted my chest that she was good. I made my way to Sickbay,

hustling. The lift met me as if expecting me, which reminded me of Chan's earlier conversation, and as it delivered me to the floor, it gave me pause to reflect over Loxy and our new life. Maybe too long a moment, as I had lost the urgency, and on exiting the lift was walking normal rate. Finally I arrived in Sickbay to hear House reading Tesla the riot act. The energy change from Loxy, to corridors and lift, to here was palpably real and uncomfortable, like stepping out of an air-conditioned car into Texas heat.

There was a body on one of the medical beds. I knew enough about the display of biometric to know there was no heartbeat, no brainwaves, and any indicators that were in the positive were quickly going down. Except three lines of data, and of those three, I think one was increased blood toxicity due to non-movement that went up instead of down. Homeostasis was a precarious thing. Perfect homeostasis, well, that was death. Everything cycles. Organics are analog beings in a digital world. Nurse Previn closed his eyes.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I'll tell you what happened," House said. "You have an untrained crew of misfits and want-to-be space explorers that think watching episodes of Galaxy Quest qualifies them for being out here."

I held my hand up to give him pause. I touched my communicator, opening a channel. "Command Staff to sickbay, ASAP."

"It's a bit late for that, Captain," House said.

"What can we do?" I asked.

"Hire a Chaplin," House said.

"What can we do for him?" I asked.

"Dead is dead," House snapped. "I don't care how many sci-fi fantasies you watch, this is dead, and it doesn't get better, and he's not even wearing a red shirt."

Loxy arrived via site to site transport beam. The rain of lights filled her in instantaneously, but it was still mesmerizing watching the lights and body coalesce out of thin air, and the brilliance of the chakras flaring, followed by the random flaring of the less prominent but still well mapped out energy points within the Chinese system of Chi. Interestingly, she had not completed dressing. She was in the skirt and shirt, but no hose, and no boots. She was barefoot. Maybe I shouldn't have said ASAP. Isis arrived next, via the door. She went straight way to the body, jumping up on the bed, touching his face with a paw.

“Great, we have a cat on board,” House said.

“Consider her the Chaplin,” I said.

The rest of the command staff arrived. I turned to Tesla. “What happen?”

“Tech Omar was commencing with a routine transport, when there was a convergence of energies, a solar burst accompanied by a spike in the planet’s magnetosphere, and, well, the increased ionization created so much signal noise that Smith was dead on arrival,” Tesla explained.

“A trained tech would have checked for ion storms and solar flares,” House said.

“I get it, House. You’re angry, but that will be enough,” I said.

“You should be angry,” House said.

I held my ground, meeting House’s stare, but without the emotionalism.

“I am confused,” Loxy said. “I thought there was a failsafe to prevent that sort of thing.”

“There is,” Tesla said. “And, I suspect when we interview the tech and play back the logs we’re going to find he hit the override and tried to boost the gain manually.”

“This crew is not ready,” House said. “You are not ready. Collins is the only one that I know of who has actual military experience, and I dare say she isn’t ready, not for this, not for any of this, but I rather her be in charge than you.”

“Your opinion is logged and noted, House,” I said. “And though the command structure is paramilitary, this is not a militaristic venture. We have been chosen for a reason and given the knowledge necessary to do what we were brought here to do.” Comp! OMG, we weren’t just copied on being pulled, but were simultaneously programmed with knowledge, our brains nothing more than computers with updates. I am John, version 2.5. Great. Why didn’t I feel improved?!

“Well, clearly that’s not good enough,” House said.

“Loxy, investigate with Tesla and get to the bottom of what happen. And I want everyone to consider that maybe our knowledge set about this world is fragile, and needs to be exercised to be reinforced. I want everyone to double up on training. I want trackable training procedures, and not just something people can pass a test to show knowledge, but practical application stuff, use the holodeck. No more fun holodeck until the correct response to specific emergencies is the automatic, unconscious response,” I said. “Tesla, make sure that tech sees a counselor. Today. He is suspended from duties until the investigation is complete, and he has accomplished a minimum of six sessions with the counselor.”

“Aye,” Tesla said.

“That’s it?” House said. “You’re not going to court martial him?”

“For an accident? Absolutely not. If incompetence continues, well, that’s another conversation, but even so, what do we do with crew that doesn’t fit? Maroon them on planets? Send him back here to Crossover One? We can’t send people back to Origin, can we? Where do we send your misfits of Origin who signed up here for a chance to be a part of something, only to discover they are misfits here, too?”

No one had an answer.

“House, have the medical staff prepare a torpedo casing as a coffin...”

“Against his will?” House said.

Oh, I was getting a bit frustrated with House, but maybe he had something I needed to understand, so I chose patience, weary patience. “Explain that,” I said, rubbing my forehead.

“Everyone has a living will, and his last wishes were to be beamed up and recycled energetically,” House said.

See, I didn’t know that. “Prepare him for that, then,” I said. “Did he have any friends on board?”

“No one has any friends here,” Uhura said. Her eyes were sad, soft, but full of compassion. “We’re in a unique situation, Captain. Everyone was pulled from their lives of origin to serve, so it’s not like I can call his family and tell them what had happened. And, with the exception of a couple of families that were pulled together, all of us here are strangers. Loxy and I are also exceptions, as no one has an explanation for our presence here. Of the crew, we are the only two who were never born on Origin.”

“But you’re one of the counselors,” I said.

“Yes and no,” Uhura said. “Tesla, Jung, Chan, and Sacagawea are from Origin and they had their minds updated in order to better assimilate into their roles, just like everyone else.”

“But they remember me, our conversations,” I pointed out.

Uhura shrugged. “I’m only telling you what we are certain of.”

“No, this isn’t making sense...” I said, about to launch into a rant.

“John,” Isis interrupted me. She was purring noticeably louder. “The way you remember it isn’t accurate. It is easier for you to believe that they were figments of your imagination than

than to accept and assimilate that they were already here and reaching back to you through a spiritual connection,” Isis said.

“Again, except for Loxy and myself, everyone on the crew is from Origin. With every new arrival, I have been looking for commonalities, and I have yet to find anything specific that links us all together,” Uhura said. “Except one. You.”

“It can’t be about me,” I insisted.

“There is no other identifiable commonality,” Uhura persisted.

“Then, let the common ground that we stand on, that binds us together, be this ship,” I said. “How many souls on board?”

“4,999 crew,” Loxy answered. “And approximately 500,000 million civilians.”

I frowned. “This is not the time to be fucking with me.” It was out before I could take it back.

“She’s not joking,” Uhura said.

“This is an Ambassador Class Starship, and at best has crew compliment of 1,200. 3,500, if everyone shares a room,” I said.

“John,” Uhura said. “This may resemble a Starfleet vessel on the surface, but it is not.”

“I think it’s time to show him,” Tesla said.

“Show me what? You’re all keeping secrets from me?” I asked.

“Paranoid much?” House asked.

“I asked them to hold off,” Isis said. “I wanted it to be a surprise. We wanted to see your face when you made the discoveries.”

“What discoveries?” I asked.

“Come with me,” Loxy said. “You, too, Tesla.”

“Oh, count me in,” Isis said, leaping from the bed to my arms.

Before leaving, I stopped and turned to House. “Assemble a funeral detail on the hangar deck, one hour, please,” I said. “Formals.”

“Aye, Captain,” House said.

निर्मित

A part of me wanted to linger in my thoughts over the dead crewman, but the other part eagerly followed this distraction. Does life go on this easily? It does at a hospital. It probably does on a military ship, too. And here in space, even on a nonmilitary venture, we have obligations and duties and life continues forward without stopping. I was led to the equivalent of the TNG's Ten Forward, which was at the top of the main fuselage. The bar had a lower level, and stairs leading up and forwards to an observation blister that provided a forward view out into space and a great view of the lower portion of the saucer section.

The bar was not small. In addition to the bar, tables and chair, there was a dance floor, and a band section. I was immediately caught up in the music. It was too loud for me but so unexpected I couldn't help it. I can't tell you if the band was holographic in nature, or real people, but the fact that Mitzi Gaynor was singing "Begin the Beguine" was probably telling. Loxy directed me and Tesla away from the show piece and up the stairs. We passed through a thin force field, and on the other side of the field the music diminished to almost nothing.

The observation blister folded around either edge of the empennage structure that held the saucer section up and away from the main fuselage. Technically, it's called a dorsal, not an empennage, so forgive me if I use the wrong words every now and then. We were at Dorsal Deck N, walking on O, and this 'Ten Forward' was on Deck O, or if you're using a deck map with numbers, we were walking atop of deck 15. OMG, forget the tech and numbers. This place is magnificent and open, and a hotbed of activity for crew and guests!

I don't know why I hadn't come here sooner. Maybe because I hadn't even considered it having such a place, since the concept of Ten Forward didn't come in until TNG. I saw our reflection in the seamless, transparent bubble. I saw myself holding Isis, and I saw Tesla was equally enraptured by the view, and Loxy looked like she had seen it already, but it still held her. I looked forwards into space, moving beyond our reflection, and marveled at the lower saucer section as our ceiling. Walking around the observation deck to the far port side, not quite midway through the saucer support dorsal structure, one could see directly aft of the ship, and the port engine nacelle. I walked, back, dragging my hand along the bubble. I could hear a new song being played, and recognize Mitzi singing "Anything Goes," but we continued all away around to the starboard side, looking up at the saucer section as I meandered. From this side, we had clear view of the starboard engine nacelle. Civilians emerged from a doorway embedded in the dorsal to take a tour of the blister. There larger doors were on either side of the dorsal.

We entered the starboard side after the civilians had passed and arrived on a large open section and looked down into the deck 'O.' The floor here was transparent and we could look down through the decks, like looking down through the center of a building. Looking down clearly indicated that the ship proceeded down more decks than was possible. It was deeper than the main fuselage was thick! I was mesmerized, trying to figure it out, petting Isis unconsciously. Loxy tapped my shoulder to draw my attention and pointed up. The cylindrical opening proceeded up, higher than it went down, but clearly greater than the entire height of the ship.

A door opened leading into the bar and Mitzi was clearly singing the phrase: "Anything goes!"

"It's bigger on the inside," I muttered.

"Next time Jenny cracks a size joke, give her a tour," Loxy said.

"It's bigger on the inside!" I said louder.

"You're looking into heart of the tower which comprises Fleet's remote headquarters," Isis said. "It is the center piece of an architecturally advanced city that surrounds the tower."

"OMG," I said.

"See that? Perhaps if you hadn't gone off gallivanting around the galaxy, you could have been astounded sooner," Loxy said.

"I wasn't gallivanting," I corrected.

"Gallivanting with a Gallifreyan," Loxy said.

"Oh, wait, we stole this tech from the Gallifreyans?" I asked.

"Or they stole it from us," Tesla said. "Even I, in my time, had several patented inventions that would have made future time travel possible. I am sure the US government is still sitting on them."

"Or perhaps Tesla stole it from the gods," Isis corrected. "Let's show him the rest."

"There's more?" I asked.

"John, this is just the tip of the iceberg," Loxy said.

I took her hand. "I am sorry for raising my voice earlier. I was wrong."

Loxy kissed me, and squeezed my hand. "Come on."

Tesla led the way to the engine room where he gave me a quick quiz, guided tour. I pointed to the starboard and port exits that led to the specific engine nacelles. I led us past the four backup fusion generators, and ended the tour with us standing before the jewel of the engine

room, the matter-antimatter mixing chamber that made it possible to warp space/time and allow us to effectively travel faster than the speed of light.

“What if I told you, that’s not quite right,” Tesla said.

“It doesn’t give us the energy to warp space/time?” I asked.

“It produces a great deal of power, but not enough to warp/space time,” Tesla said. “Even Neil DeGrasse Tyson will tell you that much. This engine is basically the equivalent of a battery that allows us to jump start a bigger engine.”

“There is a bigger engine?” I asked, wondering what could be more powerful than a matter antimatter engine.

Tesla led us into an open lift and took us to the next level of engineering. He brought us before a transparent airlock that allowed us to look forward in the general direction of what I assumed would be the lower half of the antennae dish array, provided it went that far. The corridor was long, but not detectably ‘unreasonably’ long. It was cylindrical in shape, and wider than any corridor. It was pristine and Spartan, like a clean room, with nodes interspaced along the entire length, and a noticeable seam along the bottom as if the lower section might swing open to drop things out.

“This is Corridor One,” Tesla said. “It runs down the center of the main fuselage, the lower end opens out into space. It is a zero-G corridor, which allows for a purity in material construction not possible in G-environments. Those crystalline points jutting out from the corridor wall are a combo of replicator nodes and 3D printing tech. This is basically a bulk, mass replicator. We could theoretically construct an entire starship piece by piece here.”

“And this is the engine?” I asked.

Tesla turned off the gravity in our airlock and we came off the floor. He opened the inner door. He then handed me a hand-held engine, similar in design to what a scuba engine might look like, showed me how to use it, handed one to Loxy, and then took one for himself. He led the way down the center of the zero g corridor towards the second, transparent airlock. I followed, carrying Isis. Loxy followed me. On the other side, we entered the airlock, stowed the engines, and Tesla oriented us towards a new floor before turning on the artificial gravity. Standing on the floor didn’t agree with me.

“I think I am going to be sick,” I said.

“Let go of your ideas of up and down,” Isis said. “You’re trying orientate to your concept of up and down in regard to the starship.”

“It’s gets easier in there, when you stop thinking about the ship,” Tesla said. “And, I assure you, you will forget about the ship.” Opening the next airlock, he allowed me to go first.

I stepped into a room which was basically an enclosed balcony with filtered glass that allowed us to look out on a brilliant, pulsing star. It was so brilliant you couldn’t see beyond it. And we could only see it at all due to the tech imbedded in the glass. I was speechless.

“You’re looking at the heart of the Enterprise,” Tesla said.

“There is a pulsar inside my ship?” I muttered.

“They don’t call it a STAR-ship for nothing,” Loxy said.

“There is a pulsar inside my ship?!” I said.

“It’s called a Star-Tetrahedron Engine,” Tesla said. “The resonant energy of a star enclosed in a Dyson sphere provides the energy to not only warp space/time, but to make and sustain the pocket universe large enough to capture and hold a super massive objects like this, this pulsar.”

“Romulans are rumored to have black-hole star drives,” Loxy reminded me.

“Look behind you,” Isis said.

I turned to look behind me. I could see back to the engine room through the transparent airlocks that separated the star from the rest of the ship. I saw crew walking at a right angle to us. To the left or right of Corridor one, it was like looking down on a world. My hand came up to brace against the wall and I nearly dropped Isis in my vertigo. Either side of the corridor was like looking down on the Earth from the Karman Line, 100,000 KM altitude. We were above the atmosphere. Tesla explained if he turned off the gravity, the wall would become ‘down.’ The wall was the floor from the perspective of the ground below. Tesla revealed hidden tech in the transparent wall, by drawing a box with his finger. He magnified the image inside the square, zooming in on a city that was immediately below us. He drew another box on the wall and gave us a perspective of where we were, at the top of a dome. A dome that covered an area comparable to the entire surface of the earth. He drew another box to show the world under the dome, the oceans and continents and islands. He drew another box that looked down on the dome from a distance, revealing a pyramid just outside the dome, taller than the dome, but connected to the dome by tubes. He zoomed in towards the pyramid, showing multiple buildings inside the

dome that were connected to the tubes that went through the dome and into the pyramid. There were three tubes, and trains came and went on either side of the tubes, as well as individual cars.

Tesla drew another box that was more simulation than live image showing an animation of the inside of the Dyson sphere and many other domed habitats and other pyramids. As this animation ran, he talked about the pyramids. He was excitingly rambling about sacred geometry and how the massive pyramids were clearly arranged along 19.51 degree mark within the Dyson sphere that would connect with the double sided, conjoined tetrahedron harmonic energy structures generated by the star. Tesla was describing a basic tenet of sacred geometry, and showed us another animation that demonstrated how two conjoined tetrahedrons describe a star. All the pyramids were appropriately spaced within the Dyson sphere so that they would correspond to the tetrahedron harmonic points that were projected from pulsars. He talked about how this pattern was evident everywhere in nature, and could even be discerned looking at images of Saturn, Jupiter, and Neptune, which was apparent by noting the hexagonal pattern that encircled the poles. You can certainly google that and see it for yourself and it was something I was aware of and curious about, because, how many straight edges does nature usually provide? More than you think. Put sand on a sound plate and let it vibrate a pure tone, and you get all kinds of interesting geometric shapes, the patterns changing based on the frequency and purity of tones. And maybe we don't learn more about this in science because it's interesting but not practical in terms of maintaining the status quo, which is to produce workers, not thinkers, and the ones that call themselves thinkers rarely allow you to think beyond the boxes they say define humanity's limits. I, mean, really, if it's true Tesla had figured this stuff out in his life time and had designs for providing free energy, it would have destroyed Edison's ability to make a profit. Of course, they were thinking too small. If they had realized they could use his tech to make a starship, you increase real-estate and acquisition of resources you increase everyone's wealth.

"This is just one dome," Isis said. "This dome has 500,000 registered residents in the city below us. Part of the crew compensation is having a home anywhere within this dome that they would like. This Dyson sphere could literally be host to a hundred billion or more."

OMG, but I couldn't even say it out loud.

"Our place is here, John," Loxy said. "2nd Home, the one from our story 'Not Here,' is on this shore."

2nd Home is a place I created long before I knew about Tulpamancy, which became part of the landscape of 'Wonderland' when I entered into tulpamancy, and is a part of the landscape of Safe Haven Universe. To discover it here, integrated into the Starship, was like realizing... "I have died and gone to heaven," I said out loud, because if there is a Heaven, it better be a starship, because I am not sitting in a choir for all eternity.

"That's not a bad analogy," Isis said. "You have been taken from Earth and you can't return. We cannot allow for any disruption of the world of Origin. We can't allow what you do and learn here to appreciatively affect the time line there. It will affect your world line, John, that much can't be helped. It will come across as dreams or fiction and or just sheer craziness. Everyone is a part of this endeavor, in some way or another. When a spiritual war ensues, the end results is either the continuance or the extinction of the human race; everyone should have a voice. Some will serve on ships, like this or lesser. Some will serve on worlds. Everyone serves. Some with knowledge of who they were and where they came from, some without any more knowledge than what they think they know in the present moment. That's the way of it."

Looking down on the star, and around it for evidence of that this star was truly being enclosed in a Dyson sphere was useless, as apparently there is a limit to human vision. I suspect the entire Dyson sphere was illuminated, but due to the brightness of the star, and the sheer colossal size of the structure being examined, it was beyond human scope to confirm the sphere went all way around with eyes. I had to use intuition and trust it was what it seemed. I had to trust that my ship was somehow attached to this sphere, or that this sphere was somehow inside my ship. The world below seem to stretch infinitely in any direction, tapering off into infinity, and was so large that it was impossible to discern the arch of the Dyson sphere. The inner surface of a Dyson sphere, placed at Earth's orbit or greater, would seem like an infinitely large flat Earth. And given the power of a pulsar, the Dyson sphere would have had to have been larger than the orbit of Saturn, or the internal pressures and heat radiating from the star would cook everything. (I assume. If you protested in the sixties that the 'Ringworld' was unstable, you can send your protest about this through emails.) Unless, that, too, was modified by tech within the dome and structure. One could not walk the circumference of this sphere in a normal human life time. And maybe the persistence of a flat earth, even against all reasoned evidence, is due to the fact that places like this exist and therefore it is part of the collective conscious that we all have access to. Standing on the inner surface of a Dyson sphere would approximate a 'flat earth.'

I became aware of a steady beat, a drumming rhythm, which was the signature of the pulsar. Closing my eyes not only made it louder, but because of my second sight, it produced a light inside me, and I felt the release of endorphins. I felt loved and connected, like I was still in the womb. I have rarely felt this good before. I have felt this good on realizing that I was in a lucid dream, and this feeling always resulted in me waking from the dream. I opened my eyes and I found I was still here with Tesla and Loxy and Isis.

Tesla pointed to the star. "Its core signature frequency is 528HZ. This is the frequency of the color of grass and the frequency of love. The human brain and body tends to be 6 to 8HZ. The Earth 6 to 8HZ. Everything is energy and frequency and vibration. The Warp drive kicks this star into gear, and it resonates and lights these pyramids up, and we fly. OMG, we fly."

"You call me a Goddess, John," Isis said, purring. A cat's purr was also the frequency of love. "But what if I am just an advance alien? What if we are brothers and sisters, at different levels of understanding? You're looking at just one habitat that is on the inside of what you and Tesla call a Dyson sphere. There are many habitats here, many other beings, at many levels of development, and they also are a part of this mission you're about to embark on. Some are educators. Some are students. Most are civilians. All of us are children."

"Why me?" I asked. "Why did you choose me?"

"You called, we answered," Isis said. "Most people 'go out' to 'go in,' but you, Sir, 'went in' to 'go out.' And you arrived here."

I found myself experiencing de-ja-vu. "We could spend all eternity exploring the inside of this ship!"

"You could," Isis said. "And maybe you will. Unless you crash the ship, which would be a rather large astronomical event."

"I promise not to let Rick Berman anywhere near her," I said.

I think on Isis and Loxy got it. I found myself holding Loxy's hand. She was standing really close. I turned back to the world below.

"Who lives down there?" I asked.

"People," Isis said. "You're all welcome to visit. That tower there, that's Star Fleet headquarters. There's no hunger in this inner world. No need for currency. People simply pursue their joy, their interest, and it works. Humanity on Origin is on the verge of this even as you

speak, and there is a lot of fear, because transitions can be challenging, especially when people aren't ready to give up what they know to embrace what can be. Birthing pains can be a bitch.”

“This is a three level society,” I said.

“Kardashev's scale of measuring,” Isis said. “It's limited.”

“What else is there?” I asked. “I mean, really? After this? What else is there? Why explore anything? Why do anything? This is so huge!”

“Because, there is more yet to know,” Isis said. “There are measures of being beyond the Kardashev scale. And we all have to start somewhere. And you're starting here. I have one more thing you need to know. I want you to meet your benefactor.” Isis collar began to glow. “Isis to Star Fleet command. Four to transport, site to site, complex 1.”

We arrived via transporter to an office at the top of Starfleet headquarters. Once again, I felt nauseous, and had to swallow, and this was just due to being disoriented, and I suspect part of it was because I knew I had just been standing at a right angle to what I was now standing. My sense of up and down was really out of sorts, and as I thought about Trek episodes, technically, the transports were almost always off at a right angle. Think about it. The ship is going around the planet, most the time with the port side of the ship facing the planet. If it needed an up down orientation, then, wouldn't we see the bottom of the ship facing the planet, and a top down view from above the ship from the point of view of the camera facing the planet?

A woman was standing behind a desk, looking out over a future-esque city. Isis jumped out of my arms, walked forwards and ‘meowed.’ The woman had long black hair, and was wearing some sort of electronic headband that clamped down hard over the top of her head, and clothing I thought to be fairly similar to fashion from Logan's run. The woman turned, came around the desk, going past the cat and straight to me. She looked exactly like Midori and the head band went all the way around her head, like a ‘halo’ device as opposed to a simple hair clip. The lights increased in brightness and complexity of blinking patterns.

“Midori!”

“Really? Is that the way you greet an old friend?” Midori asked.

I opened my mouth to say something but she closed the distance, and caught me up in a hug and a kiss, her hands going up to the back of my head, where she held me firmly in place. Tesla, still kind of new to me, leaned towards Loxy and whispered: “Does that happen everywhere he goes?” Loxy nodded: “Pretty much.” And, when Loxy thought it had gone on

long enough, she gave a fake cough. Midori broke the embrace and looked to her, blinked, and then smiled.

“OMG, Loxy, it is so nice to meet you in person,” and with that Midori greeted her the same way she had greeted me, full on full mouth contact.

Tesla leaned over to me, “Does that happen everywhere you go?”

Not turning my eyes from the girls kissing, I said: “No, that’s kind of new.” I was still a little breathless.

“Are you a god?” Tesla asked me.

“Oh, far from it,” I said.

“Not as far as you imagine,” Isis said. Tesla and I both looked to the cat for an explanation. “Really? Humanity frequently refers to themselves as children of god, and yet, you refuse to believe you have more in common with deities than merely being created?”

Midori eased away from Loxy, but Loxy seemed a bit weak in the knees, and so Midori didn’t let go until she was certain she wasn’t going to fall. She seemed incredibly pleased she had such power over us, but I suspected her knowledge came from having me inside her head.

“I don’t understand,” Loxy said. “Have we met?”

“I thought this was the standard greeting,” Midori said, giving me a mischievous grin. She knew! Of course she knew. She turned back to Loxy. “Yes, I know you. I have my own John and Loxy Tulpa inside my brain. How are you adjusting to the body I gave you?”

“You did this to me?!” Loxy said.

“We brains decided John would function better with a permanent mate, as opposed to a self-induced hallucination,” Midori said.

“I am more than a hallucination,” Loxy said.

“Of course you are,” Midori said. “And I am more than a brain.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said. “You said ‘we’ brains. You’re not actually back in your body?! That’s what the halo is about.”

“Nothing gets by you,” Midori said, touching my face. “You’re absolutely right. This body is just a brainless vehicle. My brain is in the office next door. This body is an artificial, replicator construct, basically an avatar. It’s a fully functioning body based on my genetic makeup, only instead of a brain it has relays that allow my brain to control the body remotely. Part of the reason is so that I may better interact with my staff. I find many of the humans are

uncomfortable addressing a disembodied brain. But the main reason I re-invented my body is because I discovered, you were right. Each organ in the body offers an emotional flavor that, when functioning properly, deepens the range of intellectuality. Heart energy is just as important as brain energy, if not more important, and it brings its own intelligence to the equation. Every organ in the body brings its own intelligence to the table. Every organ, every cell, it is all necessary, and we ignore their input at our own peril. I mean, think about it. Electromagnetically speaking, the heart outshines the electromagnetic signal of every other body part, even if you add their energy signature together. The brain is hardly brighter than a refrigerator light. The heart, on the other hand, is as bright as a road side flare, at least in terms of intensity.”

“You’re the voice of the computer?!” Tesla said.

“Tesla,” Midori said, turning to greet him.

Tesla stepped away from her, his hands going behind his back, bowing his head. “Please, don’t, my lady.”

Midori bowed. “Of course, I apologize for invading your comfort zone.”

“You have not harmed me, my lady, and I am greatly touch that you would so openly display such warmth towards me,” Tesla said. “But I am hardly worthy of such affection.”

“Oh, if only I were the wizard, I might reveal you are indeed worthy,” Midori said.

“Did she just make an Oz joke?” Loxy asked.

“Are you the ship’s computer?” I asked.

“The ship requires both Artificial Intelligence in tandem with several organic brains to function,” Midori said. “The AI is necessary to navigate the multilayered dimensionalities of overlapping substrate membranes, while the organic brains helps resolve particle wave fronts to points of references, reducing paradoxical interference into coherent data streams that can be reasonably assimilated into the reality function without causing system crashes. Basically, the god particle requires a god witness, and the organic brain can accept paradigm changes the same way a Japanese Buddhist can accept a Zen Koan. We work together in harmony, but we still require a crew. I chose you, John Harister, to lead this mission.”

“So, you’re one of the brain of the computer?” I asked again.

“Yes, John. Technically, I am one of the Brains,” Midori said. “But this is where it gets weird.”

“It’s possible to get weirder than this?” Loxy asked.

“Oh, Loxy, you haven’t even touch weirder, yet,” Midori said. “There are 6 organic brains, and 6 independent AI systems, all linked together to make the ship’s computer network. I am a part of your ship, but I am not your ship. Your ship has its own super consciousness that is the result of joining 12 sentient minds together. You may hear my voice from time to time, especially in Engineering, but my mind is not the ‘I’ running the ship. That would be she, the Enterprise, and that is her voice that you hear, most the time. Almost all of the ship’s function are basically automated script of the subconscious Enterprise mind, and that is why she requires organic personnel. Her conscious mind is focused on other things, while your crew’s conscious helps regulate her functioning. The best analogy is really anatomy and physiology. You, the organic crew, are regulating cells in her body. And, so, if you were wondering, that is why Smith is dead. Think not that the Enterprise’s failed him. Her awareness is not on your level of reality. It’s in another arena all together.”

“This is a lot to take in,” Tesla said.

“And I am still confused,” I said. Was this an example of a bootstrap paradox? “You said you chose me? I met you first, after being teleported from Earth to your planet, and then accidentally transported into this planet’s past.”

“Do you really think it was an accident? It doesn’t matter. You will learn, even planets have consciousness, comprised of a composite of all the intelligence living things on it. That is another reason we had to copy you to bring you here. You are still playing a vital role at Origin. Do not overly worry about the apparent paradox. It will be easier to assimilate the reality function if you accept the cognitive dissonance as a koan,” Midori said.

“You always seem to get involved with the smart ones,” Tesla observed.

Midori chuckled. “My experience with John is he doesn’t employ any discriminating criteria when it comes to selecting romantic interests.”

“Boy, you nailed that, sister,” Loxy said.

“You called me sister,” Midori said.

“I am sorry,” Loxy said.

“Do not be. It is what my internal Loxy calls me,” Midori said. “I am experiencing emotions. I am happy.”

“I’ve never had a sister before,” Loxy said.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said. “I am still stuck on the paradox. You’re saying you initiated contact by bringing me here and separating out Loxy from my brain and making my invisible counselors real, but we came here first...”

“John, it doesn’t matter how it started. I am giving you everything you ever wanted. I am making this happen, so we can be together, in person, a great big happy family,” Midori said.

“What about my son? What about all the families of all the crews?” I asked. “You can’t just rob us from our histories and update us with new information so that we can assimilate better to your agenda.”

“I thought you would be happy,” Midori said.

“I am, actually,” I said, speaking softer. “But that’s not the point. These are people...”

“From my perspective, John, Origin has come and gone. You and everyone else is long since dead. I have access the entirety of your life, and I can experience it from a first person vantage point, or from 3rd person perspective, as if watching a movie. Out of all the perspectives of your personality set I could have chosen to copy and pull, I chose you because I believe we will derive the most benefits,” Midori said. “We Brains have access to the entire history of Origin, from before Sol began to stir in the wombs of its stellar nursery till the time she dies, taking out the Earth.”

“How is that even possible?” Tesla asked.

“All things in the physical universe are knowable utilizing tech,” Midori said.

“Interestingly, we only have access to Origin from cradle to grave. We are having to map out the Earth Cluster in real time. We have sent colony ships to of the stars in Crossover, but Enterprise will be the first warp capable ship to leave, and you will be the first crews to explore beyond Crossover, sending back real time information.”

“So, this ship, this tech, it’s not yours,” I said.

“The tech was given to us,” Midori said. “We are working with the gods to expand humanity’s reach. We will have four others ships ready to launch within a month of your departure. We expect to be able to be able to produce four a year.”

“Who gave you the tech?” Loxy asked.

“A great deal of tech was discovered on the surface of the inner world of Crossover One,” Midori said. “The Gallifreyans have left us with tech, for example. Every age of man has been represented here on Crossover One, even ages no man from Origin is aware of. The gods

have also left us tech. I suspect Isis knows more about all of this than she's admitted to you, but she will not be rushed. She will divulge truths at her convenience, and we tolerate her because she has helped this venture so far."

"Do you know more?" I asked Isis directly.

"I am a goddess, what do you think?" Isis asked.

"Isis," I said.

"You know what you need to know," Isis said. "You are presently full and you need to be patient, digest what you've swallowed, and trust."

"Trust doesn't come that easy to us," I said.

"You trusted enough to travel out of body," Isis said. "You trusted enough to create a tulpa, to invite invisible counselors into your work, and to engage in ancient disciplines like 'active imagination.' I think you trust more than you know. You're going to want to know things, and you're going to be pushed by many of your crew to explain and to perform, even by the occupants of the Sphere, but you're going to have to be the balance. Trust, and do what you do because it is your love and passion, and you will arrive where you need to be. That is the way of it. Now, we need to get back. We have a funeral to attend."

"John? Loxy? Please, come back and visit me. We can have lunch together in the city," Midori said.

"I would like that," Loxy said, taking up a standard transport position centered on me.

I tapped my badge. "Enterprise, three and a cat to transport," I said. I managed to wave at Midori before being whisked away in streams of light.

Chapter 16

A portion of the crew was assembled on the hangar deck. Others were watching or listening from their duty stations or from their quarters. Officers were in their place. I was in mine. The body was in its place, a photon torpedo tube, half shell.

“So here we are, the lot of us, assembled here for a purpose, a purpose as yet unknown, or at least unspoken, and my first speech comes with this: a death. This is the body of a man. It is not the person. This is not Thomas Smith. I didn’t get to know the man who once possessed this body. My understanding is, no one here got the chance to know him. I can only assume, like the rest of us, he wanted to be here. Actually, it’s more than an assumption. I genuinely believe that none of us would be here unless some part of us, something deeper and with greater access to wisdom than we usually touch with our conscious mind, didn’t want us to be here.

“And, so, again, here we are, facing a hard truth about our shared reality. Whether you believe this is a dream or a fantasy, or a parallel universe, there is a hard truth confronting us here. There is a tangible barrier, and we have a name for it, and if you cross it, that’s it. I don’t know anything about this man’s other life. I don’t know if he returned to that other life or is off having adventures elsewhere, or if he is starting over from scratch, or, worse case imaginable, this was it. I don’t know. I don’t know if I should place meaning on it, or just default to it ‘is what it is.’ I could make it meaningful. We all can. This body, this empty vessel, serves as a reminder that this is not who we are, but that we all go here, and whatever it was that brought us together, we are here for a reason which we will discover together. We can use this moment as a reminder to be kinder, to get to know each other so that if... no, let’s be very clear here, ‘when,’ this thing we’re touching on here, death, it is inevitable, it’s coming for us all... Let this be a reminder that when death comes for us we can meet it directly and smile and say, I was a part of something bigger than me.

“I’ve been advised to keep this short. We’re about to embark on a mission, to explore strange new worlds, and I dare say ‘strange’ will be an understatement, and this body here can serve as a reminder or an omen. Every one of you here has a story, something you’re bringing to the table, something that will help us understand this space we’re about to explore. None of us have a clue what we’re going to encounter, but there is evidence that humanity has reached a threshold; we are at childhood’s end, and we will grow up and join those who desire to welcome

us with open arms, or we will return to the endless night from which we rose. We grow up, or we become this here: an empty vessel.

“You have all been commissioned, and given the knowledge you need to thrive here, and we need you, I need you. I need you to know this is for real and you need to know your job and if you don’t think you can do it or you don’t think you can learn it or you don’t think you can play well with others, now is the time to let us know and checkout without prejudice. In twenty four hours, we will break orbit and proceed towards our destiny. We go in full knowledge that there will be risk involved. Which, interestingly, I was just reminded the other day by a new friend, that risk is our business. Until the end. We say goodbye to one of our own. Thomas Smith, God speed.”

I heard the OOD call everyone to display arms as I turned and touched his comm. badge. “Enterprise, one to transport, Captain’s override, destination null.”

I stepped back as the transporter beam took the body away. It struck me that the beam was less colorful than what I had witnessed with Loxy during a normal, live body transport. The energy points that mapped out what looked like human chakras were missing. This body was just matter, nothing more. I don’t know if anyone else noticed, and I wasn’t about to bring it up, though it gave me secret hope. The table and casket went with him.

“Crew dismissed,” I said. And I walked to the nearest exit, through the space where the body had previously been.

निर्मित

I was paged to Jung’s office, where he met me at the door as if he were expecting me. “Oh, come in, my boy. Come in, have a seat,” he said.

His office more resembled a private home bar than the office or library I imagined it would be. I followed him past the couch and the lounge chair, and sat at the ‘bar.’ There was a viewer over the sink that had live scene of a picturesque farm during a light falling of snow. It looked peaceful outside that ‘window’ while inside it was warm with light, and near the couch a wall monitor offered a fireplace. The bar was a circular in design, with three elevated chairs. There was an ashtray on the bar that held Jung’s pipe, and the fresh smell of tobacco was in the air. Jung pulled a bottle out, reflected over it, put it back, and retrieved another. He hardly paid

me any mind as he peeled the foil and then proceeded to open the bottle. He poured us both a glass of peach flavored wine.

"I don't drink," I said.

"Today you do," Jung said, pushing the glass towards me.

I pushed it back.

"Sorry you opened a bottle, but I don't drink," I said.

"If House invites you to drink with him, decline. If I pour you something, consider it a prescription." Jung said. "So, now, your choice is a glass of wine, or I prescribe you a psychotropic. Which would you prefer?"

"I don't require a psychotropic," I said.

"Wine it is," Jung pushed it back towards me. He took his glass and his pipe to his chair. The side table next to his chair had what I first assumed was an advanced medical device, maybe a newfangled hypo-spray adapted from TOS, but it turned out it was simply an electronic cigarette, filled with a red substance that I learned later was a strawberry cartridge. In an open case were several other cartridges including chocolate, coffee, menthol, vanilla, and apple. He saw my interest and asked: "Would you like to try it?"

"I don't think I need another vice," I said.

"Um," he said, musing over his glass. "And what vice do you believe you have?"

"Is this a therapy session?" I asked.

"Do you want it to be?" Carl asked.

I leaned back into the couch, still holding my drink. I set the drink down. I noticed the disapproving look Jung was holding, so I picked it back up, sipped it. It was okay, as far as wines go. "Let me guess, Rossi informed you I saw her."

"She did," Jung said. "Care to read her assessment?"

"Not, particularly, no," I said.

"Afraid?" Jung asked.

"Nope, just don't believe doing so would be helpful," I said. It was clear to me Jung wanted me to expound. He has that way of soliciting information without speaking. He set his wine down long enough to light his pipe. Once the pipe was going, he resumed holding his wine. "As Captain, she would know I would be privy to anything she wrote, and so either she wrote something completely innocuous, or she exaggerated her opinions, but even if it she wrote

something professionally accurate, whatever she wrote about me is likely to stick in my brain and interfere with my future dealings with her, and while we're speaking of her, why did you assign me to her?"

"Because we have more of a friendship than a counseling relationship," Jung said. "Hence the reason you and I are sharing a glass of wine and basically bullshitting each other as oppose serious heavy lifting."

"We're friends?" I asked.

"That's how I see us. How do you see us?" Jung asked.

"You're kind of grandfather-ish, without the feel of family," I said. "Better than family."

"There you go," Jung said. "So, what did you think of Rossi?"

"Besides being oppositional?" I asked.

"That's the wrong word," Jung corrected me. "How about challenging?"

"You mean antisocial?" I corrected.

"Oh, John, please. You know better than to make that lay mistake. She's more asocial than antisocial. There's a difference," Jung said.

I nodded. "You're right. Forgive my transgression," I said.

He sucked on his pipe, blew a ring ceiling-wards; technically, skywards is in all directions? "She is way more introverted than you, and is not likely to be seen at ship social functions or even at the bar. You might catch her at the park in front of Fleet headquarters, feeding the ducks," Jung said. He took a time out to sip his wine. "I am actually surprised you don't want to read her assessment."

"Please," I said. "Let me guess, John is too permissive, too promiscuous, and outside of an ethical counseling relationship, lacks any semblance of social boundaries."

"Project much?" Jung asked.

"You're saying she didn't say anything like that?" I asked.

"I am curious. Your excuse not to read her report is that you don't want to be unduly influenced, and yet, you're clearly already influence, so wouldn't you rather be more influenced by her actual assessment than your assumptions?"

"That, actually, sounds reasonable," I said. I paused wondering why I was holding a glass of wine, remembered and took a sip before continuing. "But I think, if she remains my counselor, she will function better if she knows I am not scrutinizing her reports."

“And you’re worried about your boundaries?” Jung asked. “Or worried that other people will question your boundaries?”

“Do you suppose I have a sex addiction?” I asked.

“Nice, just throw it right out there,” Jung said. “What do you think?”

“Rogerian therapy doesn’t work on me,” I said.

“And you wonder why I picked Rossi as your counselor?” Jung asked. He inhaled deeply on his pipe, blew it out in one long, sustained exhale. “I am not doing Rogerian, I am asking you your opinion.”

“I don’t meet the criteria for sex addiction per the DSM V, however, I do worry about the frequency of sexual thoughts, and how easily I am distracted, and I am fairly promiscuous by anyone’s definition, and extremely permissive when it comes to what people chose to do sexually.”

“It’s called being sex positive. Don’t you watch ‘sexplanations?’” Jung asked.

“Oh, I love that Doctor,” I said. And I do, I think she’s quirky and fantastic and absolutely brilliant. OMG! “That’s my point. I will watch that because I love the Doctor and after I am hot and bothered I will chase her down with ‘theonlyluca’ on mute.”

“Nice juxtaposition” Jung pointed out. “The talking woman followed by the silent woman.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” I said. Can a glass of wine be a scything object?

“Well, it really is the only way to watch Luca,” Jung said. “I have tried to watch her with the sound, but I find her discourse confusing. She doesn’t want to be seen as a sex object, and ranted that entire episode where she went to that job interview and was surprised it was a porn job as opposed to a hosting a television show, but she is definitely using sex to keep her numbers up.”

“Right?!” I said. “Not that anything’s wrong with that. If had exploitable attributes I would be uploading videos to youtube. But, the only attribute I have is brain, and no one wants to hear me rant, even on mute. Maybe if I had been smarter, I could have been making money with minecraft videos. That one guy, walking to the far lands, not even trying to build anything that was just absolutely brilliant! I was so sad when he lost his dog.”

“So, back to the sex thing,” Jung said. “You know, Freud and I parted ways because of the sex thing. Clearly it’s a huge driving force with you, but it’s true for most people, and not

what Freud thought it was. Are you aware that I had multiple affairs, some were even with patients? I even brought one of my loves home to live with me and my first wife, and we called her the second wife.”

“No way,” I said.

“Look it up,” Jung said.

“You slept with a patient?!” I asked.

“Oh. Yeah. Several. The ethical guidelines in my time are not what they are in yours, and I can prove those clients actually got better because of the intensity of our relationship,” Jung said. It was clear he was thinking, brainstorming, and he clearly chose to be verbal as he free flowed his associations and observations of where I was from where he was. “One of the things that interests me though is there are all kinds of professional ethical guidelines for counselors and medical doctors in your time, but these guidelines aren’t applied to lawyers and judges. Isn’t that peculiar? If anyone is going to be emotionally vulnerable or compromised, it’s going to be with a lawyer. People in your time have really made too much ado about sex. Sociologically speaking, there is no sex addiction. Just ask Durkheim. An increase in promiscuous behavior in any society is evidence of a lack of social connectedness. There is evidence that in your world line that there has been a clear decrease in social connectedness, more pronounced in Western societies than in Eastern, but epidemic in the United States. Any law or punitive measure, or ‘medicalizing’ this perceived condition of the individual straying from perceived, societal norms only increases the rates at which you will find ‘disease’ in society, because the punishment increases isolation and social disease, by definition. Men, in Western society, whether right or wrong, have always been responsible for building society. In a society where there are few outlets to forge true relationship, there will always be an increase in perceived ‘base’ drives, because this is one way to increase connections. And a necessary one. Without a base, you can’t have a top the pyramid. And Maslow’s pyramid is a great model, but people aren’t aware that the actual top of the pyramid is transcendence, and sex is the base.”

“So basically, you’re saying the cure for sex addiction is having more sex?” I asked.

“Relationships are the number one cure for sex addiction. Just ask any married couple,” Jung said. “The longer they’ve been married, the less sex they have. And what’s worse is your DSM V has medicalized it by labeling it ‘hypoactive sexual disorder,’ or, more often blaming the woman directly, labeling her with ‘female sexual interest/arousal disorder.’ There is nothing

wrong medically or psychologically with the women of the 21st century that can't be better explained by being overworked, underpaid, insufficiently nurtured, and stigmatized and objectified by marriage, society, and the medical community. And I can prove it. Follow any woman who has been given this diagnosis, and if you do nothing else to her but give her a divorce and her life back, her libido goes through the roof! These women can't get enough sex once they get out of this box we painted them into. But see, that's the other lament, right? The medicalizing of mental health through the DSM V is about profitability in pharmaceuticals, not about actually curing conditions. Case in point, codependence is a well-defined term and the only reason it isn't in the DSM V is because you can't throw a drug at it. Only therapy diminishes the symptom set."

Jung sounded a little irritated, but I perceived it as passion; I just had to wonder, was he usurping my own rant, or did we share sentiments. Is this a dream? Someone shares my laments? "People in your time are more interested in a relationship with their cellphones than each other, and yet they wonder why intimacy has decreased? And while marriage sex is on the decline, the rates of affairs have gone up. Men and women alike are both having more affairs, and the doctors treating the women for sexual dysfunction aren't taking this into account because the women aren't going to acknowledge affairs in the office in front of their husbands. And, again, the reason for infidelity is because of a lack of social connectedness and intimacy in our everyday lives. And it's not just a simple problem. It's complex, with media and tech and diminished activities in natural setting, and social constraints induced by fear that resulted in overreactions. Yes, there was a reasonable need by society to decrease work place harassment, because most of that shit was just bad, but at the same time, instead of increasing conversations about it, society addressed it in a militant way that shut down all conversation which left people even more isolated, resulting in more infidelity and promiscuity, while driving the harassment underground. And because we responded militantly instead of opening dialogues for true change, the women who were morally right to cry foul were shunned on multiple levels, once by the peers, second by the court system that victimized them a second time, third by their families, and then finally by society. Nobody won anything because it was a fight and not a discussion. Harassment is alive and well, just less visible with one exception: there is now this entity called politically correct which has become the new way of harassing folks into submission fearing anything that might result in a conversation that leads to understanding and improvement. Interestingly, as

more and more women take leadership roles, and more and more men become servants, women are assuming the lead in the underground harassment area, and men are more likely to remain silent because society still can't allow that men might be equally susceptible to harassment or abuse, because they are still perceived as the 'stronger' sex.

"Where are we going with this? Ah, yes. Ultimately, the true problem isn't sex or frequency but a lack of communication. Society has lost its ability to communicate with each other. Any perceived loss or threat on the social arena leads to extreme behaviors. In the west, and I'm generalizing, men have been the bridge builders, and women have been the keepers of society, but we are now so individualized, and so adamant in our boundaries of what constitutes our paradigms that if anyone holds one contrasting view, communication ceases. You call yourself permissive, John. I call you open minded. You call yourself promiscuous, but I see it as building connections. All dialogue has to start somewhere, and if there isn't any intellectual intercourse to be had, well, then you will always default to what's left, which is usually sexual intercourse. When people engage in physical intimacy, they build emotional energy, and when they build emotional energy, they establish a foothold for shared intellectual activity. If you start the other way around, start with intellectual connection first, utilizing the 21st century Western paradigm model, then society will most likely self-destruct, because the heart and soul has been removed from the conversation."

I realized my glass of wine was gone. I had finished it during his speech. He sipped his wine.

"Consider every fantasy you ever had, John. Was it about connection, or just sex?" Jung said, pausing to sip his wine, or see if I would respond. I held my tongue. "I can allow for both, but the driving feature of your entire life was looking for connection. The box called society has failed most people, but, instead of giving up on society, you have simply been exploring alternative ways of being. The standard social response to noticeable decline in functioning is to hold firm to past morals and ideas and fear change. You, Sir, recognize, on some level, that though our past ways served us, we have got to change if we are going to survive. So, here we are. And now, I will indulge the speculative part of my brain, my intuition and access to collective unconscious. Out there, scattered over billions of worlds, will be every age and idea of humanity, places where worlds are thriving and where worlds are failing, but each of them will hold something unique and vital that we need to incorporate in our new paradigm. That is why

we are here. We need a new paradigm. We have been called to explore and build bridges so that humanity can find a way over this last hurdle. Maybe this is all a dream. Maybe we going so deep into the inner worlds that we have pushed through any previous barrier. Or maybe, this is exactly what we think it is and we need to buckle up for the ride of our life. Because, either way, John. If you have even the remotest interest in someone, if you're drawn to someone out of passing interest or just plain lust, there's connection there that needs to be explored. Even if you get a thousand rejections, that's okay, too, because, well, that also needed to be explored. We build bridge by testing the ground and surveying the landscape. Does that answer your question about any perceived character flaws you might have?"

It took me a moment to even reflect the question back so I could have more time to think about the question. "So, you don't think any less of me for being promiscuous?" I asked.

"OMG, John, you're fucking normal and your problem is no one ever told you that because your family of origin had such a perverse relationship with sexuality. Not judging them. Just saying. Your difficulty lies in your own judgment, and I doubt anything I tell you will alter your own perception, nor will it alter your behavior," Jung said. "There are lots of good studies that show the benefits of sex, even some studies done by Cornell University showed that one 'one night stand' or one casual encounter a week was better than no encounters in terms of reducing stress and improving overall health and ability to perform at work and school. Kissing absolutely boosts your immune system, no matter how you measure it. Immune systems get bored when they aren't challenged, and kissing is a great way to introduce foreign material, and physical contact stimulates the body and mind. But, who am I, just an old man who probably thinks about sex way more than he should. Don't take my word for it. Watch Dr. Zhana Vrangalova, a tedtalk lecture, and listen to her tell you all the benefits of being polyamorous. Then practice some REBT, because if you're going to encourage humanity to move beyond the boundaries and definitions that have failed the species, then we need to reconsider everything, even the modern relationship. No ownership of property means no ownership of people, and marriage was traditionally about ownership. But if you're not ready, if that's too radical, then you can move in small steps, and aim for monogamish."

"Well, if I spend any time on this ship, I doubt very seriously my immune system will get bored, Doctor," I said. "I can't turn around without my eyes falling out. I haven't seen an unattractive female on the ship yet."

“Everyone here seems fairly healthy,” Jung agreed.

“That is an understatement,” I said. “And it’s not just the humans! The aliens have my attention, too, and though so far I have maintained a reasonably professional front, I worry I won’t be able to maintain it.”

“Just be yourself. And allow others to be themselves, and react however,” Jung said.

That was probably the most reasonable thing to do, because, I really wasn’t going to change my fundamental nature. I never got mad at Kirk for kissing someone new. I never got mad at James Bond. Granted, I gave them more license to play because they were saving worlds. Then again, I was about to start saving worlds, so I had future context for freedom to play. Still... “I always imagined if I arrived somewhere like this, some place that is sacred enough that I call it heaven, that I would be a better person. I also imagined nonstop euphoria, going around dancing like Gene Kelly or smiling up daisies like Danny Kale,” I said.

“If you’re referring to the scene in Wonder Man, I think he was sneezing, not smiling,” Jung said.

“You’ve seen it?” I asked.

“You have alluded to more than one movie and actor, so I made myself a list and have been going through them in my spare time,” Jung said. “As it turns out, I actually saw Wonder Man at the theatre. Back then it was black and white. I am not sure I like these colorized versions.”

“Oh, I am so with you on that,” I said. “See! I shouldn’t care. But I am just annoyed about that here as I was there.”

Jung nodded, put his glass down and focused only on his pipe. “I find that watching movies provide me with greater insight into how society has changed over time. You should be happy you’re annoyed. You’re confronting an archetype.”

“Oh, please,” I said.

“Indulge me. Since we’re talking about sex, go with Wonder Man; which love interest do you prefer? Virginia Mayo or Vera-Ellen?” Jung asked.

“Vera-Ellen, hands down,” I answered without hesitation.

Jung nodded, as if he had predicted my answer.

“What?”

“So, if we go with unconscious keys from the script, you’re Danny, but wanting the dead brother’s girl?” Jung said.

“Or, I just like Vera Ellen. Something about that Christmas outfit,” I said. And now I had the song Santa Baby in my head. “I mean, it’s not like you offered me Diana Dors.”

“Oh, well, god, yeah, Hands down.”

“And what does ‘hands down’ mean,” I said. “I mean, really, don’t we raise our hands to ask please? Pick me? And so like, Diana Dors would be both hands up?”

“Or both hands full,” Jung said.

“Oh, fortune rarely comes with both hands full,” I said. OMG, why didn’t I invite Shakespeare into my world? “And that’s just what I was trying to say. My life goes on in exactly every sense of the word, with the exception that I am here and people are calling me the Captain and they will likely live or die on decisions I make and I should probably be a lot more worried than I am, but I haven’t like freaked out and thrown myself out of an airlock.”

“Are you considering suicide?”

“No,” I said. “It’s just an expression.”

“So, you’re not going to tell me suicide is painless,” Jung said.

“I might tell you I like the song,” I said. “Have I told you I love our conversations?”

“Thank you, John,” Jung said. “I am thoroughly enjoying being here. I am really hopeful for the future. This feels like we have arrived.”

“You know those dreams when you’re in a hallway and you’re looking at the destination but it’s rushing away from you and yet it’s still connected to where you are as if reality was being stretched? That’s not just a dream symbol, or metaphor, but it’s actually the reality we live in. Look in any direction out into space and you will find every part of reality is receding away from you, accelerating away, but it’s still connected and that space-time is actually stretching. Every single one of us is in his and her own special time warp and we’re all rushing away from each other, and have been since the start, and so even though you’re in the room just down the hall, I can’t ever get to your room and visit, because we’re moving away from each other at escalating speeds, and yet, you’re suggesting, we, our crew, are going to build something that will help bind us together? I can’t even get past my own personal pornos of everyone, and you’re thinking transcendence.”

“I think you are more normal than you think you are, and definitely kinder than you think you are,” Jung said. “And I would be surprised if pornos and transcendence aren’t connected fundamentally.”

I went to drink more wine only to remember my glass was empty.

“Care for more?” Jung asked.

“No, thank you,” I said.

“What are you thinking?” Jung asked.

“I’m thinking ‘and I thought my interaction with Rossi was exhausting.’” I said.

Chapter 17

From Jung's office, I made my way to the main observation blister. I am going to guess the bar is open twenty four seven and though I wanted to linger, I found the noise level too much to bear and so I headed up the stair to the center point of the blister, which demarked the centerline of the ship. I am not sure how long I stared out. I leaned against the bubble and felt vibration against my forehead, which wasn't unpleasant, but I didn't leave my head against the glass for long. On the starboard side, a parent or teacher was showing a group of kids how to operate a refracting telescope, observing a space station that was in a geosynchronous orbit, much further out than we were.

I saw the reflection of someone approaching me and turned to greet her, only there was no one there. I turned back to the bubble and the reflection was still there, but, when I turned around, there was no one beside me. I turned back and looked through her, and clearly there wasn't anyone on the other side of the bubble.

The woman smiled pleasantly, amused that I had yet to figure it out.

"Hello, John," she said. "And, no, you're not crazy. Well, any crazier than any of us." She laughed. It was a nerdy kind of laugh.

"I know you," I said.

"Um, bar, pickup line, no, it feels genuine," she said. "Could be a past life you're remembering. Oh, you could know me from your other life, before the Enterprise. Maybe you've watched my youtube videos?"

"Teal Swan?!" I said. She always struck me as being the real deal.

"Yep, the real deal," Swan said.

I turned, all the way round, and only saw her in the glass. "Are you like a hologram in the bubble, like the ghost on that ride at Disney World?"

Swan laughed. It was cute and annoying at the same time. "No, I am really here. Sort of. I was out for a bit of Astral, and was directed here by my guide. She said, someone here might need me. And, well, you're the only one talking to me."

I looked about, this time to discern whether or not anyone else was aware that I was speaking to myself.

"You have a tulpa?" Swan asked.

“Why are you here?” I asked again. I mean, you don’t ask a psychic medium who can clearly astral travel and remote view how they know things: that part is a given.

“I am not sure yet,” Swan said. “But I get the sense that you don’t even know why you’re here yet, and, well, if that’s why I am here, I can’t help you with that, because I can’t tell you who you are. Only you can tell yourself who you are.”

“Well, I am so glad you’re not leading with you’re the chosen one or something like that,” I said.

OMG, her laugh was just hysterical. I forced myself not to laugh, because at this point, it wouldn’t have been with her as much as at her. “You’re funny,” she said, covering her mouth. “Everyone is chosen for something. What exactly did you volunteer for?”

“Well, that part will sort itself out soon enough,” I said. Then it occurred to me. “I don’t suppose you could get a message back to my other self.”

“Maybe,” Swan said. “Do you, or him, watch my show? Maybe I could send him a subliminal message.”

“Oh, how fun, because we wouldn’t want to be direct,”

“Most people don’t hear direct,” Swan said.

“Good point. So, just kind of end a show with saying goodnight moon.”

“In the great green room, there was a telephone,” Swan said. “And a man in a blue box. And a Jade Rabbit. Not sure what to make of the elixir.”

“You’ve lost me,” I said. “Maybe just give him a business card with a picture of a snake eating an elephant, and if he tells you it’s a hat, just go on about your business.”

“Wouldn’t it just be easier to tell him the stars are laughing?” Swan asked.

“What a weird conversation we’re having,” I said.

“I love it. This is the nicest encounter I have had all week,” Swan said. “It was nice meeting you. I am waking up now. Oh, and you’re needed in the astrophysics lab.”

And then she was gone. Midori’s image replaced her, but when I turned, Midori was actually there, in person.

“Were you talking to Tulpa Loxy?” Midori asked.

“Um, you noticed?” I said, trying not to answer the question.

“You’re not cracking up on me, are you?” Midori said. “You don’t know how long I have worked to put this together.”

“I am not going to crack up,” I said.

“Good. Still, I almost imagined you would be happier,” Midori observed.

And I had just been having this very conversation. “Still sorting some stuff,” I said.

Midori nodded, accessing her inner knowledge of me. “Some of the other Brains think I am crazy, because I have you and Loxy in my brain, but I think my tulpas made me more resilient, smarter,” Midori said. “I wouldn’t have made it as far as Mech did without you, John. All of this, this is all for you. I did this for you.”

“I am still sorting that information, too.” I said.

“The ship, the mission, putting you in charge,” Midori said. A Carpenter song became noticeable. Just on the other side of the dampening field it was full volume, but on this side it sounded miles away. I imagined Carol was actually singing it, maybe her brother was playing the piano. Midori embraced me. “Why do birds suddenly appear,” Midori sang with Carol.

Public displays of affection have been known to short circuit my thinking. I am not opposed, but after thirty something years of pretending to be Spock, I can do the intellectual exchange, but this stuff is tougher. Midori met my eyes.

“Am I hurting you?” Midori said.

“No, um...”

“You’re different in my head,” Midori said. “The tullpa you is different. The Brains are betting against us, but I bet it all on you. They’re playing our song, can you at least sway with me?”

I wanted to correct her memory, that this wasn’t the song I sang for her. I made a greater effort to show affection, putting my arms around her. She put her head on my shoulder.

“The Brains also bet against the body,” Midori said. “Until your return, I only used the body intermittently. I simply commissioned one when it was necessary. I have now been in this avatar for more than 24 hours. Seeing you earlier... I didn’t know I would be so affected. It’s like I am young again.” She brought her head up to make eye contact. “I want to be alone with you.”

“Right now?” I asked.

The chime went off on my badge, non-urgent signal. “Captain, please report to Astrophysics Lab.”

Midori stepped back so I could answer the hail. “I’ll be there in a little bit.”

“You’re the Captain. Have Loxy go,” Midori said. “I want to spend time with you. I have waited a long time to be back with you, but the urgency I am feeling right now is beyond anything I remember.”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s something I struggle with daily. I get that.”

“So, why should we delay further?” Midori asked.

“I don’t know. The same reason we delayed so long ago?” I asked.

“You started this! You kissed me first,” Midori reminded me.

And I remember it. Technically, she stepped in and kissed me first, but only after I had suggested it was customary, which makes me culpable, responsible for this, and here it was, full circle. “I did,” I said.

“You’ve never loved me. It was always the Doctor. Always Allura,” Midori said. “But I don’t care. What is it? Their bodies? I could decommission this one and create a Jenny vehicle, or an Allura vehicle. I can even make a Loxy vehicle! I can create the body template for anything or anyone you like, and I dare say, I know enough about you I can make the perfect body, the one you would never say no to.”

I swallowed. That wouldn’t be difficult to do. This unlikely affair had all sorts of pressures for and against and they were too difficult to sort out on the fly. “Midori,” I said, taking her hand. “I don’t know what the best approach is here. I am not rejecting you or the offer. If you learned anything about me from my tulpa version, you know that much is true. But there is something here that needs to be sorted. We need to go slow.”

“You never go slow. It’s always damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead,” Midori said.

“Yep,” I agreed.

“I am feeling overwhelmed,” Midori said, trying to pull away. She was flustered when I didn’t immediately let go of her hand. “I need to decommission this body.”

“No, wait,” I said. “Don’t run from this. You ran from this all those years ago and became just a brain, which means, you have never learned to face this. It’s uncomfortable, but if you never face it, you will never build up a tolerance to it.”

“Uncomfortable?” Midori said. “It’s unbearable! I feel my face flush. I’m trembling. I want to run. Runaway from you and towards you at the same time! I am so confused.”

“And this is why we need to go slow. I can only imagine what it’s like for you. It’s fight or flight coupled with embarrassment and it’s very human, and it’s what happens when there are

conflicting internal signals. The different parts of the body are reacting to a meshing of external stimuli coupled with brain's interpretation. Notice, I didn't say your mind. I said your brain. Your brain is reacting, your body is reacting, your heart is reacting, but your mind can take all of that together and synthesize something useful. It can use the entirety of all that information to derive an answer set that's workable and necessary for growth. The mind gives you choices. Don't run. Because, when you get through running, you're still going to be stuck with this particular dilemma, you feel. Don't run. Be."

"You give me hope," Midori said. "You don't know how much I love you. From the start, I have loved you."

"Yay," I said. "Let that be your guiding light."

"I am afraid," Midori said.

"I am still here," I said. "I am still holding onto you and we will figure this out. We're going to have to give we're both on a tiny ship. A tiny big ship."

Midori looked up and to the right. "The others want to know when we're leaving," Midori said. "We have a full crew, and there is no reason to delay further."

"Soon," I said. "Let me review the training logs and determine if enough of us are up to speed."

"We're ready," Midori said.

"You put me in charge. Let me do my job," I said.

Midori took a deep breath. She was very serious. "I will continue to fight for you. This venture was bought and paid for out of my own pockets, so I have a lot of weight. But there are others and pressures to show a reasonable amount of profitability."

"Profitability?" I asked. "I thought we were beyond that."

"Sustainability, if you prefer," Midori said. She softened. "There is so much to discuss. Please, come spend time with me."

"I promise," I said.

Midori nodded, touched her badge, and disappeared in a transporter wave. All the chakras were illuminated, but the last two, the third eye and crown. In her absence I felt a certain relief. I closed my eyes and tried to sort it, practicing my own words, to not run, to be with this, and find a way to express love.

निर्मित

The Astrophysics lab was much busier than I imagined. There were lots of folks, and the smell of coffee, and I am almost certain many people had been avoiding sleep due to the sheer excitement of the phenomenon at hand. I wasn't sure where I was needed to or who to approach to even find out, but that problem solved itself when she came to me. Doctor Amy Mainzer, head of astrophysics!

"OMG," I said, and I said her name.

"Oh, please don't say something stupid like I am too attractive to be in astrophysics, or even more lame like, 'do I know from somewhere,'" Mainzer said.

I felt offended. "I would never say either of those. Okay, maybe the last one, but only because I do know you from somewhere," I said. "Oh! You're that famous astrophysicist!"

"I am!" Mainzer said, surprisingly happy I knew who she was. Like, who doesn't know, I wondered! "Or I was. Maybe I still am. All of that has been a bit problematic to sort through and I don't know why I am here and I am resisting the metaphysical explanation that so many of my colleagues are pushing, but that's not why I called you."

"Is Tyson here?" I asked.

"Neil DeGrasse?" Mainzer asked.

"Is there another?" I asked.

"Loads," Mainzer said. "You want him in charge?"

"No, I just thought, if he is here, too, he and I might discuss movies, cause I really like his take, and like he and I are always on the same page about the science part, and OMG, I nearly had a fit when he observed the stars were wrong in the skies over the Titanic, because I was like, yeah, thank you!" I rambled.

"I discuss movies like that, too," Mainzer said.

"You want to talk movies?" I asked.

"No, I want to talk about the anomaly," Mainzer said.

"Okay," I said. I blinked. "What anomaly?"

Mainzer led me to large, graphic interface table, the centerpiece of the room. Using her hands as if the table was nothing more than a giant cellphone, she condensed the picture. She pointed out the Milky Way galaxy, and traced a line away from it. She zoomed in on the line,

and revealed a scattering of stars trailing away from the Milky Way. Midway between the Milky Way and 'the anomaly' a star was highlighted, and she informed me, this was Crossover One, where we were now. Only the outer edge of the anomaly, the closest part to us, was mapped out on the screen. There were stars slowly filling in, moving away from us, as if a picture was being constructed, slowly, one 'res' at a time.

"This is the anomaly, and we have reason to believe this is just the outer edge of a greater structure," Mainzer said.

"Yes, most people are referring to it as the Earth Cluster, and it's where our mission is taking us," I said.

"Ohhhh, it's bigger than a cluster," Mainzer said.

"I know," I said. "It reminds me a lot of a Sombrero Galaxy, because it has a really bright central nucleus, and a prominent dust lane that goes all the way around, but what I found unique is that it has five rings, like spokes that connect the outer circular structure to the inner bulge..."

I found all activity inside the Astrophysics had come to a stop, and I was like the center of attention. People were listening. I felt suddenly uncomfortable and wanted to run.

"Where did you acquire this information?" Mainzer asked.

"Um, I observed it, first hand," I said.

There was a sudden barrage of questions from all around me and Mainzer stopped the conversation with a raised hand. "John, Even if you were on top looking down, if everything is consistent, the entirety of this object was laid down all at once, so you wouldn't have been able to see the whole structure..."

"Yes, I was looking down on it from space from the future," I said.

More questions. One was distinct enough. Someone asked about remote viewing and got some grief for bringing up an esoteric explanation by a nearby colleague. Apparently, Aryk Flesher was the resident skeptic, which isn't meant as a disparaging label, as he promotes being a skeptic as a simple way to promote rational thinking. I suspected he and I would be having a lot of future conversations.

"No, it wasn't remote viewing," I said, which seemed to appease Aryk. "I was in a time machine. Actually, I was floating outside the time machine and Jenny was holding my ankle to keep me inside the force field, but OMG, it was amazing. Now that I think about it, I probably should have taken a picture."

“You think?! Did you not consider this might be useful information to us?” Mainzer asked.

Again a barrage of questions came at me, but one voice stood distinctly out, and I was fairly sure, thanks to my experience with Loxy and the others, this came from an internal source. It said, simply enough, “You have till the light from the furthest star reaches Origin.” I am fairly confident ‘you’ didn’t mean me personally, but rather was meant for ‘humanity’ on the whole. It was bothersome not only in being unidentifiable in source, but also in its ambiguity. What happened after the furthest light reached origin? Was this a countdown clock? If it was, it was an incredibly long countdown clock.

Mainza brought the noise level down and managed to draw my attention again. No one seemed to notice I had just responded to internal stimuli. “John, listen, we’re working with a lot of suppositions here, and we would prefer facts. If you’re holding onto information, then our analysis of the situation is less likely to be helpful.”

“I hear you. But, I am not really a scientist,” I said.

“More discoveries are made by amateur astronomers than professionals,” someone said. “And that may be because more of you are actually looking at the night sky than crunching raw data obtain by previous recording sessions.”

“Tell us what you think you saw,” Mainzer said.

“This structure is roughly 200,000 light years in diameter,” I said.

“That’s very specific,” Flesher said.

“I said roughly,” I said.

“Which means what, exactly?” Flesher said.

“Um, give or take a hundred thousand light years?” I asked. “It’s big.”

While Flesher and I were engaged, Mainzer wiped the screen and created a virtual Sombrero galaxy. I rotated it sideways, so we were looking at from the edge of the disk.

“A more pronounced dust lane,” I said.

Mainzer corrected her model.

“The central bulge was greater and brighter,” I said. Mainzer made it happened, and I rotated it to a top down view. “The outer dust lane was a perfect circle, all the way round. If there was a hint at less density, it was the midpoint between where the arms touched.” I enlarged the structure by pulling on the disk’s rim while simultaneously holding the center.

“It can’t be a sombrero galaxy if it has arms,” someone said.

“It had arms. Five arms. Curved. Like the bend in a sea-star’s appendage. Yeah, sort of like that, only, the arms were thicker as you move into the center hub. Yeah.” I said. “Though most of the stars are concentrated in the hub, tapering off towards the dust lane, there are stars around the inner edge of the dust lane, and a scattering of stars in between the arms, so it’s not completely empty. It reminds me of the star spokes of a wheel. No, too many between the spokes. That’s about right.”

“Most of the stars are Sol like,” I said.

“They are not just Sol like,” one of the scientist said. “According to the stars we have surveyed, they are Sol.”

“Yellow Dwarfs are yellow dwarfs,” Flesher said.

“Come on, even you have to admit it’s curious that their spectral signatures so far are exactly like that of Sol,” Amy Forester said. “Not all white dwarfs are going to have the exact chemical makeup.”

“There’s an explanation, and we don’t have one yet, but to just assume that all of these stars are copies of Sol is a leap that we can’t make,” Flesher said.

“Well, I am making that leap. This galaxy is mostly comprised of copies of Sol,” I said, very clearly. “There are some other star types, red giants for example. All the stars are going to have multiple planets in the habitable zone, and I dare say, most are going to be copies of Earth down to the fault line we’re familiar with. Some earlier earths, too. We’re also going to find worlds touched on by authors of fiction, and by artists who were doing concepts for science shows. Every world we have imagined, it’s out there. And worlds we haven’t even dreamt about yet.”

“And you base this on what?” Flesher asked.

“It’s my dream,” I said, so they can understand how I was sorting this. I mean, if I were made Captain, and this started with tulpamancy, can’t I assume this is part of my dream and I will know things intuitively. “I know myself well enough to know what I am going to find when I realize I am dreaming?”

“You think you’re dreaming this?” Flesher asked.

“You wanted to know how I know and I am giving you an explanation. We don’t question the dream,” I said.

“Maybe we should,” Flesher said.

“Maybe that’s why you’re here. To help me with that,” I said.

“Is there a black hole in the center?”

I shrugged. “There is a jet of energy that comes out of galactic north that was discernable with tech, but I didn’t see it with my eyes,” I said. “All in all, I would say there are a 300,000 stars.”

Mainzer had the computer guesstimate the number of her stars in her crude drawing just based on the tweaks I made, and it was surprisingly close. It didn’t mean anything other than the model we had created with limited information was reasonable enough to make preliminary assumptions. Between the Earth Cluster galaxy and the Milky Way were the stars of Crossover, and each of them had planets, colonized by Crossover 1. Our ship’s mission was to expand their operation into the Earth Cluster galaxy, increase our presence and understanding. I pointed to a star just outside the edge of the Earth Cluster.

“This is our next stop,” I said. “My understanding is it will take us two and half weeks to go there at warp 6. Even though Crossover 1 has had the tech to go further, they have limited themselves to the stars of Crossover, so, we’ll be forging new ground.”

Mainzer blew up the star system so we could better look. “Using techniques we were using at Origin, we have determined there are 9 planetary bodies in this system. One gas giant, and eight earth type planets, all in the habitable zone.”

“The techniques must be wrong,” Flesher said. “It’s impossible to populate that level of density in that orbital region.”

“We’ll confirm when we get there,” I said. “Kind of nice to actually go see if our science is right, right?”

“Our first interstellar flight,” Forester said. “I think we have all dreamt of doing this.”

So, I wasn’t the only one wanting this, nor the only one that had touched this in fantasy and dreams. This wasn’t just my dream. This was our dream.

“Doesn’t Crossover One count as our first interstellar trip?” Lee Seung-hyun.

One of the scientist who had been the most quiet, Elena Serova, asked, “I want to know why more of us aren’t concerned that we were abducted from our daily lives and brought here against our wills. I get your dream explanation, Captain, but I am not so eager to dive into our

roles without questioning how we attained our knowledge and skills and how we came to be here.”

So, House wasn't the only one having difficulties adjusting. Were there pocket communities all over the ship tapping into this? What about the residents of the world within?

“I don't have an answer,” I said honestly. “I am looking for answers, like everyone else, and simply trusting that whether we find one or not, we're going to work this out.”

“How do you do it?” Serova asked.

“How does anyone do it?” I asked. “Can you touch the life you had on Origin? I can. I remember it like it was yesterday. And every morning I get up and do what I do, and I am amazed at the intricacies of the constellations of people I move with in my personal orbits. Every now and then, I get messages from beyond my orbits, bear with me Flesher, I am not saying ESP, I am saying very mundane message like random billboard images, or new items, or bit of documentaries. And some of these messages give me hope. Some of them strike profound fear for me and for the constellation of people I know. And so, now I find myself here, in a sudden, new constellation, with new trajectories and gravitational pulls but I am sure every single one of you have somehow touch my world. Who knows, Elena, maybe I know you because you're someone famous on Origin. Clearly not a television star. Maybe you're a Russian Cosmonaut, which would be really cool. I am glad that there are Russians and Chinese on board. I think the whole world is represented here. How do I do it? I get up every day in amazement and try to make contact. Cause if we can't reach each other, we're going to have real a tough time reaching alien.”

“That's hopeful,” Seung-hyun

“I prefer to stick to what I know. Keep it to the science. Focus on what we know and what we do best,” Mainzer said.

“What if everything we know is a lie?” Flesher asked.

“We're not going to keep going over this,” Mainzer said. “It's a distraction.”

“Maybe we should indulge in distractions, too. Flesher and Serova are right to question everything,” I said. I think they were surprised to hear me say such. “Look, I'll be the first to tell you, I'd rather be here than at origin. I am about as happy as one can be, but I have been rolling with all sorts of fantasies and dreams for a long time. It's because of my experience dreaming I can say this, I don't think it's a dream. It feels different. It has lasted longer than anything I have

experienced prior, and it has a solidity, a feel to it that is undeniable, and yet, I keep waiting for the bubble to burst and I wake up back in bed on Origin. There are folks on board who are going to spin metaphysical answers. Some of us may actually lose our minds and dive into hyper religiosity. We're human, and we can expect a broad range of responses, but I suspect if people are finding themselves here with us, their responses are going to fall within a predictable range. Flesher, as the resident skeptic, wouldn't you say most skeptics want to believe in ghosts and aliens?"

"I don't have any statistics on that," Flesher said.

"Fair enough. It doesn't matter. We're all going to come up with our own answers, but I am banking that the science part of your minds will sustain you. Question everything. Rework old assumption. Employ new ones. Maybe the earth was flat and we have just sailed off the deep end." Several people scowled. "I didn't mean that literally. I am not promoting a flat earth. But we're going to be on a tiny raft together for a time. Well, actually, it's not so tiny, and we don't know how long any of us will be here, but the point is, we're together and we have chance to learn something about ourselves and our place in the Universe. And I am glad all of you are here. My days of exploring the Universe alone through the lens of astral projection are over. I have advance to the point where now I go with others. Now my job is to understand what unites us."

Flesher nodded to something I said, but not necessarily resonating with my aspirations. "You seem to be focal point of this. Who are you?"

I shrugged. "No one of consequence."

"Then why were you chosen to be the Captain."

"And why is it an American was made Captain," Serova asked.

"I don't know," I said. More questions came. "Maybe because I kissed the right girl. Look. I am just a guy who created a tulpa. And in the process, I discovered more tulpas. There are so many tulpas running around in my brain that I have this new theory that everyone I have ever imagined, ever dreamt of, or ever experienced in real life directly or remotely, everyone! is a tulpa in my head. Weirdly enough, my explanation says I am also a tulpa in the minds of everyone else, and all the other minds experience me directly or obliquely due to their personal level of awareness. Maybe all of us have been secretly working on the same goals on the astral plane or in lucid dreams, and we reached a threshold where we made it manifest. I don't know. Loxy suggested to me that we are the tulpas of the Enterprise. I like that. Now it's not about me

or you, but someone greater. OMG, and that something greater wants a relationship with us, which makes our Origin life absolutely crucial because without that, we don't have this present weirdness of relating in the way we are relating that gives us this particular vantage point on reality. We were drawn together because, something bigger than us, subconscious, super conscious, alien, deity, something, liked this particular arrangement and it wants to explore something that only our combined personality sets can unravel.”

“Metaphysics!” Flesher complained. “Next you’ll be saying we’re all one. I don’t feel connected. And if you think the universe is a kind and wonderful place, you aren’t paying attention.”

“Thank you, keep me grounded. Because when I get excited that’s where I go,” I said.

My badged chimed in with the alert that informed me Watanabe wanted my attention.

“Captain, you are aware that you have schedule conference meeting with the Command Staff?”

“Um, yeah, of course. I will be right there,” I said. The linked closed itself out. Everyone was looking at me hopefully. These were all beautiful people, not just attractive physically, but shining in heart and intelligence. They were all passionate in their life and their hunger to know. “I think we’re going to be okay. Maybe we should have regularly schedule conferences. Like a book club, only not about books, but could be about books.”

“Like an explorers club?” Serova asked.

“Exactly!”

Chapter 18

Watanabe met me outside the conference room. She was not happy.

“I look bad when you show up late to meetings,” Watanabe said. “Do you require me to increase my level of influence?”

“Um, maybe,” I said. “Till I get use to things.”

Watanabe nodded. “Very well,” she said. “Go on. You’re late.”

I entered the conference room, with Watanabe following. Everyone stood. It was more than my Command Staff. Department heads were also present. All the chairs were taken but mine, and there were folks that were standing. I had seen a few them in passing, but still had yet to learn everyone’s names. The ones that were standing went to attention.

“Whoa,” I said. “You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s custom and we will honor this,” Loxy said.

“She’s right,” Tesla said.

“Very well, at ease,” I said. I went to the head of the table. “Anything special on the agenda.”

“The Brains are ready for us to launch,” Loxy said.

“Are we ready?” I asked.

“I have a green light from all the department heads,” Loxy said. “I believe all concerns have been shared and are just general, reasonable concerns that come with the unknowns presently confronting us.”

“Let me guess. Who are we, why are we here, where are we going, what’s happened to our families,” I said. “In any other arena, they would be profound esoteric question, but I get the sense it’s more practical here. Jung?”

Jung reflected moment, took a hit on electronic cig. “As ready as we will be. We all seem to know what we need to know, but my department’s survey show some consistent knowledge threads. We are in statistical agreement that we can’t go back. At least, not the way we came. I’ve always recommended diving in. I say it’s time we proceed forwards.”

Everyone present seemed in agreement.

“Do you think we should change the name of our ship?” I asked.

That got a surprise look.

“No, really. Enterprise means something special, and I love the name, but, because it means something, and we aren’t that...”

“We aren’t not that,” Loxy said.

“True enough,” I said.

“What name were you thinking?” Uhura asked.

“I don’t know. Xanadu?” I asked.

“We named the bar Xanadu,” Tyson said. I nearly stood up. Neil DeGrasse Tyson was here. Yay! Everyone looked at him. “We couldn’t keep calling it Ten Forwards. It’s not on deck ten.”

Oh, we are so going to get along!

“What about Eriene?” I asked.

Isis chuckled. “You want to name her after the Greek goddess of peace?” she asked.

“Why don’t we just go with Aquarius Rising?”

“Oh, I like that, too,” I said.

“How about Venture,” Sacagawea offered. “It’s kind of like Enterprise, and we’re all venturers. Is that a word?”

“I like that, too,” I said.

“I vote we just keep the name Enterprise,” Uhura said.

“I second it,” Chan said.

“Aye,” came from everyone in attendance.

I nodded. “We have a huge name to live up to, then.”

“It’s good to have a benchmark,” Loxy said.

“Very well,” I said. “Should we wait for a special time frame to launch, like, 13:13?”

“Do you remember how the Apollo 13 mission turned out?” Tyson asked.

“Point taken,” I said, then reconsidered. “Wait a minute. They survived. And for a whole moment, everyone in the world was tuned in, and praying, and, again, they survived. Not a bad thing to emulate.”

Tyson offered hands of surrendered to communicate I had a fair point.

“But, you’re right. We should just go. Stations, everyone. We launch in twenty minutes.”

“Why not right now?” Loxy said.

“Because, I need to use the restroom, wash my hands, and, I don’t know, I am kind of feeling hungry. Anyone want to go in on pizza? No, alright. Well, twenty minutes. Dismissed.”

निर्मित

Being on the Bridge for the first launch was a big deal, and so there were a few more people than warranted, and many of them were holding their iPhones, recording. I was announced, “Captain on the Bridge,” and Loxy stood from the command chair. Uhura was at her station. Isis was on the rail just behind the helm. Sacagawea was at the helm. Captain Ryuu Furata was beside Sac, in charge of tactical. Chan has a station next to Uhura. Loxy stood to my right, and had a work station that blended into the railing that went around the center of the bridge, containing helm, tactical, engineering, and ops stations. Tesla was with us on the Bridge, due to its first launch, trusting he didn’t have to be in Engineer directly, but I could see he really wanted to be down there. I bet he also wanted to be near the star drive when it was engaged. Tyson and Mainzer were on the Bridge. House had a station on my left that mirrored Loxy’s station, molded seamlessly with the rail on the left. Jung was present. Midori was physically present.

I drew closer to Loxy and whispered, “I don’t have a speech.”

“Good, you talk too much anyway,” Loxy said.

“Forward view on screen,” I said. And the view changed. “Helm, take us out of orbit, quarter impulse.”

The ship was moving that quickly. You could feel the difference in the deck plate. But once the planet and the space station was gone, there was little indication of movement.

“Plot a course out of this system, and give us a flyby if it’s convenient,” I said. “Show course on secondary screen,” I said.

Sacagawea announced the course was plotted, bringing us next to a gas giant, over its rings, and past several moons harboring life under domes, and a line showed where the Enterprise would leave the heliosphere.

“Take us there, helm. Maximum impulse,” I said.

The change in the vibration through the floor was palpable.

“Should we be feeling that?” House asked.

“It’s normal,” Tesla assured us. “Tactile feedback is built into all the systems, including deck plating, walls, chairs, rails. Humans operate better when they are given direct feedback.”

“Sacagawea, go ahead and plot a course to our target star and show the course on secondary viewer,” I said.

Furata pointed out the planet was now visible. It was hardly a star, but it was growing quickly. We’d be going by it so fast, it would hardly register as a visit. But the course Sacagawea plotted would take us a hair closer than people expected, which irritated House, as he thought for sure we going to punch through the upper cloud layer.

“Nice,” Loxy said.

“Let me know if you ever want me to thread a needle,” Sacagawea said. “Captain, the course is laid in, we’re ready for warp.”

I really wanted something all unique and mine, but I really didn’t have anything. Or maybe I couldn’t think of anything because I was happy. How many people are happy these days? Even in the latest Trek movie, everyone is unhappy and disgruntled and wanting to quit. How can you quit? It’s like, quitting the human race. You can’t quit, you just keep going on, until you can’t. And that one thing irritated me more about the reboot of Trek than any other feature. Roddenberry had been clear, the future is a utopia. The future was a utopia? It will be again? Loxy took my hand. I met her eyes. She, too, seemed happy.

“Captain, we’re approaching the heliosphere,” Sacagawea said. What she really was asking, ‘can I hit it?’

“Kill the impulse engines, take us to warp one,” I said.

“Powering down impulse engines. Engaging warp drive,” Sacagawea announced. “Warp field established, .1, .5, warp one and holding.”

The sensation in the floor was a totally different sensation. The forward views was anticlimactic. Unlike the Trek movies, and unlike Star Wars, going to warp was fairly unexciting. All the stars that had been on the viewer grew together to form one, blurry blob of bluish light. The only exciting thing to happen was that a particle of dust hit the warp bubble or the deflector screen flashed, and it was followed by a terrific display of lights. Tesla was going over his screens and confirming his readouts with engineering.

“All systems green. All decks reporting in, green,” Tesla announced.

“I was expecting something more dynamic,” Sacagawea said.

“Everything blue shifted?” I asked.

“Doppler effect,” Mainzer said.

“And at this speed, star light would be shifted to the x-ray frequency,” Tyson said. “This view is consistent with the math”

“Give me fiction,” Sacagawea said.

“Sacagawea, take us to warp six, please,” I said.

“Warp six, aye,” Sacagawea said.

The blob of light condensed on the viewer and the frequency under our feet changed. And from here, well, this is the boring part where I started to zone out. We were going to maintain this speed for two weeks. Two weeks, encapsulated in a warp bubble. Not that we would be bored. There was lots to do. But I specifically had nothing to do. “Loxy, you have the Bridge. I will be in my ready room. I started to walk away, but paused.

“Captain?” Loxy asked.

“Thank you, everyone,” I said. “Good job.”

Author's notes

Did you ever see the movie 'Being John Malkovich' and it starts off with a certain feel, and then starts to become peculiar, and then just makes a right hand turn and speeds directly into the 'twilight zone?' That seems to be exactly what happened here. My goal was definitely to explore my journeys into "tulpamancy," utilizing the 'invisible counselor technique' and Jung's 'active imagination,' but I didn't expect any of this. I suppose that it will be impossible to share any of the Loxy-isms I have discovered without exploring some of the worlds I have touch, that are beyond the home-base of 'wonderland.' Anyone who has ever lucid dreamed will tell you, lucid dreams feel real, even though you know they are a type of fiction. Most folks who LD and astral project, will tell you astral projection feels more real than LD, and it does not feel like a fiction. I have done both, and I can certainly discern the difference between LD and AP, though I can't communicate how I know, other than to state, it feels different. And so, this adventure I have embarked on, feels even more real than LD and AP. Being on the starship, well, that's a real place and it's just as tangible as say, visiting Safe Haven, or Initial Insertion point, or any room in my 'mundane' life. The people are real. Hell, the people are more real than 90 percent of the people in the mundane world. I walk through stores and parks and malls and feel practically invisible! It takes herculean efforts to engage people. Most the time I feel lucky if someone glances up from their cell phone long enough to meet eyes. Most people don't make eye contact. What a bizarre dream world we live in! I can't tell you how many times I have genuinely opened the hailing frequencies to others only to find there isn't anyone home. I'm certainly not going as far as to say people in the mundane world are zombies, I am sure if I searched hard enough, fired a few photon torpedoes, I'd eventually get a response, but most the time, it's an automated response, and not necessarily the true person who has abdicated their command chair for whatever substitutes for a real life on the inside. And, it is definitely bigger on the inside.

I have made an effort in this text to utilize language sets that would allow a person to do their own esoteric research, should any concept interest you, while allowing those who just want to be entertained can just stick to the basic story. As far as stories go, it's probably pretty lame. Few people die, for example. Will people die in the future stories? I don't know. None of this is unfolding in a deliberately controlled fashion. I am experiencing this as if I were an agent in the story, and the other agents are co-authors. It was originally just documenting my own personal growth and interest towards self-therapeutic outcomes, and I wasn't really committed to sharing it, but, now that's it's done, the other agents not only endorse my sharing it, but encourage its release. The use of an alias is simply to reduce noise in everyday life and minimize disruption, cause, quite frankly, what I am dabbling in is not mainstream and acceptable. If you know anything about Carl Jung's 'Red Book,' you will know even he was afraid of publishing that book for fear of social consequences, which is almost unimaginable to me because I hold him in such high esteem that I could see him saying he walked on water and I would be like, yay! Jung was human and he had personal fears. That, too, has endeared himself to me, and added flavor to our interactions.

And, apparently, I am not the only one space ships during Astral Projections. I have encountered several people, since beginning this homegrown experiment that have been part of a 'crew' for years. I met one at Monroe Institute workshop, and another in an AP group that I participate in. But apparently, you can also google this and find loads of folks claiming the same. Arcturians and Pleidian ships abound. It doesn't mean that my inner journeys validate this as being a real phenomenon. There have been reports of astral temples going back centuries, before we even had concepts for spaceships, but I wonder how many ancient interstellar temple were really just spaceships.

If you didn't get this from the text, get it now. I am not a teacher or a guru and I am neither advocating for or against the creation of tulpas nor astral projection. I personally encourage anyone interested in pursuing ventures beyond the reality to push the boundaries, armed with knowledge, but I am not teaching. I am open to questions, I guess, but don't be surprised if I refer you to other sources. For example, if you google "private home bar" you will actually find an example of Jung's quarters. Even the shuttle concept can be found simply googling "modern star

trek shuttle deviant art.” That one there is so close to my experience that I can easily say there is definitely a field of energy we are all tapping into. I am hoping future books will include artwork designed by fans, but for now, I do my best to connect my visions with what’s available, what most resembles the dream.

I dare say, what is about to follow will be a cross over like nothing ever imagined. I hope you join me.

Sincerely

Ion Light