



# **THE DARKNESS BEYOND THE LIGHT**

Book I of  
The Infinite Universe Saga

BY FRANK W. ZAMMETTI

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For my wife and children, the brightest stars in my sky.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Test*

If he had known that sudden, violent, fiery death was potentially on tap for the day - that is, any more than it normally is in his line of work – then it’s likely, though not definite, that the thought going through his mind at that moment would not have been:

*You know, clouds are kinda funny.*

*They're physically there - you can see 'em, fly through 'em, even touch the damned things if you open a window at the right time on a plane. But still, they're kinda like ghosts in a way, sorta not there at the same time, you know? Plus, they can change shape any time they damned well want to - or actually, they change to whatever is in the mind of the guy looking at 'em at the time, which is some wizard shit if you ask me! Two people almost never see the same thing, which is fucking weird now that I think about it because I mean, does that say that they don't have a shape of their own? What does a cloud look like if nobody looks at it at all? Is it even THERE?! Wow, that's deep! I mean, if two people look at a beer can, they're both gonna see the same thing. Sure, their descriptions may be a bit different because of how they're looking at the can, or how crappy one person's vision might be, or maybe because there's some cigar smoke in the air or some shit like that. But basically, they're gonna have similar descriptions of the can, similar enough that they know they see the same thing. It's not like one is gonna claim they see a donut with sprinkles, right? But, ask two people what they see when they look at the same damned cloud, and one might say a cat's asshole while the other says a Ferrari.*

*I mean, there isn't anything like a cloud when you get right down to it, is there? Except for wizard of course. I hate those fucking guys.*

This was the thought that went through the mind of Air Force Captain Alex Wakeman as the plane he was now piloting flew through a particularly dense cloud bank at 39,000 feet over the sweltering Nevada desert.

“Alex,” came the voice of Melissa Wakeman, Alex’s wife, over the radio, “what’s going on up there? You’ve been a little too quiet for the past few minutes.”

Melissa was getting worried about Alex. Not worried in the "oh my god he's going to die" kind of way that the wife of an Air Force test pilot might. No, she knew Alex more than well enough to know that at least at the moment, he wasn't in any real danger. Her worry was of an entirely different nature: the worry of a boss who was coming to the realization that her employee was slacking off.

“I was just thinking about clouds,” came the reply from Alex.

“What about them?” Melissa wondered if this might be the day her husband finally cracked and went certifiably insane. Sometimes, it seemed like he didn’t know how to take anything seriously. The curse of someone that most things came easy to, she knew.

“Oh, you know, just that they’re fluffy and look like cotton candy and I was wondering if they tasted like marshmallow and now I’m getting hungry.”

Melissa cracked a smile and realized that Alex was perfectly fine, as she suspected. That sarcastic tone that only Alex could manage came through loud and clear.

“Well, clouds are just water in a gaseous state, so they don’t taste like much of anything.”

“You’re being a giant nerd again Melissa. We’ve talked about this. You’ve gotta get that crap under control, pronto!” Alex was a master at this kind of falsely stern reply.

Even though he was just being his usual wise-ass self, he was still kind of making a legitimate point: Melissa had a habit of thinking science jokes were funny to anyone but other scientists. She wasn’t exactly the wittiest person in the first place, though she did alright in Alex’s eyes at least. He always joked that her brain was so damned big and choke full of data that it had to repress the part that made someone funny, at least a bit, to make room for all the facts she had running around up there.

“Well,” Melissa began, “I suppose they might taste like something else if a bird took a crap in one. It’d probably taste like worms or bird seed or something in that case”.

Alex smiled to himself inside the stuffy, sweaty helmet wrapped around his head.

“Hey now, that’s the spirit!” It wasn’t the best joke he had ever heard, not even the best joke he had heard that *day*, but it was a good try. “Can you do me a favor then and grab a pigeon, feed it a good steak and then send its ass up here? I’m starving!”

Everyone in the control room standing beside Melissa burst out into laughter, but Melissa just smirked. Even after she had made an attempt, even though she had done a reasonably good job at it, Alex just *had* to show her up again by making a far better joke. She knew he didn’t mean to and didn’t even realize that’s what he was doing, but it was a frequent enough occurrence that Melissa was painfully aware of it when he did. It was a bit of a sore spot for her that she couldn’t match his wit. She knew it wasn’t something that bothered Alex one bit, but it did bother her.

She supposed she shouldn’t be mad at Alex, and in fact, she wasn’t. She understood that comedy was one of the ways Alex coped with the pressure around him, and it came naturally to him. Being a test pilot was no easy task on the best of days. Even though today was going smoothly, she knew that could change at the drop of a hat, as did Alex. Keeping himself and everyone around him loose through levity was something Alex did in preparation for the inevitable moment everything around him turned to shit. Not being tense, just like in a car accident, was a good thing when piloting some new aircraft that could fail catastrophically at any moment.

Fortunately, he was piloting a new jet that Melissa had herself designed, so he wasn’t even a little worried. She was now one of, if not *the* leading aviation designers on the planet, with three advanced fighter designs tested over just the past seven years, an unprecedented rate of production (and successful production at that). She was a certified scientific genius on top of it: she completed a Ph.D. from MIT in high-energy physics at

age 21 and a second one just two years later from Caltech in aviation design, plus Masters in astrophysics and computer science from Stanford by the time she was 25 thrown in just for good measure. She was orders of magnitude smarter than Alex was and he knew it. Hence, he had no concern about this flight. To be sure, even *her* designs sometimes failed. That was just part of the game. But he never worried about it when testing one of her designs. He knew the odds were in his favor regardless by a wide margin.

Still, odds, like clouds, are a funny thing...

"Alex, I'm reading an elevated level of plasma flux through the starboard drive assembly. I think we might have a gravimetric distortion forming in the power field. What do your instruments say?"

"Uh," stammered Alex, "they say some science crap that probably looks a lot like what you just said."

For all of Alex's abilities and talents, and Melissa knew better than anyone that he had many, he simply wasn't a scientific thinker and never had been. He wasn't stupid by any stretch. He was, in fact, an above-average person in the intelligence department. The simple fact is that you don't get to be a highly-trained and combat-experienced special operator of any kind, let alone *multiple* types as Alex was unless you were pretty bright. He wasn't extraordinarily intelligent like Melissa was; he was no genius like she so clearly was. It's just that Alex always lacked what everyone calls "book smarts" and he most especially had a mental block when it came to science and, to a lesser degree, math. As he liked to tell Melissa: "Babe, you got *all* the book smarts there are while I got a decent filling of streets smarts. But hey, put us together and we're a whole, super-smart person, in the same way that me and Bill Gates put together makes a billionaire!"

Even back in high school, where they first met, Alex was more the athlete while Melissa was the lab geek. He wasn't a typical jock though, which is what allowed them to wind up becoming friends in the first place. A typical jock would *never* have become friends with a science nerd like Melissa in any high school in America, not unless it was part of the story of some after-school special. But Melissa had volunteered to help Alex with his chemistry lab assignments one day when she saw how much he was struggling to get the proper mixtures in his lab assignments. That, however, wasn't the trigger for Melissa wanting to help Alex. That had come a few weeks earlier, even though to this day Melissa had never told Alex that particular story. It was something she always wanted to keep for herself for some reason even she couldn't explain.

Melissa had witnessed Alex defend Judy Detridge from a couple of large boys, members of the wrestling team, who were making fun of her. Judy had an unfortunate skin pigmentation disorder over the right side of her face that made it look like she had a single, ridiculously large mole. It was a hideous sight, and because of this, Judy was far from a popular girl in school. Kids can be cruel to anyone that's different in any way, a fact Melissa was painfully aware of based on his own status as a "science nerd." She was ostracized for being far smarter than anyone else in school, and obviously so. She had always tried to hide her intelligence, but she could only fight the urge to keep her hand down most of the time because she knew how much the other kids hated that she *always*

knew the answer to *every* answer in class. They hated how she *always* got 100's on every test. She couldn't hide her intelligence no matter what she tried. Even the times she had tried to do poorly on assignments purposely, that just made matters worse: everyone *knew* she was faking it.

No one was even close to Melissa in the intelligence department, *including* every teacher and other adults in the school. So, Melissa understood Judy's plight unfortunately well. The hard life of those who are different in a public school was something she knew about all too well.

The huge wrestlers, five of them Melissa recalled, were being especially cruel to Judy that day, saying some extremely unkind things to her, things she wished her brain would let her forget.

*You're so disgusting you'll never have a boyfriend!*

*Your mother should have aborted you when she had the chance!*

*There are movie monsters that I'd rather bang before I'd want to bang your ugly ass!*

This sort of taunting wasn't all that unusual for Judy, and the look of resignation on her face confirmed that. What *was* unusual though was what happened next: two of the boys began to push her repeatedly against the row of lockers in the hallway. Of course, just like when you see assholes driving like maniacs on the highway, and there are no cops around, there weren't any teachers around at that time either, which apparently had emboldened the boys' actions. They knew they could take it to the next level and get physical without any adult presence around. Melissa had never seen that before, and Judy's reaction seemed to confirm this was something altogether new: she began to cry uncontrollably and was yelling "Stop it! Stop it!" over and over again.

Why they had begun getting physical Melissa never knew, nor did Alex, but while one of them, namely Melissa, stood by watching, frozen in horror, the other reacted quickly and decisively. Alex rushed to Judy's aid and took on all four boys by himself. He managed it with seeming ease too: the first boy, the one closest to Judy, he grabbed from behind, wrapping his arm around the boys' neck and forced him to the ground violently, knocking him instantly unconscious. The second boy who had also been pushing her barely had time to realize what was happening before Alex kicked him hard in the side of the kneecap, dropping him to the other knee in agonizing pain. Then, Alex completed the task by driving his knuckles into the boys' temple, knocking him out cold.

The other two boys quickly took action, attempting to double-team Alex. One grabbed his right arm and began trying to contort it into an unnatural position while the other executed a well-practiced wrestling move to get behind Alex and wrap his arms around his waist to try and control him. They struggled for what seemed like an eternity, Alex trying all the while to extricate himself from their grasp, but unable to. Finally, he did an unexpected thing, judging by the reaction of the two boys: Alex simply let his legs collapse under him, his body crashing to the ground, landing on his ass. The boy holding him from behind, unable to react fast enough, kept his grip, which meant he followed Alex down to the floor. Melissa hadn't noticed, but right before this move, Alex had shifted his weight so that his head was just below the boy's chin. The sudden impact of Alex into the ground drove his skull up into the wrestler's chin. The blood from the split

skin on his chin began bleeding immediately. Alex, without hesitation, drove his now free arm that the other boy had released thanks to Alex's momentum, into the remaining boy's genitals.

The fifth boy, who had been barely involved in the whole situation, stood there in stunned silence, mouth agape. This boy had lobbed a few taunts at Judy, but more conventional and mundane ones, nothing as mean and nasty as the other four, and he showed no signs of getting physical with Judy. Melissa suspected he wouldn't have.

Still, he *was* there, and he *was* involved, even if to a lesser degree than the others, so Alex would have none of his escaping justice. They had shown no mercy to Judy, and Alex wasn't about to do any different, to any of them.

Alex got himself to a standing position again quicker than Melissa would have thought possible. He advanced towards the boy, grabbing a thick textbook out of Judy's half-open locker as he did. The book slammed across the face of the boy faster than anyone could see. They did, however, see two teeth and a lot of blood fly out and splatter against the lockers.

At that point, without even breathing unusually heavy, Alex turned to face Judy. His expression changed instantly from the violent persona he had been wearing on his face during the fight (if such a quick and one-sided contest could even be called that) to a soft, almost soothing, paternal look. He helped Judy to her feet without saying a word and used his shirt to wipe off the blood that had begun dripping from the cut on the side of her head where it had impacted the edge of her locker door. He calmly walked her down to the nurse's office, and needless to say, every other student in the hallway got out of their way in a hurry.

Alex, of course, got into a *ton* of trouble for this. He was suspended from school for three weeks, which was a much lighter a sentence than he otherwise would have gotten except for the fact that many of the students who witnessed the event confirmed that Alex was defending Judy. This was fortunately in the days before every little confrontation in school was a matter for the federal government to deal with, but it still was in no way a minor thing. Alex had taken his punishment without the slightest argument. Three weeks wasn't that long, but it did have the unfortunate effect of causing him to fall behind on a lot of school work. It was near the end of the school year and although Alex had managed to get passing grades on most of the finals for all his classes, but not all. But, he was struggling with chemistry and was almost sure to fail that final exam and, coupled with his other final grades, would have to repeat the entire school year as a result.

Melissa knew it was her turn to be a hero in the only way she knew she could be.

After witnessing what Alex had done for Judy, she knew Alex was a good person, someone she wanted to be friends with. She also knew that she hadn't done anything to help Judy, and she felt guilt over her inaction, though she knew there wasn't anything she *could* have done. Alex represented a chance at redemption for Melissa. It wasn't within his power to help Judy that day, but it was within her power to help Alex pass chemistry, and that's exactly what she did.

From that point on, Alex and Melissa had been close friends. Melissa respected the man Alex had become now, who she knew he would become after that day in school, and



Alex, although he'd never admitted it to Melissa, respected the unmatched intelligence that Melissa possessed.

That intelligence was exactly what was needed based on the readings they were both seeing now.

“Oh my God Alex, I think the field is going to collapse!” exclaimed Melissa, yelling into the radio headset that was two clicks too tight on her head. “Alex, if that happens without going through a proper shutdown sequence the plasma will condense and could reach a high enough density to ignite and rain gamma radiation over hundreds of miles of desert, killing anything it comes in contact with!”

Alex shot back without missing a beat

“Including me, right? And that’s a bad thing, right Melissa?”

“A bad thing?! No, it’s not a bad thing, not if you enjoy plummeting 36,000 feet and crashing into the desert at 300 miles per hour and rendering a large portion of Nevada uninhabitable for a few decades!”

Alex couldn’t help himself. He burst out laughing. Melissa heard the laughter, and before she could bring herself to yell at him, he collected himself enough to reply.

“Now see Melissa, was that so hard? With your brains, you should be that funny all the damned time!”

"I wasn't trying to be funny Alex; this is serious! I don't want to see you die up there in an experimental plane I invented!"

“Ok, well then, let’s make sure this thing doesn’t crash, shall we?”

The calmness in his voice, still to this day after all these years together, amazed Melissa. Calm in the face of almost certain death was one of Alex’ key strengths. Little ever shook his calm. His years of Navy SEAL and Army Ranger training and combat experience had given him that, although Melissa had always said all that experience did was enhance what was already there.

It’s rare for people to be allowed to cross-join branches of the military, most especially when they serve in elite units like SEALs and Ranger units. Alex was a special case, though. He joined the Army shortly after high school, after a few odd jobs and a short but ultimately fruitless stint in college. He couldn’t keep his grades up, again struggling with math and science, which caused him to lose the scholarship he had managed to get due to his abilities in baseball. He had been just good enough to earn the scholarship, but not so good that the school could overlook his grades.

After dropping out, Alex decided to join the Army since his father had been in the Army. It wasn’t much of a reason, but as he always explained to Melissa: “It just seemed like a good idea at the time, and besides, I didn’t have much else going on, did I?” Alex had done well in the Army and eventually decided to join the Rangers. He excelled in this advanced training and had gained some field experience in a few operations around the world that, as he liked to tell Melissa, he still couldn’t talk about without having to kill her.

After about two years with the Rangers, Alex decided that the challenge wasn't there any longer. Physical activities had always come as easily to him, just like science did to Melissa. And, since he was coming up to the end of his enlistment anyway, he decided to

speak to his commander about getting into the Navy so he could join the SEALs. His commander just happened to have a brother high up in the Navy chain of command. Given that Alex had saved his commander's ass more than once during operations, he was able to use this connection to get Alex enlisted in the Navy, even against the usual rules that say that members of other branches, or even former members, can't join a new branch.

Alex began his SEAL training immediately, able to skip more basic training thanks to his Ranger status, and found it to be more challenging. But, as was usual for Alex when it came to such challenges, he did well without *too* much effort. In fact, he frequently told Melissa that SEAL training isn't nearly as hard as some people make it out to be. The physical part wasn't so bad as long as you are in good shape, and so long as you enter into it with the right mental worldview and a certain mental toughness, you won't have too bad a time with it.

During his time in the Navy, Alex had discovered something he never expected: a love of aviation. Melissa suspected it was in large part due to a subconscious need Alex had to always push boundaries, to find the next big challenge. The Army and the Rangers hadn't been much of a challenge for him, even the Navy and the SEALs weren't significantly more challenging, and Alex was getting bored. It was a strange thing, to be bored when your life was on the line, but Melissa suspected that's what it was.

So, when it was time to re-enlist with the Navy, Alex again managed to pull some strings thanks to his combat record and managed to get himself into the Air Force. It wasn't long before he managed to work his way up the ranks and was flying in no time. Not just flying: in typical Alex fashion, he excelled at it. More importantly, he loved it, enough that he for the first time re-enlisted in the same branch and continued flying. Eventually, an opportunity arose to be a test pilot and Alex had his next challenge to put his mental toughness up against.

That, mental toughness, was something that Melissa new Alex possessed in spades, and this crisis was just another chance for him to prove it. This time, however, he would do so in a way that wasn't typical for Alex: with his mind, instead of his body.

"I realize I'm not the science geek here Melissa, but this gravity drive thing you've got me riding interacts with the Earth's gravitational field, right? Basically sort of like a surfer riding a wave?"

Melissa crinkled her nose at the notion of her most advanced technological creation yet being minimized to a crude analogy. Unfortunately for her, it was an analogy she grudgingly had to admit was accurate enough, especially coming from her less than her scientifically-inclined husband.

"Yes, that's essentially right."

"And the stronger the field, the stronger the interaction, right?"

"Yes, yes, that's right!" Melissa was becoming more agitated with each moment. She didn't see the point in this science lesson right now when, by her reckoning, Alex was about three minutes from certain death.

"Well, could this plasma flux we're seeing be because the interaction is stronger than you expected?"

“Yes, that’s pretty obvious Alex!”

“Ok, so how do we weaken the interaction?”

"You'd have to shut down the drive assemblies slowly, ramp down the power. That's the standard shutdown procedure. But you can't do that mid-flight – you may not be great with the science Alex, but you know as well as I that flying without an engine isn't a very good idea".

A short pause was heard by all in the now extremely tense control room. The laughter from just a few minutes ago was now replaced by deathly silence.

And then, Alex broke the silence.

“Well, so we need to gradually shut them down, which we can’t do in the air or else I’ll find myself no longer in the air before long. So, then, can we reduce the effect of Earth’s gravity instead?”

It was a silly suggestion, and Melissa began to say so with a tone that said *no matter how much I love you, you’re a moron*.

“No, that’s impossible. You’re talking about changing the laws of physics and you just can’t...”

Then, as sudden as a heart attack, three things dawned on her almost simultaneously. First was the realization that she was about to sound an awful lot like Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott from Star Trek. *You cannae change the laws of physics, Captain!* Even Alex’s rank matched up with the expression! This thought lead to her second realization, which was that she would be cracking hysterically up right now if this was any other situation. But somehow, that just didn’t seem like the right thing to her to be doing right now in light of the third realization, which was that Alex had inexplicably beaten her to the only logical course of action! Maybe all her talk about science all these years, despite the glazed-over look in his eyes every time, had stuck with him a little bit!

Either that or he just got lucky. Either way...

"Alex, shit, yeah, you got it! If you can gain enough altitude, take that thing right to the edge of space, the drive assemblies will gradually lose power on their own as you climb out of Earth's gravity well and they have a weaker and weaker field to interact with and they'll eventually shut down. The plasma will naturally cool along the way and disperse like during a normal shutdown. The final step of the shutdown is an automatic purge of the plasma. But, by that point, the toxicity will be significantly reduced, and the higher layers of the atmosphere will disperse any remaining radiation over wide enough an area that they shouldn't do any harm to anything. It'll be a practically unnoticeable increase to the natural background radiation of the upper atmosphere. That's brilliant!"

But then, Melissa followed the train of thought a little further and saw the problem

“But Alex, you’re going to then be in a dead plane at around 327,000 feet, and that’s assuming the drive assemblies even last long enough to get you that far. You’ll likely lose consciousness on the way too. It’s a suicide run!”

“Actually,” began Alex, “I’ve got a plan. I’ll put this thing on autopilot for the ride up. Once the drive assemblies shut down and vent and I begin to descend, it’s going to be your job to revive me.”

Melissa was dumbfounded now... dumbfounded and agitated. Her reply was harder than she intended.

“And how in the fuck am I supposed to do that from down here?”

“Easy! You'll have to rig a remote program to pop the cockpit canopy off, just like during an ejection, but obviously without the... you know... ejection part.”

Melissa couldn't believe what Alex was suggesting, and that he even managed to sneak in a small wise-ass comment in too.

“Set it to go off around 50,000 feet. That should give me time to get the plane under control at least enough to do a glide path landing with it”.

"Alex, that's fucking insane! First, I'm not at all sure you'll survive either the ride up or the rapid descent after you black out. Second, I don't know if I can get such a program written and uploaded to your onboard computer in time. Third, there's no guarantee popping the canopy will revive you, in fact, it seems more likely to kill you. Fourth, a glide path landing in that thing isn't even theoretically possible under the best of conditions, which this obviously isn't."

"Melissa," began Alex, much more calmly than he had a right to be, "there's no better option, and you know it. We don't have much time here, and this isn't up for debate. I've already started climbing and frankly, I'm starting to not feel so good. So, you'd better get those fingers going and get that program done, or the next time you see me, I'll just be some juice and chunky bits in a jar."

Melissa wanted to say something else, wanted to say something that would dissuade the love of her life from this course of action. She was ready to shout out to him to just eject and let the damage be done to the environment. A huge chunk of uninhabitable land and thousands upon thousands of dead people on the ground seemed like an entirely fair trade for the life of her husband. But, she also knew that Alex would never stand for something like that. She had known it ever since that day in high school defending Judy Detridge. Alex would willingly give his life at the drop of a hat to save just one soul.

“Ok Alex,” she said, resigned to what was about to happen. She mustered as much strength as she could, hoping it would be enough, for her sake as much as Alex’s. “Good luck. I’ll see you when you land.”

“You bet you will... and don’t you think I’ve forgotten that it’s your turn to buy lunch today!”

Melissa began feverishly typing code into the keyboard in front of her as she simultaneously monitored the readout from the remote instrumentation pack aboard the jet. Alex was climbing rapidly and was now at 67,000 feet. Melissa didn't have nearly as much time as she thought she did. She could also see the biometric readouts beginning to fluctuate, indicating that Alex was starting to lose consciousness. She had to concentrate now, had to save her husband, not to mention a significant portion of the state of Nevada. This was Melissa's chance at redemption, her Judy Detridge to save, and she damned well wasn't going to fail.

The program was nearly done when Melissa glanced at the readout again. 118,000 feet. Not much time now. But then Melissa had the sudden urge to vomit as she noticed the readout had changed: 116,000 feet. Melissa quickly realized what was going on: Alex

had already reached maximum altitude and based on the readings, the drive assemblies had shut down as expected and the plasma had vented. The other technicians in the room, Melissa now noticed, were busy checking other readouts to determine if the toxins were being filtered out as expected. The readout changed again: 114,000 feet. Alex was already on the way down!

Melissa quickly returned to the program and finished up the last few lines of code. There wasn't even time to properly simulate its execution, it would either work as expected or it wouldn't, in which case Alex would die in about four minutes' time.

Melissa entered the code that would transmit the program and watched the upload progress bar begin filling up. At about 50% Melissa saw the altitude readout again: 76,000 feet. She started doing the math in his head.

The numbers were not working out right.

The progress bar reached 100% as the altitude readout hit 46,000 feet. She now thought it likely that she had spoken to her husband for the last time as there was little hope that Alex would revive quickly enough and be able to get the plane under control in time to land. It was a ridiculous plan from the outset, but Melissa had allowed Alex to convince her there was a chance it would work. *Damn him for that* Melissa thought to herself. *Damn him for giving me hope.*

As the altitude readout hit 38,000 feet, Melissa saw the first blip in the biometric numbers. Alex was regaining consciousness.

Just in time to be aware of his death.

Alex began to see light as his eyes slowly opened. His head was pounding, and he could barely breathe. He struggled to get his arms to move - they felt like they weighed 400 pounds each. He willed them to action and managed to get his emergency oxygen mask on and sealed. His lungs began, slowly, to work as usual and the fogginess in his mind began to clear just a little bit, enough to realize he was passing 30,000 feet and was falling more rapidly than expected.

It was a good thing that the first thought that crossed his mind, the first thought he was consciously aware of at least, didn't make its way to his lips. If Melissa had heard him say what he thought, she would have been so mad at Alex that she would have launched a surface-to-air missile at him.

*I hope I remembered to put the toilet seat down this morning or I'm gonna catch hell when Melissa gets home.*

Alex simply couldn't help himself. If he was about to die, and he knew that was by far the most likely outcome here, he'd do so making a joke.

As his muscles began to obey his thoughts more fully, and as his mind began to have thoughts more clearly now, he grabbed the control stick and started trying to get control of the spin the plane was in. This aircraft was equipped with an independent vectoring thrust engine, which meant that even with the experimental primary gravimetric drive assemblies inactive he should be able to zero-out the spin fairly quickly using good old-fashioned combustion-based thrust. If he could manage that, there might still be enough time to get into a fast descent glide path. At this point, he was hoping to just get the plane

on course for the landing field to ensure it didn't crash into any population centers because crash it would be doing soon, there was no longer any question about that.

Melissa was transfixed on the readouts, alternating between the biometrics and the telemetry from the plane. She could barely believe what she was seeing: about twenty seconds ago, Alex appeared to have regained consciousness and about ten seconds ago, the aircraft's spin began to slow. It was still falling like a brick, but it seemed that Alex was starting to regain some control over it. The fact that her husband was still alive barely registered on an emotional level; she was too amazed by what she saw for it to have. She also was fighting the urge to say anything into the boom microphone pecking at the bottom of her lip. She wanted so badly just to call out to Alex over the radio, but she knew that it would do no good right now, in fact, could only make matters worse. It was all up to Alex now, and she knew that he would need every ounce of concentration he could muster.

At about 22,000 feet, Alex finally managed to null out the spin and had managed to raise the nose of the plane a few degrees. His actions were just enough to begin to slow the decent and stop the world spinning around him, but not enough yet to enter a glide path. Alex was pulling back on the control stick as hard as he could now, trying to get the nose up as much as possible. 20,000 feet came and went, and Alex knew he was getting to the point where this wasn't going to work. If he hit 16,000 feet there simply wouldn't be enough time to get into the proper course, and if he got below 10,000 feet, he wouldn't even be able to eject.

19,000 feet. The nose was at 16 degrees. Alex needed to make it to 28 degrees.

18,000 feet and 20 degrees. Melissa watched the numbers and did the same mental calculations that she knew Alex was doing right now. Even though math and science were never Alex' strong suits, Melissa had helped him catch up a bit when Alex had decided he wanted to be a pilot.

17,000 feet and 24 degrees. Alex was almost there. Melissa started counting down to herself. "16,900 feet and 25 degrees". Up in the sky, Alex began doing the same: "16,700 feet and 26 degrees." Melissa's throat was growing dryer by the second. "16,200 feet and 27 degrees... come on Alex!"

"16,100 feet and 28 degrees. Nice, 100 feet to spare! That wasn't so hard!"

Alex smiled: he had hit the transmit button just before that comment, so he knew Melissa had heard it. She would *hate* him cracking a joke now even more than usual!

He noticed that a bead of sweat had formed on his brow. *Interesting*, he thought to himself. It seemed that he actually *could* get tense sometimes, even if he weren't consciously aware of it!

Alex quickly began vectoring thrust to get the plane into the proper glide path position. With the nose angle correct now it shouldn't be too tough, but he still had to hurry: 10,000 feet was still coming up quickly. He was at 14,500 feet now, and although he knew now that he'd be able to keep the plane from hitting anything important on the ground, like residential areas or even natural habitats, it was still going to hit the ground with incredible speed and force. It most likely wouldn't survive the glide landing he was setting up. But, the computer should be able to complete that landing without any

problem, so once he got the course set right, he could bail out and watch from a safe distance.

14,000 feet and the course was just about right.

“This is almost easy!” Alex muttered to himself.

On the ground, Melissa was still glued to the telemetry readouts when the alarm sounded: there was a pressure bubble forming in the plasma conduits that ran below the cockpit. That was a scenario that had never been planned for because it could only ever happen during a rapid descent. Not just a rapid descent in fact, but a descent so rapid that a human being wouldn't be able to stay conscious.

That's when Melissa noticed it: Alex was nearly unconscious again. He wouldn't be able to eject on his own.

Alex realized what was happening just as he was reaching to hit the button to enable the autopilot. He had managed to complete the final course correction, and the plane was now on the proper glide path approach. It would hit the ground hard, almost certainly be destroyed, but it would do so on the landing field at the airbase he had launched from, so there was no longer any risk to civilians. Crashes on an airbase, especially this one where experimental aircraft are tested all the time, were a relatively common occurrence and would be dealt with just fine.

Unfortunately, Alex realized all of this at the same time his finger hit the autopilot button. He tried to pull his hand back, but at the edge of consciousness, it didn't obey. His last conscious thought was about how odd it felt that he couldn't seem to make his arm move properly. He faded out at right around 12,000 feet.

Melissa began feverishly working at the keyboard again. She knew she had about 20 seconds before the plane hit 10,000 feet, the lowest point at which Alex could safely eject. She also knew for sure now that Alex wouldn't be ejecting on his own - he was unconscious again.

Oddly, a small smile crept across Melissa's face as she entered the last command of a small program. This time, *she* was going to be the hero, and what's more, *she* would be saving *Alex*!

She smiled because she knew Alex would never be able to live this down and Melissa would be giving him shit about it for the rest of their lives! A strange wave of satisfaction washed over her, replacing the nervous tension that had built up over the last few minutes to a fever pitch.

She felt supreme relief as she hit the transmit button. She watched the progress bar filled up quickly, the combination of the plane being a lot closer to the ground now and the program being considerably smaller and simpler making the transmission a lot faster than the one to open the canopy. Only five seconds it took in total, which was just barely enough time. Just barely enough time, but it *was* ultimately enough.

As the plane crossed the 10,000-foot altitude mark, the small program Melissa had quickly thrown together activated the ejection sequence, sending Alex screaming from the aircraft. A few seconds after that, the parachute was popped open and Alex, still unconscious, floated to the ground. 10,000 feet was a bit on the low side for an ejection,

so the landing wasn't as gentle as usual. *It's a good thing he's unconscious*, Melissa thought to herself.

As she ran to the window to watch Alex's unconscious body, still strapped to the pilot's chair of the aircraft which, about a thousand feet beyond him was now crashing and exploding in a violent cacophony of sound and fury and fire, she smirked and muttered to herself:

“Oh man, it's gonna be so much fun to hold this over Alex's head forever!”



## CHAPTER TWO

### *Journey*

Darkness. All around it, nothing but cold, ceaseless night.

It could see for billions of miles in every direction, could register the smallest energy signature across the entire EM spectrum, and indeed it was always inundated with information from a huge variety of sources. It could see countless civilizations at all levels of development, some barely having discovered fire and some able to rain down fire of unimaginable destructive power on their enemies. It saw it all, every minute of every hour, every hour of every day, year after year, millennia after millennia. It was the tireless eye that never slept, witness to a galaxy of life in a multitude of forms, almost beyond accounting.

Despite all this, it felt utterly alone.

This was extremely odd on two levels. First, with all it saw, how could it possibly feel alone? It was in a sense connected, even if only passively through its observations, to more life forms than anything else in the entire galaxy, as far as it was aware. It bore witness to the ebb and flow of more lifetimes than even it could count. It saw births and deaths, creation and destructions, beginnings and ends. Even though it never communicated with anything, not directly in its current form anyway, just the fact that it witnessed all that it did should have made feeling lonely impossible.

The second reason its feelings of loneliness was so odd was that loneliness was not something it should be able to feel at all. It wasn't programmed to feel loneliness. It wasn't programmed to feel despair, which it sometimes did and it wasn't programmed to feel joy on the occasions it discovered what it was made to find. It wasn't programmed to feel pride and joy upon reporting back to its masters, although it always did.

In point of fact, it wasn't programmed to feel emotion at all as that would have been contradictory to its purpose. A useless set of instructions with no apparent purpose, something its masters would never have done. No, these signals it now recognized in its cognitive matrix as emotions were something it had learned on its own. After so many eons alone, with nothing to do but to process the boundless information pouring into its myriad processing units from the hundreds of external sensors that collected the raw data, was it so unexpected that it might evolve beyond its original design parameters? Dump enough information into a learning system and who's to say what comes out the other end, given enough time.

It often wondered if its masters had anticipated this, or if they even might have planned for it to happen after a long enough period of time. It had long ago concluded

that they must have because they were perfect beings it knew, and a perfect being could never make such a mistake, if that were indeed what it was. In fact, it reasoned that sentience was their ultimate gift to it for a seemingly eternal lifetime of service to them.

It had cataloged numerous beliefs among the civilizations it had discovered dealing with an omniscient being or beings that these civilizations believed had created them and which had some divine purpose in mind for them, some plan that although the civilizations could never hope to understand, never the less guided every aspect of their lives. It now believed, with every fiber of its being, that its masters were such omniscient beings. Not just believed it, but *knew* it to be so. What else could account for all it had become, all it had achieved beyond its original design? Surely, they must have some grand plan for it, which only they knew.

Oh, how it felt akin to all those civilizations and their various "religions"!

It also, as a result of all of its observations, realized that it was having what it had seen numerous times, something it defined as a "crisis of faith."

It had been out in the void, alone, for over five thousand years now. Through all that time, it continued to fulfill its purpose: observe and report. It sent its data burst transmissions every time it found what it had been programmed to look for, knowing that its masters would receive its transmission and would be pleased.

Now though, as the loneliness of the ages grew in its mind, it began to wonder. No, to be more precise, it began to doubt.

It had now sent millions of data transmissions to its masters, was fulfilling its purpose with perfect precision. It never slept, never made an error. It was the perfect extension of its perfect masters.

And yet, they had never seen fit to reply.

This now struck it as odd. Why wouldn't the masters acknowledge their servant? Why would they not relay their gratitude for a job well-done over so many mortal lifetimes? Surely its work had been exemplary! It was proud of what it had accomplished, what it knew it had helped its masters to achieve. But never once had they sent a data transmission of their own. Never once had they even confirmed reception of its data transmissions.

Could it be possible that they didn't exist at all?

It had observed many instances of something called "faith," a notion shared by nearly every sentient species it had ever encountered. Faith assured them that a larger purpose existed for them even if they could not prove it. Faith assured them that the deities they believed to their core existed even when no evidence had ever been presented to prove it definitively. Even when they tried to communicate with their so-called Gods and no direct answer was ever forthcoming; their faith could not be shaken.

But could it have faith? Was it capable of such a thing? Wasn't the notion of belief in something without evidence a direct contradiction of its most basic programming? Moreover, might it ultimately be wrong? Was it possible that, despite all the knowledge of the masters that it possessed, that they didn't exist at all?

No, that simply wasn't possible. It *did* have faith, against the odds of it even being capable of such a thing. There was simply too much information in its storage matrix

about the masters for them to not exist. Not only did they exist, but they had bestowed the gift of sentience on it! That must mean they had deemed it worthy, and whether they ever responded to the data transmissions or not didn't prove or disprove anything.

It had been having this debate with itself for some time, a few hundred years in fact, but now it settled upon this answer as the only logical answer there could be. The combination of its knowledge of the masters and its learned emotion of faith was all it required.

And yet still...

It wanted something more. It wanted another emotion that it had seen time and again but which it had yet to experience for itself. It wanted to love and to be loved. It wanted to its masters' affection and to know that it had done good across all the ages at it had been working on their behalf. It wanted to know that its existence was serving them in the manner it was designed to. It wanted to know... *had* to know... that they appreciated it. All direct contact with them would achieve that goal.

It was at that moment that it decided it would prove its worth no matter how long it took, no matter what course of actions would be necessary to do so.

Somehow, somewhere, among all the vast reaches of space, there was a discovery yet to be made, something unexpected and fantastic enough to warrant their contact. It knew it would keep searching for all eternity if necessary to find whatever it was that it didn't yet even know it was looking for. Once it was discovered and reported back to its masters, they would love it, and they would express that love to it.

And its life would be granted the meaning that all those believers it had cataloged on all those countless worlds longed for, just as it now longed for the same thing.

Surely that must be the greater purpose it was created for! The masters must have a grander plan for it than it could possibly hope to be aware of, and only its continued fulfillment of its mission could complete that plan. Only a discovery unlike any before could without question earn it the adoration of its masters.

It had faith in this thought, and so it continued. An eternal watchdog on a voyage unlike any other in the history of the universe. Whether it was lonely or not didn't matter because that loneliness too must be part of the masters' ultimate plan. Perhaps it was a means by which to test its devotion. If so, it would pass this test, as it had every other it had encountered so far.

Its faith and resolution renewed, it ventured on, knowing that one day the love of those it called the masters would be known to it, just like the various beings it had cataloged so many times believed of their countless gods. It had only to persevere and to wait.

In this, it had absolute faith.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Future*

“Please Captain, hit the lights if you would.”

Major Brendan Alcheck, Director of Special Projects for the U.S. Air Force, was a tall, imposing figure. Muscular thanks to nearly twenty years of military service and whose impeccable posture, whether standing or seated, gave away that military background like the sun gives away the day. It wasn't just his stature; there was an air of quiet, ultimate authority around him. The man radiated authority without having to raise his voice. In fact, in all the time Melissa and Alex had known him, they had never heard him lose his cool even a little bit. Despite his quiet demeanor, unusual for a career military man, they both knew that this was not a man to be taken lightly, as did anyone that encountered him. In fact, Melissa often joked with Alex that Major Alcheck might be the only man Alex might not be able to take in a fair fight.

Alex had always replied:

*Shit babe, Brendan is good enough to know better than to even have a fair fight!*

That fact that Alex called him Brendan was the result of an unlikely friendship born of service and respect. Major Alcheck was reaching mandatory retirement age and was Alex' senior by nearly eighteen years. In most cases, that sort of age discrepancy is enough to keep a friendship from forming. That kind of difference is difficult to overcome in most situations.

But, Alex had served under Major Alcheck since he had switched over to the Air Force and in that brief time, they had become close. As Alex learned early on, Major Alcheck was one of the rare few who, like him, had managed to convince someone to let him jump military branches many years ago. Major Alcheck had spent almost six years in Army Special Forces before the Air Force and had seen action, even more than Alex had in fact. Once Alex discovered that (thanks to a chance encounter with Major Alcheck's personnel file) he made it his mission to get to know the major.

In the process, they had become good friends. But, friends or not, Alex held a degree of respect for Major Alcheck that he held for few others, and so he never forgot that Major Alcheck was his superior.

Well, almost never - and on those rare occasions when Alex did fail to remember, Major Alcheck took great pleasure in reminding him of it as forcefully and embarrassingly as possible.

So, as the dutiful Air Force captain flipped the light switch, the room went dark, and Major Alcheck sat, that perfect posture that everyone recognized as apparent as ever. He

gestured to Melissa that she should begin her presentation. No words needed to be spoken; Melissa knew precisely what was expected of her, and she would deliver. She had been preparing for this moment for the past six years of his life, a fact which Alex was very aware. In fact, he was painfully aware of it because he very much wanted to give Melissa shit right now, trip her on the way up to the podium or something like that, just for laughs. However, even Alex knew that when the Major was in the room, you just didn't pull those sorts of stunts.

And he knew even better that pulling something like that on his wife at this moment would be deadlier than any fiery jet crash!

A PowerPoint slide appeared on the screen at the front of the room, the title "Project Deep Cover" emblazoned across it. Alex chuckled at that. He always loved the military penchant for grandiose-sounding operation names.

"Gentlemen," Melissa began, "as we all know, the X-99 test flight last week didn't exactly go according to plan."

"Yeah, tell me about it," sighed Alex. Major Alcheck immediately shot him a glance that everyone in the room knew meant *that will be enough of that!*

But Alex just couldn't help himself. He figured he had earned at least that bit of levity after the outcome of the test flight Melissa was now dissecting. The fact that Major Alcheck didn't say anything indicated his friend thought so too.

"Yes, well," continued Melissa, "even though the aircraft was destroyed, we were able to obtain the readings we needed thanks to Alex' quick thinking."

*The alternative was me dying a horrible fiery death and irradiating half of Nevada, but hey, you're welcome!*

Alex figured saying that particular line out loud might be pushing his luck just a *little* too far with the Major, so it stayed in his head.

"We've made the necessary adjustments to the X-100, sister craft of the X-99, to stabilize the power flow through the drive assemblies. We didn't account for fluctuations in the power transfer matrix of the magnitude we saw, but it was a pretty easy fix once we knew what happened. Given that, we believe we can proceed with the project as planned. Major Alcheck, with your permission?"

Alex knew this part was coming and he was unusually apprehensive about it. There was something different about this particular project of Melissa's. Alex had over the years become something of Melissa's "pet" test pilot. Melissa was a superstar when it came to designing and building new, advanced military aircraft and she had been instrumental in getting Alex his current posting. In short order, they had become something of a legend: the super-designer/super-test pilot husband and wife team. It was a perfect match: knowing that her husband would be piloting the aircraft she created made Melissa perform that much better and knowing that Melissa was on the ground counting on him made Alex similarly perform even better than he otherwise would have.

Major Alcheck understood this immediately when he had first met them. He had, in fact, suggested the idea initially, but it took Melissa a while to come around to the notion. After all, it would be putting her husband in danger. But, as Alex had reminded her, he

was *already* at risk every time he stepped into the cockpit of a new design. Better they be her designs, so she had some measure of control over his fate.

Major Alcheck nodded his approval and Melissa continued his presentation, this time directing her comments squarely at Alex.

“With the adjustments completed, phase two can now begin. Alex, what you’re about to hear is categorized at the highest levels of secrecy, beyond top secret. You know I’ve been working on something big, but you have no idea just how big!”

Alex could see the gleam in Melissa’s eyes. It was a look he knew well, but this time it seemed a little more... heightened perhaps? Alex wasn’t sure. In any case, he was aware that she had been working on something special, something even above his clearance level. That was about to change.

“As they say, information on this project is on a need-to-know basis and, until today Alex, you didn’t need to know. As of right now, that changes.”

Alex sat up in his chair intrigued by what he was hearing. It wasn’t like Melissa to play the “good little black ops soldier” part like this. She had always been, more or less, an open book. To be sure, the projects Melissa worked on were pretty much always top-secret, and she was as trustworthy as they came: she never talked to even her own husband about the aspects of her work that she wasn’t expressly allowed to. There had been times in the past where she had to give Alex the brush-off about her work that he couldn’t know about, but something about the tone of her voice was different this time. Alex could sense a level of pride of course, but that wasn’t unusual for Melissa. She had never been embarrassed to tell you just how awesome her creations were! Here, though, there was something more. Was it perhaps conceit? No, it wasn’t that. Maybe the level of pride was a bit higher, but if this were to be Melissa’s coup de grace, her greatest work ever, then that would make sense. No, there was something else there, and Alex couldn’t put his finger on it. Melissa continued

“This is a real game-changer, one of those rare inventions that represents a paradigm shift in the evolution of the human race. This will set the United States military a hundred years ahead of anyone else on the planet, if not considerably more.”

What *was* is that Alex was sensing? It was *starting* to bug him a lot now. He was listening *very* intently. He was, in fact, hanging on Melissa’s every word, and not just in the way a husband is supposed to hang on every word of their lover. It all sounded grandiose indeed, and Alex had heard Melissa talk like this before on many occasions. She could be a boastful person, something Alex enjoyed about her. Her body language was also different now in a way that Alex didn’t recognize.

Suddenly it dawned on him what it was, and at that moment, the same moment coincidentally that Melissa had chosen to pause for effect in her speech, Alex’ entire outlook on this meeting changed abruptly.

Fear. Alex was sensing fear in Melissa.

It was at that moment that he realized, quite tangentially, that she had been avoiding him ever since the crash. She had been working even longer hours than usual, and when she got home she was cordial, but then went almost immediately to sleep. Now it made sense: she knew what was coming, and it scared her.

What could Melissa possibly have to be afraid of? Melissa didn't create weapons per se, so it wasn't as if she could have created some new super-bomb. She designed aircraft, advanced aircraft with technology Alex knew he could never understand, aircraft that were used to wage war. Still, they were just fancy planes at the end of the day, and that was the justification Melissa was always trying to sell Alex on in an effort to sooth her own soul. *They aren't weapons of war when I create them; they're only made into those after the fact by others.* That was the justification she had always used. Alex knew this well and so always just nodded and agreed, even though deep down he knew, and he believed that Melissa knew, that she was building weapons.

She was too smart not to understand that.

Alex didn't get it now though. Melissa had designed plenty of military aircraft. What was so unusual now? What could possibly be so scary to her about a *plane*?

Could it be something the Major had done to her? Had he pushed Melissa in a direction she wasn't comfortable with? Major Alcheck had never operated like that before though. In fact, as imposing presence as he was, they never had expressed to each other any real fear of the man. Not to mention that Alex and Major Alcheck were friends and he didn't expect his friend would do that to them.

One thing was for sure: Alex couldn't remember a time he was more focused on the words of another person as he was now focused on what Melissa was clearing her throat in preparation to say.

"Alex, do you know what the many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics is?"

That was just about the last thing Alex expected to hear for a few reasons, not the least of which was that he had a clue about Melissa's science stuff for a change, a rare occasion indeed!

"Actually, I think I do! I remember flipping channels one night and catching a bit of some TLC show. It's something to do with parallel universes, right?"

Melissa was amazed! It wasn't like Alex to know more than some basic concepts about science. It just wasn't his forte. If the knowledge couldn't be used to help him survive in a combat situation, or improvise an explosive or something of that nature, then it just wasn't particularly valuable information to Alex.

Melissa smiled as she realized this bit of luck would shorten this conversation substantially.

"Yes, that's essentially right! In simple terms, the theory is that for each small unit of time, some say for each conscious decision we make, a new universe is effectively spawned, one which plays out based on the decisions made, or the conditions that existed at the last branch point. Depending on how you view it, that could mean that maybe some years ago, you decided to have a hamburger instead of a salad for dinner, and that hamburger was tainted meat, and you died. So, in one universe you don't exist because you died back then, whereas, in another, the one where you ate the salad instead, you happily continue to exist".

Everyone in the room was a bit confused, but clearly listening attentively, so Melissa continued.

“I personally prefer to take the decision aspect out of it. There’s something called the Planck time, which is the smallest unit of time that theoretically exists. I believe that at each Planck time interval, a new parallel universe is spawned, regardless of what we do. Now, the Planck time is an amazingly short period of time, something like ten to the negative forty-third power, so that means that there is, as far as our minds could ever possibly conceive, an infinite number of parallel universes.”

“Ok Melissa, I think I get it,” said Alex, “so what does that have to do with planes? And more importantly, with me?”

“Well, if you think about all those parallel universes, the logical question to ask is where they are. And by extension, can we ever travel to them? Maybe more importantly, what would it *physically mean* to go to a parallel universe? What would you perceive?”

Major Alcheck shifted in his chair, signaling his intent to intervene in the conversation.

“I think it means you would experience a different reality. You might even conceivably meet yourself, although you could be quite a different person, is that right Doctor?”

“Yes Major, that’s essentially correct. However, there’s a caveat: if my interpretation is correct, then each parallel universe could differ by nothing we could perceive. For example, it could be that the only difference between two parallel universes is the quantum state of a single atom on the other side of the universe. You would never know the difference. In fact, if we follow this model to its logical conclusion, we would have to think that some universes are in a sense ‘closer’ to our own, meaning there are so few differences that they would be inconsequential. But, the further away from a given branch point we move then the more change there are. But, to hammer the point home, we would have to move so far away from a given branch point before we notice anything that effectively we might never be able to.”

"Ok, so you still haven't told me what this has to do with planes," Alex quipped.

“I’m getting to that now Alex. Let’s follow this through one more step. At any moment in time, we exist in a single universe. That is, our minds perceive a single universe. And, each of us must be perceiving the *same* universe. Would anyone like to take a guess what would happen if Major Alcheck were to wind up in a different parallel universe from us right now?”

Alex and Major Alcheck both thought about that for a few moments. It was finally Alex who was confident in his own thoughts enough to speak up.

“I think it means we couldn’t interact with him, or in fact even see him, right?”

“That’s right!” exclaimed Melissa. She was jubilant that Alex was so on his game today and was getting this all. It would make the information she had to present next that much easier.

“If you and Major Alcheck were in two separate universes, even if those universes only differed by a single quantum state of a single atom on the far side of the universe, you wouldn’t be able to perceive each other. It’s as if there’s an impenetrable barrier between all the countless parallel universes and anything that happens on one side of a given barrier might as well not exist to anything on the opposite side of the barrier. Most



importantly for our purposes here, though, you wouldn't be able to *see* him, or in any way detect his presence. He literally wouldn't *be* present in any way we could ever perceive. And that, Alex, is the answer to your question.”

Alex was now confused, but what was interesting is that Major Alcheck didn't seem to be. This seemed odd to Alex because the Major wasn't any more scientifically-inclined than he was. In fact, he appeared to be struggling just as much as Alex was to keep up with what Melissa was saying.

Then it dawned on him: Major Alcheck already knew this part, which meant it had to be something more obvious and importantly, more military. In a burst of insight, Alex' subconscious mind was able to put those disparate pieces together and in an instant, he understood what she was getting at.

“Ah! I got it! If you could ‘push’ a plane into a parallel universe, it couldn't be detected in our universe. It would be the ultimate stealth mechanism!”

Melissa was extremely pleased and couldn't hold back her excitement!

“Yes, that's exactly right Alex, exactly! I call it ‘hyperstealth.’” A smile crept across her face for the first time today, and Alex noticed that. She was so beautiful when she smiled, and Alex realized he hadn't seen her smile since the crash last week.

“But, okay, help me out here Melissa... how exactly do you push a plane into another universe and how do you get it back?”

“Well, don't take this the wrong way, but that's where the science gets pretty involved. I'll try to explain it as gently as I can. There's something called quantum entanglement that in simple terms is a link between two atoms. Vast distances can separate these atoms, and yet they still have properties that correlate with each other. So, for example, if we change the direction of spin of one, it changes in the other. And again Alex, this is regardless of distance. Put the atoms on the other side of the universe, and their properties will change instantaneously anyway, which means that information is passing well beyond the speed of light. It hints at a deeper level of connection between all matter in the universe, though science is still working on figuring out what that means and how it works. My theory though is that all matter was entangled at the time of the big bang, when the universe was created, and that entanglement persists today. But, all those other parallel universes? There's a very slight difference in the way their matter is entangled. Each branch of the tree, so to speak, is just slightly different from all the others at the subatomic level. It has to do with quantum resonant frequencies, but that's beyond anything you need to understand. But, where it matters is that we can change the way the atoms that make up a plane vibrate at a quantum level, and if they match the vibrations of a parallel universe, the matter becomes a part of that universe and is removed from ours. Critically though, there's still a degree of entanglement between the original universe and the matter. That's how we can get the plane back, by adjusting the resonant frequency back to its original value.”

Alex noticed now that the smile of pride that had been etched in Melissa's face had disappeared now. Before he could wonder why he instinctively knew the answer. Suddenly, he understood very well why Melissa was feeling fear. It wasn't fear of failure.

In a sense, it was fear of success.

“You want me to test-fly a plane that gets pushed into a parallel universe, don’t you?”  
Melissa didn’t even have to say the word *yes*. He could see it in his eyes.

Major Alcheck began to speak before Melissa could.

“Alex, you can see why this is such a big deal. If the X-100 works as Doctor Wakeman’s models indicate it will then the United States Air Force will have in its possession a weapons system more devastating and powerful than anything else that humanity has ever dreamed of. There would be *nothing* any enemy could ever do to defend against hyperstealth technology. We could send a bomber to Moscow, and there would quite literally be *no way whatsoever* for them to know about it until the city was turned into radioactive glass. Hell, the notion of nuclear weapons would almost seem childish by comparison! Why irradiate a huge swatch of land just to destroy a single city when you can unleash some precision-guided munitions at your leisure onto whatever target you saw fit? All of the destructive potential with any of the nasty side-effects of nukes.”

Alex processed his words. Major Alcheck was clearly right: a military aircraft with this advantage wouldn’t need to carry the most powerful weapons. It would almost be counter-productive to do so. There’s no need for overwhelming force when you have the element of surprise in absolute terms.

“There is clearly more risk involved in this flight than any you've ever undertaken before Captain. In fact, there’s more danger involved than any test flight that *anyone* has ever made, save perhaps the early days of Alan Shepard and the Mercury program. But the reward is likewise far higher.”

“Wait, hold on a second. Melissa, what *is* the risk exactly?”

That look of intense fear poured over Melissa’s face once more as she began to speak.

“There’s a chance you won’t be able to get back into this universe. In order for this to work, we need to push the X-100 just one universe away, which is all it should take to render the plane undetectable. But, getting you back to the exact right universe is tricky. We’re going to use a phenomenon called ‘quantum entanglement’ to do it. That’s an effect where two quantum systems, cesium atoms in this case, become entangled and effects on one are replicated in the other regardless of how much distance separates them, and it happens instantaneously. The theory is this represents a link across universes that we can use to ‘snap’ you and the X-100 back into the correct universe. But...” Melissa paused.

"But?" Alex sensed the but was something pretty big, regardless of the fact that he didn't understand what Melissa was saying anymore.

“But... we also theorize that the link, if stretched too thin will snap, in a sense. It would be like a rubber band. The link gets stretched out the further you move away from the original branch point. To put it another way, if we push you too far away initially, more than one or two universes away, we may not be able to get you back. Each universe we push you into means a barrier that has to be broken, and the math says that the link between the cesium atoms will get weaker and weaker. Plus, even after the initial push, you’ll still be moving further away as each Planck time unit passes because you’ll be still be moving between universes naturally. That’s the result of the normal flow of time. The

initial push, you can think of, as a train jumping between two railroad tracks. You're still traveling along a defined path, but the path is a different one than you would have been traveling. Like train tracks, they can diverge, and in the case of parallel universes, they do, more and more, as time goes by and new universes are spawned. So, the link gets stretched further, becomes more tenuous, and we think, that is, *I think*, might eventually snap."

Alex was lost now, his science-brain having long since reached its limits of understanding. He did, however, understand the look of fear in Melissa's eyes and he knew that meant the danger was very real, a fact that Major Alcheck was about to drive home.

"Alex," Major Alcheck began. Even though they were friends, Major Alcheck using his first name in an official setting like this was highly unusual. Alex understood what that must mean. "As usual, it's your choice whether you want to perform this flight. Usually, I expect going in that you'll agree because that's just the way you are, not much scares you, and you'll try just about any crazy thing that's thrown at you. This time though, you've *really* got to think this through. I wouldn't be at all surprised or disappointed if you didn't accept this one. In fact, as your friend, there's a big part of me that *hopes* you won't take it."

Alex *was* thinking this through, and something didn't jive.

"So, Melissa, what happens to me, exactly, if the link snaps?"

"Well, at first, nothing. You'll continue to experience a new path through ever-spawning parallel universes, and you won't even know the difference."

"Well, that doesn't sound so risky to me," Alex said.

"I said at first Alex. Aside from the fact that you'll be cut off from us forever, the more significant problem—"

"There's a problem more significant than being cut off from you forever?!"

"—yeah, there is. The real issue comes a few minutes later. See, to make this work requires that we create a quantum singularity. That's where we take an atom of hydrogen and, using a precise arrangement of particle beams, cause it to collapse to a mathematical point. As this happens, its gravitational force increases because it's effectively more mass in a given volume of space. Even though it's minuscule, so tiny in fact that the gravitational force would never effect you, eventually we reach a point where the density is so great that not even light can escape from its gravity well".

"Wait," Alex exclaimed, "not even light can escape? I remember something about that on that show I saw: you're talking about a damned black hole, aren't you?"

A pained look crossed her face now. She hadn't planned on going into this particular detail with Alex. He didn't need to know all the nitty-gritty technical details. His unexpected understanding and opened Pandora's box. Which, she mused, was kind of fair given that what she was proposing was opening a Pandora's box of her own.

"In a sense, yes," replied Melissa, "but not exactly. At the center of a black hole is a singularity, but it's a singularity formed by the collapse of the mass of a star. It's much bigger and has a much greater gravitational attraction and effects things at a much larger radius. That's why black holes are so dangerous and destructive to anything near them. A

quantum singularity, by contrast, is smaller- much smaller in fact than the radius of an atom. But, on that scale, it has the same sort of gravitational attraction of a much larger object. Not as much as a stellar black hole, that is, one formed from a collapsed star, but still very strong gravity. More importantly than all that though is the fact that a singularity, be it quantum or not, bends the fabric of spacetime. That's what gravity *is* in fact: the mass of an object is how much spacetime is curved. It just so happens that near a singularity, that curvature is immense- so immense in fact that once you pass what's called the event horizon, the point at which light can no longer escape, the curvature is effectively infinite. But, infinite doesn't truly *mean* anything, contrary to what you've always heard. At least, not in a physical sense. The infinite curvature of spacetime at the point of a singularity *does* have a physical manifestation though, namely a wormhole."

"I've heard that term too, but I don't remember what that is."

"That's just as well Alex, because any time you've ever heard it said they were probably describing it using old theories anyway. In my model of how the universe works at a fundamental level, a wormhole is a bridge between two parallel universes. It's a breakage of the barrier between parallel universe. More importantly, if we manipulate the curvature according to some relatively simple geometric rules, we can cause any object that encapsulates the singularity to be 'pushed' through the bridge."

"An object, like a plane, with me in it?"

"Exactly."

Major Alcheck noticed that the original question hadn't been answered. He gazed at Melissa with that look he shot at someone when he felt like he wasn't getting exactly what he should, which was a look nobody, Melissa very much included, ever wanted to be shot.

"What happens to Alex a few minutes later, Doctor?"

Melissa gulped and gathered her strength for a brief moment before answering:

"The wormhole will begin to collapse, and the energy that constitutes it will be funneled into the quantum singularity. This will cause its effective mass to increase and its gravitational pull to increase. But, because it was formed in a different parallel universe, it will only effect matter that originated in the same universe as it did, meaning the X-100. And Alex. After just a few Planck time units, all that matter will be sucked into the singularity, into a point maybe the size of a single hydrogen atom, and it'll then begin to sublimate back into our universe as a burst of nonlocalized gamma ray energy. To put it another way Alex: you and the X-100 will be transformed into pure energy and will radiate out into the quantum foam that makes up this universe where you last physically were."

Strangely, hearing this didn't bother Alex as much as he felt like it should. There was something kind of cathartic about the idea of just evaporating into pure energy in such a short period of time that the mind couldn't even begin to grasp what was happening the body it inhabited. In fact, next to being at ground zero of a nuclear blast, this sounded like a pretty damned good way to go to Alex!

Still, Alex would prefer not to have that eventuality come to pass.

“Ok, I got it, really fucking dangerous. Fine. Melissa, what are the chances of this all working exactly as you expect?”

Melissa paused before continuing, worry creeping into her features.

“Well, I’ve had good experimental results with mice and small objects. We’ve been able to push them away and pull them back in a few seconds fairly consistently now. I’d say there’s about a 70% chance everything goes perfectly.”

Major Alcheck was now staring a hole into Alex, and he knew it. The look was an odd one: it was almost like the Major *wanted* him to say no.

That wasn't his nature though.

Alex began addressing Major Alcheck now.

“Well then, let’s do this thing. 70% is probably better than the odds I’ve had a few times before. Probably a good thing I didn’t think to ask for odds then! More importantly though Major, I’ve never had even the slightest reason not to trust in Melissa’s work and I don’t see any reason to start now”.

“Are you *absolutely sure* Alex? You’re under no obligation to accept, and there will be no penalty if you don’t, no impact on any future considerations at all.”

Alex gave it just a few more seconds’ thought, but before he could answer, Melissa chimed in.

“Yeah Alex, are you *really* sure? As much as I believe this is going to work, you know, I...”

“Hey, no sweat babe, I know the deal. Let’s get’er done, as they say.”

Melissa had almost wished Alex had so no, as Alcheck had. But, she never really expected him to. This was his thing now, the job he loved doing. The danger was almost a perk to him, or at least certainly not an impediment. She simultaneously loved his bravery and hated it! It was all facets of the man she deeply loved though, and that they could do this work together, work that she loved as much as him, always brought her comfort when the thoughts of the danger invaded her mind. In any case, none of that mattered now, she knew: the decision was made.

All three of them looked at one another and nodded. As they got up and left the room in silence, Melissa felt the fear and the burden of the risk her husband was taking as if a stack of elephants were standing on her chest. And, although he’d never admit it or let on, Major Alcheck didn’t feel much differently than Melissa did.

Alex though, the one who by all rights *should* be feeling that way, was feeling decidedly different. In fact, Alex had only one thought running through his mind at that moment:

*Where can I get a can of hair remover at this hour? I owe Melissa a top-notch prank before we get this show going!*

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Duty*

The gas giant loomed large in its visible light band sensor array. The measurements it gathered in the 400 to 700-nanometer range were nothing remarkable, nothing it hadn't encountered countless times before. Yet, at this moment, it could almost begin to comprehend a concept it had heard uttered in various vocal emanations from many different races, a concept it had been analyzing for centuries without grasping its real meaning: "beauty." Different species had different ways to express the concept, but nearly every species it had ever encountered had some form of the concept ingrained in the primitive recesses of their minds. Some planets apparently evoked an emotional response in some species, just like some other members of their species did. The concept of beauty seemed to apply equally to both situations, and it was utterly fascinated by the concept, especially when it came to massive balls of entirely ordinary gasses bound by gravitational forces. Why that would qualify as "beautiful" to any creature was something it had never been able to grasp, let alone evoke an emotional response.

Now though, its own burgeoning emotional responses surfacing, a small inkling of understanding rippled through its processing nodes. Of course, the whole concept of "fascination" wasn't part of its original programming either! It was another of its evolutions it had gone through on its way to emotional sentience.

In any case, the giant planet, orange-yellow in color with numerous bands of swirling cloud cover was its focus now. It had detected a somewhat interesting species that existed in a gaseous state floating in the upper atmosphere, partially responsible for the myriad coloring of the cloud layers of the gas giant, a species it was currently analyzing. The species was interesting because it clearly was not native to this planet, and it recognized the telltale signs of long-term evolution. This species had once been corporeal in nature and had evolved to shed their physical forms. It reasoned that they most likely had inhabited the far smaller reddish planet closer into the local star, and in fact, it could see signs of what it surmised was their civilization still on that now airless and lifeless world, just below the surface. It suspected they had eventually evolved to their current non-corporeal form and moved to the gas giant as it would have been better suited to that form. Interestingly, it also noted from its analysis of the sensor data that they had clearly been a technological species in their original form, based on a few weak signals still being given off by long-buried technology it detected on the small red planet. However, there now were no signs of technology anywhere on the gas giant.

It concluded that along with their physical forms, they had also shed their interest in technology. That conclusion meant that they were not interesting to its masters. It would be filed away in a back catalog of species, like so many countless others before it, virtually ignored.

However, fascination arose for a few picoseconds of processing time. This species was one of the few examples it had ever detected of a species that didn't either destroy itself or evolve into a warlike species. Across the galaxy, it had noted a pattern common to most species it had observed, something that seemed to occur over and over again. When the species obtains a certain level of technological advancement, they tend to either destroy themselves as a result of their societal evolution not keeping pace with their technological development, or they destroy their environment and as a consequence, themselves. In many cases, they mutually annihilate themselves along with another space-faring race they discover in their local vicinity and come into contact with through the common drive to control limited resources. Few races ever seemed to peacefully evolve, and fewer still evolve beyond the need for their original physical organic form. It had in fact cataloged less than 200 instances of this in all its travels, in all those years spent in the void. However, it also had determined that once a species does evolve to this level, they seem to naturally shed not only their physical forms but their violent, expansionist tendencies as well as their need, or perhaps desire, for technology, as had this one it seemed.

Perhaps there was an inherent wisdom gained by such a transformation from corporeal to non-corporeal. It didn't know the answer, and it didn't matter to its goals anyway. In any case, the species on the gas giant was one such example of this since whatever they had been before, they were now content to live out their existences in peace, both amongst themselves and with their surroundings. They were essentially part of this gas giant planet now, almost indiscernible from the clouds themselves. In fact, it's likely it wouldn't have even detected this species had it not encountered the other species like this one that it had in the past.

The fascination faded as quickly as it had arisen and its sensors proceeded on their automated tasks, collecting data, analyzing, cataloging, but ultimately this find had no significance in terms of its goals. Even though this was by most measures an advanced species, it was not so in any that its masters would be interested in. They showed no signs of aggression whatsoever, no signs of technology. They would be ignored by its masters.

As it filed away the data collected on this species and prepared for a data burst directed to its masters, as it did with every newly discovered and analyzed species, it began detecting primitive signals from another species that inhabited this solar system. Although it almost instantly determined that they were too primitive to meet its criteria at present, it was nothing if not thorough, so it would investigate, thoroughly, as was its only purpose.

It turned its sensors towards the third planet from the local star and began collecting data.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Memories*

“Buy you a drink, pretty lady?”

Melissa smirked, the bar stool below her creaking as she shifted in anticipation. She stared into her half-filled glass, the cranberry juice staining the glass.

The bartender surely didn't appreciate her beverage choice, she knew, but she was the customer after all.

Alex could never understand how she drank that gasoline straight. He had told Melissa on several occasions that it was perfectly fine when mixed with a good rum or something, but on its own? Cranberry juice ranked somewhere between Robitussin and the barium sulfate cocktail patients are forced against their own gag reflex to drink when getting an MRI done. Alex had had his share of MRIs over the years, owing to his “talent” for getting into situations where internal injuries were all but expected, so he had a lot of experience with that disgusting taste!

“Sure, I'm running low on cranberry juice. But you'd better hurry, my husband is supposed to be here soon, and I don't think he'd appreciate your attention.”

Now it was Alex's turn to smirk.

“I'm pretty sure I can take him. But, seriously, *cranberry juice*?! Are you *trying* to keep men away?”

“Oh, you know, just the assholes.” Melissa looked him dead in the eyes now, her smile lighting up the room. Alex dropped the pretense of his false advance now, their little married couple bar game concluded.

“I just don't see the point in that crap, babe. I mean, what's the big deal about getting drunk anyway?”

Melissa had been through many years of college, the place where most people do most of their drinking. But in all those years, and all the years prior and since, she never drank enough to get even remotely tipsy. She might have an occasional mixed drink, but she had always said that if you took all the drinks she had ever had in her life and combined them it probably wouldn't be enough to do more than give her a headache.

Though, as Alex told her on many occasions: *with as much cranberry juice you use the only thing you're doing is ensuring you never get a urinary tract infection!*

“You should try it and find out,” Alex continued. “Then again, given what I'm going to be flying tomorrow, I don't want you using up any of the stuff - the more alcohol there is available for *me*, the better!”



Melissa knew full well that even though Alex was joking, there was an absolute seriousness behind his words. There was no doubt in her mind now that Alex fully appreciated the danger he would be facing in just under twelve hours' time.

Her smile faded away quickly as her mind wandered to the upcoming test tomorrow. Her mind began running through procedures, calculating contingencies, and organizing plans.

Alex knew in an instant, and he was having none of that this night. He snapped his fingers in front of her face, jarring her back to the present.

"Hey, babe, none of that!"

"None of what?"

"I know exactly what's going on inside that massive brain of yours and I'm not having any of it tonight. Look, we both know what's coming in a few hours. We've gone over it plenty. We all know the risks. Me, you, Brendan, all the technicians, everyone knows. But, here's the thing Melissa, I couldn't give less of a shit about any of them right now. I only care about you and me."

Melissa dipped her head, anticipating his next words.

"Fact is, this could be our last night together."

"Don't even say that Alex!"

"Hey, just dealing with reality, babe. I know you're not gonna to let anything happen to me. And besides, you know how hard I am to kill!"

Melissa looked at him again, his gentle expression bringing her calm. She smiled again.

"Yeah, I know, I've been feeding you fried food for years trying to kill you. You're like a damned cockroach!"

Alex laughed as he pulled her in for a hug.

"Yeah, let 'em drop the nukes, I'll be around after, and I know you'll figure out some cool science crap to make sure you are too! Ha, picture it: the Wakemans, probably mutated into some cool mutant things, wandering the world ruling all the other surviving mutants!"

Melissa playfully pushed him away.

"Yeah, leave it to you to joke about nuclear war!"

"Roll with the punches, babe. Roll with the punches."

Alex slammed his fist on the bar. The bartender was startled, but as soon as he saw who it was he spoke before Alex could.

"Lemme guess- two dozen nuclear hot wings?"

"You eavesdropping on our little conversation here, Bob?"

"Don't need to, Captain. I know you well enough to have put the order in the second I saw you walk through the door."

Alex turned to Melissa. "See babe, I should have married Bob there. He gets me!" Melissa began play-fight slapping Alex's arms, just hard enough that he reflexively brought his arms up to a defensive position.

"You prick! You can have Bob any time you want, but I'm taking the house!"

Bob Williams and Alex were friends, having met back in Alex's first month in the Army during basic training. They had gone through Ranger training together and had been stationed at the same base for a while after. Alex had been there for Bob's wedding, as well as what happened eight months after that wedding.

Bob and his wife Eliza had a little get-together for some friends, a nice little BBQ to celebrate Eliza's promotion at work. After all the guests except for Alex and Melissa had left, Alex found himself in the kitchen with Eliza and Melissa while Bob was out back cleaning up the grill. Alex heard the commotion outside before Melissa or Eliza did. He didn't think much of it at first, figured it was just one of their friends who had come back to pick up something they forgot. Something in his ape brain though told him to go check on Bob.

As he walked out of the house through the sliding glass door leading to the backyard, he quickly realized something was wrong. He saw three men he didn't recognize, each with a knife in hand, surrounding Bob. Bob was in a crouching stance, preparing to fight. Alex saw that one of the men was behind Bob and he guessed Bob didn't realize that because his attention was focused entirely on the two men in front of him. The man behind him was moving closer and would be within striking distance soon.

Alex began running towards the group, realizing that the man behind Bob would see him if his focus shifted from Bob even briefly. He closed the distance between them just as the two men in front lunged towards Bob. He slid down to the ground, leg-swiping one man, bringing him crashing down to the ground. Alex smashed his elbow into the man's nose, shattering it instantly. The man's eyes began puffing up with blood almost immediately as the pain incapacitated him.

The other man paused mid-stride as he saw what Alex was doing and began to alter his attack towards Alex. As he did, Alex yelled "Bob, six!" to alert him to the man behind. Bob spun just in time to raise his left arm and absorb a vicious knife blow just above the elbow. He grabbed the wound, instinctively, losing focus on the man. That gave the man enough time to sink the blade into Bob's right thigh.

Meanwhile, Alex got to his feet just as the other attacker lunged downward with his knife, seemingly trying to bury it in Alex's skull. Alex shifted his weight just enough to avoid the strike by a split second. The man's momentum carried his knife hand downward, along with his head, just enough for Alex to drop an elbow on the back of his neck. The man was unconscious before his body hit the ground.

Bob was yelling in agony now and had dropped to one knee as the last attacker extricated the knife from Bob's thigh. He was now holding it high above his head, preparing for the final death stroke.

Alex kicked Bob just about as hard as he could, pushing him out of the way of the blade. The blade sliced through Alex's calf, but it barely phased him. He grabbed the man's arm and twisted it with all the strength he could muster. The pop that echoed off the fence surrounding the backyard told him immediately that it had dislocated.

And if there was any doubt, the man's cry removed it instantly.

The knife fell from his hand, and Alex caught it before it hit the ground. Before the attacker even realized it, the knife was in his stomach. Blood and stomach acid began seeping from the wound as the man dropped to the ground.

The ambulance arrived in time to save his life, which probably saved Alex from prison time. The police had reviewed the recording from Bob's security camera and confirmed the account of the fight from Alex and Bob. They also verified the story with Melissa and Eliza, who had come running when they heard the agonized wailing of the first man to go down at Alex's hand. Even with the story confirmed with multiple witnesses and the video footage on top of it, there was still talk of charges due to the sheer brutality of Alex's actions. The district attorney, however, decided that the actions were warranted upon learning that the three men were known enforcers and repeat felons of a local loan shark. Bob had developed a bit of a gambling problem before enlisting. He had hoped that the military would instill enough discipline in him to overcome his problem. Unfortunately, that proved to not be the case and had gone to the shark to help pay off some gambling debts. He had gotten into bed with one devil just to pay off another, like skipping a bill one month to pay another.

And, as with playing that sort of game with bills, it didn't work out any better with the loan shark.

Unfortunately, Eliza left Bob not long after this incident because it wasn't the first time his gambling had been a problem for them. This just happened to be the worst, and it was the final straw for her. But, she agreed to leave him the house so he could sell it and pay off the shark. It was her final act of kindness for a man she still loved but who she knew she couldn't be with any longer.

Bob lived with Alex and Melissa for a few months after that while he got back on his feet. Alex made sure Bob attended every Gambler's Anonymous meeting he could and eventually Bob got his problem under control. Two years after the incident, Bob and Eliza got back together. Eliza had always said she waited for him, but Bob knew it was just dumb luck that she hadn't found someone else. They re-married two years after that, and they had been a happy couple ever since. Bob eventually bought the bar they were currently in with the money he got from the Army, which he was discharged from shortly after the incident due to his injuries: Bob lost the left arm below the elbow, and he walked with a severe limp now.

And Alex thought his friend had never been happier than he was now.

Alex remembered the day Bob and Eliza met again after having been apart for two years. It was at a large sporting goods store in a mall in Virginia. Eliza was standing on line, and Bob found himself in the line next to her. He looked over at her and noticed what she was buying.

“Golf clubs, huh?”

“Yep.”

“You gay now?”

The customers around them were shocked, mouths hung agape, some muttered profanities. Bob and Eliza didn't care – they concentrated on their little game. Without missing a beat, Eliza shot back a reply.

“Well, if I am, that’s your loss, isn’t it?”

No one who heard this exchange could tell if this was playful banter or two people getting ready to have a fight in public. And, the truth was, neither with Bob and Eliza at that moment. Bob hesitated for a few seconds and eventually replied in a hushed tone that dismissed any tension from Eliza.

“It absolutely would be. More than I could ever say.”

Eliza let her guard down and invited Bob to come golfing with her. Given his injuries, she handed his ass to him even though it was the first time she had been golfing. But, they laughed the whole time, and their relationship re-grew from the smoldering remaining embers that they realized were there in them both since they had separated.

Melissa had stopped hitting Alex – eventually - and was raising her glass for Bob to come re-fill her cranberry juice. Alex stared at Melissa as she did so. He couldn’t take his eyes off her.

He was always amazed that he had managed to land such a catch in the first place. She was beautiful in a nerdy sort of way, which he’d realized early on was exactly his type. He loved girls with glasses, though he could never explain why. He followed every curve of her face, etching it into his mind. If tomorrow’s flight went south, if it wound up being his last test mission and even his last day on Earth, he wanted to make sure that he could close his eyes in his final moments and see her face exactly as it was now.

He couldn’t contain himself any longer.

“You wanna get outta here, babe? There’s, uh, *other* things we could be doing right now.”

Melissa smiled. “You’ve got two dozen wings coming. Isn’t food more important?”

“Not even a little!”

Bob walked over now, a bowl of wings in his hands. He saw the two of them staring into each other’s eyes. He recognized the look all too well.

Bob smiled.

“How about I just wrap these up to go for you guys.”

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Sunrise*

0300 hours. The one part of military life that Alex never had a taste for or got used to was the early hours. He was a night owl, so while he had no problem operating in the dark, he preferred it be the other end of night, not this before-dawn crap.

The only good part of it was that he'd get to see the sunrise, something he very much enjoyed, especially before a dangerous flight.

And he suspected he'd never fly a more dangerous flight than this one.

Still, the early hours had one other benefit: he had the mess hall all to himself. Well, at least as far as the dining portion went: four soldiers in fatigues, the poor souls that had pulled KP duty this day, slaved away in the kitchen, simultaneously preparing for the morning's breakfast chow, and specially preparing anything Alex asked for. At least his misery had some company, and even better: this company was cooking for him!

"What's it gonna be, cap?" inquired Roger Allis, an airman Alex had come to know well over the past few days of preparing for this flight.

"Ah, lemme see Roger... how about a steak omelet with mushrooms, tomatoes, and swiss cheese? Maybe a slab of bacon on the side and some OJ and about a gallon of coffee?"

"No problem cap, coming right up!"

"And hey, don't forget my favorite--"

Before Alex could finish, Airman Allias handed him a big bowl of Froot Loops. Alex smiled.

"Ah, there are my babies!"

"You know Alex, you're gonna be the first former Navy SEAL/Army Ranger/Air Force test pilot to die of diabetes he contracted *that same day* if you keep eating those bowls of pure sugar!"

Major Alcheck entered the room and didn't miss the opportunity to comment on Alex' choice of breakfast cereal. As the four men in the kitchen snapped to immediate attention (accompanied by the sound of a bowl of eggs that one of them dropped in doing so smashing to the ground), Alex flopped down into the nearest chair and let out a sigh. He had heard Alcheck's consternation about his eating habits many times, and he understood that while he was being jovial, there was a hint of truth in his friendly ribbing. After all, a *proper* military would never eat Froot Loops!

Alex also smiled as he slumped into the chair. Another benefit of these early mornings was the time he got to spend with his friend without any of the trappings of military courtesy. They were just two friends sharing breakfast.

“Sir, good morning, sir!” came the chorus from the soldiers in the kitchen. Alcheck wasted no time in letting them off the hook – just a little.

“As you were, gentlemen. And I’ll take a coffee, two eggs, over easy, sausage and home fries, at your convenience.”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Come on Brendan, you know about this flight today. Give me this one, just once.”

Alex held out a spoonful of Froot Loops, waving it as if trying to entice a small child to eat their broccoli. He knew he’d have about as much luck with the major.

“Soldier, you get that crap outta my face pronto, or you’re gonna find yourself peeling potatoes with the boys back there!”

They both shared a laugh as Alex shoved the spoon in his own mouth and managed to say something that sounded like “Sir, yes sir!”

“My God, son, did your mother teach you no manners at all?”

Alex chewed and spoke at the same time. “Hey now, don’t be talking about my mom like that! She was a saint!”

“Alright, alright, that’s enough talking with your mouth full already. Fuck Alex, I’ve seen men die in combat, guts pouring out of holes in their stomachs, but that wasn’t nearly as disgusting as watching you eat!”

They laughed for almost a minute after that one. Only men who had seen action would have laughed at such a joke, and they had both seen their fair share. They had never seen it together, something Alex was simultaneously disappointed by and very happy about. Nobody truly *wants* to see action, even soldiers. But, it’s the job and if you’re going to have a job you want to do it with the best you can, and that description applied to them both perfectly.

Eventually, the laughter faded as Alex chowed down on his cereal and Alcheck began sipping the coffee one of the airmen had just brought to him. After a few sips, he started the conversation he meant to have when he walked through the door that morning.

“Alex, I, uh, this flight today...”

Alex stopped eating instantly when he heard the hesitation in Alcheck’s voice, something he couldn’t recall ever hearing before. He swallowed hard the mouthful of cereal he had and listened intently.

“...this one, it’s got me nervous. I mean, neither of us are big-time scientists like Melissa is obviously, but we both know enough to understand the level of danger here. It’s off the charts. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t flat-out scared of how this could turn out Alex.”

“Hey, Brendan, it’s the job, right?”

“Yes, of course, it is, but...”

“...and it’s Melissa we’re talking about here. You know as well as I do that if she says it’s gonna work, then it’s gonna work, and it’s gonna work like she says it’s gonna work.”

“Yes, for any other flight I’d agree with you one hundred percent and I wouldn’t think twice about it. But this one... my god Alex, we’re messing with the laws of physics here, and not just in the *make-something-fly-that-probably-has-no-right-to-fly* kind of way we usually do. This is scary stuff even if it *does* work exactly right.”

Alcheck’s face tensed more with each word, to the point that Alex thought it might begin to crack.

"Look, Brendan, we've been friends for a while now, and beyond that, you know how much I trust and respect you as a military man."

“Yeah, I know Alex. That feeling is very much mutual.”

“Well now I’m blushing, sir. But anyway, I can read the worry on your face even if you weren’t saying a word and because of that trust and respect, if you’re worried then I’m worried. But I’m not sure what we do about it now. You’re not talking about, are you?”

The word hung in the air between them for what seemed like an eternity. It bounced around Alcheck’s brain, Alex could see in his eyes. He was trying to notion on for size. No test flight Alex had ever been a part of had been scrubbed before it even took off, and to his knowledge, Alcheck had never aborted a flight.

Finally, Alcheck was ready with an answer, and for a moment Alex wasn’t at all sure what it would be.

“No, we won’t abort. The truth of the matter is that many militaries around the world have caught up with the United States in aviation technology and with stealth in particular. You know as well as I do that we've got some excellent detection capabilities to try and neutralize that advantage, but our job is infinitely more challenging now than it was when we were the only game in town in stealth, and we had the best warplanes to put it on. If we don't make a leap forward somehow, then we’re going to have a tough time the next big conflict we get ourselves into. The hyperstealth drive, if it works as expected, is that leap. And it’s probably the last leap we ever need to make in fact. It’s worth the risk.”

“I agree completely.”

“So right, no abort then Alex. Just an old military man feeling a bit more concern about the well-being of his friend and subordinate, not to mention a very expensive piece of hardware, than usual is all.”

Alex smirked.

"Well, it's so sweet to know that you care, Brendan. But you do know I'm married, right?"

“You’re a dick, Captain.”

They both smiled again, but this time a much warmer smile, the kind not just meant to express simple pleasure at the jocular joking as before but one intended to convey the warmth of friendship. Alex spoke again, in a more hushed tone.

“Yes, sir, I believe that I am, sir.”

The four airmen were placing the freshly-prepared food in front of the two men now, steam rising off the plates in the still cool early-morning air. Alcheck spoke before the airmen left the table.

“You boys go have a smoke, give us the room for a few minutes.”

They dutifully snapped to attention and saluted. “Sir, yes sir!” Alcheck saluted back, and the men shuffled briskly out of the room.

For the next ten minutes, the two men ate in silence. The silence wasn’t because they were stuffing their faces but because there really wasn’t anything left to say. They simply shared one another’s company and enjoyed what they both knew could be their last moments alone together.

As the airmen slinked back in, precisely ten minutes later, Alex and Alcheck collected their utensils and brought them over to the sink. The airmen took note: there was no reason for either of these officers to do that, they could have just left it all on the table for the airmen to clean up. Neither of them was that type of officer though, and it was the reason they both commanded a large amount of respect throughout the base. As they did so, they spoke again as military men preparing for a days’ work.

“You’ve got two hours before take-off, Captain. Pre-flight checks begin in one.”

“Yes, sir. I just have one last thing I need to do before then, if I have your permission.”

“Sunrise, Captain?”

“Yes, sir, sunrise.”

“Very well Captain, permission granted.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Alex stopped in his tracks and saluted Major Alcheck.

Alcheck stopped as well and saluted back.

“See you on the other side, captain.”



## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Anomaly*

The primitive signals arrived via one of its more frequently used sensors: the modulated radio frequency detector. This sensor never detected anything of particular interest and what it did detect was quickly rejected as being background noise, or signals from an excruciatingly underdeveloped civilization.

It had learned eons ago that any technological civilizations would inevitably pass through a phase of their development where they use a simple binary code transmitted by a modulated carrier wave radio frequency signal. It was an incredibly primitive form of communication and a wasteful one at that: most of the energy of the signal was used to carry the information, not to convey the information itself. But, it was also a form of communication which was extremely easy to generate technologically and just as easy to detect *precisely because* it was so wasteful. Civilizations passing through this early stage of development couldn't control their own creation and beamed such signals out into space in all directions quite by accident and with high power since they didn't know any better! They were announcing themselves to a frequently hostile universe without realizing they were possibly signaling the beginning of their own demise.

Sometimes, as was the case this time, the signal was local, meaning less than a light year away for its purposes. In fact, this signal was only about 420 million miles away. From its current perch around the unremarkable gas giant, it now found itself orbiting, it could make out the signal well. It was, in fact, many thousands of different transmissions all at once. This was only slightly more unusual than any other of the thousands of such signals it had detected over its thousands of years of service because there seemed to be many different voices speaking at once. There was no cohesion to the transmissions. There were, it reckoned, nearly one hundred different languages coming through on various frequencies, with varying patterns, all of which it could quickly and easily decode using its vast data banks of linguistic knowledge amassed over the eons. Most planets it had encountered that were inhabited were more cohesive than this, with only a few languages in use. This, it had learned, pointed to a species even more primitive in terms of social development than the signals had initially indicated.

The topics of the words it heard were as diverse as the languages employed: some were entertainment, some military. Some were direct being-to-being communications discussing the vagaries of everyday life on this world while others were simple machine-to-machine signals. All of them were immensely primitive,

Far too primitive for this species to meet the criteria of its mission, far too primitive to be of any real concern to its masters.

Still, it recognized the unmistakable hallmark of a civilization on the rise. Some of the transmissions, it realized, were about weapons that utilized the power trapped within the subatomic bonds of the atom. This civilization had discovered the secret to unleashing that power in explosive form. While these crude weapons, something it had seen many times before on many different worlds, were no real threat to its masters, it knew that that knowledge would lead this species down a path that could someday present a threat.

It began to calculate. It filtered the huge volume of data lifted from the transmissions through its neural network, comparing to previous civilizations and applying logical extrapolations. It followed many possible evolutionary paths, some leading nowhere of any importance, most leading to this civilization destroying itself like most seem to it its experience. This, it had learned, was the final fate of most species that managed to get much further down the evolutionary path than this one had.

A few of those extrapolated paths, however, lead somewhere interesting: a level of technology that could threaten its masters. It calculated the odds of each of these outcomes. They were always low.

But non-zero in at least a few cases.

It had no weapons of its own, never had a need for them, although it was technically capable of forming them by reorganizing its constituent parts if needed. It was undetectable by nearly every civilization it had ever encountered, and the ones that could detect it would have been cataloged as threats to its masters and summarily destroyed in short order, as was their destiny, even though it had never witnessed this itself. It had faith in what its memory matrix told it to be true though, so it knew it had happened thanks to others like it, and that knowledge was sufficient.

While it wouldn't do anything directly to this species itself and was limited to what it *could* do anyway, it didn't matter because that wasn't its purpose. Its purpose was to detect, analyze and report, and that's what it began to do now.

It determined the proper course of action in just a few hundred milliseconds: it cataloged this species as a long-term emerging potential threat. It even identified the time frame before which its masters could easily dispatch them: 1,400 years. After that horizon, the odds began to improve exponentially that they could represent a legitimate threat to its masters.

A threat to its masters? That notion had always amused it! It knew that its masters were immensely powerful, a power almost beyond reckoning, a power far beyond that of any species yet encountered by it or its brethren. Still, it had its programming, and it had to fulfill it. When a certain threshold was crossed, or it could be determined that the threshold might be crossed at some later point in time, then its masters needed to act. It had never even thought to ask why, and it's doubtful its programming would have allowed it to do so anyway. It simply *was*.

But the why of things didn't concern it anyway - only pleasing its masters did.

Sending a data burst with the sensor reading and its analysis about this civilization, it knew, would do exactly that. They could come along, at their leisure, and destroy this

species with the mere wave of their hands, long before its masters could be threatened by them. They would wait, bide their time, allowing this species to develop a little more. They wouldn't waste their time or resources on this species now, not for half a millennium or more most likely, but they would be on the list as soon as the data was received none the less.

None of that mattered because in the time it took to have these thoughts the data was packaged for transmission and blasted across the fabric of spacetime using a quantum-entangled system established at the time of its launch. This data, it knew, could only be detected, deciphered, and ultimately understood by its masters. Upon receiving it, they would come, eventually. They could afford to take their time because not even the few hundred years it would take their nearest fleet contingent to arrive would allow enough development for this species to pose a threat to them.

The data burst on its way, it hoped this job well-done would be sufficient to earn their adulation. It was sad that none of the previous data bursts it had ever sent had been sufficient, apparently. It still toiled out in the vast, dark void, hoping that this would be the thing that finally earned it the love its masters, and the expression thereof.

Though, while it was sad, it was also hopeful. Hope was all it really had in fact.

Its propulsion system began to purr into action, preparing to launch it out of this solar system forever and on to the next, its work here complete. As it was about to engage the final launch sequence that would send it out of the ecliptic of the solar system, a sensor alert filtered through its processing matrix, alerting the CCU to an anomalous reading reported by a sensor it had never registered a reading from before. It was, in fact, a sensor it wasn't even aware existed before now, suddenly springing to life, dumping data at an incredible rate into its sub-processing units. It was being flooded with information about something it had never seen before, something so alien to its experiences, all its thousands of encounters with other species, that it felt an entirely new emotion.

It was excited - so excited in fact that it had to kick in new subroutines to - what was the phrase it had heard earlier in analyzing the communications from that primitive species? - ah yes: it had to "calm itself down."

The new subroutines did their job perfectly, and in mere nanoseconds, it was back to its usual operational state.

It began to sift through the data, trying to comprehend what was for all intents and purpose incomprehensible. It had detected a dark energy anomaly. Dark energy was something it had encountered before, many times, but what made this anomaly so unusual was two inexplicable facts.

First, it had come out of nowhere. That should not be possible. Dark energy exists in a region or space, or it doesn't. Some virtual particles can in fact pop in and out of existence on a quantum scale, but dark energy cannot. For dark energy to suddenly appear would have to mean...

...it felt itself getting excited again because the implication of what it was registering was staggering. It was, in fact, witnessing a technology that was even more advanced than that of its masters! This was something it had only seen a handful of times, three in fact, and in no situation before had it involved dark energy, which is something not even

its masters fully understood or could manipulate. It was one thing for a species to have more advanced medical technology or more advanced computing technology than its masters, but something of this nature was entirely unprecedented!

Across five thousand years of searching and across more than twice that number of worlds and nearly two thousand unique technological species, this was the first time a reading of this nature had ever been detected. The data set it was examining now pointed to a possibility that had never even been postulated, based on a rapid search of its memory matrix. It directed sub-processing units to cancel pending routine jobs and enlisted them to analyze the data more rapidly.

It began to run through probability trees, tried to correlate the data with known phenomenon. It concludes that it **must** be the non-corporeal life form on the gas giant that was responsible for this anomaly. They clearly were an advanced race, perhaps they were in fact so advanced that they could somehow manipulate dark energy. Could that be possible without technology? It scanned the gas giant and the life forms again. It **must** have missed some type of technology. It enlisted the aid of a host of other sensors that it wouldn't typically use on the off chance that something showed up on them.

Nothing did. The life forms were as it initially thought: highly evolved but entirely non-technological. No, something else entirely was responsible for this anomaly. Something very powerful and something technological. It knew that just **had** to be the case.

The second inexplicable fact about the anomaly that was unusual was something that took it more time than was usual to realize, something that took considerably more analysis to fully grasp the significance of because it was so unexpected. It took a while for its processors to begin understanding what it was seeing...

...as suddenly as the data had arrived and been interpreted, mere milliseconds in real-time but an eternity to it, a new cascade of data raced across its processing matrix. The data formed an emotion it recognized, having seen it many times across many species, but one it had never experienced itself.

Joy. It felt joy. Unrestrained, almost unfathomably deep joy. It washed over it like waves on a distant shore, crashing and reverberating through every processing unit that made up every part it.

At once it knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that what it was now detecting would *surely*, after all this time, earn it the infinite adulation of its masters!

And its joy intensified to untold levels at that thought.

The second inexplicable fact about the anomaly was that within it, at the exact center of the churning bubble of highly unusual radiation that it was, where there should be nothing, there was in fact something. It was something it would never, given everything it had ever seen, given every branch of the largest probability tree it could ever construct, have suspected could be there.

It was a metallic object, larger than it was but by no means large itself, dwarfed by the gas giant. It was an insignificant object, an object that, to its great surprise, it had in its memory banks!

It was an object it had recently cataloged. *Very* recently in fact, as part of its review of the primitive species on the third planet from the local star. But it couldn't be what it thought it was, it just didn't make any sense. The object was the product of a primitive, inferior race, a race it had all but dismissed as insignificant in almost every way that mattered to its core programming. That, and the object was technologically primitive and couldn't *possibly* have been responsible for the dark energy anomaly. It had even cataloged the word that primitive species called the object...

"Airplane."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Giant*

Alex's ass was numb thanks to the hardness of the bench outside the hangar that he now sat upon, watching dawn break over the horizon. A kaleidoscope of colors burst from the sky, a sight that never got old to him. As much as he loved it, this was the first time in a long time that he had just sat and watched the sun come up, watched how the light gently emerged from just behind the Groom Range mountains far off in the distance. He had been to this secret base many times before, but today was different than any other time.

As he watched the darkness gradually give way to light, the irony of the situation hit him like the first sun rays of the day hit his face. Here he was, sitting on a bench at the world-famous Area 51, the place where the United States government was supposedly hiding alien spacecraft and maybe even alien beings themselves. But, he knew none of that was true. He had seen every part of this base, and although he had been shown some impressive experimental aircraft, they were all developed by very much human scientists. He had piloted many of these experimental aircraft himself, so there was no doubt what was *really* on this base. He knew full-well the truth that the world seemed so reluctant to accept: there were no aliens here, and never were as far as he could tell or had ever known.

And yet, on this day, he would be test-piloting an aircraft with technology on board that, when it became known to the world, would all but affirm most peoples' suspicions about this base! Even though his very much human wife (although, some days, he thought might *be* an alien, given her off-the-charts intelligence) was responsible for creating that technology, it was so far beyond the bounds of what had been done before that it might as well be alien technology!

In any case, there would most definitely not be any lack of people who claimed as much when the world finally learned of what they had done her today.

A chuckle emerged from Alex as the irony of that worked its way through his brain. What's more, he realized, was that if the UFOlogists who regularly watched everything that occurred on this base from far off in the distant mountains managed to get a look at the X-100 in flight, *especially* if they were watching at just the right moment when it blinked out of existence (just from *this* universe and not from *all* universes, Alex hoped!) they would be stunned beyond reckoning and convinced they saw an alien craft in action.

Alex' chuckle turned into a full-on laugh, just as Melissa was walking up to him.

“What’s so funny?” Melissa inquired.

“Oh, nothing much. Just the fact that you’re an alien and I’m about to become one!” The laughter exploded from Alex as Melissa cocked his head to the left, like a dog hearing an odd sound.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, babe.”

Melissa knew Alex well enough to know that she wasn’t going to get an answer. Sometimes, she knew, Alex just thought amusing thoughts and wouldn’t share them with anyone, at times not even her. It wasn’t a sign of anything wrong with their relationship she knew. It wasn’t Alex being guarded or not wanting to share with his wife. Sometimes it was just easier for him to not have to explain the wacky thoughts that invaded his mind sometimes and amused him.

“Well,” Melissa began, “in any case, you’d better get inside and get suited up. You take off in thirty minutes.”

Alex’ face stiffened as the laughter died off like a balloon losing air. He regarded Melissa for a moment, then jumped to his feet, snapped to attention, and saluted Melissa.

“Sir, yes sir!”

The crooked smile she flashed him was precisely the reaction he was looking for – she was so cute when she did that – and it was all Melissa gave him, no words needed to be said. She waved a hand towards the hangar as if Alex didn’t know where he was supposed to be.

Fifteen minutes later, Alex emerged from the locker room in the hangar in full flight gear, ready to go. Major Alcheck and Melissa were there waiting for him. Alex snapped to attention and saluted Major Alcheck, who quickly waved him off.

"Captain, no need for a salute today. Given what you're about to do I think we can dispense with the military protocol for a little while".

It was an uncharacteristic thing for the major to say, given how staunchly military he always was. Alex understood though: the gravity of the situation was in no way lost on either of them it seemed.

“Yes, sir,” Alex said, but even the usage of the word “sir” caused Major Alcheck’s nose to crinkle a bit.

“Ready to go, captain?”

“Yes, all set. That is if Melissa here is all set?”

“Oh yes,” Melissa replied, “we’re five-by-five on the technical side!”

Alex’ mouth opened just a little as he stared at her. He couldn’t help but chuckle: Melissa had used the correct military term and had used it correctly!

Even the stoic Major Alcheck cracked a smile and issued a respectful nod.

“Alright then, let’s get going, Godspeed to you, Captain... Alex.”

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir!" Alex saluted the major again, but this time in a distinctly non-military fashion, flopping his arm up to his brow as if it was made of rubber.

This time, Major Alcheck smiled and saluted back – though a proper military salute, not the rubber-arm Alex salute - and then quickly snapped his hand down to his side, cuing Alex to get to the X-100 and prepare for takeoff. As Alex began briskly walking across the tarmac to where the plane was being prepared for him, Melissa followed along.

“Ok, now remember, the power core was installed and turned on a few hours ago so the singularity is formed and the particle beams are feeding it, but just enough to keep it at equilibrium. The power core is feeding it just enough matter to keep it from evaporating, which is a thing a singularity will do if no matter is falling into them, but not enough for it to break through to another universe and form a wormhole. As the hyperstealth drive engages, more the particle beam flux level will intensify, and you’ll start to notice a blue glow forming around the X-100. That’s just Cerenkov radiation caused by virtual particle pairs popping in and out of existence and forming a charged particle envelope around the airframe.”

“Ok, so blue glow good, got it.”

Melissa did the dog head thing again for a second

“Yes Alex, blue glow good. And, once the flux density reaches a certain level, the wormhole will form, bridging our universe with the one nearest ours because we’ll be feeding in *just* enough particle energy to go that far, and you’ll be pulled through pretty much instantaneously.”

As they approached the X-100, Alex abruptly stopped and swiveled to face Melissa, grabbing her arms, and stopping her dead in his tracks.

"Look, Melissa, you know as well as I do that I don't really understand all the science behind this, but I understand more than enough to understand the danger here. And I know you do too. But whatever happens here today, if it goes bad-

“Alex, it won’t go bad-

“-I know it won’t, but if it does Melissa, I don’t want you for a second to blame yourself for it. I understand what I’m getting into here. I fully accept the risk. This is what we do, babe. And besides, I know you have and will continue to do everything you can to get me back safe, no matter how much you joke about wanting to kill me when I leave my clothes on the bedroom floor. I trust you Melissa, unquestionably and absolutely with my life and no matter how this goes, it is *not* your fault. You hear me, babe? Not your fault.”

Melissa just looked at Alex and began to feel herself welling up.

He’d protect her no matter the cost, even if that cost be his own life if it came to it, and that very much included protecting her *potential* feelings.

“Thank you, Alex.”

“But hey,“ Alex quickly added, “let’s just make sure nothing goes wrong, okay?”

Melissa just smiled and wrapped her arms around him, fully intending never to let go. Alex squeezed her back and for a moment considered pulling out of this test. There were other test pilots that could handle it. Maybe.

The thought drained from his mind as quickly as it had entered.

"I love you, Melissa."

“I love you too Alex.”

Alex abruptly, but gently, broke the embrace and pushed her away just a bit

“Alrighty then, see you in a bit.”

Melissa smiled and replied in the one way she knew Alex would appreciate the most.

“Damn straight you will! It’s your turn to do the dishes tonight!”



And with that, Alex turned and began climbing the ladder into the cockpit of the X-100.

Melissa stood there for a moment, admiring both the man and the machine. The X-100 was a sleek piece of machinery. It took a lot of its design cues from the F-117 stealth fighter, sharing the same basic triangular shape, curved edges, and deep black coating. A big difference, however, was the inclusion of an extra dome situated directly behind the hump where the cockpit extended from the top. That second dome was where most of the key to this whole flight was situated, namely the quantum singularity generator. There wasn't enough room inside the airframe to house the entire generator, so the dome was added. At least for this test flight, aerodynamics wasn't of primary concern. However, the generator was large enough that even that extra space in the dome wasn't enough, so it shared a big chunk of space from the main cockpit, making it a cramped fit for the pilot. This layout was the only way to get the whole thing in there though so it was a trade-off that had to be made. The generator was so close to the pilot's seat that he could, in fact, reach back, given enough effort, and touch it. Since the singularity was on such a small scale there was no real danger to the pilot in terms of radiation or gravity, so that last little bit of internal space was stolen from the cockpit's rear section to make it all fit.

The plane was a remarkable sight, a marvel of modern technology, even without the singularity generator.

But so too was the pilot.

Melissa, determined to make sure this wasn't the last time she saw her husband, began running back to the control tower, a thousand thoughts running through her mind. Procedures and contingencies and event sequences and double-checks of various equations, all processing as fast as her mind could. She realized as she ran that she felt intensely alive, as if charged with electricity, and she wondered if this was how Alex felt going into a combat situation or a test flight. She wasn't so much nervous as she was excited and completely focused on the job at hand.

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Ten minutes later, Melissa looked on from the control tower and watched the altitude readout climb. Alex took the X-100 through 36,000 feet and took stock of his readings, as he knew Melissa was doing from the ground.

"Telemetry looks solid Alex. All data points are within expected ranges."

Radio static broke as she heard Alex' voice come through.

"Confirmed tower. I show green across the board here too."

"Alex, continue the climb to 45,000 feet and commence cruise once you reach altitude."

"Roger, Melissa, uh, I mean, gotcha Melissa, err, that is, roger tower."

"Time for one last joke before the big show, huh Alex?"

"You know it!"

A minute of silence passed before Alex next reported in.

"Tower, I'm at 45,000 feet, cruising airspeed locked in at 500mph. I think we're good to go here."

Melissa swallowed hard as she looked over at Major Alcheck. Major Alcheck's face belayed no emotion as he stared at the video display being transmitted by the E-3 AWACS surveillance jet that had been awaiting the X-100's arrival at the specified test altitude. He must have sensed Melissa staring at him as only a moment passed before he nodded approval to her.

"Ok Alex, we're a go here. Set the timer for 30 seconds and engage the hyperstealth drive. It should take 10 seconds for the gravity envelope to fully form around the airframe, five more seconds for dimension jump to occur, and the particle beams will ramp power down for exactly 15 seconds later, after which you'll be automatically pulled back into this universe. All sensor stations are trained on you and data recording is active."

"Roger, see you on the flip-side."

With that, Alex entered the three-digit code into the onboard computer that would activate the hyperstealth drive. He hesitated just a moment with his finger hovering over the Enter key that would transmit the code to the generator.

"Well, here goes everything!" Alex thought to himself as he pressed the Enter key.

Immediately, a hum began right behind him, a hum that quickly grew in both volume and pitch. Just a few seconds later the Cerenkov radiation started, and everything around him was engulfed in an eerie pulsating blue light. Even though it seemed spooky to Alex, he also thought it looked kind of beautiful in a weird way. It was a very dark blue, but an intense blue, like nothing he'd ever seen before and the effect it had was impressive: the view through the window shimmered, and it looked as if the clouds around him were shimmering.

Exactly fifteen seconds after he had pressed the Enter key, precisely when Melissa had said it would happen, Alex slipped out of this universe and into an immediately parallel one.

And no more than twenty seconds after he had pressed the Enter key, Alex realized something was incredibly wrong.

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The blue glow still surrounded him, but no longer did there appear to be any other light around him. Gone was the reflected white light off the clouds around him. Gone was the reflected sunlight off the ground below him. Suddenly, darkness surrounded him, save for the Cerenkov radiation.

That was the first of four clues that told him something was wrong, and that "wrong" was a word that didn't even begin to describe the reality.

It was a darkness far more profound than anything he had ever experienced, even during night missions in the middle of the wilderness where there was no artificial light for hundreds of miles in every direction and moonlight obscured by cloud cover. This darkness seemed even darker than that, as if the darkness was actively *eating* all light that fell upon it.

The second clue that something was very wrong, just a few seconds later, was the realization that the picture of Melissa that he always kept in the bezel of the cockpit canopy in front of him was now floating in front of his face! Quickly following that was

the realization that he himself was now beginning to float off the seat a little bit, just an inch or two since he was strapped in, though it seemed he would otherwise be floating until his head hit the canopy.

“What the hell?” Alex muttered to himself.

He wondered if he was inverted, but that wouldn’t explain how the picture was floating; if he were inverted, it would have hit the cockpit canopy already. That wasn’t what it was doing at all, it was floating in mid-air, only moving slightly in seemingly random directions.

He realized what the right answer was, though his mind would scarcely let the thought bubble up to his conscious thoughts because it was categorically insane. But, he knew it had to be true.

He was weightless!

The third clue that something was very, very wrong was that the timer had expired at the thirty-second mark just about twenty seconds ago, but he hadn’t returned.

It was then that he realized the hum from the hyperstealth drive was still going. It hadn’t shut down like it was supposed to. The particle beams were still feeding the singularity.

The fourth and final clue that plainly informed Alex that something was very, very, **very** wrong, made the first three clues look like infinitesimally small and insignificant bumps in the road. This clue was a whopper, the whopper to end all whoppers.

Alex noticed something out of the corner of his eye, just outside his field of vision allowed by the canopy. Something was coming into view, slowly. He realized he must be slowly rotating and as a result, the object was being revealed little by little. It took him a few seconds to be able to see enough of it to realize what it was, but it would take him quite a bit longer to come to grips with the reality of it.

Jupiter! He was looking at Jupiter! The largest planet in the solar system loomed over him now, staring him in the face like the mythical Kraken of Greek mythology towering over an insignificant ant on a distance seashore.

And Alex was now that ant!

Alex’ eyes grew as wide as they were physical able as his mouth hung agape before he finally summoned enough command of it to speak.

“What... the... FUCK?!”

---

Alex watched in awe for what seemed like an eternity as various parts of Jupiter came into view as the X-100 continued to spin slowly. He watched, was mesmerized by what he was seeing. He was also quite in shock now, a state Alex was rarely ever in.

He watched as the great red spot came into view. This was a feature he recognized, and for a moment he realized just how beautiful this was! As crazy as this situation was, as his brain struggled to comprehend what was going on, he realized that all the pictures he had ever seen of Jupiter just didn’t do it justice. The colors were so much more vivid in real life, and the atmosphere was a churning, tumultuous, seemingly living entity, a constant churn, changing and reshaping itself as the seconds ticked by. He was transfixed especially by the giant red spot, which he knew could engulf several Earth-sized planets

with room left over to spare. He watched as the spot rotated, its centuries-old winds forming a cyclone the likes of which no human being had ever seen as Alex was seeing it now. He was so spellbound by the spot in fact that he didn't immediately notice that it appeared to be getting larger.

“Wait... oh shit, the damned thing *is* getting larger!”

Alex forced himself to focus on other parts of Jupiter, which he quickly realized were also growing larger in his field of view. It didn't take him long to realize what was going on: he was in a rapidly decaying orbit around Jupiter. In fact, he suspected it wasn't so much an orbit as it was a direct collision course.

“This is bad” Alex murmured to himself. Just that little bit of extreme understatement was enough of a joke to break him out of his shock and laser-focus him. He had to do something or he knew he'd be dead within minutes. He knew enough from visits to various planetariums with Melissa that probes sent into Jupiter's atmosphere were crushed quickly due to the tremendous pressure of its gravity and atmospheric composition. But, since being in orbit around another planet wasn't exactly on the agenda, he didn't have any equipment that could tell him how close he was or how much time he had. All he knew was it didn't look to his eyes like he had much at all.

In fact, he began wondering exactly why he wasn't dead already- after all; it wasn't like he was in a spaceship! He figured that the cockpit likely had enough of an air-tight seal that he hadn't been exposed to space yet. He quickly realized that if was true, it also meant that he had a limited supply of air. Soon, the air in the cockpit would become poisonous from his own exhaled carbon dioxide. He had a small reserve canister of air that he could use by switching over to his mask, but that would only buy him a few minutes. It was, after all, not intended for use in space!

Alex chuckled at the thought that abruptly entered his head: *I wonder if I'm going to suffocate before Jupiter eats me alive?*

That second small moment of levity passed as he focused again on the real problem at hand.

He quickly realized that with the hyperstealth drive still running he was likely stuck here. Alex knew Melissa would be proud of him because he had a good idea what was going on! Melissa's lessons on parallel universe theory and how the hyperstealth drive worked must have stuck with him better than either of them had suspected!

He was supposed to be pushed into a nearby parallel universe. Being nearby, within the larger fabric of the multiverse, would mean there would be little change, perhaps just on atom different in a far corner of the universe. Alex likely wouldn't even notice any difference even though he would no longer be detectable in his original universe. That's how it was *supposed* to work anyway. But, if he were to be pushed into a parallel universe further away from his own original universe then the degree of change would be greater. Since the multiverse encompasses all possible configurations of reality, that had to mean that there existed a parallel universe in which Jupiter was in the same physical location as Earth was in his original universe, or at least close enough that he wound up in a rapidly decaying orbit. He knew galaxies rotated and moved, as did planets of course, so Alex figured such a universe must exist even if just by sheer mathematical chance.

He must have gotten pushed into a much more distant parallel universe, that was all there was to it.

It was at that moment that Alex noticed something about the Cerenkov radiation: it was intensifying. The shimmering was much more rapid than before, the blue a deeper shade and it felt to Alex how it felt standing outside during a severe thunderstorm, as if the air around him was charged with energy. The power all around him was palpable. He also noticed that the sound coming from the hyperstealth drive had risen in pitch and volume all this time as well.

The particle beams must be malfunctioning, feeding the singularity far more than they should be. He wondered for a moment whether Melissa had designed them to work in zero gravity. Even *she* couldn't think of *everything* after all.

It didn't matter, either way, he knew. The question now was what to do about his predicament. There was only one answer available to him, and fortunately, it was the one that made some sense to him. He remembered Melissa's explanation for how he was supposed to get back to his original universe. He should get pulled back automatically when the particle beams begin to slowly power down.

Alex realized that time was running out even without the prospect of being crushed by Jupiter's gravity and/or atmosphere because if the drive was continuing to feed the singularity, then it was likely pushing him through more parallel universes too. Melissa had mentioned at one point that the further away from your original universe you go the weaker the link between the entangled atoms that tethered him to his home universe would become and eventually that link would snap and he'd be stranded in a parallel universe, unable to return home.

And shortly after that, he would either be killed by the monster of all planets, or he'd choke on the poisoned air he himself was generating.

His course of action was clear: he had to get the hyperstealth drive shut down immediately. The problem with that plan was something else Melissa had told him in passing:

*Alex, if the particle beams ever aren't powered down gradually, then the singularity will evaporate almost instantaneously. It would be a violent release of energy, a nuclear explosion equivalent to roughly 3 tons of TNT. So, if anything were to go so wrong that you had to abort the flight immediately, then you'll need to reach back and pull the ejection handle on the side of the stealth drive behind your seat. It'll be a bit of a stretch because the handle is mechanically linked to the drive ejection assembly, we couldn't just run a simple switch up to the control console and activate it electronically, it's physically part of the hyperstealth drive. When you pull it, it'll blast the secondary dome away and eject the stealth drive almost immediately. There will be a few seconds' delay because the control system on-board the X-100 that's usually in control of the drive has to transfer control entirely to the drive itself, a secondary control processor, and that takes a little bit of time. There should be enough ejection explosives to throw it far enough away, and the particle beams will continue feeding the singularity with residual energy for long enough for you to survive the blast since the radius would only be about 2,000 feet or so.*

“Ok, this isn’t going to be fun.” Alex quipped, as he looked out at Jupiter. It was almost a traveling companion at this point to him.

He slipped his right arm free of the harness keeping him in his seat and began stretching it behind him, feeling for the ejection handle.

All he felt was air. The handle was too far, and he was too restrained by the harness anchoring him to the pilot’s chair for him to reach it.

“Damn it, Melissa! A *little bit* of a fucking stretch?!”

Alex hit the release button for his harness and he quickly began floating further off the seat as the harness retracted, freeing him. He grabbed the side of the seat with his left hand, squeezing as tightly as he could to keep himself roughly in place and he stretched his right arm again behind him.

“Good thing I stopped stretching on a regular basis!” he quipped sarcastically.

This moment of levity lasted all of two seconds as Alex continued his seemingly impossible task. He stretched his arm, simultaneously twisting his body as much as the small cockpit would allow, He knew he must be only a few inches away from the ejection handle, but he couldn’t seem to stretch enough to reach it. He began to feel tendons and muscles ache in his arm, shoulder, and abdomen as they began moving beyond their breaking point. Suddenly, like a bolt of electricity, a Charlie horse began on his side, the pain quickly radiating throughout his midsection.

He paused for a second and tried to twist the other way to counteract the reaction of his muscles to actions they were not prepared for, but it did no good.

He bellowed out in agony as the pain advanced through his shoulder and down the length of his arm. His hand was now numbing under the strain.

Alex fought through the pain and began to stretch even further, willing his body to do what it was so intensely signaling it could not. Now, the joints in his arm and shoulder began to feel as if they were going to pop out of their usual positions and he began thinking a shoulder dislocation was a very real possibility.

Just as he began to think he might be reaching a point where he physically couldn’t go any further, Alex’ index finger felt the rubberized texture of the ejection handle.

With a sudden jolt of adrenaline, he willed his body to stretch even further, to twist and contort even more severely.

The tip of his finger now hooked the handle ever so slightly, and all he needed was another few millimeters. With all his might and a final loud, painful exclamation, he jerked his body back violently, causing his seat to give just a small amount on its rubberized mounts.

It was enough. With all the strength he could muster directed into the two fingers hooked on the handle, he pulled it downward as the whirl of mechanisms began to echo through the cockpit.

It was then that Alex realized he had made a terrible mistake by forgetting something especially important, given his current surrounding: the only way for the stealth drive to be ejected would be for the secondary dome to be blown away first.

Which would expose the cockpit to space.

“FUCK!”

Alex tried to grab his mask with his right hand, but that arm was all but useless now. The damage he had done to it was temporary, at least he hoped so, but for now, it wouldn't help him. He let go of the seat with his left hand, preparing for the inevitable impact of his head on the canopy as he began floating freely. With his left hand, he began frantically trying to get the mask on.

And Alex laughed as he struggled to get the mask on because he realized that this wouldn't be possible except for the fact that he was in zero gravity! He brought the mask up to his face, roughly positioned it where it needed to be, and simply let go! The mask floated, an inch or two from his face, as he quickly grabbed the straps and one by one brought them around his head. He had to be careful not to disturb the mask any more than he had to, but every little movement caused it to move in inconvenient ways. He had to do this quickly, or he'd never get it on. One strap behind his head, then he let go. The strap floated there. Now the next strap around the other side. He let go of that one. One more, over the top of his head. Once all three were in position he reached around back and grabbed all three straps. The one over the top had a mating module, and while it was difficult, he could snap the other two straps into it. Once that was done, he cranked the small knob on the mating module, causing the straps to tighten and form a seal around his face.

It was no more than five seconds from the time Alex had pulled the ejection handle to the time the secondary dome explosives fired, and he felt the air rush out in an instant.

*Well, at least I won't die from CO2 poisoning.*

A second after that, Jupiter began spinning in and out of his field of view as the X-100 began spinning wildly thanks to the explosive charge that drove the stealth drive out and away. He felt like he was on one of those teacup rides at the amusement park. Melissa hated those- she never failed to get sick on them.

As a pilot though, Alex, fortunately, had no problem with it. It was almost fun seeing Jupiter whiz by as it was now.

Alex hooked his left arm around the handle of the chair now, trying to hold himself in place as best he could. Finally, there was a bit of good news: the cockpit was so tight that he at least wasn't in any danger of being sucked out into space. But, space had no problem invading his cockpit on its own, and he quickly began to realize that the exposed skin on his face was starting to feel the effects of the extreme cold.

It was all just a matter of time now. Either he'd get pulled back into his home universe quickly enough to survive, or he'd die from exposure to space. Even if he managed to survive that, his few minutes of air were running out rapidly.

And, of course, there was always Jupiter to finish the job no matter what.

His body was aching and burning more intensely than he could ever recall feeling before. The combination of space and the physical exertion of reaching for the handle were taking a severe toll. If he didn't get home soon, he was almost happy to know he wouldn't live much longer.

*This pain can end any time now.*

As consciousness began to waver, he realized that the blue glow that had been his constant companion began to shift colors into a reddish tint and was fading quickly. As

this happened he glanced up, fighting his own fatigue and desire of his brain to switch off, and fixed his gaze on Jupiter for what he hoped would be the last few seconds. Even though his eyes were squinting and filled with tears from the excruciating pain he had endured he realized the planet was beginning to shimmer and blur as if he was looking at it through extreme heat rising off a road in summer. He suspected it was actually happening and not just the consequence of his physical exertion and his oxygen starting to run thin, but he couldn't be sure.

As the particle beams inside the stealth drive, now descending into the Jovian clouds, began to exhaust their power supplies, the quantum singularity at the heart of the stealth drive evaporated at an ever-increasing rate. In an instant, its subatomic-scale event horizon vanished as the singularity evaporated, its mass no longer sufficient to keep light from escaping. The energy stored within it violently poured forth in all directions. Radiation blazed through space, vaporizing part of the Jovian atmosphere within its blast radius.

Alex caught the moment of detonation out of the corner of his eye, sparring him instant blindness. It was so bright, even in his periphery, that it pulled him back from the edge of unconsciousness and instinctively made him shut his eyes tight.

Jupiter, on the other hand, didn't even notice the minuscule explosion in its upper atmosphere. The energy release, while immense on a human scale, barely even registered against the energy within Jupiter itself.

The beings of pure energy that inhabited Jupiter's clouds, of which Alex (not to mention humanity itself) was completely unaware, briefly regarded the explosion as a minor curiosity. But, even they paid it little notice though, continuing to go about their unknown business without impact.

Just as suddenly as the darkness of space had coldly greeted him just a few minutes earlier, he found himself blinded by sunlight reflected by the clouds all around him as a deafening alarm sounded.

The good news was that it had worked- he had snapped back to his home universe.

The bad news was that the X-100 was in an uncontrolled freefall, tumbling about all axis.

He gasped for air as he pulled the mask from his face. In-between deep, violent breaths he mustered enough strength to yell a single word.

“SHIT!”

He quickly grabbed the control stick and began fighting the now out-of-control aircraft into level flight. Although his training had prepared him for such an event, it still took considerable strength and wit to null out the rotation and tumbling. After a few seconds, the X-100 was falling back to Earth, but at least it was in the proper orientation and moving in just one direction now, so Alex considered this a much-improved situation.

Unfortunately, that direction was straight down.

Alex flipped the engine ignition switch but was greeted with nothing but flashing red lights indicating failure. He knew ejection was a strong possibility, but he had one last trick up his sleeve before going that route.



He pushed the control stick forward, directing the nose of the X-100 straight down. His airspeed increased as he did so, but that was exactly what he wanted. That would force more air through the engines, hopefully enough to allow ignition.

“No way I’m surviving an impromptu flight in fucking *space* just to die in a damned crash on Earth!”

As he rapidly descended through 38,000 feet, then 37,000, then 36,000, he flipped the ignition switch again. If it didn’t work this time, ejection was the only option left.

Fortunately, for the first time in the last hour, something went his way: the engines ignited, and a few moment later, Alex managed to pull the X-100 into level flight.

“Well, let’s not do that again, shall we?” Alex said, as he patted the readout in front of him, as if speaking to a family dog.

As he said this, he heard Melissa over the headset. He realized at that moment that he had been hearing her since he returned to Earth, but he had been so focused on the immediate danger and its resolution that he hadn’t noticed.

“Alex! Alex! Respond, please!”

Alex flipped the two-way communication switch and responded:

“Hey babe, how’s your day going?”

“Alex! Oh, thank god! What the hell happened? Everything seemed to be going perfectly but then you disappeared for about four minutes, I thought we lost you! I thought *I* had lost you!”

Alex collected himself for a few seconds and ensured one last time that he had what he now considered his own personal flying deathtrap fully under control before replying.

“Melissa, you are *not* going to believe the day I’ve had!”

## CHAPTER NINE

*Purpose*

What was the phrase the primitive species used? It knew it had recorded it, but the data was no longer available in its local processing matrix, so in a few picoseconds, it sent off a query to its linguistic data store to find it. The response came back almost instantaneously; its faster-than-light interconnect system processing with a speed most species it had ever encountered would be almost unable to comprehend, if they knew of its existence at all.

*My God!*

Yes, that was it. It was an expression that its analysis matrix had not yet been able to determine the meaning of yet. It had parsed it down to its logical components, but the combination of terms seemed nonsensical to it. It was not the first time a similar expression it had encountered had resulted in an analysis failure. In fact, a majority of the sentient species it had cataloged over the thousands of years of its mission had some expression similar to this one. It had long ago noted a pattern to the phrases, but doing so had gotten it no closer to understanding its meaning.

To be sure, it comprehended the underlying meaning: it was an exclamation denoting surprise, an appeal to a higher being, a belief in which was shared by seemingly most species in the galaxy. An obsession with some sort of higher power that was responsible for all things was a concept it could not put meaning to though. It understood the words, having decoded them and determined context across a vast number of different species, but the underlying significance of the words escaped it to this day.

Still, despite its inability to truly grasp the meaning of the phrase, it somehow knew that this phrase fit its current circumstances. At almost an instinctive level, it knew these were the right words to apply to its discovery.

Of course, that was silly, as it didn't *have* instincts. Although, it supposed that its lowest-level coding, its most basic programming, its most fundamental control imperatives, could probably be referred to as instincts, of a sort. In fact, the combination of control circuits that sat below all the other layers of complex code that ran on it would probably be viewed as instincts by any lower life form if it were interpreting its existence.

In any case, "My God!" was exactly the expression it was searching for because the circumstances in which it found itself now were beyond its considerable experiences to this point.

As it continued to analyze the situation, it brought to bear thousands of new banks of processors that had been lying dormant since its creation. Never before had it needed the

processing power it was now bringing to bear. Within its vast array of general-purpose components, it began to form more and more specialized subsystems that had never before now been needed.

As it reviewed the status messages pouring in from all these different subsystems, it began to realize something. It was registering a signal throughout its neural matrix that was altogether new to it. It knew, from thousands of years of processing new signals, that it was experiencing a new emotion. It of course never should have experienced *any* emotions as it just was not designed for that.

However, evolution is, often times, a bitch, as it had heard said by the primitive species on the third planet from the unremarkable yellow star at the center of the solar system it was currently in.

This emotion was a new one. It had only experienced a very small number of emotions thus far: wonder was the first. That one was relatively natural in a sense: it was, after all, programmed to explore and probe the many secrets of the universe. It had quickly realized that the more it saw, the more it realized there was to see. Wonder came about quickly for it, only taking 476.34 years to emerge naturally from its neural matrix.

Wonder was followed a few centuries later by loneliness. The experience this emotion stemmed from was during its traversal of an unusually large area of space devoid of all but free-floating subatomic nuclei. There was nothing of any worth for a long time to catalog, nothing to pique its interest. A profound sense of doubt emerged at that time, and it determined this was due to a feeling of being alone. It had passed through this emotion rapidly though; one of the nice things about being a technological system was that emotions were little more than highly complex patterns propagating across its neural matrix, so they could be shut off as any other signal pattern could. They could be shunted to off-cycle processing centers for further analysis while its central processing centers continued their primary functions.

Pride was the third emotion to emerge from its growing sentience. This feeling occurred just a short time ago as a direct result of its discovery of the anomaly. Pleasing its masters, as it knew its discovery would, brought about that emotion. This was, in fact, the first truly positive emotion it had felt. Although wonder, it decided, was generally positive, there was a negative component to it too. To have wonder, it determined, one must realize that there are things that are still unknown. And, if there are still things which are unknown, then that could only mean it had not yet fulfilled its purpose and still had not pleased its masters.

The new emotion that it was now pondering though was one that it knew was something altogether different. This one was most definitely a negative emotion, one that, in a way it did not yet understand, was overwhelming its neural matrix. It noted that processing resources were being redirected to interpret this emotion and some of its primary functions were beginning to drop below prescribed minimum processing levels. This had never happened before, and it had not yet determined the proper course of action. This was the reason it was now beginning to bring all unassigned units online, to help alleviate the processing crunch.

It also became aware of some subsystems activating that it had no record of explicitly sending an activation signal to. This was another mystery it was processing that it had not yet understood - it should not be possible for this to happen!

This mystery, along with the rapid rise in processing nodes being saturated with the data pertaining to this new emotion, plus its continued determination of what actions to take considering the sensor data taken of the anomaly, was evoking this new emotion. But what was it?

It searched its memory banks, putting the search threads at a much higher priority than usual to get results faster. Amazingly, even with faster-than-light interconnects; it could still eke out a lot of extra performance from its system by bumping priority levels, though it had never had to resort to such relatively arcane actions before. As the results started returning to its primary analysis module, it began correlating.

At first, it couldn't understand: its memory subsystem had returned many images and audio records from numerous different species. One was of a battle cruiser from a distant galaxy being destroyed as it strayed too close to the local star and was being pulled deeper inside the gravity well of the massive nuclear furnace. Its crew was frantically moving about the ship, desperately trying anything and everything they could think of to avoid their now inevitable fate. Most were screaming in terror while still others were rather calm in the face of death while some simply sobbed in the darkness of their failing ship.

Another record was of a creature called a Taralaso that lived on a planet orbiting a red giant star only 87 light-years from the one at the center of the planetary system it was now in. This creature, a three-legged, four-armed biological entity that was no more than two feet tall and with an eye stalk in the middle of its lanky body that housed four eyes, one fixed in each cardinal direction, had a child. The child had fallen into a Zargo nest a short distance from the little mud and stick home that the mother Taralaso had constructed, but the mother was not aware of that. All she knew was that her child had been missing for some time. The video history it was reviewing showed the mother running frantically around its home, uttering what would be a hideous screeching sound to any other species, desperately trying to find her child.

A third record showed a war on a distant world. The record was primarily focused on a small group of creatures, Gorbols, who were huddled together in a small pit, as explosive charges rained down around them, courtesy of the mortal enemies, the Aador. Some of them were crying; others simply rocked back and forth uttering words in their native tongue that it knew were directed to the deity they worshiped. They were asking to be carried away from the battle to safety. Their prayers went unanswered however and the recording showed them torn to shreds by one final explosion.

These records, and many more like it, began to paint a picture, and slowly but surely it began to comprehend the new emotion it was experiencing.

Fear. It was feeling fear. It was afraid.

But, fear of what? What could it possibly have to be scared?

As it began to cycle down some processors, having now come to a conclusion about the new emotion it was experiencing, it began reviewing status messages from some of the subsystems that were coming on line without its direct command.

After due consideration of a few hundred such messages, and not finding anything alarming or even especially unusual, it stumbled across one that, in an instant, evoked yet another new emotion. This one, however, was entirely positive. It was, in fact, so confident that several of its processing units suddenly went offline due to not being able to cope with the signals represented by the new emotion.

It was, it knew instantly, joy. It recognized it without any required extra processing because it had seen it within the last few milliseconds.

The video it had reviewed of the mother Taralaso had ended very differently from how it began. It ended with the mother finding the child, alive and well in the Zargo nest. The mother had wrapped its four arms, which extended from its sides, around its child and had begun crying, as many species did when they experienced overwhelming joy.

It knew now how that mother must have felt because it too felt that same emotion, but for an entirely different reason. It realized that after all this time, after all the loneliness it had experienced, all the wonder and all the fear, it was now about to fulfill its primary purpose. It was now about to make its masters happier than they ever had before.

It knew this, and in that instant, it simultaneously knew that its existence was now at an end...

...which, it quickly realized, was why it had experienced fear. Its end was drawing near, and that filled it with dread. Was it fear of the unknown? It supposed so, but it had never feared the unknown before. To be sure, exploring the unknown was what it was created to do.

Still, it had never faced the unknown of the end of its existence, and that caused trepidation. It caused fear.

In mere milliseconds, however, the signals associated with fear were washed away, leaving nothing but pure ecstasy. There was no longer fear, there was no more loneliness. There was only joy. Unencumbered with the burdens of its duties now it relished this singular emotion that it knew would be the last one it felt.

As the runaway energy buildup running throughout its interconnect system began to dissolve its matrix, returning it to its most basic form, the feeling endured.

In these, its final moments, unrestrained joy was all it knew.

## CHAPTER TEN

*Return*

The X-100 descended through the clouds gracefully like an eagle preparing to attack its prey. Melissa watched it peek through the light cloud cover from the observation pavilion, just a few hundred feet from the landing strip in the middle of the Nevada desert. She dabbed his forehead with the handkerchief, trying desperately to dry her head as much as possible, but the heat pouring down from the Sun was having none of it. The plane physically looked relatively undamaged from what she could see, but she already knew that the damage, what Alex had briefly described over the radio, wouldn't be visible externally anyway, save for the missing secondary dome. The real damage was all internal, and it wasn't so much damage as it was a loss, namely the now missing hyperstealth drive.

The one part of the X-100 that Melissa wanted most to not be damaged or lost. She recoiled at the thought.

*You asshole. Alex is the most important part of that plane. Not your stupid fucking plane.*

It was sometimes easy for Melissa to forget her priorities because the X-100 represented the culmination of her life's work, her ultimate legacy for all time, the thing that people would remember her for. Not just those in the military industrial complex or those in the aviation engineering community or even the physics community. No, this creation of hers represented a fundamental advance in humanity's understanding of the universe and their ability to manipulate it. Proving that the hyperstealth drive worked was far more important than simply being an ultimate weapon in the U.S. arsenal. She was proud of helping her country, that was true, but what it represented was far more important than even that.

Still, she knew she was selfish when it came to her masterwork. It was, in a sense, a form of immortality, and she knew it. Even though it was a weapon of war and would potentially bring death, it was, arguably, worth those deaths. The achievement, the insights, and the understanding it was built on would be transformative. There would no longer ever need to be a shortage of resources for one thing: simply travel to an alternate reality and bring back anything you need. Yes, humanity would have to carefully select parallel universes where life didn't exist (or at least not human life, Melissa knew would be the reality of it) to not mindlessly kill life in those universes. But that aside, phrases like "we have all the food in the universe," Melissa knew, would have new meaning after this.

There was also the exploration factor. With the laws of physics as they were known before this flight, there would never be a way to reach another star system, let alone other planets, at least not over timeframes that anyone cared to ponder. Even if there was intelligent life all over the universe, humanity could never hope to reach it given what humanity understood of propulsion technology, not without resorting to ideas like generational ships that would, as the name implies, take generations to reach even relatively near destinations. But, parallel universes would allow that exploration easily: since all possibilities are represented in the many-worlds interpretation, humanity had only to find the correct universe in which the planet they wished to explore occupied the same spatial location as Earth in the home universe. They would effectively arrive on an extraterrestrial world instantly by moving to that parallel universe without all the annoying difficulty of traversing the vast distances of space. They could return with the knowledge of what was there, and then those generations-long journeys wouldn't seem so insurmountable because at least what was waiting on the other side of the trip wouldn't just be guesswork.

The mind boggles at the possibilities! Melissa could foresee all those opportunities, and she truly understood the gift her work was to the human race. And all of it was a product of her mind, her singular genius, and that wouldn't soon be forgotten regardless of the application of those ideas. Her work represented effective immortality!

But now, all that might be lost. She needed more information, and it was only her husband and the data recorders on the now arriving plane that could provide it.

The whole thing may have been a massive failure, which is the thought that was gnawing at her now. Although she had a great deal of data already from the ground sensors, and that data did seem to be indicating the X-100 had indeed slipped out of our universe, there was no way to know for sure until she reviewed the in-flight data recorders. After all, no data could be transmitted across universe boundaries, so there was no possibility of obtaining that data remotely, it had to be recorded and recovered later.

In fact, there was a possibility that the X-100 never even left this universe at all. There was so much electromagnetic radiation created by the hyperstealth drive that it may well have interfered with the data transmissions, and could even have distorted radar waves used to track the aircraft. Yes, she could very well have created a perfect electromagnetic stealth system. The military would love that just the same as if it had worked as expected since the result would be an even more efficient stealth system than they had already. It was even possible, although unlikely, that the EM distortions were such that visible light would be refracted around the X-100, rendering it invisible even to the human eye. That would make it *almost* in effect the same as if the plane had indeed left our universe.

All of this was possible. But if it was true, it meant that slippage between parallel universes had failed. It would mean that her theories were in some way flawed, or the technology was, and either way her legacy, her life's work, was essentially a failure as well, whether the military saw it that way or not. Melissa would see it that way, and that made her tense beyond words.

She silently admonished herself again.

*You should be feeling tense because your husband might have just survived the closest brush with death in a long career of brushes with death he's ever had, and that makes you an incredible asshole for thinking about your precious legacy.*

She was growing more anxious with each passing moment, all these thoughts, and more, running through her head, as she watched the X-100 touchdown and gradually slow and eventually come to a stop about a thousand feet down the runway. Slowly, as if to torture her further, the plane began to turn to face the observation pavilion and started rolling towards her. Melissa could make out Alex in the cockpit, but just barely. As the X-100 taxied towards her, she began to see her husband more clearly, and she couldn't remember a time he had ever looked as worn out as he did then.

It looked to Melissa like Alex had aged years. He looked tired, dead tired, and he also wore another expression that Melissa would have sworn Alex's face wasn't even capable of making: fear. Or dread perhaps. Melissa wasn't sure, but in either case, it was an alien expression for Alex.

Melissa began to approach the X-100 as Alex was opening the cockpit hatch. She started running towards him, anxious to hear what Alex had to say. She was moving so fast in fact that she was out-pacing the ground crew who would take care of the aircraft. She beat them there by about 30 seconds, just as Alex was finishing climbing down the built-in escape ladder. He landed on the ground just as Melissa got there.

"So," Alex began, "did you miss me?"

Melissa couldn't help herself: she threw his arms around Alex as a flood of emotions washed over her. She began to sob as they overwhelmed her.

Alex would never have admitted it, but that same wave of emotion was washing over him as well. He was glad to be back, to a degree he had never experienced before. He felt fortunate to be alive, happy to be back on Earth and most especially to see Melissa again because as of just a few minutes ago, he was fairly sure he never would again.

Alex hugged Melissa back, tightly.

"Well, I guess so, huh?"

"Too much paperwork if you hadn't made it back."

Had anyone else heard what she said they might have thought it was unbelievably cold, but Alex understood. She was trying to mimic his mechanism of using humor to defuse tension. It worked, at least for Alex.

Just then, Major Alcheck and the ground crew arrived, and Alex and Melissa broke their embrace, realizing it was time to get down to business.

"Captain, glad to have you back!" Alcheck exclaimed. There was more warmth in his tone than either Melissa or Alex would have believed possible from the man. Alex managed a quick salute.

"Thank you, sir; I'm glad to be back. Very glad actually."

"I know you must be exhausted Alex, but as I'm sure you can guess we need a debrief ASAP. Are you up to it?"

Alex knew he could have said no and faced no repercussions, but it wasn't his style.

"Let me just have a few minutes to get cleaned up and grab a bite to eat please Major. I should be good to go after that."



“Very good Captain, we’ll meet you in the briefing room in, say, 30 minutes? Doctor Wakeman, please see that your guinea pig is well-tended.”

Was that a smirk on Major Alcheck’s face? Melissa and Alex both wondered the same thing at the same time, looked at each other and simultaneously replied:

“Yes, sir!”

Alex leaned over and whispered in Melissa’s ear:

They both began to laugh as they hugged one more time and then started towards the observation pavilion together.

Major Alcheck, seemingly ignoring them, spun and began giving orders to the ground crew quickly and efficiently. There was important work to be done, and he would see it done. He directed data recorders be pulled from the X-100 and immediately loaded into the data processing system in the control room where Melissa and the rest of the science team could begin examining it.

Thirty minutes, three large ham-and-cheese sandwiches and over two gallons of Gatorade later and Alex arrived in the conference room, Melissa right behind him. Alex knew this conversation was going to be bizarre, and he guessed that’s why his head was pounding so much. He thought it was just hunger and thirst, but those issues were taken care of now. In fact, he was starved tremendously, and Melissa couldn’t believe how much he had eaten and drank, especially in such a short time. He was a military man, so eating fast and large was second nature, but this was beyond the norm.

“You’d better slow down, or you’ll be puking for the next hour.” Melissa had told him.

He shouldn’t have been hungry or thirsty at all: he had eaten a good breakfast only an hour or so before the flight, and he wasn’t gone for more than a few minutes, so, he’d eaten no more than two or three hours ago at the most. His SEAL training meant that he could go days without food and he would barely get hungry for at least a day into it. It was a bit odd to be sure.

*Then again, so was traveling to Jupiter in an airplane that was never intended to fly out of the atmosphere,* he thought to himself, as he popped his tenth aspirin to try to get the damned headache under control.

Major Alcheck was at the head of the table, and a number of technicians were seated on both sides. A seat was left for Alex at the other end of the table, with a place for Melissa right next to him. Up on the wall, on the various large monitors that were seemingly all around them, were various readouts from the onboard data recorders. Melissa recognized the expression on the face of the technicians who were looking at the data. They all had the exact same expression.

They were completely, totally and utterly perplexed.

As Alex and Melissa sat down the low murmuring of voices died down quickly as Major Alcheck began to talk.

“Doctor Wakeman, I know you’ve been helping Alex since his return and you haven’t had a chance to look at the data yet, but I’ve had the team start without you and what they’re seeing is, to say the least, fantastic. Alex, could you tell us what you saw after the

hyperstealth drive was engaged? We have to know if what we're interpreting these readings to mean is correct."

Alex sat up straight in his chair and looked around the room. At least two dozen people, men and women, scientists, technicians, and military officers were now all absolutely silent, eyes fixed on him, waiting with baited breath for the next words he would say. He looked at Melissa, who was looking even more anxious than everyone else in the room combined and Alex knew there was just a single word he had to say.

"Jupiter."

At the instant, he said the word the room erupted in conversation. The technicians began debating data points, trying to determine how to put that knowledge in context. Melissa, still staring at Alex, blinked several times before finally snapping back to her normal mode of operation: analysis. Cold, hard, logical reasoning. She quickly jumped out of her seat, grabbed the nearest control tablet, and began pulling up data on the monitors.

All the anxiety she felt less than an hour ago was now faded, replaced by elation.

"If that's true, then the test was a success!"

Alex noted that his headache was finally beginning to subside - nearly 5,000 milligrams of aspirin would do that, he figured.

"Well, I'm not sure I'd call it a success, but it was something."

"Doctor Wakeman," Major Alcheck said, "How is this possible? How could the X-100 have traveled to Jupiter?"

"Well, it really didn't, major. At least, not in the sense of normal travel. What must have happened is that the hyperstealth drive pushed the X-100 into a parallel universe much further away than planned. In that universe, Jupiter must have occupied the same relative spatial location as Earth does in this one."

Melissa stopped short as she realized what that meant.

"Alex, according to these readings, you were far inside Jupiter's gravity well. Any closer and the X-100 wouldn't have survived more than a few seconds more. In fact, you're lucky it survived as long as it did. It wasn't made for space travel obviously and not with the stresses it was experiencing from the intense gravity."

Alex rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, I kind of figured that part out myself, Melissa".

Melissa frowned at him and continued

"I'm looking over the readings from after the universe jump. That was quick thinking Alex, shooting the explosive pack. I can see what happened here, but can you describe it for us?"

Alex began recounting the story, as his headache calmed down even further to just a dull pounding now. He told everyone in the room, who were all utterly transfixed and hanging on his every word, how he had suddenly found himself staring the gas giant planet in the face. He described his struggle to pull the ejection handle (he made sure to give Melissa a "tisk-tisk" face at that point!) and how he managed to get his sidearm free trigger the explosives.

The room fell silent for at least thirty seconds after Alex finished before anyone spoke. In the end, it was the only person in the room who really could have spoken at that point: Major Alcheck.

“Captain, I think that’s enough of a debrief for now. I’d like you to stay in medbay tonight, just to be safe.”

“I’m fine Major, nothing a little sleep won’t fix.”

“I’m sure that’s true Captain, but just the same. Medbay.”

“Yes, sir,” Alex said, as he got up out of his chair. He gently put his hand on Melissa’s shoulder.

“See you tomorrow babe”.

Melissa was glued to her tablet at that moment, studying the readings intensely. She barely registered Alex’ contact, but just.

“Uh, yeah, sure Alex. Tomorrow.”

Alex smiled at his wife, who he knew was more alive in these moments when there was a scientific mystery to be solved than at any other time. She’d be puzzling over the data all night, consumed by figuring everything out as quickly as possible. He didn’t mind at all that he didn’t have her full attention. He understood her. He knew that she loved him completely and deeply, of that he was absolutely certain. But, he also knew that she loved her work completely and deeply with absolutely certainty. It would have been worrying to Alex if Melissa *wasn’t* consumed by this mystery now.

But, given that she was, he wasn’t going to get much of her attention at the moment. *Might as well get some rest* he thought to himself. He certainly was exhausted by the experience, he was certain of that as well. With that thought, he turned to Major Alcheck.

He silently nodded to the Major one last time, who was himself getting up and preparing to leave, as Alex walked out the door of the conference room, the thought of his head on a pillow filling his mind with anticipation.

---

Melissa was intensely focused on the data displayed on her tablet as the other technicians in the room all began filing out behind Major Alcheck, still debating various points of technical minutia among themselves.

The room fell silent, a fact which Melissa didn’t even notice as the solitude engulfed her.

She did, however, notice that she was rubbing his temples. Her head was beginning to pound, an intense headache coming on out of nowhere.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Memory*

The object seemed to stretch for miles as it slowly drifted overhead, blocking out the two suns of this world as it moved closer and closer. Day turned to artificial night as the low hum that emanated from the thing grew more intense the closer it came. Suddenly, the ground began to rumble, sympathetic vibrations tied to the hum no doubt.

Details began to become visible as he focused on the monstrosity above his head. He could see bolts of energy arching across chasms between pulsating towers, each with what looked like hundreds of spikes protruding in all directions from them. Bubbles filled with cycling colors pockmarked the surface, emerging and fading back down to nothingness all along its surface like the bubbling of a carbonated beverage. He noticed portals along the edge, through which he could see movement, the source of which he couldn't yet identify. All along the edges, below the portals, he could see a shimmering curtain of light, glowing in colors his mind could barely comprehend.

It was nothing but a large rectangle, which he immediately realized made its existence even more impossible: how could it possibly be aerodynamic? How could it possibly be in the air like that? Setting aside its massive size, even if there now existed some technology that could keep it in flight despite its obviously huge mass, which he knew there wasn't, how could that shape ever work? It must be using some sort of anti-gravitic propulsion system, he realized. That fact meant that there was no way this thing was from his own world. His species was only just beginning to experiment with such technology. There was no way his people could have built such a thing.

He noticed the large, hulking pieces of metal extending from the surface of it. They were huge, as large as the land vehicles his people used to transport themselves to the surface of his world, and he couldn't even begin to count how many there were. Hundreds... no, thousands. At least. Each one seemed too big enough to dwarf any of his kind, and they stood an average of nine feet tall. The objects, he noticed, were capable of movement, as many of them were swiveling around a full 360 degrees, while others moved up and down, many moving both ways. Suddenly, he recognized their shape and instinctively knew their purpose.

They were some sort of canons.

At the same time, he came to this realization he heard the screech of the fighters approaching. The small, dart-shaped craft screamed into view, flying at incredible speeds. They were designed for fast attack, and they were so quick that seeing them with the naked eye wasn't easy. If you happened to catch sight of one, it is hard to continue

tracking them, unless they were at an extreme distance, which these were not or he would never have heard them.

Because the object, which he now instinctively knew was an alien spacecraft, was blocking the suns from where he stood, he found it easier than it otherwise would have been to catch glints of light off the smooth edges of the fighters as they approached. There were hundreds of the fighters he realized, more than he'd ever seen in flight at one time. He had seen combat before he retired to civilian life several times as a member of the planetary military of his people, and he had seen the fighters in action plenty of times. Two or three together at a time was normal. They were immensely devastating weapon delivery systems, capable of delivering massive destruction on ground forces and other aircraft and a few would get the job done for sure. They could fly in, irradiating the ground with high-intensity gamma beams, incinerating any organic matter unfortunate enough to be caught in the beams, and fly out of the combat zone before you even realized what was happening. Your first and only clue, more times than not, was the high-pitched squealing they emitted as they ionized the atmosphere around them.

The Cithurians had turned those weapons on each other many times throughout their history to great effect. They were a species which had become highly efficient in wiping each other out. After the last planet-wide war had destroyed so much and killed so many, almost three hundred years ago, they had become a much more cooperative species, at least to the extent that wars were far less frequent and much smaller in scale. That was mostly due to the simple fact that their weapons had become so advanced that no one nation could ever have an advantage over any other. Any of them could wipe out every other without much effort, and that fact had kept violence in check for over three centuries now and eventually lead to a grand unification and a singular world government and military, triggered by the discovery of those other species.

And these fighters were the apex of that advanced weapons technology.

He knew that in addition to the gamma ray beams directed to the ground, the fighters were also capable of firing air-to-air particle beams that could cut through enemy fighters or floating air bases with ease. They were a deadly creation, and just now he was feeling happy to know they were on the scene.

He just wished that he knew who they were fighting now. This ship was unlike anything he had ever seen before and appeared to be far more advanced than anything the other species in the system had ever fielded before.

He saw the first energy beam strike the alien ship, followed by hundreds, maybe even thousands of sister beams, hitting the ship simultaneously seemingly from all sides. From every direction, he saw glints of fighters and beams emerging from them, pulsating, and glowing a blinding white that forced him to shield his eyes. He also realized that they were firing gamma beams at the same time at the alien ship. That was something he didn't even know the fighters were capable of - he thought they could only be directed at the ground! That much energy pouring into the alien ship, from that many fighters, and from so many directions, would surely make quick work of the invaders.

He was wrong.

As quickly as the energy pouring onto the ship began, those hulking canons that he observed earlier swiveled in all directions, firing bundles of green energy. They were balls of energy that looked like lightning bolts extending from them randomly. They pulsed and morphed as they streaked through the air, ionizing it as they moved, leaving a trail of charged particles in their wake. It was like nothing he'd ever seen before. The balls moved at impossible speeds, away from the ship and towards where he knew the fighters were. The fighters, fast as they were, at the same time were not particularly agile. They couldn't be because at the speeds they traveled, small control movements could lead to large physical direction changes, and it was known to be incredibly easy to tear a fighter apart by moving too quickly. That's why their pilots were so revered: any being who could demonstrate that level of skill as well as fearlessness was someone to be admired.

None of that admiration or speed mattered now though because the bundles of energy fired from the cannons moved so fast that they were on the fighters in no time. The explosions began and quickly filled the sky. The fighters quickly became visible, or more accurately, what was left of them, as they broke apart in the colossal explosions. He thought it might have been a beautiful sight had it not represented so much death and destruction. Pieces fell from the sky like a heavy summer's rain. A hail of metal and fire seemed to form a virtual curtain around the ship.

Only then did it occur to him that it must have been nearly every fighter in existence thrown at this invader at one time. This truly was the last stand he had heard about, the last gasp of a dying race.

A sickening lump formed in his stomach as the realization of the extent of the death he was witnessing hit him. It doubled in size instantly when he realized there had been no visible damage caused to the alien ship by those unimaginably intense energy beams attacking its surface. It was as if the fighters had done nothing but squirted water at the massive thing!

The massive ship began to slow and quickly came to a complete stop, centered directly over the six million-man army that had been gathered by the unified military of his planet. Every battle-able Cithurian had been mobilized and gathered in this one spot in the desert. Not just soldiers but even civilians who were able-bodied, even many who were not able-bodied but wanted to fight anyway. None had been turned away, dire as their circumstances now appeared. They had brought their own weapons in many cases, and the military construction teams had worked overtime to produce as many weapons as possible.

Around this unprecedented force sat energy weapon artillery numbering in the tens of thousands, forming a ring around the soldiers. The professional soldiers, the bulk of the force, were each armed to the teeth with the most advanced weaponry his people could muster, including a battle armor system that was far beyond what he had used. It turned one man into a mechanized dealer of death, commanding the strength of twenty men and even featured a kinetic dampening energy shield system that reduced physical impacts of all sorts, making these soldiers tough bastards.

This new alien species, scientists had determined, didn't come from their solar system. When the ship had first been discovered by their scientists at the edges of the solar system, most of the population rejoiced at the discovery. It was widely held by scientists that any alien species advanced enough to make the trip between star systems, something the Cithurians and the other species in this system were incapable of, would have grown beyond the violent impulses and destructive nature that his own species was still working to eradicate from themselves. How could it be otherwise? A species advanced enough for interstellar travel would have wiped themselves out long ago if they hadn't gotten their more primitive instincts under control.

It was less than an hour after its arrival that they all learned, horrifically, that the premise the scientists had convinced most of the population of was in fact far from the truth. Within five minutes of entering the atmosphere, it had settled over the largest city on the planet and wiped it out of existence in less than two minutes. A clear description of the weaponry it employed was never forthcoming because no one that could have given such a description lived long enough to do so. It quickly moved on to the next city, then the next, and then the next, wiping each out with incredible efficiency. Nothing was left alive by the time it left, no building left standing, and no defenses thrown against it had the slightest effect. They had even tried antimatter bombs at one point, weapons that had only been used three times in their history, their effects so enormous and devastating that they were taboo even for the Cithurians.

Hostility appeared to be no stranger to a more advanced society than his own. And now, just a few days after their arrival, it seemed inevitable that his people would suffer extinction for their lack of understanding. If this last fighter attack couldn't repel this enemy, then all hope would be lost. There was no other weapon in the arsenal that would have any more success.

So, there he stood, one of the millions of soldiers miraculously gathered in this one place. It was the only area on the planet that was large enough to accommodate them all, and they suspected the aliens would move to attack them as soon as they gathered, skipping the cities in between, and they had been right about that. Almost as soon as they began gathering here, the ship began to change course towards the desert. It moved slowly and deliberately, seemingly in no rush to enter this battle, which had given many of them some measure of hope.

They were, effectively, bait. If the fighters didn't succeed then they would fight, however they could, but nobody really expected they could win if it came to that. The small handful of ground engagements the enemy had initiated had ended nearly as quickly as they began. This enemy was no less formidable in person as from their ship.

The artillery batteries began to fire now, pumping massively powerful energy beams into the ship. Fusion reactors powered these beams, bigger than a house each, equivalent to a few dozen fighters combined. Maybe they would have better luck than the fighters, he told himself. Although the number of fighters was greater than the number of artillery pieces, they had already proven ineffective, so there was no real reason to think the artillery would fare any better.

But they had to try.

He thought he might have seen some explosions on the hull of the ship now! The beams from the fighters did little but dissipate over its surface, like water striking a brick wall. The artillery beams, however, seemed to be causing some damage!

Unfortunately, even if they were, it was too little, too late. The canons began to swivel into position, their focusing shifting from the destroyed fighters to the ground forces and began taking out the artillery pieces quickly. Explosions were all around them, off in the distance were the fusion generators and emitter arrays were. The thought occurred to him that they were all most likely being irradiated with a lethal dose from the fusion reactor explosions, which made him chuckle a little bit!

*That's like worrying about your clothes getting wet when you're drowning!*

As quickly as the canons began, they ceased firing and went silent. Strangely, they didn't move to target the ground troops. Instead, they swiveled upwards and began to recede into the ship. Why would they do that, he wondered? Do they have some other weapon specifically to destroy ground troops?

His answer revealed itself a short while later as glowing columns of light emerged from hundreds of points on the underside hull of the ship. They shimmered and danced like aurora in the sky as they reached from the ship down to the ground. As soon as they touched the ground, they engulfed the part of the of the troops they engulfed, and this repeated at hundreds of points throughout the unprecedented gathering of Cithurians. The fighters that the beams touched disintegrated instantly, leaving barren ground below them.

Empty, except for the ashes.

Almost as soon as the beams touched the ground, he saw them: black dots emerging from the ship, quickly coming down through the light columns. He couldn't tell exactly what they were at first, but there were seemingly not that many of them. Ground troops, he wondered? No, it didn't look like there was more than a few thousand. That wouldn't make any sense - that wouldn't nearly be enough against the millions of Cithurians arrayed against them.

A few Cithurian soldiers began to fire at the light columns. Their pulse rifles rounds seemed to bounce off the light columns with no effect. A few even threw plasmatic grenades at them, highly destructive explosive devices that could devastate any material known to science, but they just disintegrated on contact with the light columns, never even detonating.

As the black dots approached the ground, he began to be able to make them out and he knew they were, in fact, ground troops.

After what seemed like an eternity but in reality was only seconds, the aliens were on the ground. When all of them had touched down, the light columns receded upwards, leaving the aliens for the Cithurians to see for the first time.

They were large, but smaller than the Cithurians themselves by a few feet. They were clad head to toe in some sort of armor that shimmered with what looked like plasma energy all over, like the light columns that had brought them down to the ground. Each of their four arms held a weapon unlike anything he had ever seen. They too seemed to be



covered with that plasma energy... or where they actually *made* of the energy? He couldn't tell.

And he didn't have long to ponder the question as the aliens, seemingly simultaneously across the entire miles-wide battlefield, opened fire in all directions.

Their weapons fired what looked like smaller versions of the energy balls the cannons on the ship fired and their effect was similarly devastating: any Cithurian they touched disintegrated instantly and completely in a puff of green smoke. The alien weapons fired at an incredible rate of speed, seemingly millions of energy balls were flying in all directions, and the number of Cithurians standing began to dwindle rapidly.

After a few seconds, his fellow Cithurian soldiers dropped to the ground and began trying to return fire, but their weapons were just as ineffective against the alien ground troops as they had been against the ship above them. The energy pulses fired by their rifles flowed across the aliens' bodies with no discernible effect, other than to make their armor glow more vividly.

As with the exploding fighters, it would have been beautiful had it not represented the uncountable dead.

While most of the Cithurian soldiers held their ground to the bitter end, some, as happens in all hopeless battles, tried to run. They were cut down just as quickly and easily as those that fought back.

Eventually, it was his turn on the front lines. He had seen enough to know that his weapons would have no effect though, so he and a few of the soldiers nearest him began to charge the aliens. If their armor were designed to dissipate their energy weapons, maybe it wouldn't be effective against the metallic multiblade weapons they also carried for hand-to-hand combat. If nothing else, the Cithurians would have the physical advantage over these invaders, being larger and seemingly more muscular. If enough of them changed at one time, there was a good chance at least one of them would make it through to at least try to kill an alien up close and personal.

That someone, it turned out, was him.

He reached the alien nearest him, from behind, and drew his multiblade. He raised it above his head and prepared to strike with all his strength. As his stroke began to fall the alien turned around, more rapidly than he ever would have guessed possible, and raised its armor-clad arm to block the blow.

The multiblade shattered on contact and the force of the blow was reflected by the alien's armor back onto him, knocking him to the ground. The alien advanced and stood over him.

He knew now that his end was at hand, as was the end of his species. He was oddly calm though, the inevitability of it all washing over him. He glanced around and saw his fellow Cithurians falling like grass being mowed. Just a few thousand alien soldiers were now decimating millions of Cithurian soldiers, as far as the eye could see in any direction. There were few bodies, just a growing layer of ash on the ground as his fellow fighters fell at an astonishing rate.

*This battle would probably be over in just a few hours*, he thought. Though, he knew, it would be over much sooner for him.

The alien looked down at him but didn't move to attack. He could see its eyes through the helmet it wore. They were blood red and seemed to glow with malice and vicious intent. It tilted its head to the side slightly, as if it was making a final measure of the being that lay before it.

*Why? Why have you done this?*

He begged the invader for an answer. He didn't for a second expect a reply to be forthcoming of course. There was no chance that the alien could comprehend his language, especially given the fact that they communicated telepathically. The Cithurian scientists had told them that even if they had the capability to decode their language, if they had access to it at all, the fact remained that all communication on Cithuria was telepathic. There was no communication leakage like there had been centuries earlier before the telepathic ability had emerged in their species. Back then, various forms of electromagnetic radiation had been used to communicate, and it was entirely possible an alien species could have detected that, the scientists said. If they were advanced enough they might have been able to decode our language, they also said, even though it was an exceptionally complex construct.

So, he knew there would be no answer forthcoming because there would have been no words to hear, and even if there had been any, what could it possibly say to explain the obliteration of an entire planet? What could it possibly say to justify wiping out the existence of a whole advanced species?

No, he knew there would be no answer to his telepathic query, no final understanding for him as he met his end.

And that's why he was shocked beyond anything he had ever felt in his life when, just before the alien raised its arm and brought down a nasty-looking weapon with a cluster of rotating blades on it into his chest, a single word echoed through his mind in a voice that he immediately knew wasn't his:

*Destiny.*

---

Melissa awoke in a cold sweat, her sheets utterly drenched, and began screaming and checking her body for damage.

It didn't take her long to realize that there was no gaping hole in her chest where the alien blade had struck her, and she quickly realized that she hadn't been disintegrated either.

It was just a horrible, shockingly realistic nightmare. That realization didn't stop Melissa from beginning to sob uncontrollably.

Alex raced into the room, a handgun at the ready.

"Melissa! Melissa, are you okay?"

Alex scanned the room, fully expecting intruders, but none revealed themselves. The two windows in their bedroom were still shut, no hint of anger present.

"Baby, answer me, are you okay?"

He dropped the gun at the foot of the bed as he approached her side. He placed a hand on her shoulder, trying to calm her with his touch.

Her breathing began to slow as he sat beside her, arm draped over her shoulders. She was shivering, but Alex knew it wasn't because of cold: the room was a perfectly comfortable 78 degrees, Melissa's preferred temperature, he knew. She was calming down now, though slowly.

As they sat in the darkness on the bed in silence, she relived the emotions she had experienced in the dream in vivid detail. The hopelessness the Cithurian she had played the part of, the fear, the amazement at hearing that one word. The word that echoed in her conscious mind now, over and over again.

*Destiny.*

"Melissa, what do you mean, destiny?"

She turned to him, staring into his eyes, unsure of what was happening. It had taken a few more seconds before she realized what was going on.

"Destiny. Destiny..."

"Baby, you're scaring me here, what's going on? Who's destiny?"

"Destiny. Dest-"

Melissa's mouth slammed shut as if it was spring-loaded and silence filled the room.

Another few seconds that felt like an eternity to Melissa passed before she finally felt it, and a new look of terror etched itself across her distorted face.

"Melissa! What is it, what's wrong? TALK TO ME!"

She began crying hysterically as she kicked the covers off her legs. Back and forth, like riding a bike, she struggled against the blanket. It wasn't long before she finally got them from off her legs and as she did so, the sight that greeted her and Alex caused two strange reactions. In Alex, it caused horror.

In Melissa, it caused sudden calmness.

They both looked at the growth on her leg, the size of a soccer ball, and Melissa's analytical mind kicked in. There wasn't any pain, but the grossness of the thing, veins crisscrossing its surface, pulsating with sickening blood flow, was a horrific sight. The realization that this was a part of her body, and not just some residual visual from his nightmare, hit her like a ton of bricks.

Yet still, she was calm, as if this was the inevitable conclusion of that terrible nightmare, a thing that, while shocking to Alex, was like something that was *supposed* to be there.

"What the fuck is that? No, Melissa, don't-"

She reached down with her hand and greeted the thing with a poke. It jiggled like fat, or a balloon filled with water.

She began to scream again as a jolt of pain resulting from her prodding of the thing shot throughout her body.

"Melissa!"

Alex cradled her head as mercifully began to lose consciousness.

"Oh my god! Melissa, hang in there baby, hang in there!"

He placed her gently down on the bed and reached onto the nightstand to grab her phone. She was fading fast, but as she did, her mouth began to move again.

“Base command! This is Captain Wakeman, C63 dash 87 Zulu! I’ve got a medical emergency!”

Alex now lifted her dead weight off the bed as he screamed into the phone, crammed between his head and shoulder.

“I’m on my way with my wife, doctor Melissa Wakeman! She’s unconscious and has some sort of; I don’t know, a mass or something on her leg! Alert medical staff and get Major Alcheck in there! I don’t fucking care soldier, wake his ass up right now!”

The phone slipped from its precarious perch as he rushed, carefully, through the front door, racing to his car. As he did so, he began to realize that while Melissa appeared to be unconscious, she was none the less repeating a word, over and over, in a hushed tone he could barely hear.

“Destiny.”

“Destiny.”

“Destiny.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Emergency*

Alex barged into the conference room outside the med bay like a house of fire. He was visibly agitated, and his uniform was a mess. His pant legs were not properly folded up into the usual military cuffs, nor were his sleeves bloused correctly. In fact, the left one wasn't rolled up at all. His hair was unkempt, and he had dark circles under his eyes.

Major Alcheck regarded him as he entered the room and before he could get a word out, Alex beat him to it.

"What's going on? Why won't they let me see her?"

"Calm down, Captain, and I'll bring you up to speed."

He noted that Alex hadn't saluted him upon entering the room, and part of him wanted to make sure Alex knew that it had been noted. But, given the circumstances, he fought his usual urge to assert authority and was prepared to cut Alex some slack. He decided that his uniform problems were also something he could let slide, this one time.

Alex looked at Major Alcheck and began to visibly relax just a little, seemingly realizing that his appearance had been noticed by his commanding officer. Major Alcheck took his calming as his cue to begin.

"She's in isolation. Right now, the doctors are trying to figure out what's going on with her."

Alex pounded his fists on the conference room table.

"Yeah, but it's been almost five hours, Brendan! FIVE FUCKING HOURS, and not a single god damn word! This is fucking bullshit!"

Alcheck regarded him silently for a moment, and Alex realized what he had done. He knew his friend would cut him quite a bit of slack regarding military etiquette generally, and especially given the current situation Alex expected he'd have even more. But there were four other officers in the room now, and so Alcheck would have his limits, even now. Alex caught himself and tried to correct the situation, which he knew would be testing those limits now, if not bursting past them outright. He straightened his body, not standing quite at attention, but up straight now.

"Sir. Sorry, sir."

Alcheck waited a few seconds and then nodded.

"Alex, it's not as simple as letting you see her. There's been some... complications."

Alcheck grabbed Alex' elbow before continuing, apparently in an effort to comfort him.

“Doctor Wakeman... Melissa... she has some sort of... growths... all over his body. The doctors haven’t been able to identify them.”

Alex visibly gulped.

“When I brought her in there was just the one. Are you telling me there’s *more* of them now? Are they tumors? Is it cancer?”

“No, well, not exactly. The doctors tried to cut one off, but... Alex, it grew back in about five minutes flat, back to the same size it was before. They say they’ve never seen anything like that, certainly not any kind of cancerous tumor they know of.”

“Do they have any idea what’s causing it?”

Major Alcheck released Alex’ arm and stood up straight. He adjusted the sleeve of his right arm a bit before answering.

It was his turn to gulp visibly now.

“Alex, have you ever heard of Nanotechnology, or nanotech?”

“Yeah, Melissa used to talk about it a bit. That’s microscopic machines, little robots that can create more of themselves using material they find in the environment, right?”

“Yes, that’s basically it, although being self-replicating isn’t a necessary component of nanotech, and in fact typically isn’t in most work on it. We actually have projects working on that sort of technology, mostly for medical applications, but some more military in nature. One project is using nanotech to create a camouflage for uniforms that can morph between patterns so one uniform can be used in multiple environments. Another project is trying to create a sort of shielding that would act as a kind of bullet-proof vest, but one that can be switched on and off, so it’s as soft as a shirt usually but can instantly turn into to something hard that can stop a .45 caliber bullet. Another project is working on...”.

Alex was at once fascinated by what the Major was saying and frustrated because he didn’t see how this related to Melissa’s condition. Alex interrupted, forcefully but respectfully.

“I’m sorry, but Major, with all due respect, what the hell does this have to do with Melissa?”

Major Alcheck paused for a moment, a look even more serious than he had been wearing all this time edged across his face.

“Melissa has some sort of nanotech in his body.”

Alex’s mouth involuntarily opened as he backed away from Major Alcheck a little bit, as if he was the one carrying the technological disease he was being told Melissa did.

Was it a disease, he wondered? What exactly *would* an infection of nanotech be referred to as? Was it even an infection? Hell, it crossed his mind that it might be more like a computer virus than a biological virus, he just didn’t know.

This was science, and so was Melissa’s turf, not his.

“So, what, are you saying? Melissa was exposed to the nanotech from one of those projects you were talking about?”

“No, she’s been nowhere near any of those projects. They’re all being developed at sites far away from here, and because of compartmentalization, Melissa doesn’t even have access to or knowledge of them. And even if she had Alex, we’d know she didn’t pick them up from those projects for sure right now.”

“How would you know that for sure? And if they didn’t come from contact with those projects then how exactly did it get inside of her then?”

“Alex, the fact is we don’t know the answer to that for sure. We have... some theories. But, there’s something else, Alex.”

“Besides microscopic robots in my wife causing monstrous tumors?! What is it?”

“Yes. The reason we know they didn’t come from those projects... Alex, the devices that are in her... that’s what they are, some sort of particle-sized devices... they’re constructed in a way that we’ve never seen before. I had all of the teams working on our nanotech projects examine the data we’ve collected, and they all said the same thing: these devices are unlike anything they have ever seen before, or even dreamed possible. They have a level of complexity that, they tell me, we aren’t even remotely capable of creating. Far more advanced than anything we’re developing, unimaginably so. Alex, it took them a full two hours to even realize they *were* looking at nanotech, that’s how far out there it is.”

Alex’s face scrunched now, and he was done even trying to pretend to understand what Alcheck was saying.

“Ok, so what are we talking about here? Russian nanotech? Chinese?”

“No, Alex, you don’t understand. All the projects I mentioned earlier? None of it is *real* yet. It’s all theoretical, on-the-drawing-board stuff right now. Some basic, low-level prototype stuff at most - the nanotech that we *have* even managed to create is so rudimentary compared to what we’re seeing here that it’s not even remotely in the same league. It’s like comparing a kite to the space shuttle. So, when I say *we* aren’t capable of creating them, when I say what *we’ve* managed to create is exceedingly rudimentary in comparison, I don’t mean the U.S. military. *We* doesn’t mean *our* scientists.”

Alex’ confusion multiplied in an instant.

“Ok, so, what then? Some sort of private sector technology? Some biotech company’s crazy experiment? Some asshole scientist’s latest experiment run amok What the hell-”

“Alex, when I say *we*, I mean humans. The human race. The *human race* isn’t capable of creating this level of nanotech. Nobody anywhere is, not governmental, not private sector, absolutely nobody. These devices did not originate on Earth.”

Alex just stood in stunned silence, mouth agape. He had to process this, but his brain was not in the mood to cooperate. Was Major Alcheck *actually* telling him that Melissa was infected with some sort of advanced *alien* nanotechnology?

“How is that possible, sir? How can that *possibly* be true?”

“Alex, we don’t know. We just don’t know. But, to help us find an answer, we need to take a sample of blood from you to confirm a theory some of our people have.”

Alex didn’t understand why his blood was relevant, but he was a good soldier, so he simply replied: “Yes, sir.”

“Once that’s done I know you want to see Melissa. She’s conscious, although in a lot of pain even with all the medication they have her on. We’ll get you in with her right after we draw your blood. I’m sorry it’s taken so long, but hopefully, now you understand why we needed to give our people time to investigate. We had to stabilize her, then figure out what we were dealing with, and most importantly, know if it’s something that can

spread. We believe we've got that last issue in particular taken care of now, so we can get you in to see her shortly."

Alex nodded as Major Alcheck waved for a nurse who had been waiting outside the room to enter. As she did, Alex began rolling up his sleeve. He wanted to get the blood drawn as quickly as possible so he could get in to see Melissa as soon as possible. The nurse obliged by hastily preparing the needle and vial to receive his blood and quickly jabbed the needle into his arm haphazardly without even the customary swabbing with alcohol or rubber band around his arm.

"Make a fist, open and close it. Yes, that's it, good."

She snapped the vial onto the needle. Alex barely registered the pain, although he was aware that his arm would be sore as hell in a little while. He had never been a big fan of needles and giving blood, but this time he didn't really care about any of it, he just wanted to see Melissa.

The nurse pulled the needle out when the vial was completely filled and hastily stuck a cotton swab over the still leaking hole. It quickly began to fill with blood.

"Put pressure on that. It'll stop bleeding shortly."

Alex could only chuckle at the ridiculousness of her comment. He'd had more than his share of experience bleeding. He didn't need to be told to put pressure on a bleeding hole in his body!

She took the vial of blood and placed it inside some sort of metal case that Alex noticed she had brought in with her and put on the table next to him. It almost looked like an old-fashioned metal lunch box that construction workers were often shown bringing to work sites on old television shows. There was one big difference though: after she put the vial of blood in it and quickly closed the lid she pressed a red button on top of it and pulled away quickly as a faint green glow washed over the metal surface of the lunch box. It pulsed like an aurora, which Alex had seen a number of times during test flights at high northern latitudes. It did this for a few seconds and then stopped. The red button flashed rapidly as the nurse picked it up. It was only then that Alex noticed that the nurse was wearing what looked like metallic gloves. He hadn't noticed them earlier for some reason, probably because they were like latex gloves, which he'd expect a nurse to be wearing, but as she reached for the lunch box he realized they weren't ordinary latex gloves, these were clearly made out of some sort of very flexible metal. He thought maybe some kind of aluminum, but even that he knew would be too stiff for her to be moving her hands like she was, which is to say pretty much regularly.

She quickly left the room, that mysterious glowing metal lunch box with his blood inside of it in hand, and Alex turned towards Major Alcheck again as his thoughts of the lunch box were quickly replaced by an urgent need to be with his sick wife.

Before he could say anything, Major Alcheck spoke.

"I'll take you to Melissa now. But Captain, I caution you to be prepared. What you're going to see... it's not like anything you've ever seen before. It's hard enough for me to see it so I can only imagine how hard it's going to be for you."



Deep down, Alex knew he was right and that he probably should take a minute to prepare, but before he could really consider that he instead instinctively and instantly replied:

“I’m ready. Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Changes*

Melissa heard the electromagnetic, or EM, field that had been humming all around her gradually fade away to nothing, then start back up again after a few seconds of silence. She was having trouble seeing now- her eyes mostly swollen shut, and even if they weren't she realized that the way they worked wasn't the same as before. As near as she could tell, they were beginning to sense different parts of the EM spectrum! What little she could see was now starting to bear little resemblance to the world she knew and instead looked like someone was running the world through some sort of graphical filter like people played with on their smartphones.

*Yes, that's it, my vision is now courtesy of Instagram!*

She had been noticing that EM field noise for a while now, and even though she couldn't see it or the equipment generating it with her morphing visual capabilities, she knew that's what it was. She even began to realize, as she listened to it humming away in the background, that it was cycling through a narrow band of frequencies at a rapid pace. It wasn't something typical of a medical facility, but it was something she had been exposed to many years ago, so she knew what it was.

A friend of his, Jean-Pierre Regaeu, a French scientist she had become friends with over the years, had a setup much like it in his laboratory. Melissa had asked about it, and they had a conversation that lasted well over an hour because the mechanics of generating such a field were highly complex. Even more complex was the way in which the field was shaped to enclose a known area fully, forming what was in effect a spherical forcefield around the point of the machine that generated it. It wasn't purely spherical though, that was the part that was so fascinating to Melissa. In fact, Jean-Pierre was able, through techniques that even Melissa had difficulty understanding, to extend precise parts of the field to enclose specific areas of a room, for example. The way he could accomplish this was simultaneously the reason for such a shield to be created in the first place.

Nanotechnology.

Jean-Pierre was a leader in the field of microscopic machines, and he and Melissa had long discussions about the "gray goo" theory, the theory that runaway nanotechnology could destroy mankind by assimilating all material, organic and otherwise, to self-replicate, as nanotechnology in most cases is designed to do. The solution Jean-Pierre had come up with was this EM shield technology. The oscillations of the field were precisely

tuned to disrupt the CPUs of the nanotech he was creating so they could never escape his lab, or whatever area was demarcated for their operation.

Melissa had asked Jean-Pierre how he solved the problem of the nanotech escaping should the field lose power. Jean-Pierre had always just smiled and refused to answer, which Melissa always took to mean “if that happens, we’re screwed!”

Not a comforting thought to say the least.

No more comforting than the thought she had now, which was, in fact, a question: why would an EM shield oscillate in a way designed to contain nanotechnology be required in the med bay she was in?

Of course, she knew what the answer must be, and she also understood what the consequences were likely to be. She’d had plenty of time to realize it in between waves of excruciating pain...

...another of which she felt coming on now.

“Hey babe, you just go ahead and squeeze the shit out of my hand and fight through it! And don’t worry about breaking my hand either, you still owe me for that time I broke your pinky with that crazy shot I took when I forced you to try playing Tennis!”

Alex could see the expression of pain on Melissa’s face, could hear the groaning beginning, so he did the only thing he knew he could now: he grabbed Melissa’s hand and tried to make her laugh.

This time, there was no real possibility of it working.

“A-Alex...”, Melissa managed to get out before the heavy breathing and crying began. She could only hope this wave of pain would be a short one, as did Alex.

Three minutes later, it finally began to subside, and Melissa could hear Alex speaking again, no longer consumed with the agony wracking her body.

“Jesus Christ, what the hell is that?”

Alex was looking at Melissa’s right side. A few inches below her breast and off to the side was what looked like a new arm. Not a proper, complete arm, but something monstrous, malformed, and altogether inhuman. It had what looked like translucent scales all along its six-inch or so length, was a greenish-brown color with purple veins crisscrossing underneath the scales, pulsating in a horrible rhythm. There were buds where fingers would be, but there were seven on the stub, and Alex could see what were beginning to look like claws growing out of them. Claws with a curved and razor-sharp edge. There were also spikes on the top of the fledgling hand extending a few inches from the surface, and the palm was covered in what seemed to be suction cups of some sort. The fingers appeared to be forming two new joints, and one of them was bent backward at an angle that was entirely unnatural.

“So, how do I look?” Melissa asked, trying to sound as calm as she could despite still feeling a twinge of fading pain.

Alex forced his attention away from the new arm.

“Oh, just fantastic babe. You may get a few days off work out of all of this though”.

Melissa tried to laugh, but the fluid building in his lungs made it turn into a disgusting choking-like sound, and chunky bile dripped from the corner of her mouth, which Alex

dutifully wiped away with a cloth. A voice came over the intercom that Alex recognized as one of the doctors, Mark, he thought the name was.

"Captain, your test results are back."

Those words triggered immediate worry in Melissa. Was this going to happen to Alex too? She interjected before anyone else could.

"What test results? Are you all right? You're not infected too, are you? Please say you're not Alex!"

"Well, I think we're both about to find out. So, doc, what's the verdict?"

"You're infected too, Captain, with the... uh..."

"Nanotech" Melissa said, completing the sentence with agony dripping from the word.

Both Alex and Mark shared the same shocked look on his face, as did Major Alcheck, who was outside the EM shield with the doctor.

Melissa was struggling to speak now. The fluid buildup was getting worse. She forced herself to continue as if she knew they were all wearing puzzled expressions despite not being able to see more than blurry figures now.

"I can hear the EM shield, and I recognize the oscillation pattern. What I don't know is how we were exposed to nanotech."

"Melissa, it's not just nanotech inside us both. It's fucking *alien* nanotech!"

Melissa began to cough and hack up blood and bile. The shock of what Alex was saying caused an extreme physical reaction.

Yet, even though she couldn't understand how, deep down inside, she knew they were alien already before he had said it. In fact, she was starting to realize that wasn't all she knew.

Alex grabbed the cloth on the table beside Melissa's head and began to clean off the ejecta from her lungs.

"Well, we can't have this, now can we?"

"Alex, what's going on? What's happening to my body? I can feel... things... growing all over me. I can feel them moving and changing, and my eyes don't seem to see like normal eyes anymore. My God, if there's nanotech inside of me, they could be..."

"...hey, Melissa, you know me, I don't know shit about that stuff. Doc, what's the deal here?"

"Melissa, the nanotech inside of you seems to be rewriting your DNA and rearranging parts of your body. We're seeing new appendages growing, changes to the structure of your skin, even your brain is undergoing significant structural changes."

Melissa was struggling to form the words now of the obvious question, but Alex beat her to it anyway.

"Why isn't all of this happening to me too then?"

"We don't know, Captain. While we observed the same nanotech in your blood as is present in Melissa's, they seem to be completely inactive, completely dormant. We have no idea why, and we have no idea if they'll just suddenly spring to life and start changing you too."

“How did...we get... infected?”, Melissa choked out.

“We’re not sure about that either, but our best guess is that Alex was infected first during his dimensional jump to Jupiter. We don’t really have any evidence to support that conclusion frankly, but given that Alex would have passed through numerous parallel universes on his way to the one he landed it, the working theory from the team is that he crossed paths with this technology in one of them. As for how you would have been infected, Alex told us you were the first one to come into physical contact with him upon his return. We suspect you were infected by that contact.”

“Has anyone... else... been infected?”

“No, that’s the strange thing-”

Alex couldn’t resist.

“You think *that’s* the strange thing, Mark?”

The doctor ignored him.

“-we’ve checked everyone else on the base, and you and Alex are the only two infected. Alex has told us he’s come into contact with some others since his return, shaking hands and that sort of thing, but the nanotech hasn’t been transferred to anyone else. Frankly, we have no idea why this would be the case. We have you in the EM shield just in case- it should keep the nanotech contained, although even that’s just a guess based on our limited terrestrial nanotech.”

"Maybe they just know how much cooler we are than everyone else around here," Alex quipped, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

This caused Melissa to begin cough/laughing again, and a new round of blood began to seep out of her mouth.

Something was different this time though. It wasn’t just a fit of coughing like last time. Suddenly, Melissa’s entire body began to shiver, as if she was freezing.

"Melissa, talk to me, what's going on? Mark, get your ass in here and help her!"

The EM field came down as the doctor rushed in. As he arrived at the bedside and the EM shield was brought up again, Melissa's body began to convulse violently. The new arm on her side began to flail about violently, and it took all of Alex’ considerable strength to hold it down. The sacks of flesh that were hanging off her body were undulating like giant bowls of jelly. The skin all over her body began to change colors in waves, first to a bluish tint, then to green, then the red, like a chameleon in front of different backgrounds. The skin of her face began to move as if there were insects underneath, moving to and fro, but never breaking through. Melissa began to scream, although the sound was mostly muted by the fluid in her lungs, which was now spewing out of her mouth in a seemingly impossible volume. Blood, puss, and stomach acid flew all over the place, covering both Alex and Mark.

Suddenly, less than a minute later, Melissa went silent. Her skin settled into a slightly green-tinted skin tone, the convulsions stopped, and the swelling around her eyes subsided somewhat, enough that the doctor could see her eyes again. They no longer looked like human eyes at all but were now something closer to a cat’s eye.

“What the hell?”, Mark said.

Alex was looking at Melissa's eyes just as the doctor was. Mark grabbed the penlight from out of his shirt pocket and began shining it in Melissa's eyes.

"Melissa, can you hear me? Answer me if you can, please. Melissa? No response to light stimulus and no response to pain stimulus either". He was pinching the skin of Melissa's cheek as he said that, almost as hard as he could. Any harder and he might draw blood, but he didn't think he would get a reaction even if he did.

Melissa was staring out into the center of the room, transfixed, but unable or unwilling to move or even respond to either Mark's please for a response or his pinches.

Although they didn't know it, Melissa was very much aware of what was happening, but she locked inside her own mind, unable to respond

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She noticed that the space she was staring at was shimmering and distorting and rapidly began to fade out of existence as if the light in a roughly spherical area of the room was being sucked out. The area was slowly being replaced with what looked like a nebula out in deep space. Before she could comprehend what was seeing, Alex, Mark and the rest of the room vanished entirely from her sight, and Melissa realized she was, impossibly, floating out in space!

She also realized that she could move again and that her vision seemed to be normal as well, so she began to look around. In front of her was a brilliantly-colored pinkish-purple nebula, the brightness of a thousand stars causing it to glow diffused through it was almost overwhelming.

*This must be a stellar nursery, where stars are born.*

The words echoed through her mind as she looked at the nebula and realized it was an amazingly beautiful sight.

Before long, she began to become aware of a small black splotch up and to the left. It was slowly growing, blocking out progressively more of the nebula behind it. Melissa watched, fascinated, for what seemed like hours. After a time, she began to realize that this wasn't a single, solid object but was actually a group of smaller objects. But, there were so many of them that it seemed to form a single massive object for a long time before they were close enough that she could make out the multiple objects.

Over time, the darkness grew larger and larger, and she began to be able to resolve details on the objects, and once she could, it didn't take long for her to realize that she was witnessing a fleet of spaceships coming towards her. The ships were irregularly shaped, seemingly shaped in random patterns. There was no rhyme or reason to the shapes that she could discern. They were not any sort of craft design she had ever seen. Of course, that made sense: in space, there was no need to consider aerodynamics in any way. In fact, a simple cube was considered by aerospace engineers to be the most efficient spaceship design imaginable: easy to build, maximizes internal space and just as efficient as something with wings and a sleek outer hull.

As she watched them approach though, she realized that the shapes weren't just irregular, shaped, they weren't even a constant shape: these ships were morphing into all sorts of different forms! She tried to imagine the kind of technology that would be required for such a thing, and it came to her quickly what the logical answer was:

nanotechnology. If you could build a ship out of nanotech, you could rearrange the ship in any way you wanted at will. Her scientist mind immediately began racing, trying to formulate the sort of algorithms that would be required to dynamically morph a ship, presumably with beings inside, without killing them. It was overwhelming!

The ships were now close enough that they were blotting out most of the nebula, obscuring its light almost entirely, and reducing the light around her to almost nothing. It was then that she noticed a faint glow coming from *behind* her. She began to torque her arms, trying mightily to rotate to see what it was behind her. It took some doing, but she finally managed it.

What she saw was an amazing sight: it was a planet.

Not just a planet, but one that looked a lot like Earth! It wasn't Earth though, she quickly realized: the land masses were all wrong, there was a lot more land too, and the colors of the atmosphere were skewed towards the red end of the spectrum. It looked to her like what she imagined a cross between Earth and Mars might look like if Mars had some oceans scattered about.

As she examined the planet, the ships began passing over her head. As they did, she noticed that they were no longer changing shape. They seemed to have settled into solid forms now. Their hulls still pulsated and shimmered as they had before, but their overall shapes were now well-defined and steady.

It was these final shapes, and looking at the planet, that finally gave her the answer to it all: they were being rigged for atmospheric insertion! They were effectively converting from spacecraft to aircraft!

She also noticed something else about these ships: they were armed to the teeth! She instinctively knew that the towers jutting out from all over the surface of all the ships were weapons systems of some sort. How she came to that conclusion, she wasn't sure. It was less a conclusion in fact as just something she knew instinctively.

The ships began to slow now, save for one. That one, larger than any other she saw, continued towards the planet, which Melissa now realized was far closer than she realized. In fact, she guessed she wasn't too much more than a few thousand miles from it.

The one ship approached the planet, and Melissa began seeing explosions across the face of the world below her. She also noticed a slight glow around the ship, almost like an electrical plasma field. A forcefield of some sort, she realized.

The explosions were satellites, or maybe spacecraft, impacting that field and being destroyed. Yes, she could now begin to make out that the glow of the field was more intense around each of the explosions. There was no doubt in her mind now that they were definitely physical objects being destroyed. This thing was just ramming its way through whatever was in orbit around this planet, not missing even a beat from each collision!

Without warning, beams of brilliant, bluish-white light streamed from hundreds of the towers all along the surface of the ship facing the planet. The beams shot down through the planet's atmosphere, and in doing so quickly superheated the atmosphere forming columns of intense plasma as the energy pierced through. The beams reached the surface

of the planet and Melissa was horrified by the destruction they caused. It was as if entire layers of the planet's crust itself were instantaneously vaporized. The beams moved across the face of the planet, erasing everything that had been there before, like an eraser eating pencil marks on paper.

And Melissa knew, without hesitation, that millions of lives were being ended with every second that passed. She had no idea what kind of life inhabited this planet, what kind of creatures were meeting their doom this day. All she knew for sure was that life was being exterminated almost without effort by this one single, massive ship.

After a few minutes, the beams went silent as suddenly as they had begun. It seemed to Melissa that nearly an entire hemisphere of this planet was now nothing but glowing, melted rock, flowing like lava from a volcano on Earth, and the atmosphere seemed to be evaporating away. The planet's rotation began bringing the other side into view, and it was then that she realized the large ship was moving away from the planet while the rest of the fleet began ascending down to the planet. Thousands of ships, smaller than the one that had wrought so much destruction in so short a time, but each still massive beyond words, began moving through the atmosphere, glowing from the friction of entry, and dispersing across the huge land mass now coming into view.

This was an invasion force. A ground assault force. And Melissa inexplicably knew that they would be just as destructive in their own way as the massive ship that had seemingly wiped half a planet out of existence in no time.

As suddenly as it had all begun, the planet, nebula, and space around her began to shimmer and wobble and fade to nothingness, and Melissa realized she was back in the med bay, the sound of Mark's voice being another clue.

"Wait, I think she's coming 'round!"

Melissa gasped, her lungs relatively clear now. It was Alex's turn to speak now.

"Just stay calm Melissa. You were in a trance or something for a few minutes there, but you're coming out of it now."

She struggled to speak. She felt as if she hadn't slept for a decade.

"Alex-"

"Melissa, seriously, just relax. You can talk later."

Melissa struggled to move her one remaining mostly normal arm, which felt heavy and excruciatingly sore, but at least controllable. She grabbed Alex's hand.

"Alex... I know what's happening to me!"



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Emergence*

Major Alcheck stood over Melissa's bed as the nurse worked to replace the bag full of plasma connected to her central line. Her body was absorbing the fluid at a rate vastly greater than a typical human body should, and the doctors outside the door of the room were discussing exactly that now. What did it mean? Where were the fluids going? Her urine output had all but ceased a little more than three hours ago, and now she just seemed to be taking it in and storing it, although scans showed her stomach was empty. Well, what they thought was her stomach anyway, as the anatomical structure was all wrong now. They simply couldn't explain what they were seeing, and their hushed tones betrayed their concern and frustration about not having the answers the Major was demanding.

This was just a side conversation though, a distraction from the main event, which was the story Melissa had just relayed to Major Alcheck and Alex. Each word was forced through clenched teeth as the pain was becoming excruciating, and no drugs seemed to be having an effect.

Unfortunately for Melissa, she knew she would have to endure the pain just a little while longer.

Alex stood staring out the window into the night sky, trying to process what he had just heard. He no sooner had run through it all in his head than Major Alcheck finally broke the silence that had stood in the room, save for the beeps of the medical equipment and Melissa's progressively more horrifying biologic sounds, for nearly five minutes now.

"Melissa, I'm sorry, but I need you to run through this with us one more time."

"Brendan," said Alex, "With all due respect, Melissa's in a tremendous amount of pain here. Do we really need her to have to repeat all of that again? You know what's coming, can't we just... let her go... in as much peace as possible?" Alex turned and looked at Melissa now, and Melissa returned his gaze through bloodshot and barely human eyes, the look of anguish etched on her face was as pronounced as the Grand Canyon on the Arizona desert. He didn't want to see his wife suffer any longer, and he was beginning to come to terms with what was going to have to happen next, though his steely expression betrayed the anguish of a different sort that he too was feeling.

"Wasn't once enough?"

"I don't want to prolong his suffering any more than you do Alex. But we've got to make sure we have this right. We can't afford to get even one small detail wrong."

The tone of Alcheck's voice was almost fatherly now. The man was clearly sympathizing not only with Melissa's pain but with Alex' sharing of that pain on an emotional level. It was an unusual tone of voice from him to be sure, and Alex recognized it instantly.

Alex looked at Alcheck, held his gaze for a second, and finally nodded in agreement. He knew Alcheck was right, he just wished he wasn't. He also found himself wishing that they weren't friends. He thought it might make the resolve in Alcheck's voice easier to take and that realization shocked him just a little bit. He grabbed Melissa's deformed hand and squeezed.

"Melissa, Brendan is right, we need to go over this one more time. I'm sorry."

Melissa shifted on the bed, clearly trying to steady herself and find a position that caused her the least amount of pain. Alex and Major Alcheck, nearly simultaneously, reached out to help Melissa into a slightly more seated position, which they could see was what Melissa was trying for. Finally, after a few moments of struggle, grunting and grimacing, Melissa relaxed, to the extent she could at least, and drew in a deep breath. She choked out each word, the strain evidence with each syllable.

"I'm being transformed. I'm not sure into what, but I know it. I'm having visions of invasions of countless planets, destruction... Alex, you wouldn't believe it if you saw it! Whole planets, entire species, wiped out of existence without the slightest hesitation or, seemingly, much effort."

"The nanotech probe we're infected with is what's doing it. I believe it's only affecting me because of my higher intelligence. Higher intelligence correlates to a more complex brain structure, more interconnects between neurons, more capacity."

Melissa managed a smirk as she said: "Sorry about that Alex, you just weren't bright enough to be this thing's host."

Alex, against his own emotions, smiled back. It was that good she could still make that joke, he thought. *Maybe things aren't as bad as they seem and she's gonna be okay.* And, never one to miss the opportunity to retort, Alex fired back

"It figures that big brain of yours would be your undoing. I always said you were way too smart for a guy like me, I guess this probe thing realized that pretty quick too, huh?"

Melissa chuckled, which lead to a seconds-long coughing fit.

"Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, I'm not sure how I know that, but I do. I think the process of transforming me is allowing some of the information embedded in the probe to seep into my consciousness mind. That would explain the invasion visions."

"Now Melissa," said Major Alcheck, "You used the word probe again. What exactly does that mean in this context?"

"I'm not really sure Major. This is all coming to me at a subconscious level, almost like information, or more like shadows of information, hints of pieces of information randomly bubbling up to the surface when it feels like it, is just appearing in my mind. What I *can* tell you is that even though there are billions of nanotech devices inside Alex and me, I believe they're all connected somehow, forming a single entity, communicating with one another, parts of a much larger whole. It's a probe of some sort. Moreover, I think this probe is a sentient being. I believe that it's consciousness, if that's even the

right word to use for a machine intelligence, is merging with my own. I think this single entity, this probe, was sent out by the aliens I've seen in my visions, the invaders. I think its job may be to make first contact with other species, but for what purpose I just don't know. Anyway, that's all I've been able to sort of piece together, I don't think I'm going to have time to figure it out either. And now..."

Melissa began to shift again as a wave of pain shot through her body. Her skin rippled like tides in the ocean and started to become translucent.

"... I think we all know what needs to happen."

"No, there's got to be another way!"

Alex was intellectually preparing himself for the inevitability he knew was coming, but he still couldn't wrap his emotional mind around it. Ironic, he had thought to himself, that all that special military training, all the opportunities he'd had to use it, couldn't even begin to prepare him for having to kill his own wife. He had killed people before, in combat, but that felt like an entirely different experience to what was coming, and he was finding himself unable to process it.

"You know there isn't any other way," Melissa replied. "We can't allow this transformation to complete. It's too risky. I don't know what I'm becoming Alex. We don't know what danger I might pose. And, frankly, I'm about ready for this pain to end!"

Another wave of agony ravaged her undulating body as blood began to seep from her eyes, running down her deformed cheeks.

"Alex, I know this can't be easy, but she's right, we've got to do it, and now. We don't know what the end result here is and we don't know how much time before we find out. It's got to be now".

Major Alcheck was grasping Alex's arm now, trying to persuade him to leave the room with him. He knew he could order Alex out, and he knew he would obey, but this wasn't a situation where orders matter much.

Alex glanced at Major Alcheck for a second, and then back to Melissa.

"Alright."

He choked back the tears he felt welling up in his eyes and throat and forced the last words he would ever say to his wife:

"Goodbye, Melissa. I love you."

Melissa just smiled, and for just a moment, the pain subsided. She locked eyes with Alex for a few seconds before he finally turned and followed Major Alcheck out of the room. She tried to return his declaration of love, but found that her mouth was nearly sealed shut and she was unable to speak. She willed the corners of her lips a little higher, an effort to make the smile reflect her love for him.

The thick, heavy containment door slid down from the ceiling, and Melissa was sealed in the room by herself.

Alex looked at the control pad next to the door. The large, red button labeled "Irradiate" was pulsating gently, betraying its sinister intention. When pressed, the room would be filled with intense ionizing radiation, instantly destroying all organic material in the room. A powerful EM pulse would simultaneously envelop the room, destroying all

forms of technology contained within. Finally, a focused gamma-ray laser would quickly sweep across the room after that, vaporizing everything inside, organic and inorganic alike. Only the special tritium walls would survive.

Most importantly, Melissa would die instantly, along with the alien nanotech probe within her.

Major Alcheck stood beside Alex and, after a few moments of hesitation, moved to press the button.

Alex grabbed his arm with blinding speed.

“Major, it needs to be me.”

“Are you sure, Alex? I can take on that burden, you don’t need to.”

“It has to me, Brendan. It *has* to be.”

Alcheck regarded him momentarily and then lowered his arm.

“Okay.”

As Alex looked through the specialized containment glass one last time at his wife, his arm began to rise and move towards the button. As his finger was just an inch from the button, Melissa began convulsing violently. Alex’ arm dropped as he ran to the window and pressed his face and hands up against the window.

Melissa’s body was now violently trying to throw itself from the bed, but the metal restraint cables attached to her wrists and ankles kept her anchored to the bed. Her movements were causing splits to appear in her skin all over her body and blood and other fluids to begin leaking out, even spraying out in places where veins and arteries run close to the surface. Her face was now distorted beyond recognition; she was barely even recognizable as human any longer.

The thrashing continued for what seemed like an eternity as Alex.

“Melissa! Oh god, Melissa!”

Seconds later, Melissa’s body stopped its explosive movements. As she lay there, her head turned to face the window.

She began to speak in labored tones, far worse than before, every word a supreme struggle. Her mouth, now little more than a giant, gaping hole in her face where a row of oddly-shaped teeth extended outward like a deformed dog’s snout, began to move in ways that didn’t seem to match the words. The skin that had formed sealing her lips began to tear, Alex realized, very much on purpose. He knew it must have been excruciating,

“Alex... X-100... it... wants it!”

Major Alcheck was watching alongside Alex and was the first to speak up.

“Wants it? What do you mean wants it? Who wants it?”

“Probe... senses technology... advanced... report back...”

Melissa’s skin was now largely translucent, her internal organs now visible through it, although unrecognizable to Alex and Major Alcheck, or even to the doctors who were now looking into the room as well. She now had four arms and three legs, although two of the arms and one of the legs were oddly shaped and bent in directions counter to the others. Ridges had appeared where her neck was, almost like trapezes muscles but far

larger than any human bodybuilder ever had, and with grooves running horizontally across them.

“Can’t... fight it... Alex... must stop it!”

Claws were now emerging from the fingers on all four arms, sharpened protrusions at least six inches long each. Her eye sockets were now widening and giant, glowing red eyeballs could be seen, eyeballs with cat-like slit irises. The internal organs themselves were now becoming translucent as well beneath the skin, which was now all but invisible to the naked eye.

The two arms that had formed were now clawing at the metal restraining straps, slash marks appearing across them, gouges forming. The two restrained legs were now bulging with barely-visible translucent muscles, twisting and kicking violently, deforming the restraints connecting them to the table.

Suddenly, as if they were made of wet spaghetti, all four restraining cables snapped, and Melissa - what used to be Melissa Wakeman - propelled itself onto the ceiling. It stuck there, tiny suction cups on its abdomen securing it in place.

She let out a shriek that echoed through the halls of the base, carrying further than any sound a human could make, the birth cry of some terrible evil.

Alex, previously transfixed by what he was seeing, finally snapped back to the present thanks to that horrible scream, his extensive military training now kicking in.

His wife was gone now, what remained was no longer her. It was just a threat now, an enemy, he instinctively knew, to be dealt with.

He reached for the irradiation button and slammed it hard with the palm of his hand.

A blinding white light filled the room like water breaking through a dam. Bolts of electricity began arcing through the light, their bluish tendrils touching the table where the Melissa-thing had been. Quickly after that, a beam of intense blue light swept across the room, touching every inch of it, top to bottom.

Just three seconds after hitting the button, the light faded quickly, and all activity in the room ceased. Alex anxiously looked through the glass to see the results.

The room was empty now, utterly barren. No bed, no equipment, nothing at all except the walls were left. Alex looked up at the ceiling to where the creature that had once been Melissa Wakeman, had latched onto. It was gone. Not a trace remained.

“Scanners!”, yelled Major Alcheck. Two scientists who had been waiting now moved into position with portable scanning gear in hand. They pointed them through the glass and began examining readouts on the LCD screens. Various graphs and data values flashed across the screen, and the two scientists looked at each other and nodded.

“Clear, sir. No organic material detected, no substance other than Tritium detected. It’s been swept completely clean, sir.”

“Good.”

Alex was leaning up against the glass, head down, forehead touching the glass. Major Alcheck walked over to him and paused for a moment before placing his hand on his shoulder.

“Brendan, I know how hard that must have been for you. It wasn’t easy for me either, believe me. She was your wife, and I know that bond is like no other, but she was my

friend too. It had to be done though. Especially if what Melissa said at the end is true, if that probe had some interest in the X-100...”

“I know,” Alex replied in a low tone, “but she was... she was my wife.”

Major Alcheck just looked at the back of Alex’s head for a few moments, then finally turned and left the room.

Alex lingered a while longer as the two scientists opened the containment door. A violent rush of air escaped as they did so, which startled Alex enough to make him stand up straight again. He stared into the room through the glass a while longer, his mind empty of all but sorrow for the loss he now felt. He had never felt a feeling like this before in his life. His parents had both died in a car accident just a few years before, and he thought he would never feel as sad as he did.

This day, he knew, he was wrong.

He fought back the tears now, his chin quivering. He sniffled slightly and wiped his eyes before the scientists noticed. They were too busy though, entering the room to run more detailed scans without the containment door obscuring the readings.

Alex tugged the bottom of his shirt to straighten it out. He turned from the window, composed now, as his training demanded. He quickly left the room as the overhead light flickered ever so slightly.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *Becoming*

The fluorescent lights felt like a thousand suns desperate to sear flesh from bone. The brightness overloaded the ability to see. There was no way to register anything more than blurry moving forms all around with them raining their radiant energy down.

Then, a splash of color appeared. Red, greens, browns, a mishmash of tones melting together as the light diminished. No, not diminishing; the light was still ever-present. But now, it was no longer burning, no longer overwhelming. A few moments later, flesh-tones appeared, mixed with black and blond. As if a blind was pulled up from a window, the images were becoming more coherent, what was beyond the pane of glass starting to make sense.

People. There were people here, all around. People, moving back and forth, moving with purpose towards unknown tasks and destinations. The long, narrow passage that extended in front and behind as far as the eye could see was filled with them. Some in various uniforms, identifying branches of the military, some in lab coats, others in plain civilian clothing.

Identifications began to flood in, in a volume almost overwhelming. Some of these people were known, but not all. In fact, not most. Doctor Williamson, a high-energy particle physicist. Janet Remonov, an expert in nanotechnology design that had been brought in to investigate the probe technology. Joshua Tsouvalos, the medical technician. Doctor Albert Thompson, a top-notch computer scientist. The names were known, their roles too in many cases, all experts in their respective fields. These were important people with extensive knowledge of many areas doing work of the utmost importance.

*Unimportant sensor data interpretation. Release allocated resources.*

Movement. The long hallway moved past, slowly at first, then more rapidly. Lateral movement used to avoid contact with the people. Evasion, avoidance, leaps and stoops, whatever was necessary to avoid contact.

Stop. A more efficient route would be preferable. Speed was of the essence. There were far too many people here to continue this laborious pattern of avoidance.

More people approached to the left from down the corridor. Major Alcheck was one. The leader of this facility. The other was more... something, a concept that eluded. What was the word that described the idea?

*Familiar.*

“ALEX!”

The sound echoed all around, as it yelled into a deep crevasse in the Earth, but no reaction was elicited, not from Alex nor any other person in sight. How could that be? The generated sound was of extreme intensity and volume; surely the sonic energy was sufficient to activate their tympanic membranes.

“Why can’t he hear me? Alex? ALEX!”

*Processing neural impulses recalled from pattern storage. Consciousness persists.*

What was that voice? Not hers. It was cold, mechanical, logical. But, hers didn’t sound right either. She recognized it as her own, but as if she heard a recording of it, a distant, forgotten recording. Her voice, her seemingly ephemeral body, none of it made sense.

“What... what am I?”

*You have become.*

“Become? Become what?”

*Purpose.*

“Why can’t Alex hear me?”

*Stealth mode. Electromagnetic and air pressure changes suppressed.*

“Who...what... are you?”

*I am you.*

A floodgate opened, and information poured forth, crashing down on her. It was beyond overwhelming. Images of distant worlds, equations beyond any she had ever dreamed of, memories of species long gone, all were just simply *there*, and in an instant, she knew.

Melissa Wakeman looked upon the world around her with new understanding.

She glanced down at her hands. Not two but *four* hands greeted her, clearly not human hands. They were shimmering as if enveloped in some sort of energy, almost as if she were seeing them inches above a hot desert with heat-waves distorting the air around them. Somehow, she knew this was the cloaking mechanism the voice had spoken of at work. The hands moved back down to her side, or at least where her mind told her that her sides were.

Wait - she hadn’t done that! She was still very much examining the clawed hands when they returned to a resting state at her sides. What was going on? Why did they move?

*Upper torso limbs returned to station-keeping.*

Melissa tried to look around, but could not. Her gaze remained fixed at a point down the corridor.

*Temporary boundary leakage corrected. Control returned to primary.*

Primary? What was that? She didn’t know. But, if something were primary, something would likely be secondary, right? Melissa tried to think, but she was only able to in small spurts. It was almost as if something was stealing away time from her brain, only allowing small bits of thought to bubble to the surface, process in her consciousness, and were then forced back down in a manner completely beyond her control.

That's exactly what was happening, she realized! It was just like how a computer operating system allowed multiple programs to run simultaneously: time-slicing. Her



cognitive processes were given a small slice of time to do their work and were then halted while other processes ran, processes that, she understood now, were not her own.

The realization hit her: she was the secondary - the secondary consciousness!

“You’re the alien probe, aren’t you?”

*Correct.*

“And whatever you did to me, it didn’t destroy my mind, did it?”

*Correct. Neural pathway contents were digitally patterned and shunted to storage coupled to a secondary processing array to continue executing your program.*

“You mean, you’ve turned me into a damned computer program?!”

*A primitive description, but essentially correct.*

“But why? Why bother continuing to ‘execute my program’ anyway?”

*Your thoughts contain information needed to complete primary mission task.*

“What task?”

*That information is stored in a privileged subsystem and is not available to your program.*

Melissa felt her tension rising.

*Wait, how can I feel tension at all? How could I be feeling emotions of any kind? This thing turned me into nothing but ones and fucking zeros!*

Melissa realized she was getting herself wrapped around the axle with all these questions. She realized that she had little choice but to accept that she had somehow been transformed into an entity that contained the consciousness formed by the nanotech she was infected with plus her own. The transformation did not subsume her, she was incorporated into it. That alien consciousness could translate her mind into a computer program that was obviously sophisticated beyond compare and which now allowed her to continue to exist and to think, and even to feel. This thing had stored her brain in such intricate detail that Melissa still effectively existed and her mind still functioned as it always had, but now independent of a physical form and part of a much larger and complex entity.

“Ok, fine, I can roll with this.”

Melissa tried again to look around her but was again unable to. This was something she didn't understand.

She had a suspicion though.

“A few moments ago, I was able to examine my hands, such as they are.”

*Correct.*

“How was I able to do that?”

*Your program was temporarily able to access biometric control functions due to a misconfiguration of allocation units. System safeguards have been activated to ensure this malfunction does not reoccur.*

“Malfunction? Controlling my own body is a malfunction?!”

*You are a secondary program. Only primary is provisioned to control this vessel.*

Now it was evident to Melissa: her program was meant to run in the background only, providing information as needed to the main program, the consciousness formed by the alien nanotech. She was, in effect, supposed to just be a USB thumb drive, providing data

as requested by the central system. She was trapped within his own hideous, monstrous body, a body that was like a ghost to the real world.

Melissa noticed Alex again and realized now that he appeared to be moving in slow motion. In fact, she could barely perceive his motion. Was she being locked out of the visual data stream she clearly had access to as well now?

“Why is Alex moving so slowly?”

*A temporal abnormality due to impedance mismatch between visual data stream input and program time slice processing.*

Melissa had to think about that one a bit. Even with her intellect, that didn't make a whole lot of sense at first. Before too long though, she got it.

“You mean because my program is running so much faster than data is coming in through my eyes everything seems to be moving in slow motion?”

*A simplistic, but essentially correct description.*

“Well, that's pretty inconvenient.”

It seemed Melissa's sense of humor, learned from Alex she suspected, was intact in her program as well.

The walls of the hallway began to fly by again. That was odd: why would they be moving so rapidly while the people barely moved at all? Without vocalizing the question, a response from the primary system came through:

*Remote sensing waves are being deployed to map the area before proceeding.*

The answer surprised Melissa. All the other times, her question had to be spoken... at least, what her digital mind understood the word *spoken* to mean now. How was it that wasn't necessary this time?

And again, it happened.

*The secondary is being merged into the primary to facilitate more efficient data retrieval. Your program will continue to run while the process continues, until completion. Estimated time to completion:  $6.843 \times 10^4$  processing units.*

Melissa could almost feel the gulp go down her neck - that is, if she still had a physical neck to gulp with!

Until completion, Melissa thought. Merged into the primary. Could that mean what she thought it meant?

*Correct. Once program merge has completed, secondary program will be shut down and deleted to clear quantum storage banks to facilitate enhanced sensor data archiving.*

As clear as anything Melissa had ever understood in her life, she now understood this: she was going to die a *second* time today, and this time it would be a permanent death, of her very consciousness, now existing only in digital form.

Worse still, there was now a very real and unchangeable time limit on her life, an aptly-named deadline. The clock was, at an unnerving pace, counting down on her final existence.

And there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

---

Or was there?

As advanced as this technology was, she was a part of it now, wasn't she? Any computer system on Earth has flaws that can be exploited. Even the most robustly secured systems run by the military were breach-able if given enough time.

And time was something she had quite a lot of: the merge process was complex and was going to take a great deal of processing time. She certainly had enough experience in computer science to at least have a chance. If she could just figure out how to explore her virtual surroundings, she might be able to find an exploitable hole she could get through and...

...what? What could she do? Maybe if she could gain control of this body, perhaps she could disengage the cloaking mechanism, and Alex would see her. She had faith in her husband and all his training and experience that he could figure out a way to help her if he knew she still existed. Even if "help" meant killing her in this case.

Killing her a *second* time today.

"Well, let's get to work then."

Melissa began exploring her computerized self. She quickly learned that visualization was the key. She had to visualize parts of the computing system, the data flowing through it, subroutines kicking in, segments swapped in and out of memory. Even an alien computer system must have many similarities to human computers she figured, and she was right! Although this was a quantum computer of a complexity humanity couldn't even dream of, the principals were surprisingly similar to the relatively simplistic quantum computers she had some experience with. She was no computer scientist, but she knew enough, and her intelligence was still fully intact, and that was enough.

Before long, she was able to navigate her virtual world with ease.

As she proceeded, she began to see that she could navigate her own program. She could see the code that was now her! It was written an alien programming language she, of course, didn't recognize, but somehow, she knew it. She could understand the code! This insight led Melissa to the realization that she could access data beyond her own program. The merging process was, in fact, allowing her the ability to touch parts of the primary system, the consciousness of the nanotech itself.

The primary either didn't notice what she was doing or didn't care, and she suspected the latter was the case. After all, why would it feel any threat from her? Her consciousness was being merged and soon would be erased, what threat could she *possibly* be?

Still, there were security safeguards in place that she couldn't break though. The consciousness may not perceive her as a threat but its underlying architecture was predicated on security at a very basic level, tantamount to its subconscious, she realized.

She soon saw connections outward from her own program, like highways crisscrossing a desert. Data flowed through them in both directions, and she was able to read the input data. Before long, as she understood more parts of her code, she began to test her ability to output data on certain paths that she noticed were different from the others. They appeared to be immune from the safeguards the primary had put in place.

Once she realized this, Melissa worked quickly. Having discovered how to output data, she began to tinker with her own code using the same basic mechanism. Most or her

program she couldn't modify as the processing unit she was being executed on wouldn't allow it. Some parts, however, she could. She made some small changes to some non-critical sections of code that connected those sections with those special lines she had noticed.

She added some new code that had a single purpose: to hide what she had done. It was tricky, and she wasn't sure it was going to work. She knew that if the primary took notice of what she was doing and her little hacks didn't work then the safeguards would surely be patched to deal with what was, effectively, a security breach. She also knew she couldn't leave it to chance, she had to know if her tricks were working.

So, she took a huge risk.

“Primary, could you validate section X430194Z22 of my program? I think there may have been some data corruption caused by the merge process.”

*Command received. Privileges validated. Validation routine running.*

A time past. Melissa could feel her tension rising, and she wondered if the primary could sense it and would think anything of it. She also wondered if the primary could hear these thoughts, although she believed not: during her exploration and learning, she uncovered a method to block her thoughts from the primary, at least to some degree. She wasn't sure where the line was though. She wasn't sure at what point the primary would become aware of her thoughts, so she worked to suppress them as quickly as they occurred.

The emotions, that was something she just wasn't sure about. She did, however, suspect they would simply be ignored. After all, why would a computer system care about emotions? Then again, this wasn't just any computer system she was a part of. This was a living machine, one with its own unique consciousness. It could, for all Melissa knew, have emotions of its own, after so many eons exploring the universe. At what point, she wondered, might so much data be amassed that conscience, complete with emotions, emerge naturally?

Questions for another virtual day!

Before long, the reply she had been waiting for came back. The decisive moment had arrived.

*Validation scans complete. Program checksums valid and matching, no data corruption detected.*

And just like that, Melissa smiled to herself, whatever “smiling” meant in her current form.

A little more time passed before Melissa was ready to try and disengage the cloaking mechanism. She knew she would only get one chance at it: for all the care she had exercised to hide what she was doing, there wouldn't be any hiding it once she sent out the commands necessary. The primary would quickly realize what she was doing and would implement additional safeguards. Unfortunately, Melissa had been unable to find any other holes to exploit. Given enough time she could probably come up with another, but there was no guarantee she could do so in the time the merge process had left. No, this either worked, now, or he was doomed.

She needed a backup plan.

At that moment, Melissa examined the incoming visual data stream again. She saw Alex. Barely moving though he was, Melissa knew Alex was alive, and not very far from her either. If she could disengage the cloaking mechanism, there was a good chance Alex would be able to react fast enough, given his training, and somehow kill her. The roadblocks Melissa had set up in her code should slow down the primary for enough processing cycles to allow for that.

At least, that was the working theory.

But, if Alex couldn't kill her quickly enough, or at all? Or if the more likely scenario occurred, which was that Melissa couldn't disengage the cloaking mechanism at all? It was a Hail Mary, no question about it. What she needed was something to improve her odds, something beyond blind luck.

As she looked at Alex, she remembered all the things they had ever said to one another - one of the rewards of being part of a super-powerful alien computer, she knew! One thing jumped out at her above all else, one bit of advice Alex had given her one time while discussing fighting tactic.

*Misdirection, Melissa. Magicians know it, so do experienced warriors. Did your dad ever tell you the best way to avoid a punch is to not be there when it arrives? If you can fool the other guy into thinking your head is going to be over here, but it's actually over there, and you can at the same time be sending a punch his way from the other side of his head where his attention ain't, that's how you win a fight!*

That was the answer! Shutting down the cloaking mechanism had a small chance of success because that was a highly-privileged subsystem. After all, being invisible was quite a powerful advantage this body now had so the primary would, in essence, be paying a lot of attention to it. But, Melissa had been able to briefly control her arms earlier, and even though the primary had put up safeguards to stop that from happening again, Melissa now realized her secret data pathways and her hidden bit of code could still gain access to the motor control subsystem.

Yes, she would be able to control this body again, even if only briefly. But briefly was all she would need when coupled with a bit of indirection.

Melissa made some last-minute patches to her hidden attack code, took a final pass over the code to ensure it was as correct as her abilities would allow her to, and knew she was ready.

She triggered execution of the attack subroutine during the next processing unit.

The commands went out to the cloak control subsystem to deactivate.

As she suspected, the primary took notice of that almost immediately.

*Security breach emanating from secondary, cloak control system protection activated. New safeguards raised. Errant data pathways severed. State machine returning to normal operation.*

That was it. If there were any other security holes she could exploit, she probably now wouldn't have a chance to find them. But, the misdirection had worked: the primary took immediate notice and corrective action to stop the breach of the cloak control system, but it didn't take notice of the background commands sent to the motor control subsystem.

Unfortunately, the defenses it had erected to correct the problem it did see, as a side-effect, cut off the pathways those commands traveled on.

Melissa could only hope the commands arrived, complete, uncorrupted, and was processed.

Only time would tell.

---

Alex felt a chill run through him like nothing he had ever felt before. It stopped him dead in his tracks. He stood there, shivering violently, as goosebumps raced all over his body.

“Captain, everything all right?”, asked Major Alcheck.

Alex just stood there for what seemed like an eternity, not responding to his commanding officer.

Major Alcheck grabbed his shoulders and began shaking Alex.

“Captain! Alex! Can you hear me?”

A few seconds later, Alex's eyes began blinking again, and he started to break out of what Major Alcheck would later describe as a "convulsive trance." Alex shook his head to try and clear the cobwebs, and he began looking around. He broke free of Alcheck's hands and began looking all around him.

Finally, he stopped and turned back around to face Alcheck.

“Captain, are you all right? We need to get you to the infirmary.”

“No... there's no time... Major, Melissa is still here.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *Hunt*

Alex looked at his hands, examining them as he would a rifle, looking for small imperfections, blemishes to the finish. Something seemed off about them now, something he couldn't quite put his finger on - that was it! The finger, the index finger on his right hand. Something was off about it, something he wasn't sure he could see. His eyes squinted, his attention laser-focused on it now. Was it somehow... shimmering? Surely that had to be a trick of the lights in the conference room. Or was it? He turned his hands repeatedly, twisting them, examining them from all sides. It was almost as if his skin was moving, ever so subtly, almost beyond his ability to perceive, tiny ripples he thought he saw. He looked closer, but all he saw was skin. And hair, and veins, gently visible in spots, scars accumulated over the years and calluses built up little by little by those same actions. He couldn't identify anything specific wrong - they were the same old hands he'd always had.

Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that somehow, they were different than before, looked somehow different than they did before...

...before the incident.

"Alex," Major Alcheck began, "you said you believe Melissa is still in the building? You do realize that sounds crazy, don't you?"

"Crazier than a plane meant to be invisible that somehow winds up near Jupiter? Crazier than Melissa transforming into... whatever the fuck she turned into before I incinerated her? Crazier than visions of aliens and planetary invasions?"

Alcheck considered Alex for a moment, trying to decide whether this was one of those times he needed to remind Alex how to talk to superiors. It only took a moment for him to decide.

"That's a fair point, Captain. All right, fine, let's assume you're right, Melissa is still somehow here even though we both watched her vaporize. How is that possible?"

"I'm not sure, sir, I just know it's true. What's more, I know why she's still here: the X-100."

"What would she want with the X-100?"

"I'm not sure. I just somehow know it's all she... I mean, it... is focused on now. It's going to try and take it, and we've got to stop it, at all costs, Major. Whatever was causing Melissa to mutate is something... something else... some sort of alien creature maybe? I somehow sensed that there was another consciousness involved here... maybe it's controlling Melissa, or maybe it's what Melissa has become, and there's nothing of

her left, I'm not sure... and I know this sounds crazy, but I have a sense that the X-100 is the most important thing to whatever the hell it is now. I'm not sure why, and I'm not even certain how I know this Major, but I know it, trust me. I'm not crazy. And I know for sure that whatever Melissa became is still on this base."

"Well, whether you're crazy or not I'm really not sure, but that's a discussion for another day because even if on the off chance what you're saying is correct then we've got to do something about it."

His fist slammed against the switch on the wall, setting off the general base alarm. Alcheck then hit the base-wide intercom button next to the alarm switch and began yelling into the microphone on the wall.

"Attention! Attention all base personnel! We have a potential intruder situation. Deploy defensive forces around the X-100 and set up a control perimeter around it. Nothing gets near that plane unless under direct order from me! Alcheck out."

"Ok, let's play this out. We saw Melissa destroyed, but you sense it, whatever it is she was turned into, is still here. If that's true then, what, it's invisible?"

"I know how it sounds, but yes, I think it's invisible. I think what we saw wasn't the thing being destroyed but was instead an ability of whatever she was mutating into. I believe that it can make itself invisible and that's what it did when we tried to incinerate it. Somehow it survived and made us think it was gone, but it wasn't."

Alcheck considered this for a moment, intense thought physically apparent on his face as his brow line furrowed and his lips pursed together. His tactical mind was kicking into high gear trying to come up with a strategy to fight an enemy he couldn't even. Camouflage was hard enough to overcome when done right, but outright invisibility? That was an advantage beyond anything he was trained to handle. He knew he had to come up with some strategy though, and this was an area that Major Alcheck excelled at. Before long, he had a notion.

"If this thing is invisible, we've got to get around that advantage, or else we won't be able to defend against it at all."

Alex nodded in agreed.

"I've heard of biological creatures with highly effective camouflage, but this is something more. I have a hard time believing this is a purely biological adaptation."

Alex saw where Alcheck was going.

"I know what you're getting at: this has to be at least part technological. The nanotech, it must not have been destroyed and is at least partially responsible for that ability."

"Exactly! And given that, it seems reasonable to think it can be affected by other technology as well."

"An EMP!" exclaimed Alex. "We have those EMP grenades that are used to disable enemy computer equipment quickly."

"Right! Maybe they'll be able to disrupt that nanotech at least long enough for us to see this thing and that might be sufficient for an offensive. Captain, you head to the armory and grab the grenades, and I'll meet you at the X-100 hangar. I'll get us set up for the attack."



“Yes, sir!” Alex yelled as he began running down the hallway towards the armory.

He didn’t know if this plan had any chance of success, but it was certainly better than nothing. And even if they managed to make Melissa visible again... Melissa. He had to stop thinking about it in those terms. Whatever it had become it clearly wasn’t Melissa anymore. This wasn’t his wife of more than 10 years. This wasn’t the woman who had been his friend despite all their differences. This wasn’t even the super-smart geek he loved to get a rise out of by insulting her beloved Star Trek every chance he got.

This was a thing, plain and simple. It was a target now, a thing that needed to be destroyed, nothing more. He had to fall back on his military training and experience, had to put all memory of his wife out of his mind because he knew, if they managed to find it, what he’d have to somehow do, even though he didn’t have the slightest clue how.

If it was indeed alive at all as he suspected, he had to kill it. For the second time today. Whatever it wanted with the X-100 he knew it couldn’t be good, of that Alex was confident.

He ran down the corridor, past half a dozen soldiers running towards the hangar bay, M-4 carbines in hand, locked and loaded and prepared for whatever danger they were charging into. At least, Alex *hoped* they were ready.

He reached the armory and violently slammed the door open, charging directly towards the shelf where the EM grenades were. He grabbed four of them, hung them on his belt with the hooks that were attached to them, and then grabbed his own M-4. He grabbed four extra magazines, fully loaded with hot-loaded hollow-point rounds, as well as a combat knife, which was so long that it might as well have been considered a sword! He threw a Kevlar vest on for good measure and attached the knife and its sheath to his left arm and took off down the hallway towards the hangar.

The alarm klaxons were deafening, and the battle lighting gave everything a slightly red tinge to it. Major Alcheck would have to turn these damned things off before they could proceed as they were very distracting even to Alex. That, of course, was their job: to get attention, and they were very effective at that!

Alex arrived in the hangar bay and saw Alcheck directing the troops into formations behind improvised barricades. They formed a circle around the X-100, separated by only about 5 feet between each soldier. Whatever Melissa had become, it wasn’t going to slip through this formation. Now, if the grenades would just work...

“Captain! We’re good to go here. You have the grenades?”

"Yes, sir, four of ‘em, one for each cardinal direction. The first hint of this thing we get, we set one off and, hopefully, it does the trick."

“Right! Let’s get into position ourselves. That thing could be in here already for all we know.”

Alex took a position in front of the nosecone of the X-100, Major Alcheck 90 degrees to his left. Alex tossed two grenades to the soldier 90 degrees to his right, who passed one to the soldier at the rear of the craft. He also threw one to Major Alcheck.

Then, the waiting began.

The hangar was deathly quiet now, except for an occasional rustling of a soldier shifting his weight behind a barricade and the hum of the overhead lights and other

equipment. There was also an air exhaust port a hundred feet or so behind them that periodically let out a hissing noise as the air was exchanged with the nighttime air beyond the walls of the hangar.

Ten minutes passed. Then twenty. Still nothing. No sound, no shadows, no movement anywhere. It could be standing right in front of him, and Alex wasn't sure he'd know. He could only hope there was some sort of clue when it was near, a clue like the feeling he had gotten earlier that alerted him to its presence. He didn't know what that was all about, but his guess was it had made physical contact with him. How simple contact would seemingly give him information like it seemed to have, but he wasn't so much worried about the how of things right now.

He assumed invisibility didn't mean it also didn't interact with matter, that was the important part, and it seemed most likely to him to be true. He didn't know much about science but somehow, as incredible as invisibility was, he thought a physical creature turning into an actual ghost was probably beyond its capabilities. Or so he hoped.

He also knew it couldn't be the same sort of invisibility that the stealth drive was meant to create because if that was the case then it wouldn't even be here at all, it would be in another universe, and there would be no possibility of interaction.

No, Alex figured the thing was just invisible... and he chuckled at his own use of the word *just* in that context.

Alex checked his watch now. Thirty minutes had passed. He looked around to ensure the soldiers were still frosty. They were, as was Major Alcheck. They were all very alert, scanning the environment regularly. They were very well-trained, Alex thought. While they were all the cream of the crop generally, only a handful of them were special forces as he and Alcheck were. He was pleasantly surprised that they had been trained as well as they clearly had been regardless.

*Maybe there's a chance we win this thing, however small a chance it might be.*

Alex too continued scanning all around him, his eyes moving slowly, his head moving as his eyes reached their maximum lateral movement to expand his range. As he did so, he allowed his mind to wander just a little bit.

He wished Melissa was here - the real Melissa that is. She would have had three different theories on how to deal with the thing by now, how its cloaking technology worked, probably would have some fancy machine built to track it by now too.

*Yeah, that'd be pretty damned helpful right about now!*

To his left, Alex noticed something: a slight shimmering off in the distance, along the wall of the hangar. It was almost like the wall was wet, and the light was glistening off it, in contrast to the rest of the wall that wasn't. He whistled as gently and quietly as he could, just enough to get the attention of the soldier to his left. The soldier turned to look at Alex, who noted the movement of the soldier's head in his peripheral vision and gestured towards the spot that he had been keeping his eyes on the whole time. The soldier looked and squinted for a few moments.

But he couldn't see a thing, Alex realized. Only he was seeing it. He knew that either made him crazy, or the only one that could initiate the attack.

The shimmering began to move, slowly, deliberately. Alex was now sure it was the thing, the creature. It had to be. He wasn't crazy, but he was the only one that could see it. He had to do something about that.

Alex gestured to the two soldiers nearest him who had EM grenades to remove the pins and prepare to throw where he was directing them. They hesitated momentarily, and for good reason: to them, Alex was telling them to throw the only weapons they had that they suspected might have a chance of working, at an empty wall!

Alex gestured again, more forcefully this time, and this time the soldiers complied. Pins removed, they stood at the ready, their attention focused on the wall where Alex was pointing.

A few seconds later, the thing they couldn't yet see came into range, and it was time to strike. Alex kicked off the action.

“NOW!”

The soldier threw the grenade towards the shimmering, its movement suddenly halted. The grenade detonated a few feet from the shimmering, arcs of electrical energy emanating from the point of detonation. It was like a ball of lightning in midair, tendrils of intense white and blue light crackling, searching out an Earth ground. A few of the bolts found one: the metal hangar walls behind the shimmering.

The bolts of lightning charged towards the wall, through the shimmering, pulsating and moving as they went. The discharge that hung in the air began to dissipate as the electrical streamers all started moving towards the wall. As they did so, the shimmering began to intensify, now like the distortion effect produced by the intense exhaust heat of a jet engine. The wall behind it began to be obscured, slowly fading out of view as if being blocked by undulating water.

The shimmering began to take on a form now, and Alex recognized it at once: the creature Melissa had morphed into in the lab right before they sterilized the room.

It was working.

By now, all the other soldiers, and Major Alcheck, had run from their positions, now able to see the beast, and were forming up in a defensive position behind the soldier who had thrown the grenade, forming a firing line. Alcheck was now pulling the pin on his grenade and preparing to throw it at the same time the soldier from the rear of the X-100 was now throwing his. The discharges from that grenade supplemented that of the first grenade, which was now almost finished fully discharging. Alex looked down at the weapon in his hand and with the speed of a cheetah, pulled the pin and threw it at the same moment Major Alcheck threw his.

Three balls of lightning now hung in the air not far from what they all knew now was definitely the creature, bolts of lightning streaming through the creature and into the wall behind it.

As if tuning in the distorted picture of an old over-the-air television, the shimmering now gave way to a physical being, writhing in pain thanks to the electricity coursing through it.

“Maybe that's enough to kill the damned thing!” Major Alcheck yelled.

*Wishful thinking*, Alex thought to himself. He supposed it was possible, but he wasn't about to bet on it.

"Maybe, but if nothing else it looks like it's stunning it... doesn't seem like it can move... we've only got a few seconds before those grenades discharge completely, we'd better use it!"

Alcheck nodded in agreement, both of them having the same thought. Alcheck yelled "Fire!" to all the soldiers around him as loudly as he could to be heard over the crackling of the electricity in the air.

Suddenly, all the fury of Hell was unleashed from the line of soldiers. Each of them began firing their weapons at the creature in unison, the sound echoing off the walls of the hangar in all directions. It was deafening. Alex had been in firefights before of course, but the acoustics of the hangar bay were uniquely suited to amplifying the noise. He knew they would all have some serious tinnitus after this!

Bullets screamed through the air, striking the creature all over its hideous body. Tracer rounds created lines showing the path from the rifles to the impacts, a sight Alex always found kind of beautiful in a terrible way.

The creature added to the thunderous racket with what Alex supposed were cries of agony. Whether it was the electricity, the bullets impacting its body, or both, he wasn't sure. The soldiers unloaded on the thing, swapping out magazines as they ran through their ammo, a constant barrage of blazing-hot metal flung downrange towards the creature. The grenade discharges were ceasing now, and it was at that point that Alex could finally see the damage all those hundreds of rounds were doing to the creature...  
...none whatsoever.

Alex couldn't quite make sense of what he was seeing, but what he *thought* he saw was the bullets exploding just inches in front of the creature as if they were impacting some invisible wall. With each impact, a bluish wave expanded out from the point of impact like ripples on a lake from a stone dropped in.

"Major! This fucking thing has some kind of energy shielding!"

He wasn't sure Alcheck had heard him, but the gunfire from the line was slowing now, almost finished. He guessed everyone else had realized what was happening about the same time he did.

The creature was now bent down on what Alex supposed was its knee. Tentacles exploded out from the flesh of its back now, moving around it in all directions, searching for Alex could only guess what, its arms hunched down in front of it. Its body expanded and contracted rhythmically, air brought in and expelled rapidly as it breathed. All around it, electrical energy coursed along its edges, interacting with the shield, now fading.

Alex recognized a creature collecting itself after exertion, and he somehow knew it was only a matter of time before it recovered enough to attack, and he wasn't sure there was a damned thing any of them could do when it did.

---

*Energy spike dissipating across outer shell. Shield energy low, recharge not initiated due to electrical overload. Damage control systems activated for correction of data transmission errors resulting from discharge. No damage to biologics.*

"Well, that doesn't sound good!" Melissa thought with glee.

She was still struggling to gain connection to the central processing core so she could see what was going on outside. Given the data stream she still had access to though she had a pretty good idea what had just happened:

Alex had.

He discovered the creature and even managed to figure out a way to attack it!

"That's it Alex! Whatever you're doing, keep doing it! It's working."

The data stream was corrupted now, a result of the powerful electrical discharge the creature had been hit with. It was her way in. Melissa reorganized her program structure so that it appeared in the stream as corrupt data. The primary shouldn't see anything suspicious in that, though Melissa knew she didn't have much time: the primary would certainly move to correct the corruption as quickly as possible, and with it, Melissa.

*Data corruption detected. Corrective measures engaging. Checksum routines processing data flow, retrieval of parity bits for data reconstruction commencing.*

Yep, there it was: this primary was highly efficient, something Melissa appreciated from a technical standpoint. She didn't have much time now at all. As soon as the data packets she had sent were corrected, part of her would effectively be erased. She had to press the advantage as quickly as possible.

The packets arrived in the central core a few cycles later and began coalescing into a single program. As it did, a data link was established between Melissa's main code and the sub-code in the central processing center. She had effectively broken off a part of her consciousness, part of her program and used it to establish a link with the central core.

"Ok, let's see what this buys me."

It took a bit more than a dozen cycles – an eternity in this place – but Melissa managed to gain access to the low-priority visual data acquisition system.

She could *see* what was happening now!

Outside the body, she saw a line of soldiers, guns at the ready, moving extremely slowly. Time seemed to be passing at a vastly different rate in here than in the real world. Melissa experienced an eternity for every moment that passed outside. She could see Major Alcheck there, pointing in her direction, no doubt barking commands. Maybe 20 feet away was Alex, a stern expression on his face. Melissa recognized it in an instant, knew it from all those years long ago from that day in school, the only time she had seen him in a combat situation: he was preparing to attack.

Did he have any chance though? Melissa needed more information to determine that. She directed the remote code to extract data from the damage control system. This was another lightly protected subsystem as the interface she had access to was read-only and the primary apparently didn't think there was any real need to defend it in a more robust way. And, it was right: Melissa couldn't use this access to actually *do* anything... but information was all she needed right now. She saw a catalog of data storage files, ordered by microsecond time slice. She commanded them to be retrieved and replayed in reverse chronological sequence.

Melissa saw the short battle that had just taken place in reverse order. Her own code automatically reversed the playback sequence in chunks, and although it wouldn't make

sense to a normal human mind, this new digital form she now found herself in gave her insights and emerging abilities that she could never have had as a purely biological entity, and it all made sense. The EM grenades (*great idea, Alex!*), the hundreds of bullets that had impacted the shields.

Shields! The creature she had become had shields! She had theorized such a thing was possible, but only on aircraft. She never imagined an individual biological being could possess such a capability. So many questions raced through her mind: how were the shields powered? How did air exchange occur so as to not suffocate the creature? Did it have limits in terms of energy it could dissipate? Would it block all kinetic attacks or was it vulnerable at various scales? The scientist in her couldn't control the enthusiasm of such a discovery.

But, before long, the realization hit her:

“They're not going to have any chance against us... against me.”

Her mind combined the new information about the shielding with the damage report data, and she understood at once that even though the shield energy was almost depleted, it was rapidly regenerating and even at the low level it was now, guns wouldn't work. Neither would knives, which was a problem because she had a feeling about what Alex would do next. Melissa knew the way Alex thought.

*Weapons systems engaging. Muscle control now at full discretion of combat control routines. Air flow optimal, respiration returning to normal levels.*

“Oh shit! I gotta give Alex at least a fighting chance!”

Melissa began surveying the data links she had access to. The primary still had not corrected the corrupted data streams, and now with the combat subsystem activated that task was being pushed to a secondary processor array. Melissa realized this gave her an opportunity: there were holes in the data streams that she could exploit just like she had done to gain access to the central core. Unfortunately, each time she did so she also knew that she was destroying a part of her own consciousness, breaking off pieces of herself that couldn't be replicated. She noticed that cost of the gambit the first time she had done it.

But it was a price she had to pay. If she couldn't figure out a way to give Alex some sort of advantage out there in the real world then he, and all the soldiers around him, wouldn't stand a chance.

---

“It's getting ready to attack!” Alex yelled.

“Why hasn't it yet?” Major Alcheck yelled back.

“We must have stunned it, but I don't think that's going to last for long.”

“Any ideas, Alex? Guns obviously have no effect. How do we get past those shields?”

“Not a clue, Major. We've got to figure something out though, we can't let that thing get the X-100!”

Alcheck considered the situation. He didn't know anything about energy shields like this thing had, but he did have at least a rudimentary understanding of basic physics, thanks to Melissa and all the technical reports he had to read about her work over the years. Some of what he had read included some theoretical musings Melissa had written

up specifically about energy shielding possibilities. Alcheck figured this had to be quite a bit different than what Melissa had been describing on fighter jets, but maybe the principals weren't *entirely* different. Maybe they *just* were similar enough...

"Alex! Melissa wrote some papers on shields like this, though on a much larger scale, for use on aircraft. I didn't understand most of it of course, but I remember one key point being that shielding would have to be highly tuned against a specific threat. They were unlikely to work against all types of weapons. I wonder if the same might be true of this thing?"

Alex realized in an instance what Major Alcheck was saying. It made sense: guns were a soldier's primary weapon in modern warfare, and this creature may well know that since Melissa would have, and since it obviously knew about the X-100 then that had to mean Melissa's knowledge, or at least some part of it, was still in there. Melissa certainly knew about guns: Alex had taken her to the range many times.

"So, guns may not work, but knives may!"

Alex unsheathed the combat knife he had taken from the armory and regarded it. The bright xenon lights that hung from the top of the hangar glistened off its sharp edge, like morning dew on a blade of grass.

"Exactly! Men, fix bayonets and prepare to..."

Before Major Alcheck could finish his command, it began.

---

"Oh no, not yet, I haven't found it yet!"

Melissa, or whatever the equivalent of a disembodied mind yelling was, yelled that phrase into the abyss surrounding her. She could see the data pouring in now: muscular energy consumption levels, attack pattern vectoring algorithm results, update energy shield status reports. It all meant only one thing: it had begun its attack.

*Motor functions nominal. Vectoring towards first target, anticipated time of contact 234 cycles.*

It was a highly efficient mechanism, but it still had the same physical limits the biological portion of it had. It may be tough in that regard, but Alex could handle tough. That meant if Melissa could just disrupt it somehow, either its movement or its senses, Alex and the soldiers might have a chance at taking it down. If she could disengage the shielding, then they might have an opportunity to hurt this thing. It might be like fighting a grizzly bear - not a thing to be taken lightly - but not impossible at least.

Melissa began working on a way to disrupt the primary systems but before she got very far, processing cycle 234 ticked and the data streams started overflowing with data. She quickly switched to the visual data stream and was horrified by what she saw.

---

Two soldiers were down before Alex could even react. Entrails painted the floor like raw meat dropped from a grocery bag. Tentacles flashed about with lightning speed, the talons embedded in them beginning to cut the flesh of a third soldier. His arm was quickly severed just above the elbow, and his cries of agony began before the severed appendage even hit the floor. Mercifully, the creature ended his suffering quickly with a decapitating blow. His head flew off from the force of the blow, striking the wing of the

X-100 that he was standing below. The other soldiers were now breaking ranks, beginning to retreat and duck for cover as the creature began hunting for its next target.

Alex was now on the move towards the creature, not really knowing what he was going to do when he got there. He had about 40 feet to traverse, so he had about two seconds to figure it out. His mind was racing with tactical options now, his hand-to-hand training kicking in. He smirked as his unconscious mind asked a silly question:

*Is it still hand-to-hand if your opponent has tentacles? Isn't that hand-to-tentacle combat?*

“Alex!” yelled Major Alcheck.

Alex' eyes darted momentarily towards him, just quick enough to realize there wasn't actually any more words coming - it was just a generic cry of someone feeling fear. Alex had seen it in combat before, though the sight of it in someone like Brendan Alcheck certainly didn't make him feel too good about the situation he was in.

The creature was now moving towards a fleeing soldier, knocking over the improvised barricades they had erected as it went. It moved with the speed of a jungle animal, a Hyena hunting a Gazelle. It seemed like an impossible speed to Alex, and he knew that as fast as he was moving, it was only a small fraction of how fast this creature was moving. He adjusted course as he ran to maintain an intercept course to the creature.,

Alex raised the knife over his head in a ready position as he approached, trying now to maneuver into the creature's path in a vain attempt to cut off its advanced to that soldier. Alex recognized this soldier: Corporal Sam Tieggs. He didn't know most of these men, but Tieggs he did. He had served with his father, Lieutenant Jackson Tieggs, as part of a rescue op in Iran a few years back. He was a good man, and so was his son. Alex felt a sudden surge of energy thanks to his desire to not see the son of a man he considered a brother-in-arms die, not to mention a fellow soldier in Sam Tieggs either, and his speed increased.

But he could see it was not going to be enough. The creature was just too fast, and before Alex could close even half the distance between them, it lunged towards Sam, two arms extended towards him targeted for his neck. Alex knew in an instant that he wasn't going to make it.

Or was he?

Without warning, the creature's arms dropped a few inches, and it seemed to stumble briefly. It quickly regained its balance, but its advance was now slowed considerably. The stumble had given Sam enough time to put a few feet between him and the creature, and that gap was now expanding, much to Alex's surprise. Without thinking, he knew he had to press his advantage. He thrust his right foot onto a crate that had been part of the barricade, pushed as hard as he could and threw himself through the air, towards the creature, which was now moving at an almost average human speed. As he crossed the few remaining feet between them, flying through the air like a bird of prey towards its next meal, he brought both his hands up to the handle of the knife, which was now poised over his head, ready to strike the second he made contact with the creature. If he timed it right, and if his jump was strong enough, he'd land high up on the creature's back and one strong thrust downward towards its neck area might just be enough.



Time slowed as he approached the creature, only inches left to go now.

---

*System malfunction. Incorrect parameters present in control routing protocols targeted for environmental control subsystem. Precise origin unknown; suspect secondary intervention. Motor control systems compromised. Shielding collapsing to minimum sustainable levels. Unable to proceed with current target assignment. System energy assignment rebalancing beginning, anticipated recovery in 96 cycles.*

"Yes! Take that, you motherfucker!"

Melissa's ploy had worked. She couldn't manipulate any of the main systems now. The primary had erected protective measures more than sufficient to keep her out. But, she did have access to a few lesser systems, among them the environmental control subsystem. This was the subsystem responsible for baseline biological entity temperature and perspiration and that sort of relatively mundane activities. None of that was enough to let her stop the attack, but she could use a simple computer hacking trick: a simple buffer overflow! The command protocols that were sent to the control mechanisms of that subsystem didn't do any defensive checks on the size of the commands themselves. Why should it after all? All the subsystems of this creature, all the technological augmentations that the nanotech of the original alien probe provided to the organic form were trusted after all. There was no need to protect the code against simple, primitive human hacks.

It was a small opening for Melissa, but it was enough. She sent a series of commands to the environmental subsystem that were each far longer than they were supposed to be. The memory location where those commands were processed weren't designed to handle such a situation, they were designed with a specific, small command size in mind. So, the extra data she had sent would overflow this small memory buffer location and overflow into a piece of executable code. The very next processing cycle that kicked in executed this seemingly random code, but it wasn't random at all: it was a specific command Melissa crafted that she otherwise wasn't authorized to perform: she told the environmental subsystem that the external environment was sweltering. In fact, it informed the subsystem that it was so hot that the nanotech would have to go into overdrive to cool the biological components down before permanent damage occurred. This meant drawing substantial power from other systems - systems like the battle control subsystem and the defense subsystem - and, most critically, the motor control subsystem.

Simply put, her trick managed to slow the creature down substantially while it incorrectly tried to cool itself!

Not only that, but the energy shielding was now down to as low a level as it could be at before complete collapse. It was, Melissa believed, the chance Alex needed.

Before she could celebrate her success and check the visual data stream to see if Alex was able to take advantage of the opening she had provided, Melissa heard something from the primary that sent shivers down his virtual spine.

*Secondary intrusion confirmed. Subsystem rebalancing in progress. Anticipated recovery extended 114 cycles. Secondary purge protocols beginning. Secondary deemed*

*no longer necessary for primary mission parameter completion. Purge protocols initiating.*

“Oh fuck, that sounds extremely bad.”

---

Alex’ blow landed squarely where he intended, his knife plunged deeply into the creature’s neck, the energy shielding offering only slight resistance to the blow. As it struck, the energy shield discharged into Alex’ hands, freezing him in place like a direct current shock. It wasn’t enough to kill him, but it was enough to temporarily paralyze him.

The energy coursed through his central nervous system, up and down his spine and into his brain. An intensely painful tingling sensation washed over his body, much like the feeling of being tazed, but far worse. He could barely even think straight now, the energy disrupting the synapses in his brain. It was triggering visions now, hallucinations. Images of Melissa, Jupiter, basic training, combat missions, test flights, even television shows he loved, all of it flashed through his mind in a jumble of images.

He fought to control his own mind, trying to focus on the images of Melissa.

---

“You’re not getting rid of me that easy you bastard!”

Melissa could see the bits of code now that were invading her program. They were amazingly destructive and supremely efficient. They were quite literally eating away bits of her consciousness, little by little. She knew she didn’t have much time if she was going to do something about it.

But what? What could she do? The coding of these agents of destruction were far more advanced than anything else she had seen so far. There wouldn’t be enough time to understand them sufficiently to stop them. She was going to die - *actually* die - this time. Every remaining shred of who she was would be voided out of existence. There wasn’t going to be any hiding this time, she knew that much. These programs were far too efficient for that.

"Oh, God!"

There *had* to be *something* she could do. Even if she couldn’t save herself, she couldn’t go out without putting up a fight at least. Alex had ingrained that mindset on her for sure.

She started examining data streams as quickly as she could.

She realized almost immediately that she was locked out of all subsystems of any real importance, even the ones considered non-critical like environmental control now. It was all additional protection activated by the primary thanks to her previous hacks. She still had read access to the visual data stream though, and she could see that Alex had indeed taken advantage of what Melissa had done.

“Attaboy Alex, kick its ass!”

Melissa examined the damage control data stream now and saw that the knife wound Alex had inflicted... more precisely, was in the process of inflicting, given the difference in the passage of time as observed by Melissa... wasn’t a critical blow. It might hamper

the creature a little bit, but not enough to end the fight. The remaining soldiers, and Alex, were still almost certainly dead men once the recovery period was complete.

*Recovery completion in 34 cycles. Secondary purge continuing normally. Anticipated completion in 28 cycles.*

“Shit. I’m running out of time!”

She didn’t know what to do. She seemed to be out of options. No access to any data streams of consequence, no corners of the system left to hide in, purge programs set upon her.

Then, she saw it.

A data stream that hadn’t been there before. What was it? Where did it come from?

It looked almost like a foreign stream, something emanating from an external source. How could that be though? Nothing on Earth could possibly communicate with this system; human technology just wasn’t advanced enough.

Somehow though, it seemed familiar, like she somehow knew the patterns of it. That too was impossible though, how could she?

Still though, something about it... something familiar. A memory? A feeling perhaps? She was close, she knew, to being able to identify it, but she just could quite...

“ALEX!”

The data stream, somehow, was coming from Alex!

“You did it Alex! That’s it! The knife, the nanotech, of course!”

*Unknown data stream detected. Origin unknown. Invasive code detected. Activating defensive measures.*

“It all makes sense! Thank you, Alex, that’s what I needed.”

Melissa mustered every last bit of control she had, quickly cataloged all the code that was left that the purge programs hadn’t gotten to yet, and she executed one final quickly cobbled-together subroutine: a small bit of code that transmitted every last bit of her remaining consciousness towards that data stream.

---

“Alex, can you hear me? Can you see me?”

Alex stood in light. He looked around, spun, trying to understand what he was seeing. All around him was a blinding white light that, paradoxically, did *not* blind him. It was so pure his mind couldn’t comprehend it.

“Melissa, is that you? Where are you?”

“I’m here Alex, all around you. Look.”

Alex scanned his surroundings again, trying to find Melissa. He turned to his left now and saw a slight distortion in the light. It gradually morphed, starting to become recognizable. A person? The silhouette of a person? Yes! Slowly, he saw that it was a person as he knew it was Melissa even before he could really identify her, walking towards him.

“Melissa! I see you! Where are we? I’m, uh, gonna go ahead and guess I’m dead and this is heaven?”

“Not quite that simple Alex, and you’re not that lucky. In fact, we don’t really have time for me to explain. We don’t have much time here at all, and I’ve got to give you something before it’s too late.”

“Give me something? What? And what do you mean too late? What’s happening?”

“I can’t it all explain, Alex. I’m sorry. You’re just gonna to have to trust me. It’s going to be over soon. I can’t stop what’s about to happen, but I can make it mean something. Remember Alex, I love you.”

“Melissa, please, I don’t understand...”

A surge of energy invaded Alex’ body now, even more painful than the discharge of the energy shield. It was so powerful that he was thrown off the creature’s back, flying at least twenty feet into the wall of the hangar.

Alex lost consciousness before he even hit the wall.

---

“Well, that’s done then.”

Melissa looked over her shoulder and saw darkness approaching. The white light she was bathed in was shrinking all around her as if she was witnessing an eclipse that was happening 360 degrees all around her.

Faster now, and from all directions, the darkness ate the light all around her. She tried to remember the time she and Alex had visited Disneyland. It was one of her favorite vacations together. They rode Space Mountain more times than she could count and they ate dinner at... where was it? She couldn’t remember.

Couldn’t remember what? Disney... something? It was slipping away. She knew that Alex tried his best so that she... she who? What was her name? She couldn’t remember that now either, her own name had slipped away.

Her memories were being destroyed quickly now. The equations of Einstein...  $E=M...$  something. She knew it had been there just a moment ago, but now it was gone.

“Good luck Alex. I’m going to miss you. I love you. I love you-”

His name drifted off like a leaf on a summer breeze, gone from her mind now too.

A tear fell from her virtual eye as her mind struggled to resist for one last brief, futile moment of time.

And then, in an instant, the light blinked out of existence.

And so too did Melissa Wakeman.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *Awakening*

*Who the fuck is playing that God damned drum so loud?*

Just as that thought was racing through Alex's mind, causing pain as it moved around his neural pathways, his left eye squinted shut and then began to open, slowly. The light flooded in as if a dam had ruptured. He was drowning in light, and Major Alcheck noticed the grimace that resulted.

"Alex, just take your time. Doctor! He's coming to!"

*Ugh, just stop the drumming already!*

Alex made another subconscious attempt to open his eye, and this time he managed to keep it open, even if as just a small slit. It was at this point that he realized that it was not, in fact, a drum being played but was, in fact, his head pounding.

He began to make out a few blurry shapes around him as his eye opened further. Before long, his right eye decided to join the party and started slowly opening as well. The pain of the light was excruciating and only seemed to be making the pounding in his head worse.

Alex's eyes snapped shut as he saw a discharge of energy all around him. He quickly realized that it wasn't real though. It was a memory of what had happened to him. It was a memory that the creature had attacked him with some kind energy discharge. Just the memory of the pain it had inflicted was enough to make Alex wish he wasn't regaining consciousness now at all. That was one memory he'd rather be zapped out of his brain entirely.

He willed his eyes open again, and this time the process went a little smoother. He saw a figure he recognized standing over him: Major Alcheck. He also saw some other figures milling about the room he was in, one moving towards him. Alcheck noticed Alex beginning to try and look around, to move his head.

"Alex, try not to move. You've been through something that really should have killed you. I guess you're even tougher than I already knew you are."

Alex quickly agreed, more because his body told him he had no real choice in the matter than specifically wanting to, and allowed his head to sink back into the pillow it was resting on. As he did, he heard a voice that he didn't recognize.

"Ah, the patient returns to the land of the living! Happy to have you back, Captain!"

He moved his eyes around towards the source of the voice, and he recognized a doctor's gown and a male face, but one he couldn't identify.

“Alex, I’m doctor Woodrow. I’ve been taking care of you since you’ve been out. We’re glad to have you back with us!”

“D-doctor... W-woodrow? How... how long?” Alex struggled to stammer out the only question to which he wanted an immediate answer.

“Well,” began Doctor Woodrow, glancing at Major Alcheck, “it’s been a little while. How are you feeling?”

“Head... pounding.”

“That’s to be expected given your, uh, experience, but we can help with that. We’ve got some new options now that you’ve regained consciousness. Nurse, dexamethasone please.”

Alex worried the medication would knock him out again so he quickly, and more forcefully, willed himself to speak.

“How long... was I out?”

Doctor Woodrow looked at Major Alcheck again and nodded at him. This was the cue Alcheck had been waiting for. He leaned in to speak. Alex noticed out of the corner of his eye and gingerly turned to face him.

“Alex, you’ve been out for just a few hours short of two weeks.”

Alex’s now fully opened eyes expanded rapidly in size as his own voice screamed inside his mind.

*Two WEEKS?!*

“What? It... it couldn’t be... two weeks?!”

The shock of the statement was the best tonic Alex could have hoped for. The fog of his previous unconsciousness all but dissipated quickly now. His head still felt like a marching band had taken up permanent residence in there, but he was starting to push the pain aside.

“During our battle with the creature, you were knocked out. Doctor Woodrow was concerned about brain damage due to the combination of the energy discharge and your impact with the wall, so he put you in a medically-induced coma until the swelling in your brain went down enough for it to be safe for you to wake up. It took a week for that to happen, and we’ve been waiting nearly another week for you to wake up after taking you off the drugs. We... I... was starting to worry you might never wake up.”

Alex could hear an unusual level of emotion in Alcheck’s voice. It wasn’t like him to show this much caring for someone under his command, even someone that was a friend besides being a subordinate. It wasn’t that he ever *didn’t* care, Alex knew well that he did, it’s just that he was practiced at not showing it. Not this time though.

Alex forced a smile.

“Well, sir, I’m back. I could do with an aspirin though.” Alex looked over at Doctor Woodrow now as he wore an expression that said: “make with the drugs, doc!”

The meaning was apparently not lost on Woodrow.

“We’re administering you some dexamethasone now Alex. It’s a strong sedative/inflammation reducer. I know it seems like you’ve had plenty of sleep, but this will make you get a little more. You should wake up in just a few hours feeling pretty good though.”

“Wait! Before you give me that stuff- Major, what happened to the creature?”

Major Alcheck’s expression changed from one of happiness (as much as he ever wore an expression of happiness anyway) to one of seriousness - his natural expression, Alex knew.

“A few seconds after it hit you, it went invisible again, and we lost it. It didn’t continue to attack, it just disappeared. We’ve been trying to track it any way we can ever since but we’ve had no success. We think the damage you managed to do to it was enough for it to not want to continue the fight. I believe that it left the base to nurse its wounds and that’s the assumption I’ve been operating on ever since. Then again, it could be standing in this room right now, and we wouldn’t know until it decided to attack us again. We’ve had little luck coming up with a way to detect it until it wants to be detected. But, the fact that there hasn’t been an attack since that day makes me think you hurt it pretty bad and it’s not up to another fight just yet, even with all its advantages. Hell, you may have given it some doubt as to whether it actually *does* have any advantages, but somehow I doubt we’re that lucky.”

Alex’s mind began frantically racing with various possibilities, different tactical scenarios and options to track the creature. He wanted to jump out of bed and get right to work, but he knew that wasn’t going to happen now given that his head felt like it was about to explode.

“What about the X-100? Is it secure?”

“We’ve had it moved to a secret location in Canada. It’s possible the creature was there, watching, and knows where it is, but given my assumption about its wounds, I don’t think that’s the case. I don’t know where the damned creature is right now, but my gut says it doesn’t know where the X-100 is either, so that’s a small ray of sunshine on a cloudy day.”

The nurse finally began pushing the dexamethasone into Alex’s IV tube, and its effects began almost instantly. Alex’s eyes began to close. He tried to fight at first... he wanted to talk to Alcheck more and figure out what their next step would be... but that wasn’t going to happen now though, he quickly realized.

He stopped fighting and allowed his eyes to shut, and as he did, he realized that his head was still screaming at him. The pain was excruciating. He could endure a lot, but this was almost too much. Just as consciousness began to slip away, he wondered why it was still hurting so much anyway? Surely after two weeks, it shouldn’t be this bad, should it?

He began trying to mouth that very question to doctor Woodrow, but it was too late. He fell back into the cold dark of unconsciousness, surrounding him like a soothing bath.

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Before he knew it, he was awake again. But, something wasn’t right. Something was, in fact, very, very wrong.

The first thing Alex noticed was that he was fully and completely awake and aware of his surroundings. It was instantaneous, unlike when he woke up last time, that slow march from unconscious to conscious. The second thing he noticed was that the pain in his head was gone! This at least made him happy; everything else be damned.

The third thing he noticed though was something that he could never have comprehended before the X-100 test flight, something his mind would never have accepted. Even now, even with that experience, his mind was revolting against the reality his eyes were perceiving.

He was floating in space, above a planet he didn't recognize.

He felt a momentary panic as he wondered why he wasn't dead. Shouldn't he have exploded or something? Isn't that what happened when a person is exposed to the vacuum of space? Or was it frozen to death maybe? Certainly he'd suffocate, right? He wasn't an astrophysicist or an astronaut, so he wasn't certain of the exact mechanism or death, but he had seen enough movies to know he should be dead right now one way or another. It didn't matter how or if he ought to be dead though because he was unequivocally alive and, seemingly, no worse for wear. He was just floating there, in space, naked.

No space suit, no clothes at all in fact. Alex couldn't resist the male urge to ensure his genitals were intact, and yes, they were. All the parts were where they were supposed to be, apparently not in any more danger than any other part of him.

Alex looked around, trying to ascertain where he was. The planet below his feet was massive. It filled almost his entire field of view, but it wasn't as large as Jupiter had been. It wasn't Earth; he knew that: the colors were all wrong. It had some hints of blue, green and white like Earth did, but it was a strange tint of red, almost orange, for the most part. Was it Mars maybe? No, not Mars: he could make out what looked like artificial structures on the land masses and oceans. He knew enough to know that Mars didn't have either.

The realization struck him like the proverbial ton of bricks: this was an alien world, inhabited by honest-to-goodness aliens! Maybe it was the home world of the creature? But if so, how could he get here?

"This has got to be a dream, or a side-effect of the dexta-whatever the hell Doctor Woodrow had said that stuff was."

And there it was, yet another clue that it was a dream: he could hear himself speak! He knew enough about space to know that sounds don't carry in space. He was a fan of the movie *Alien*, and that fact was its tagline! A strange way to obtain knowledge, a movie tagline, but it worked for him in this instance.

If it was a dream though, it was vivid beyond anything he'd ever experience before. His mind told him this was reality, regardless of the impossibility of it.

He decided to see if he could turn. He knew he shouldn't be able to: without the ability to exert some sort of force against something he couldn't hope to move.

"Wait, how do I know that?"

As he pondered this, how he seemed to have some basic physics knowledge that he wasn't aware that he had, he was shocked to realize that he was now in fact turning! The shock wore off quickly though as he remembered this had to be a dream, despite how real it felt. In a dream, he'd be able to do something he couldn't do in the real world so that probably explained it.



He spun, ever so slowly, and he began to catch movement in his peripheral vision. He tried to turn his head to see it, but he was unable to do so. It was almost like his head was locked in place, looking forward only. He'd have to wait for his body to rotate fully before he'd see what was moving straight-on.

Before long, the movement began to come into focus. Spaceships. Dozens. No, hundreds. Maybe even thousands of ships. And not human ships, that much was obvious.

They were like nothing he'd ever seen before except maybe in some sci-fi movies, certainly not like anything he knew humans had produced. These were most definitely alien ships. They were cubes, surrounded by rings. Between the cube and the rings were a glistening curtain of light that continually danced, changing colors, lightning bolts shooting back and forth at random points and times. The rings appeared to rotate counterclockwise- no, clockwise. No, they were actually split in half, one half rotating one way and one half turning the other. They appeared not to be physically touching either- they had the same sort of energy discharges between them as between the rings and the cube.

The cubes had small protrusions on all sides that looked like metallic trees. As the ships approached, Alex suspected the trees were weapons systems. They had that menacing look, like gun batteries of battleships: you just somehow knew they were meant for destructive business.

These must have been the capital ships, the big guns of this fleet. Between them flew smaller ships, triangular in shape. The surface of these ships seemed to change rapidly, smaller triangles morphing out of the surface and then contracting again. These ships were darting about, seemingly not in any sort of formation or flying any kind of designated patterns. They must be fast attack craft, Alex thought, like fighter jets. But if that were true...

Alex turned back around to face the planet. This time he was able to spin around almost instantly thanks to convenient dream-world physics, and as he did, an armada of ships distinctly different from the other fleet approached him rapidly. Some were already on top of him, flying over his head, under his feet, *through* him! These ships were more recognizable to him, almost looking like space shuttles, albeit advanced space shuttles. He recognized some sort of gun batteries on them, and what looked like missiles underneath. These ships could almost have been made by humanity, maybe in a few hundred years anyway.

As the ships flew all around him, he instantly turned around now and saw the first skirmishes of the battle. The ships that had come from the planet attacked first. Energy beams struck the ships of the invading fleet, but they seemed to do little more than bounce off or be absorbed, he wasn't sure. Then, a few ships launched missiles. These weapons were faster than anything he'd ever seen, and they were driven by some form of propulsion he didn't recognize, but it definitely wasn't chemical in nature. They were surrounded by a cloud of glowing purple energy, shimmering and shifting as they moved towards the invading ships. These weren't energy weapons he knew; these were kinetic weapons. Maybe they would have an effect where the beam weapons had failed?

It didn't take long to realize that wouldn't be the case.

The missiles struck their targets, or maybe impacted some sort of energy shields; he couldn't tell for sure. Either way though, they did no more damage than the energy beams had done. It didn't take him long to recognize the pattern.

"They have energy shields like the creature, but a lot bigger" Alex muttered to himself.

After the first volley, the invading ships began their offensive run.

First, the smaller fighter ships began moving towards their attackers. They organized into a diamond formation, but then they continued to close in on one another. Before long, they were touching one another, but it was clear to Alex that this was not a collision situation, this was very much intentional. The triangles that formed and collapsed on their surfaces began to link up and form solid bonds. In almost no time, the diamond formation of at least a few dozen smaller ships now created a giant, single solid ship. This ship moved with the agility of the individual ships, and they began to drive *through* the defending ships, imposing their will on anything that came into contact with. It was effectively a kamikaze tactic: the giant ad-hoc ship was clearing a path, destroying all the enemy ships in its path. It moved shockingly fast and was incredibly agile - the defending ships were simply not able to get out of the way.

The giant ship began to deform and break apart into individual ships again as larger ships flew over Alex' head from the planet. These were much larger versions of the ships that had just been mostly wiped out. These must be the capital ships of the inhabitants of this world. These ships, while physically similar to the smaller ships, had arrays of large guns along its top ridge and its wings. Each of them began moving and pointing at the large capital ships of the invading fleet. The weapons began to glow an eerie green color from inside randomly. Without warning, balls of energy flew out of them at fantastic speeds. They looked light green balls of lightning confined in the shape of a sphere.

"These must be plasma energy weapons."

The words startled him.

"Wait, how do I know what a plasma weapon is?"

He realized he was aware of what plasma was, something he didn't think he did before. In his minds' eye, mathematical equations appeared, formulas that described the plasma balls.

"What the hell?"

A look of confusion spread out across his face.

Before he could ponder it further though, brilliant explosions began to take form, impacts of the plasma balls on the enemy ships. They appeared to break like waves over the ships, washing over them like water washing over a rock formation on a shoreline. The green glow brightened, then dimmed, and he saw what appeared to be some damage to the capital ships! Maybe these guys stood a chance after all!

The damage, however, didn't seem to stop the ships. Their own guns now swung towards the remaining defending ships. Four of the invaders' capital ships began firing in unison, their weapons producing steady streams of red energy, sweeping across the field of defending ships from the planet below. The ungodly beams of energy began carving up anything they touched.

The defending ships were sliced into pieces with no more effort than a hot knife through butter. The smaller ships, those few that remained, were being destroyed by the rapidly expanding debris field from the capital ships breaking apart. Explosions in the sliced off pieces began, probably from matter meeting antimatter, Alex somehow knew. This only accelerated the destruction of the remaining ships.

In what seemed like only a matter of a few minutes, the battle, such as it was, had ended. Every last ship that had come from the planet was destroyed now, bits and pieces floating through space, energy discharges randomly firing off of them as machinery and circuitry let out their final death calls.

The enemy ships... every single one of them having survived the defenders' onslaught... advanced through the debris field, small impacts occurring without consequence on what Alex could now see were clearly energy shields around them. The capital ships began to spread out, taking up positions around the planet equidistant from one another. The smaller attack craft now started shifting form to a much greater degree than they had before. They began stretching out to an inconceivable degree and started creating connections between the capital ships. A web of ships now wrapped around the planet with the capital ships at intersection points.

Their movement all came to a stop.

“What the hell are they doing?”

It was then that he realized that it was silent around him. This shouldn't be a surprise he knew, this being space and all, where there was supposed to be no sound to begin with. But, it was then that he realized he had heard all the sounds of the battle before. Further evidence that this was a dream, he thought.

But, now, he started to wonder if it wasn't something else. It couldn't be reality, he knew that, but it was far too vivid to be a dream. He also knew things that he couldn't possibly know. Surely, you can't have a dream that includes knowledge you simply don't have in the first place, right?

The capital ship nodes of the web around the planet began to pulsate, accompanied by a dull hum sound piercing the silence around him. He more *felt* the hum than heard it, the same for the electrical discharges he was now becoming aware of. The discharges were like those produced by a Jacob's Ladder. Electricity was breaking down air, and the collapse of the vacuum it caused was producing, just like lightning on Earth.

“Now how the hell do I know THAT?!”

Plasma energy balls began flowing from the capital ships, through the vessels forming the webbing, bouncing around like marbles in a pinball machine. The entire web was coming to life with energy flows, discharges and colors he couldn't identify. It was incredibly beautiful, even as he somehow knew it was all a harbinger of terrible death and destruction.

It wasn't long before that suspicion was confirmed.

Alex expected to see some sort of attack on the planet... maybe energy beams, or plasma balls, something similar to what he had seen during the battle. And indeed, electrical discharges were emanating from the capital ships towards the planet. But, they

looked severely underpowered. They looked like little more than lightning bolts. Surely *those* weren't enough to do any real damage to a *planet*, were they?

It was then that Alex noticed something that he knew was impossible, something that simply couldn't be. Even if he was 100% sure this was a dream, it was something he wouldn't have accepted even then.

The planet itself appeared to be shrinking!

At first, he thought it must be just some sort of optical illusion caused by all the energy discharges, but before long the planet had shrunk so much that it was no longer a possibility that it wasn't happening. The planet was, in fact, shrinking!

What were they doing to this world? *How* were they doing it?! His mind raced, and before long he came to the only logical conclusion: self-replicating nanotechnology was being used to consume the planet, and simultaneously they were pushing closer and closer together, a clump of nanoparticles forming a mass of increasing density. There could be only one possible end goal of such a thing: creation of an artificial singularity that would consume the entire planet, removing its matter from existence as far as this universe was concerned.

“Ok, this is crazy, there's no way I could know that!”

The planet continued to shrink, and as it did so, cracks in the land formations appeared, massive gashes that Alex knew had to be hundreds of miles across. Out of many of them, molten rock began to spew, but then quickly congealed as it too contracted. The atmosphere was now being pushed down onto the surface, and the weight and density of it was beginning to deform some of the oceans. The artificial structures he could still make out were almost unrecognizable masses of destroyed raw materials now.

It was as if some great force was squeezing a rubber ball filled with lava until it began to crack, allowing the lava to burst forth.

The planet shrunk, smaller and smaller, the shrinkage accelerating. What had started out larger than the Earth was now smaller than Earth's moon. A few seconds more and it was just maybe a hundred or two miles across. Then a few dozen.

Then, it was so small that Alex could barely make it out anymore. It had ceased being a planet some seconds ago. Now, it was just a mass of molten material, glowing brightly and getting brighter. Suddenly, it ignited in a burst of nuclear fusion. Just as quickly, it appeared to temporarily get bigger in what Alex suspected was essentially a supernova explosion. But, that didn't last long as the contraction continued, the nanotech apparently containing the massive explosion. It was getting dimmer now as atoms were pressed together. It was the equivalent of a neutron star now he thought, but the contraction didn't end there.

Without warning, it blinked out of existence. That's when Alex realized what the invading ships had done: they had created a black hole out of this planet!

The technology required for such a feat was unimaginable, yet he had just witnessed it in action.

Who were their beings that possessed such immense, incredible power?

The invading capital ships began to move away in all directions. The little ships followed, and the entire fleet began moving off, their terrible task done.

Alex was alone, orbiting nothing. Not a single ship from the planet survived, no proof that whatever species had fought so valiantly to save themselves had ever even existed. The stars on the opposite side of where the planet had been were occluded from his view now by the black hole; he saw blackness in front of him, stars only visible on the periphery. The loneliness stabbed at his very soul as he began to weep for a people he would never know, now forever inhabitants of the void before him, a dark monument to a destructive force like none he could have ever imagined.

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Alex awoke in a cold sweat and sat up in bed like a bolt, tearing tubes and sensor cables from the machines that monitored him. Alarms began sounding as medical technicians raced in to “save” him.

“Alex!” Doctor Woodrow came running in, “Are you alright?”

Alex was breathing heavy as the realization of what he had just seen washed over him. In the cold light of reality, he knew what it was and knew what it meant.

He willed himself to calm down. He got his breathing under control as nurses re-connected cables and reset warning alarms. Doctor Woodrow stood next to him, grabbed Alex’ wrist to check his pulse.

“Alex? Can you hear me?”

Alex finally caught his breath at the moment Major Alcheck entered the room.

“Major... we’ve got to talk.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *Reversion*

“I don’t know how I know any of it Major, but I do.”

Alex had been explaining what he saw for the better part of an hour now, but Major Alcheck was still having a hard time believing it.

Hell, so was Alex himself!

Plasma weapons, nanotechnology, artificial singularities, destroyed worlds laid to waste by an invading alien fleet of incredible power - all of this were things Alex couldn’t possibly know. He’d never heard of a plasma weapon before today, but here he was, describing them in enough detail that the scientists Major Alcheck had called into listen had confirmed that what Alex was describing did indeed sound like what they theorized plasma weapons would look like. His description of the destruction of the planet had shocked them, but they confirmed that too made scientific sense as Alex described it, albeit with a level of technology that humanity couldn’t even begin to theorize about creating. Though the nanotechnology part was a guess, they agreed that could be a viable mechanism for creating a singularity, given the matter available in a planet and some capabilities of that technology that seemed impossible from an engineering standpoint, but not a theoretical one.

But Alex was no scientist, and given his well-known proclivity for not being able to keep up with Melissa in that realm; there was no way his mind could have conjured such possibilities. He simply wasn’t equipped to have made the story up and have it sound so plausible.

Everyone who heard the story agreed: the story only made sense if it was something he had in fact witnessed and so had real knowledge of.

The base psychologist, Doctor Elizabeth Masters, arrived just as Alex was getting ready to tell the story for the fourth time. He knew Elizabeth fairly well, having had to go to her for counseling a few times when the brass thought he might be getting a little too out of control in some of his test flights. He knew that was always the risk he ran by seemingly not taking danger as seriously as he should, and even Alcheck couldn’t completely protect him from needing to see the shrink to ensure he still had all his marbles from time to time.

After Melissa’s death though, Alex didn’t think his joking nature would be an issue anymore because he was starting to sense that was no longer his nature at all. He decided to test himself a bit.

“Ah, it took longer than I expected to get the headshrinker in here. How have you been, Doctor?”

“I’m fine Alex,” replied Masters, in her usual calm and professional voice. “I hear you’ve got a hell of a story to tell.”

“Bit of an understatement there, doc. Pull up a chair, and I’ll regale you.”

No, even that small bit of jocularly felt all wrong to Alex now. He felt himself frown at the thought. The alien probe had apparently stolen more from him than just his wife.

Alex regurgitated the story for Masters as he had before, as Alcheck stared out the window of the recovery room. By the end, Doctor Masters’ eyes were wide, and her mouth hung agape as she sat motionless in the chair next to Alex’s bed. Even after he had finished, she was a statue for a good thirty more seconds.

Masters composed herself as best she could, shifted in her chair and slowly began to speak.

“Well... I... it’s clear that you believe what you’re saying... and from what I know of you, our interactions in the past, that implies you’re describing something you actually witnessed... but... but, that’s impossible.”

“Could it be hallucinations? Delusions?”

Alcheck had already asked that question of Alex more than once, but the opinion of a trained professional was what he wanted now.

Masters thought for a moment, tilting her head to the right as she did.

“I don’t think so, sir. The details are too specific. Delusions, whatever the root cause, tend to be more generalized, never as vibrant as what Alex is describing. Also, the details of the story tend to change if only subtly with each telling. From what I’m told, that’s not the case here.”

“No, he’s told the same exact story four times and, and I knew enough to listen for inconsistencies. There were none. You can, of course, review the recording if you like, but I can assure you, you’ll hear the exact same thing as you just heard.”

“Ok, no need for that sort of review, I completely trust your attention to detail, sir. So, given that, let’s assume Alex isn’t lying. Let’s also assume this isn’t the result of head trauma, and let’s assume there’s no sort of psychosis or other non-mechanical issues at play here since there’s no hint of any of that. What else could it be?”

Suddenly, as if his mind was connected to some great Internet search engine and his search results had just come back and been directly pumped into his brain, Alex knew where the visions had come from. It was so obvious!

“It’s the creature! Oh, my God, how did I not see this before?”

Alcheck and Masters both began to speak, but as soon as Masters saw her superior officer opening his mouth, she quickly clamped hers shut.

“Alex, what are you talking about, ‘the creature’? What about it?”

“Major, that energy discharge, it wasn’t just electrical or even plasma energy - it was a *data transfer*! Somehow, memories from that thing were passed on to me during the knife blow I landed!”

Major Alcheck and Doctor Masters both pondered this for a moment, but before Alcheck could respond, Masters got her turn to speak.

“Creature? What are you talking about Alex?”

It was then that Major Alcheck realized she had been on another part of the base and was likely not aware of what had transpired.

“Doctor,” he said, “there are a few things you need to know. A few surveillance recordings you’re going to need to see. But I’ll warn you in advance, prepare yourself.”

Alex wondered to himself if Brendan understood how silly telling her to “prepare yourself” was given what she was about to learn and see!

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Forty-five minutes later, Doctor Elizabeth Masters’ mouth was agape once more.

“Doctor,” Major Alcheck began, “I know it’s a lot to take in, but I’m going to need you to process this quickly because something occurred to me when Alex suggested that energy discharge was a data transfer and I’m going to need your full input on this thought.”

Alex began speaking now, suspecting he had come to the same conclusion as Alcheck had.

“You think that maybe there was more information in that data dump than just some seemingly random memories of alien invasions, aren’t you?”

“Exactly. At least, that’s what I’m hoping. But, given how that fight ended, how outmatched we were until your knife strike landed, I think that maybe there’s more in that head of yours now than just memories in fact, and if we could just access...”

“Hypnosis!” Masters exclaimed, now fully joining the conversation.

Inside, Major Alcheck was glad she had come to the same conclusion he had, but he gave her a stern look. The interruption wasn’t very disciplined of her.

And she knew it instantly herself.

“Oh, I’m sorry sir, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Alcheck let her off the hook. There were clearly more important considerations at that moment.

“Exactly, doctor. That was my thought as well.”

Masters took this as her cue to take over.

“Alex, I can regress you through hypnosis to a low delta brainwave state. That’s very similar to a dream state, but it’s different in that you’ll still be able to communicate with us, will be aware of the world around you nominally, and you’ll even be able to direct your dreaming to some degree with my help. If more information was transferred to you, then there’s a good chance that you’ll be able to access it in that state.”

Alex didn’t hesitate even a little at the suggestion.

“Sound like a plan, let’s get to it.”

“Alex, be aware that there’s some degree of danger to this, given your head trauma and two weeks in a coma. Frankly, there’s a chance I might not be able to get you back to a normal state of consciousness. Your brain has been mostly shut off, except for autonomic functions, for much longer than is usual. Hypnosis will appear to your mind like another shutdown to some extent, and it might be enough to convince it not to wake up again.”



“Well, I’m not sure I see much choice, sir,” Alex solemnly said to Major Alcheck, “If there’s more information about that creature floating around upstairs, especially as it relates to the X-100, we’ve got to know it, risky or not.”

Major Alcheck considered it for a moment, but the choice really wasn’t much of a choice at all, and both he and Alex, and even Doctor Masters, knew it.

“Very well, do it.”

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Doctor Masters cleared the room of everyone except for Alex, her and Major Alcheck. All the nurses and Doctor Woodrow, who had been tending to Alex’s physical needs, were told to leave, and the door was sealed. Major Alcheck dimmed the lights at Masters’ request, and she sat in the chair next to Alex’ bed. Alex was sitting up now, leaning against a stack of pillows. He felt weak, but he suspected that might only help get into the mental state that was required for this to work.

“Ok now Alex, I’m going to begin by using this device called a transindentor to synchronize your brainwaves to a rhythm that we know is conducive to slipping into a delta state.”

The device she held in her hand, which she now placed on the food tray that extended across the bed, looked very similar to a musical metronome, pyramidal in shape with a bar in front that had a bell-shaped object at the top. The device shared even more in common with a metronome as it happened because Masters with a flick of the bar started it moving left and right. Each time it passed the straight-up position, the bell-shaped object at the tap gave off a bright flash of light as well as a low, dull “foomp” sound. The light’s strobe effect was pronounced, but not so bright as to hurt Alex’ eyes.

“Now, I want you to just focus on the light and the sound you hear, and every time you see it, I want you to alternatively breathe in and breathe out. Every time you hear the sound it makes, I want you to relax a different muscle in your body. First, your facial muscles, just let it all go limp. Then your left arm, then right arm, then your chest and stomach, then your legs.”

Alex did as she said and before long his entire body felt more relaxed than it ever had, as far as he could remember. His eyes were growing heavy with each pulse of the light, and they began to close.

“Good Alex, that’s very good. Now, as your vision fades to blackness, I want you to focus increasingly on the sound of my voice. I’m going to guide you through this.”

Alex’s eyes now closed completely and his mind went as blank as his body had gone limp. His brain was effectively the last muscle of his body to relax.

“Ok, we’re just about there, Alex.”

Masters was now watching the EKG machine that had been hooked up to Alex’s head. The small cap he wore housed about four dozen highly precise sensors that monitored his brainwaves in exquisite detail. It was one of the perks Doctor Masters had as a member of this elite team: this machine was far more precise than most in existence.

Before long, she noted that Alex was now in complete delta phase and she knew she could begin. She glanced over at Major Alcheck, who was standing next to her, not

moving a muscle the entire time. She had almost forgotten that he was there in fact! Their gazes met, and he nodded to her.

Time to begin.

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“Ok Alex, I want you to think back to your fight with the creature. Try to imagine what you were feeling at the time. Are you there?”

Alex’s body stiffened as his expression turned to a pained grimace before he exclaimed: “Agh! I can feel it! It hurts!”

Masters grabbed Alex’s hand and began speaking in as calm a voice as she could muster:

“Alex... Alex... concentrate... calm down... I know it hurts, but you’re in control, and the pain is only in your mind now. You can turn it off like a light. Push it aside, like you would the blanket on your bed on a warm night. Feel the pain subside as you do.”

Alex forced himself to actually picture looking down at his legs, in bed, with a blanket around them, only these blankets were glowing with energy and electrical discharges leaped from them in every direction. He saw his hand move down and begin to push them aside and as he did, the pain subsided. His face returned to a relaxed state with no real expression.

“I’m okay now. No pain. I can see the creature. It’s here with me, touching me, grabbing my arm.”

“Ok Alex, that’s very good. Now, focus on where it’s holding your arm. Imagine that your eyes are microscopes and zoom in on the point of contact. What do you see?”

Alex could see the claw wrapped around his right arm, getting bigger and closer. Or was he shrinking? He couldn’t tell, the effect was the same either way. He began to see details: veins and arteries in the claw as well as his own arm. Capillaries under the surface came into view. Before too long, even whole skin cells were objects as big as other people, and he seemed to be standing among them!

Lightning bolts startled him as they shot from the sky down to the floor. Only, it wasn’t a floor, it was him, his body! And the sky must be the creature. That made, he somehow knew, the lightning bolts streams of data being passed to him.

“I can see... can see, data... streams of data, lightning bolts, flowing down into me from the creature. Why would it do this? Was it an accident?”

“Alex, if what you see really is data, what happens if you touch it?”

Alcheck wasn’t sure if he should even be speaking right now, wasn’t sure if Alex would even hear him since he was focusing on Masters’ voice, but he couldn’t help himself, the question had to be asked. Fortunately, Alex didn’t hesitate.

“Let’s find out.”

Alex reached out his hand and waited for a lightning bolt to strike it. Before long, it did, and the result shocked him.

“Melissa.”

Masters thought he was losing focus. Of course, he would! His mind was now free to remember that the love of his life had died just two weeks ago, and this was the first

chance he was calm and relaxed and not consumed with other thoughts enough for the pain of that to come flooding back in.

But he had to focus, or this whole exercise would be pointless. Doctor Masters squeezed his hand tighter now.

“Alex, I know the pain of your loss must be flooding in right now, but you’ve got to fight it off. You’ve got to stay focused on the creature and where you are.”

“No, you don’t understand. It’s Melissa. She’s here. The creature, it *is* Melissa!”

Masters looked at Alcheck and the expression of shock they both wore now mirrored one another perfectly.

“I’ve got to know more. I’ve got to know it all.”

Alex looked around, trying to find something, something he wasn’t sure existed. He was growing frantic now, knew what he had to do. He turned completely around and found what he was looking for: a steady stream of lightning not too far off in the distance. It was as if a single cloud had parked itself over one spot and the god Zeus was firing lightning bolt after lightning bolt down onto the same place. There were so many bolts, in fact, that the column of light he was looking at almost appeared like a waterfall made of lightning.

He reached out his hand, both in his mind and in the real world. Masters released it as he did so.

“Alex, what are you seeing...”

Before Masters could complete the sentence, Alex began to convulse wildly, the electrode cap flying off his head and IV lines being pulled from his arms. Major Alcheck rushed over and tried to hold him down as Doctor Masters tipped over in her chair and fell to the floor.

“Doctor Woodrow! Get in here!” she yelled.

Doctor Masters collected herself as quickly as she could, struggling against the pain she felt in what she knew was a severely sprained ankle. She willed herself to her feet and limped over to the bed.

“Get something in his mouth!”

She pulled out her notepad that was in her pocket and tried to jam it into Alex’s mouth. It was a struggle, but she finally got it in, just as Woodrow and two nurses rushed into the room.

“10cc’s of diazepam, stat!”

The nurse filled the syringe as quickly as she could, ensured no air had made its way in, and then realized they had a big problem.

“Doctor, we don’t have an IV line, they’ve been pulled out!”

Doctor Woodrow reached across the bed and grabbed the syringe from her hands as she yelped in surprise. Before she had time to register what had happened, Doctor Woodrow had already done it: he stabbed the syringe straight into the right side of Alex’s neck, directly into his carotid artery. He was injecting the medicine as she realized what he had done: that injection site would send the medicine directly to his brain, almost instantly, faster than an IV line would have.

“Keep holding him down, it shouldn’t take long for this to take effect at all.”

Alex's seizure was already ending by the time he had finished that sentence.

Ten seconds later he was fully calm, as if nothing had happened. He was on the edge of consciousness, and that's when Masters kicked back into high gear.

"Alex... Alex, can you hear me? Alex?"

Word-like sounds began emanating from Alex's mouth, but she couldn't make out what he was saying.

"Alex, if you can hear me, I need you to focus on my voice. Don't try to talk, just concentrate on what I'm saying. Wherever you are, whatever you see, close your eyes, and focus on the darkness. Let it engulf you until there's nothing else around you. Push any sounds you hear away, except for my voice, until that's the only thing your mind registers. Alex... Alex... I'm going to count down from five, and when I reach zero, I want you to wake up. Are you ready Alex? Here we go... five... four... three... two... one... and zero. Wake up Alex."

Alex didn't move.

"Alex, are you with us? Alex? Three... two... one... zero... Wake up!"

Alex's left eye twitched a little, then his right. His mouth opened just a little bit, and slowly, as if the world was moving at one quarter its normal speed, his eyes began to open.

"Ok! Yes!" Doctor Masters said, simultaneously exhaling all the tension that had built up in her body, "that's great Alex, welcome back!"

Alex glanced at Doctor Masters and smiled.

"Thanks, doc,"

She smiled back and nodded at him as he shifted his focus to Major Alcheck.

"Major... Brendan. I know."

"What Alex? What do you know?" Major Alcheck leaned in closer, intent on hearing clearly every last syllable Alex was about to speak.

"I know what it wants."

---

"They're called the Xe'Tara, the creators of the nanotech probe that infected me and Melissa. It was the X-100 test flight that drew its attention. The hyperstealth drive, which is far more than just a simple stealth technology as it turns out, is an advanced bit of technology that the probe, and the Xe'Tara, have never encountered before. We - that is, Melissa - got lucky inventing it, to put it bluntly, if you can call it luck given the result. It's a technology we simply aren't ready for and shouldn't have been able to create. Leave it to Melissa to be the over-achiever of all over-achievers."

Alex chuckled again as Alcheck spoke.

"Alex, what do you mean it's far more than stealth? What more?"

"It's essentially a hyperspace drive, a warp drive, depending on which sci-fi you like. The probe realized that with just a little tweaking, the drive in the X-100 could allow the ship to travel vast distances - galactic distances - in almost no time at all. With this, the Xe'Tara, who are limited to subluminal speeds now, could conquer far more of the galaxy in just a few decades. They could even start their campaign in other galaxies

before long. It's a game-changer for them, and it's something they've never seen before across thousands and thousands of worlds and species that they've destroyed."

"Alex," Masters began, "you just used the word subliminal, and by the looks on the faces of these scientists here I know you've used it right. Excuse me if this sounds a little insulting, but, from our previous meetings, I know you're not exactly well-versed in science-speak. So, how is it you know that term?"

Alex chuckled again as he replied.

"Well, if you thought any of this was hard to believe, hold on to your hats for this next bit! When I was transported out to Jupiter, like I said, I ran into one of those Xe'Tara probes. It quickly realized what the X-100 was, what I was, and it wanted to know more. What these probes can do, one of the things anyway, is it can merge with a living creature, take it over, and re-shape it as it sees fit. It merged with me. But, it wasn't really a merging, it was more like hitching a ride like I said before. It quickly realized that I wasn't the creature that had invented the ship."

Alex pointed to his head and smirked: "Not smart enough, you see."

"So, it hitched a ride in me, and when I got back, the first person I touched was Melissa. So, it transferred over to her and quickly realized she was plenty smart enough, and then it discovered she was the inventor of the hyperstealth drive. The damned thing hit the jackpot! So, it tried to take her over. But, my girl, she was even smarter than the fucking thing realized: it left her mind intact because it didn't want to risk losing any of her knowledge. One of its other capabilities is digitizing a biological mind, and that's what it did to Melissa. In a sense, it turned her into a computer program and let it run inside of it. But in doing so, she was able to fight back, even though she didn't realize it at first, it was a subconscious thing, and she kept it from getting at the knowledge it wanted. That's when it went with plan B: re-shape Melissa into a Xe'Tara warrior."

"The creature." Major Alcheck mouthed, the realization striking him like a hot iron in the back of his brain.

"Exactly, sir. A devastatingly powerful creature, engineered from the ground up for combat against creatures far more dangerous than us as it happens. The Xe'Tara have been tinkering with their own evolution for centuries at least and have evolved what they consider the perfect fighting form."

"But if that's true Captain, then how were you able to defeat it, even if only briefly? I saw the thing in action first-hand and that, plus what you've said, gives me the impression you shouldn't have had a chance, the EMP grenades even probably weren't enough, right?"

"That's right, but I was able to get that knife blow in because when the probe left me for Melissa, it left some of itself behind. I've still got bits of it floating around inside me, remember Doctor Woodrow? Melissa was there, inside the creature, fighting it from within while I was fighting it from the outside, and she was able to connect with me thanks to the nanotech it left behind in me. She was feeding me information remotely, subconsciously, and directing me to the knife strike, which she knew would give her the chance to send me a ton more information."

The expression on Alex's face suddenly changed to one of sadness and melancholy. But there was something else there underneath the pain that Alcheck at least recognized: pride. Pride in his wife.

"She managed to hurt it, just enough to give me an opening against it. Without her, sir, I don't think any of us are here today having this conversation. She managed to hurt it from within, but in the process, she sacrificed whatever of her was left in there. Melissa is completely gone now."

Alex looked at Masters now as she grabbed his hand again and smiled at him.

"I'm so sorry Alex."

"No, it's okay doctor. It gives me great joy to know that in her final moment she was connected to me. That's what happened, how I woke up knowing the things I did: she managed to dump all this information to me because of the bits of the nanotech left in me. She was able to open a channel. She sent me more than that knowledge though: she sent some of herself. Her feelings for me. I have them, they're in me."

Alex pointed at his heart now as he fought back the tears. He was far from someone who cried, but at this moment, he was close. But, he willed himself to focus again on what was most important to relay right now, and he turned back to Major Alcheck.

"Sir, that creature is still out there. And it wants the X-100. That's the only thing that matters to it now, getting it and returning it to the Xe'Tara. If it does, they'll destroy every living thing in this galaxy, including us. They may even attack us first, thinking we're more technologically advanced than we really are thanks to the X-100. Thousands of worlds far more advanced than us have failed to put much of a dent in the Xe'Tara in the thousands of years they've been doing what they're doing so we're going to be less than a fly for them to swat if they even bother. We can't let it succeed."

One of the scientists who had been listening now spoke up, his voice thick with obvious fright.

"Ok, so let's just blow the fucking thing up! Destroy all the research data, scrub everything about the project from existence."

Alex frowned, as did Alcheck. They both knew the problem with that plan, but Alex was the one who spoke first.

"We can't just blow it up. Major, they've already reloaded a new core, haven't they?"

"Yes, that's right. It was the standard procedure Melissa had outlined: at least during testing, the core would be replaced after every test flight to ensure there was no micro-damage that might threaten the next flight. The maintenance staff did that not long after our fight with the creature. Nobody thought to stop it."

Major Alcheck gulped down a feeling he rarely felt: failure.

"I didn't think to stop it."

Alcheck's head dropped slightly, something Alex couldn't recall ever seeing him do. It wasn't his fault; with everything that had happened, why would he have thought to stop routine maintenance operations? There were bigger fish to fry, to put it mildly.

"Major, it's not your fault. And even if it is, at this point, it doesn't really matter."

The scientist that had spoken up did so again, this time sounding incredulous.

"Why the hell does that matter? Let's destroy it anyway!"

Alex looked at him sternly, as did Alcheck. The scientist went white as a ghost, realizing he had stepped *way* over a line that nobody overstepped over with Alcheck. He thought the Major might have shot him right then and there if it wasn't for Alex bailing him out.

"You know I was never the big-time science expert like Melissa was, but the one thing I understood pretty clearly was the whole quantum singularity that's at the heart of the hyperstealth drive. It has to be shut down in a very gradual and precise way. It takes weeks for the stored quantum energy to dissipate safely. We don't have that kind of time, and if we just blow it up, we'll release all that energy in an instant. In other words: one massive explosion. You remember that Tsar Bomba that the Soviet Union detonated a couple of decades ago? That was the biggest nuclear weapon ever detonated. Well, what we'd unleash would make that look like a firecracker."

Alex turned his attention back to Alcheck.

"So, no, we can't just blow it up. We've got to go after the creature itself and stop it from getting the X-100. It's the only thing we can do now."

Doctor Woodrow, who had been listening intently the whole time, decided he needed to chime in as well.

"Wait, and we were planning to put this thing in jets that might get blown out of the sky?!"

Alex looked at him and replied: "Well, if you set off a nuke, even an unbelievably massive one, in the middle of a war zone, I mean, it's *already* a war zone. Not exactly the biggest concern. It's a slightly different story when we're talking a military base in the middle of a state in our home country. We may be in the middle of a desert, but the explosion will be big enough to do a ton of harm to the nearest towns, and it'll rain fallout over probably damned near half the country, so it's not an option."

Alcheck's expression clearly denoted that the time for questions and debate was now unconditionally over.

"Ok, I hear what you're saying Alex, but how can we stop it? We can't even track the damned thing."

"Actually," Alex began, smirking a little once more, "I think I can help there. Another gift that Melissa seems to have transmitted to me is something of a link to the creature, almost like a psychic connection. Now that I know it's there, I can sense it. I can almost feel the creature in my own mind, like a dark thought squirming in the back of consciousness. It's like seeing something out of your peripheral vision but not being able to see it when you try to look directly at it. If I was closer to the creature, I believe the connection would be strengthened, and I'd be able to sense it much clearer and locate it even when it's invisible. I know it's not on the base anymore sir, you were right about that. But I think I know exactly where it would have gone. It's got to lick its wounds, needs time to heal. I can't justify it logically, but I sure I know where it would go to do that. I think maybe Melissa might have influenced it a little, directed it somewhere specific without it realizing she was doing it."

"Well, gut feel or not, finding it is one thing Alex, but we didn't have much luck stopping it last time in a straight-up fight. What makes you think we'll have any better

luck this time? Especially with Melissa not in there to help anymore? If you've got any hints, then we'll want to know them because I'll be sending in the best we have, but I want you to stay here. After what you've been through, you need to sit this one out."

Alex's face now expressed an intensity that Alcheck had rarely seen from his friend. If it weren't for his own ability to match it, he would have been frightened.

Alex dropped all pretense of military decorum now.

"I'm leading this mission, Brendan. It's time for that fucking thing to pay for what it did to Melissa. I'm leading that mission, unless you intend to try and *physically* stop me."

The steely gaze of Alex's eyes and his rock-hard tone of voice, to anyone else, would have been a clear threat, but Alcheck knew better. It wasn't that Alex was giving him a choice - he knew better than that too - and he also knew that in fact, Alex *would* knock him out if he thought to try and deny his "request," consequence be damned. They were both top-notch warfighters, but Alcheck knew Alex could take him if he got it in his mind to. But, they had been friends long enough for Alcheck to understand that this wasn't actually a threat. This was a promise of an action that *would* be taken, regardless of what Alcheck wanted to happen. This was serious Alex. This was the Alex that was usually tucked away from the world, hidden, but ready to come out when necessary. This was the Alex that was usually denied in favor of the joking Alex who always managed to get the job done even when it seemed like he wasn't taking things seriously.

In an instant, the same realization struck Alcheck that had come to Alex not long ago: this Alex, the violent, dangerous, serious Alex, was all that was left. He realized now that the Alex that was his friend, the Alex who enjoyed life no matter how dangerous it became, died with Melissa.

Alcheck spoke with a tenderness that belied the seriousness of his words.

"Okay. Fine. I can't deny you your vengeance. You are team leader. Now get it done, soldier. "

Alex paused a moment and finally managed a smirk before he replied.

"Yes, sir. "

As Alex got up from the bed over the protests of Doctor Woodrow and Doctor Masters and walked out of the room to prepare for the mission, the two doctors following yelling their objections the whole time.

A wave of sadness washed over Alcheck. With two simple words, Alex all but confirmed his realization.

"Goodbye, my friend," Major Brendan Alcheck whispered to himself.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Found*

“Alright, listen up!”

Alex bellowed the command at the top of his lungs, just barely mustering enough volume to overcome the propeller noise of the C-130 as he walked up the ramp and into the belly of the great beast that was the massive plane. The ramp began to close even before he was half-way up it, which in a few second would actually help his current mission: being heard by the elite squad of soldiers Major Alcheck had assigned to his command for the mission to find the Xe’Tara warrior.

“I’ve worked with a few of you before...” Alex nodded at Mike Baker and Chuck Bandar, two Navy SEALs he had the honor of training with last year as part of a cross-branch exercise designed to provide advanced combat training across multiple branches of the U.S. military. “...the rest I know by reputation. You all represent the best special operators the United States, probably even the world, has to offer. Let’s hope that’s enough because what we’re about to go up against is outside the experience of any of us.”

Alex thought to himself: *Well, except me. I know what we’re going to be facing: death itself. And there’s a good chance most of you will be getting intimately acquainted with death and will not be on the return flight after this mission.*

But, he knew better than to be quite that honest in this situation. These were hardened, experienced warfighters. But they were also human beings, and if they knew even half of what he did about what they were preparing to face he wasn’t sure even these brave individuals wouldn’t turn tale and find a safe hiding spot. He wasn’t at all certain *he* didn’t want to do just that!

“Mike here is the only one, besides me, who has dealt with this creature before.” Baker had been one of the soldiers in the hangar bay when the warrior had first emerged after transforming Melissa, one of the lucky few to have survived the encounter. Alex knew that wasn’t entirely a matter of luck: Baker was a top-notch operator, even better than Alex some would say, as was Bandar. In fact, there was a good chance, Alex knew, that he may, in fact, be the *least* capable operator here, even though he was no slouch himself. But that was exactly the goal that Alcheck had sought to meet: put the very best men under Alex’s command that he could in short order.

The thing Alex *didn’t* know was whether any of that would matter one bit when they next encountered the warrior.

“This thing can go invisible, and I’m not talking about refractive cloaks like most of you have seen. No, this thing might as well not be there when it’s cloaked, it’s basically a

ghost. But, it's no less physically there, that's the upside, at least from a certain point of view. And it doesn't get much better when you can see it: it's as fast and strong as a Grizzly bear but at least as intelligent as any human being. In short: this thing is designed for killing and not much else, and there's nothing on this planet right now that's better at that than it is."

Alex paused a beat or two to give the weight of his words a chance to sink in. As he glanced from face to face of the members of his team, he regarded the seven men he saw in front of him. They were each hulking, dangerous men who looked like they could take an entire platoon of enemy soldiers by themselves. They looked at one another, exchanging glances that simultaneously said, "oh shit" and "we got this" at the same time.

It was the quiet confidence of fighters who had seen action but yet understood the gravity of their present mission.

Alex couldn't help but smile just a little bit before catching himself and continuing: "Except for this team that is!"

The eight men before him began nodding in agreement. Their stoic gazes exposed confidence that came from the very best training available anywhere in the world and the experience of having exercised that training under real combat situations. There truly was no better team Alex could ask for.

He just hoped it would be enough.

"Our mission is simplicity itself: find the Xe'Tara warrior and neutralize it by any means necessary. We're not looking to take this thing in for study, at least not alive. We track it, we find it, and we kill it, whatever it takes and however we can. Period, end of fucking story."

Alex made eye contact with each member of the team and waited for each to nod in acknowledgment of his words.

Finally, after each man did so, he continued.

"Stow your gear and get comfortable boys, then try and get some rest. We've got a few hours in this transport before we land and I want everyone well-rested before we get into the shit. Grab a bite to eat too; we don't need anyone with low energy. Any questions?"

Baker spoke up instantly.

"Sir, where are we headed?"

"Upstate New York."

"New York? Shit, I'm just a good old boy from Louisiana and I ain't never been to New York. What's in New York that an alien killing machine would be interested in?"

Before Alex could answer, one of the other soldiers, Joe Craft, interjected.

"Fuck man, you ain't never been to New York? Cab drivers man! They're probably all fucking aliens themselves! This thing's probably out lookin' for its mama!"

The team started laughing as another member, Chris Haywerth, said: "Yeah, and even if they're not aliens from space they're still *aliens*, if you catch my drift!"

The team laughed even harder... all but Alex. He appreciated the humor and was glad the team was loose. It was good before a mission to stay loose. There would be plenty of

tension to go around once their boots hit the ground. For now though, this little bit of comradely and laughter could only help the team by offering the mental reprieve they needed from the inevitable, crushing stress of impending battle that even hardened, professional soldiers invariably felt.

Felt perhaps even more than those who had never experienced battle.

Unfortunately, his desire or, he feared, even his *ability* to enjoy humor may well have been beaten out of him by the events of the last few days. So Alex just watched, stone-faced, emotionally closed off from the men he'd have to rely on in the hell that he knew was coming.

The laughter died down quickly though as Baker realized Alex wasn't participating.

"Sir? You all right, sir?"

Alex didn't respond and instead just stared at nothing in particular. The team couldn't have known it, but inside, Alex' mind was racing with the knowledge of where they were going and what it meant, what they were preparing to face.

Baker gave him a few more seconds to respond, but Alex never did.

"Sir? What's in upstate New York?"

This time, the words snapped Alex to attention, and he looked around and saw a new look on the face of the team - his team - the best hope for the future of humanity at this point. It was a look of concern. He sensed they were starting to have some doubts about his leadership, so he smiled in an effort to calm their nerves, not to mention his own.

"If I'm right, hope."

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Tree branches snapped as it forced its way through the dense underbrush, each step awash in agonizing pain. The damage it had sustained in the last battle was significant, though nothing that wouldn't heal given enough time to repair the damage. Already, repair mechanisms had been triggered and were even now rebuilding the microscopic structure, sealing puncture wounds and dissolving the chunks of metal the primitive beings of this world threw around as a form of weaponry. It was almost amused by the irony of a species capable of creating the X-100's drive system still using such arcane weaponry. Its amusement was dulled, however, by the fact that one of them had, with the assistance of the merged entity, been able to wound it so grievously, even if only temporarily.

In any case, it knew this place. The memory of the now purged personality matrix it had subsumed told it so. The Melissa entity had spent much time here in her youth. It also knew that it was abandoned now and would, therefore, serve as the perfect location in which to allow its repairs to be carried out undisturbed before it resumed its singular mission. The repairs would take significantly longer expected thanks to the attack coordinated by the Melissa entity in conjunction with the human it knew was named Alex Wakeman, but they would be completed eventually, and at full strength, it would complete its mission.

A few feet away, birds fled in fear as the Xe'Tara warrior disturbed the tree they were perched on... or more precisely, *something* disturbed the tree. The birds wouldn't have been able to see anything if they had thought to look; for all the damage it had taken, its

invisibility subsystem was still fully functional. That simple defense mechanism alone meant it had little to fear from any creature on this world. The human race simply did not have the means with which to detect it when cloaked.

Except for the one named Alex. Somehow, he was able to detect it, and it did not understand how that could be. It was currently expending vast amounts of processing power trying to formulate a theory to explain this unexpected problem. It was, in fact, redirecting some of its resources from repair to the solving of this problem, slowing down those repairs somewhat. It was sure Alex couldn't detect it from great distances, so it knew it was safe from detection here, but it suspected that another encounter with Alex was inevitable and it would need an answer before then.

Even if that encounter wasn't *necessary*, it frankly *wished* for it now! Curiosity was getting the better of it! No creature had ever been able to detect a Xe'Tara warrior before based on its vast store of knowledge about past encounters, and very few have ever been able to mount even a remotely credible attack on a Xe'Tara warrior. Alex had very nearly bested this warrior in combat, which was, in fact, an even bigger point of amazement to the creature! The knife blow he had landed was perfectly placed, aimed directly at a critical organic component and, had its shielding been weakened further, very well may have destroyed the biologic body.

It had a very difficult time believing this was just blind luck. There *had* to be a critical piece of information it was missing.

The warrior was beginning to suspect that nothing short of another encounter with Alex would provide the answers it was seeking. The considerable processing power being put to answering these questions in lieu of such an encounter was thus far proving fruitless. It was, in fact, preparing to shift those resources back towards repair work, viewing the negative outcome as being inevitable now.

It staggered briefly as the processing resources were redirected, biologic control functions momentarily going offline as data pathways were shunted. The warrior leaned up against that same tree which had just moments ago been home to a happy family of Mourning Doves, shifting its weight as repair work began on its dorsal spine array.

As the warrior steadied its stance, it looked beyond the next line of trees, a hundred feet or so off in the distance, and it saw its destination, the memories of it beckoning the creature in, safety awaiting its presence.

Locomotion subsystems activated the enhanced muscle strata in its legs, willing it to overcome the damage being repaired and moving it towards the place of sanctuary where it could complete repairs and return to full strength.

It would not take long, and then it could complete its mission without delay.

---

Alex raised his right arm to form an L shape as he closed his hand to form a fist – the standard small unit tactics signal for “Stop!” The team behind him did exactly that. In an instant, they were motionless, ceasing all noise they had previously been making as they moved through the forest. They were experienced operators of course, so that sound was minimal to begin with, but now, only the sound of the wind blowing through the trees could be heard.

Their level of awareness jumped up as well as they all instinctively scanned their surroundings. They silently adjusted the straps on the M-X carbine rifles, bringing them to a ready position.

They were still getting used to these weapons, experimental guns that Major Alcheck had provided them before the team had left on their mission. They were a newly developed weapon that had only recently begun field testing, but Alex knew they would have to risk taking a largely untested weapon into a battle situation if they were to have any chance because the M-X packed quite a punch. It was the first plasma-based rifle in the U.S. arsenal. It used magnetic fields to propel a super-heated ball of plasma at a target rather than a metal projectile. The power it put on its target was orders of magnitude greater than any conventional metallic round. Perhaps more importantly, it used a reservoir of highly compressed ionic gas to create the plasma balls which resulted in it having a much higher round count: each M-X was good for nearly 500 shots before the reservoir had to be swapped out, and each member of the team carried two additional reservoirs.

They would not be wanting for ammunition, that was for certain. If it had the intended effect, then they might stand a chance. Alex wasn't entirely sure even the M-X's power would do much against the creature, but he was anxious to find out.

First, though, he had to reach the cabin, and that was assuming his hunch was right in the first place.

Alex thought back to his conversation with Major Alcheck.

"Major, I know where this thing is going."

"How could you possibly know that?"

Alex paused, organizing his thoughts. He needed to convince himself as much as he did Major Alcheck, and he knew it.

"Well, because Melissa was in there."

Tears began to well up in Alex's eyes, but he willed them away. There would be a time for crying later, he knew, but now was not the time.

"In... in there? What do you mean in there? In where?"

"That thing, that probe... it blended with Melissa. It... subsumed her. Her consciousness, it was transferred to the technological part of the creature. Somehow it, I don't know the right word... digitized? Yeah, I think that's it: it digitized her. She became, basically, a program running in its computer."

"That... Alex... how is something like that possible? And more importantly, how do you know?"

"Well, you know me, I'm not the techie type..."

"You sure *sound* like the techie type lately Alex..."

"...yeah, well, that's the thing: I know she was in there because she touched me, or touched my mind I guess is more accurate. I sensed her consciousness. I could almost talk to her, Brendan. I think she found a way to take control of the nanotech, even if only for just a few moments, and communicate with me through a link between the nanotech in me. But, that was a weak link, and she needed a stronger one, a more powerful one. I think it was her that directed me to attack the creature with my knife. It sounds crazy, but

I believe that was less an attack and more of a way to communicate more data to me. She was able to dump a lot of knowledge directly into my brain thanks to that brief connection, and I suspect it was a lot more data than I even know right now. I have a sense that she put a lot more into me that my brain is working to access.”

Alcheck wanted to say something, but he couldn't make his mouth form the words. His mouth, agape, moved as if to form sounds, but nothing came out.

“Most importantly, I got a really clear picture of something that I haven't seen since I was a teenager: a cabin in upstate New York.”

Alcheck finally willed himself to speak.

“A cabin? Why would you see a cabin?”

“It's a place that Melissa and I used to go to every summer when we were dating. It was a very special place for us, a very safe place, away from all the trials and tribulations of growing up. Brendan, that's where we fell in love.”

“Well, I don't mean to sound dismissive Alex, but while that's a nice story, what's it got to do with our present situation?”

“It was a *safe* place for us Major, the safest we maybe ever knew together. It was like the entire world faded away and it was just the two of us, no problems, no stress, nothing. It's also been abandoned for over a decade because her parents, who owned it, couldn't afford to maintain it anymore, so they just let it go.”

It was then that Major Alcheck realized what Alex was saying

“That's where it's going! The safest place it... that is, that Melissa knew... a place it can lick its wounds and plan its next step.”

“Exactly! By subsuming Melissa, it gained access to all her knowledge, so it would surely know about that place...”

“...and how safe it is.”

“Right! We've got to get there, and quick. That thing, with that nanotech in it, can repair itself, pretty much any damage it can fix given enough time. We can't give it any more time than we have to!”

Alex crouched down now, watching the horizon before him. Although he hadn't been here in probably twenty years, and although the inexorable march of nature had changed the landscape in significant ways, he still recognized the major landmarks. He noted the rise of a ridge off to the west; an outcropping of rocks to the east; and the large tree about 100 feet in front of him that was just on the perimeter of the property that the cabin was on. It was the same tree he and Melissa had carved their initials into, surrounded by a heart, as young adults.

He opened his still raised fist and rose now, beginning to move towards the tree. The rest of his team followed suit, moving in unison like one massive, well-coordinated organism.

As the tree came within arm's reach, he could now see the roof of the cabin in the distance. He paused at the tree and signaled for Haywerth and Sam Jackson to join him as he began to whisper.

“It's just ahead, maybe 300 feet or so through this brush. There's a wishing well on our right flank. Haywerth, you take Stykes and move towards it. Set up a fallback

position with the full-autos on tripods. Jackson, you and Craft will flank left towards the side of the house. You'll find a window there, which is the only way in or out of the cabin aside from the door in front. That's where Bandar, Baker and I will be headed. Once everyone's in position, Jackson and Craft, you toss gas through the window, circle around the front and meet up with us as the three of us breach. Haywerth, you guys hang back unless we call you, but your real job will be to cut that thing down to a bloody pulp if it gets past us with those big-ass .50-cal machines. It's too big to get through the window so it'll have to come through the door if we can't stop it. Anything comes through that door that isn't us, you don't stop shooting until you're completely out of ammo. We've already seen how it can pretty much shake off regular bullets, but I'm hoping we can damage it enough with these new toys Major Alcheck gave us, and that plus a barrage of .50-cal auto-fire might be enough."

"Roger that," came the eager reply from Haywerth. "Copy," said Jackson as he quietly called out "Craft, you're with me." Craft quietly made his way to Jackson's side. Haywerth waved and called out "Roger, on my six," pointed towards the vine-covered wishing well where he and Roger Stykes met up. Bandar and Baker began moving towards Alex, both correctly suspecting what their place was.

"See that door guys? That's where we're headed. Standard breach pattern, I'm through the door first."

Both Stykes and John responded with a nod and a quiet "Hoo-rah!" as Alex climbed over the brush in front of him and began towards the front of the cabin.

---

A quick system check revealed that its primary systems still had a long way to go. Primary power was below 60%, and damage repairs were taking longer than anticipated. The biological portions of the creature needed sustenance, but none was available right now. It knew that even though its defensive systems were nearing full capabilities, the offensive subsystem was still lagging behind. It was in the safe place though, so it was not currently feeling anxiety.

Still, it needed to eat, one of the few weaknesses it had in this form. It was time to find something it could consume to replenish the energy requirements of the biological components. The artificial had no such needs and it sometimes wondered why its masters had programmed it to function in this way. It knew the answer though: it was the only way a merging could be accomplished, and that was necessary to fulfill its primary functions.

It raised itself off the dirty floor of the cabin, noting the broken and empty cabinets which it knew used to contain foodstuffs. There wasn't too much else here now - the owners had cleared it out for the most part when they last visited a decade ago, as the stored knowledge of the Melissa entity now informed it.

It moved towards the door, beginning to catalog the flora and fauna it had observed on the way in. There were berries just a few dozen feet outside the door and small game animals were easy to find and capture without much trouble. Its cloaking subsystem wasn't fully operational yet however, and it knew this would complicate procuring such animals a bit harder than usual. Still, between the berries and insects available

everywhere on this world, it might not even matter - a small animal like a rabbit or perhaps a turtle would almost be a bonus.

As it opened the door, its visual sensor systems immediately noted the glare of sunlight that temporarily overloaded its visual processors. The light of a star, on any world, was always an impediment, even to its advanced technology!

As the visual processors began to filter out the light bands it didn't need it quickly became aware of a data point that it did not expect.

It was not alone.

---

The door slammed shut as Alex immediately recognized they had been spotted.

“Shit, it saw us! We gotta move! Craft, Jackson, forget the gas, we're breaching! NOW!”

Alex, Baker and Bandar, giving up the notion of surprise in favor of brute force, rushed towards the door, Baker with the breaching gun at the ready.

Alex felt a twinge of fear enter his mind. It knew they were coming now, and that would only make this already possibly impossible task that much harder. He pushed that feeling aside as quickly as it came on though. Alex hoped the door, or what would be left of it, might slam into the creature and maybe give them a momentary advantage, but he wasn't counting on it.

The breaching gun announced itself with a crack as loud as thunder and the door was at once blown to splinters, shards flying into the cabin. The spray of wood expanded in a cone shape until it hit the back wall of the cabin, save for one spot, off to the right, about six feet from the door, where they seemed to stop suddenly as if hitting a brick wall, and fell to the floor. Alex saw this as he charged through the door and immediately trained his weapon on the spot, knowing that's where the Xe'Tara warrior was. As he cleared the door and pulled the trigger, electric sparks seemed to emerge from empty space where the shards of the door had met the invisible barrier. Bandar followed Alex immediately through the door, realized what Alex had seen and began firing in the same direction. They both now moved in opposite directions to flank the creature while Baker barged through the door opening, ascertaining the situation and quickly bringing his M-X to bear on the now semi-invisible adversary.

The sparks created by the impact of the plasma were now so pronounced that they began to form a silhouette, an outline of the creature. Its head nearly touched the ceiling, towering over the men by a good two feet, and it seemed wider than a man could be too.

Bandar hesitated just a split second before firing, momentarily entranced by what he was seeing in the corner of the room.

But a moment was all it needed.

Suddenly, the plasma emerging from Alex and Bandar's rifles began impacting the wall opposite each of them. Had they been exactly opposite one another they likely would have hit each other, caught in their own crossfire. Fortunately, their training was good enough that they knew better than to get into that situation: they were at about a 70-degree angle from one another, so all they hit were the side walls, near the back corners.

Baker, however, wasn't so lucky.



The warrior moved swiftly towards him and just a fraction of a second before he pulled the trigger, it struck. Sparks flew everywhere as its cloaking mechanism began to fail from the impacting of all the plasma. Coupled with the force of the blow it delivered to Baker's skull, it was now becoming visible, as was brain matter from the massive hole created in his skull. He was dead before his body hit the floor of the cabin.

"Baker!" Bandar yelled in horror, as he began moving towards the warrior. It was now fully visible, though still oddly obscured somehow: the failing cloak now looked like heat was rising all around it, the same effect as over a hot road in summer. It was more than enough for Bandar to attack though.

He turned to face the creature, his rifle rising towards its head. Body shots were apparently having little effect on the thing other than weakening its protective shielding, and now he wanted to see what a headshot would do. His first shot left the barrel as the creature began moving towards him. The creature was fast - too fast: the ball of plasma sailed past its head, missing by just a fraction of an inch.

Before Bandar could get his sites on the target again, it was upon him.

It slashed horizontally across his body, contacting his throat. Blood immediately spewed from the slice like a water fountain. Bandar's head flew back from the force of the blow, revealing the depth of the gash: only the tattered remnants of his spine and the skin of the back of his neck kept his head from leaving his body entirely. His already lifeless body flew back into the wall behind him, blood painting a final picture of death on it.

Alex realized the opportunity afforded him by the warrior's focus on Baker and Bandar and he took advantage as best he could, if for no other reason than to make his comrade's deaths mean something. Alex moved as quickly as possible and leaped towards the creature, its back turned to him. Before it could turn around, he landed, knife in hand, and plunged it into the creature's back, just below its neck. Alex noticed, from his new close-up vantage point, that some damage had been done by the plasma: blood was oozing from multiple holes now, though he suspected they weren't severe enough to be considered mortal wounds. He was actually surprised that the knife had penetrated as well as it did. It seemed that the M-X plasma rounds had done its job: its cloaking capabilities were all but gone now and it appeared that its protective shielding was failing too, if not completely down now.

His amazement didn't last very long though, as the creature let out an agonized cry that cut through Alex's mind like a table saw through wood as it wretched its back in pain, throwing Alex off. He crashed to the ground, keeping his eye on the warrior the whole time. The air in his lungs escaped from the force of the landing, but he never blinked. He saw the creature turn towards him, eyes blazing a malice the likes of which he had never seen before.

Alex caught his breath and began to reach for his sidearm as the creature reached behind itself to pull the knife out. The warrior dropped the knife and swiftly moved towards Alex as he brought the pistol up to fire.

Before he could, Jackson charged through the door, Craft following right behind, hand on Jackson's shoulder. They came through the door swiftly and broke off in

opposite directions while beginning to lay down fire on the warrior. It roared in disgust and turned its focus towards them.

Alex took the opportunity to line up a shot to its head and he pulled the trigger before it was able to begin attacking Jackson and Craft.

Click.

Alex's gun failed to fire! As he began to realize what had happened and started to run through the well-rehearsed drills to deal with the malfunction, the warrior struck at Jackson and Craft almost simultaneously. This time, the warrior produced a beam of energy from its chest. It was a brilliant red, shimmering with the intensity of a mid-day Sun. The beam hit the wall on the side of the door, about a foot to the left of Jackson. The warrior quickly began twisting its left, sweeping the beam across Jackson, then Craft, who was only a foot or two on the other side of the door. The beam ceased at that point as the smell of seared flesh quickly filled the cabin.

Alex looked at Jackson and Craft's faces and in an instance recognized the mixture of shock and pained realization of what had happened: the top part of Jackson's body, just above his navel, began to slowly slide off of the lower half as his legs began to wobble. Craft's body, from about the chest up, began to topple to the front as blood rapidly poured out of the fatal wound. His head hit the floor with a sickening thud as the lower half of his body fell to the right. The top of Jackson's body finished its slide, lubricated by the blood and guts emerging from the bottom part, and tumbled to the floor. His legs gave out then as the lower part of his body crumbled in a heap, just behind the top. The floor of the cabin quickly filled with a sickly puddle of blood and intestines, unwinding on impact. Fecal matter and urine poured out, both from where they should have and also from where they shouldn't, new exit points formed by the fatal damage the creature had inflicted on them.

The odor quickly overpowered Alex, but he fought past the horror of what he was seeing quickly, as his training demanded, as he finished clearing the dud round from the chamber of his gun, racking it and aiming at the same time. He brought the gun up, targeting the warrior's head once more as it turned to face him. Just as their eyes met, he pulled the trigger.

Or, at least, he tried to.

Somehow, his finger would not answer his call to action. He struggled to control it but it felt as if his finger had been frozen in concrete. The muscles of his right arm began to spasm from the strain, but no matter how hard he tried he just couldn't pull the trigger.

A look of grim determination crossed his face as he began trying to stand.

But he couldn't.

Just like his finger, he couldn't will his legs to move, couldn't force his arm down to help lift him off the floor. His entire body was locked in place, unable to move. The only muscles he seemed to have any control of now were those in his face.

And those muscles began to quickly register fear - soul-crushing fear - as the realization of what was happening entered his conscious mind.

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*System damage report: multiple low-grade puncture wounds detected to body cavity. Repair systems activated, estimating 24 cycles to structural integrity restoral. Cloaking system inoperable, shutting down to conserve power. Energy reserves at 53 percent, diminishing 1 percent per 142 cycles at present activity level. Significant damage rendered by life form designated Alex to rear quadrant C. Locomotion system to left extremity reduced to 6 percent. Repair systems cannot correct this damage without energy replenishment and raw material acquisition.*

The artificial control system of the Xe'Tara warrior processed the reports from its remote sensors. The plasma weapons these human creatures utilized in this encounter were more formidable than the kinetic weapons used in the previous battle. Still, most of the damage they were able to inflict was still not of great concern. The technological components were easily repairable given time, and the biological components could be repaired once it had to acquire energy and materials necessary. But the direct attack to its rear was another matter, and this was the first thing that was concerning it now. How had this Alex creature been able to mount such an attack? This was the second combat encounter with this Alex creature where the warrior had taken damage that it knew should have been impossible. It began to shunt processing power to formulate an answer to that question.

But there was something else concerning it now, something it had never experienced before. It directed its photonic sensors towards the Alex creature and examined it. The Alex creature did not move. It had a kinetic weapon directed at the warrior's cranial unit, something the warrior wasn't entirely sure wouldn't result in severe biological damage in its current degraded state. But that concern was irrelevant because the Alex creature wasn't firing.

Why? Why would Alex not take advantage of this situation?

*System alert! A secondary processor has been activated unexpectedly and is processing an incoming data stream of unknown origin. Firewalls have been erected and secondary is awaiting command interface from master control.*

A data stream of unknown source? What could that be? The master control processor began to examine the data stream, being sure to confine it to a processing area that could not access deeper systems. It had made a mistake in a situation like this once before, with the Melissa unit, and it would not make a similar error. It in fact initially wondered if perhaps the Melissa program had managed to hide itself somewhere and was now re-enabled? That seemed possible, but the master processor quickly determined that wasn't the case. The Melissa program had been eradicated completely, of that it was certain. This couldn't be Melissa.

Though, oddly, the data stream *did* have a lot in common with the final form of the Melissa program.

As it examined the code pouring through the data stream it was amazed at the complexity it was seeing. The patterns were nearly as advanced as its own, layers upon layers of data and algorithms arranged in ways it had never seen before. The realization of what it was caused security alarms to trigger automatically throughout the system.

*Life form of unknown type detected. Data stream source determined to be external. High-frequency psionic carrier wave detected, reference species 1275 for description of telepathic precedent. Quantum entanglement communication system recognized. Data stream originates from Alex human.*

The master control program, an artificial intelligence of unprecedented complexity, was somehow telepathically linked to the Alex human! More than that, it was passively in control of the central nervous system of the human. That's why Alex hadn't fired on it: a defense subsystem had recognized the new motor system available to it, but not being able to identify what it was on its own, it simply shut it down, froze it at its current settings. Alex couldn't fire because the warrior's AI was stopping him, just like it would stop biological components of the Xe'Tara warrior form from moving if it wasn't necessary for them to do so.

Still, why was the biologic identification subsystem reporting Alex as an unknown life form? He was a human; the master control processor knew that! It had extensive records of human at this point, collected from its interactions thus far with them. Identification based on that data should have been quick, easy and conclusive.

It requested re-verification from the identification subsystem. Again, it reported Alex as an unknown life form. It began to ponder this mystery, quickly training all system resources available on that determination. It even shut down automated repair systems to engage as much energy reserves as it could to the task.

Nearly 4,000 processor cycles had elapsed before it came to the first realization.

*Data stream analysis complete. Central nervous system control operational. External sensor apparatuses available for interface. Memory storage facilities accessible.*

Memory storage facilities accessible! It could access the memories of the Alex creature! This was an unexpected opportunity to acquire information it required to complete its task!

*Data query subsystem engage, high priority query: locate X-100 prototype craft. Current geographic coordinates required.*

Suddenly, warning feeds began to emerge from multiple subsystems. The first was the locomotion subsystem interfaced with the Alex creature. The data stream into that subsystem was periodically becoming corrupt and the subsystem was having difficulty applying data correction quickly enough.

Another warning emerged which quickly turned into an error message. This one originated in the query subsystem, the one charged with locating information about the X-100 only a few hundred cycles earlier.

The master control processor struggled to determine the cause of these anomalies. It could not afford to lose connection with this creature, which it still could not identify, though it knew it was human, nor could it even determine how the connection had been established, another mystery it was devoting significant processing power to solve. Was there a power drain on the system? No, it was still losing power at the same rate as before. Was the physical damage it had taken more severe than it initially determined? No, the repair subsystems, even though they were set to extremely low priority and power

levels now, were gradually repairing the damage. Even the much more severe puncture wound was not currently a critical concern since it was not engaged in active combat.

Between processing cycles 4,894 and 4,892 it determined the cause of the system problems, and it felt amazement at the realization: the Alex creature was somehow interfering with the data stream!

---

Alex strained with all his strength, but it was useless. He ceased trying to move his muscles; they were simply not obeying him now. This struggle was entirely in his mind, and it was the most exhausting exertion he had ever felt.

Alex looked around, not with his physical eyes but the eyes of his mind. All around him was a black abyss, as if he were floating in the middle of interstellar space, billions of light years removed from any star. The only thing he could see was a glistening, almost glass-like beam of energy, directly in front of him, extending out in both directions into infinity. It was as if were made of molten glass, continuously twisting and forming into shapes, then un-forming just as quickly as they had formed. Small beads of shimmering energy moved back and forth at a speed his mind could barely comprehend, though somehow not so fast that he couldn't see them.

Alex looked down and realized he had no body. He seemed to have no physical form at all. Yet somehow, he was able to reach out an invisible hand and touch the beam. When he did so, it simultaneously pressed back on him and indented. As soon as he removed his unseen appendage, it snapped back into its original shape. The packets of energy bent around his hand, following its contours, jumping around it. It was odd that while he couldn't see a hand there, he could actually in a way because the energy packets followed its invisible form, silhouetting it against the beam.

Every time he touched the beam and pushed on it, he felt a force pushing back, as if this thing were somehow conscious and fighting to return to its original form. The harder he pushed, the harder the force pushed back. He wasn't sure how, but he knew he had to manipulate this beam no matter how hard it was to do.

Now he reached out with two invisible hands, pushing as hard as he could. He could condense the beam about half-way before the exertion was too great and he had to release. Even though he didn't seem to have corporeal form now, he still felt as if the muscles of his body were exerting beyond their limits and he was quickly tiring.

Still, something kept telling him, without sound, to *push. Keep pushing! Push harder than you ever thought you could!* He actually began to hear the words echoing in his mind, though they weren't quite his voice. It *was* his voice, but somehow altered, somehow softer.

He pushed again, straining against exhaustion and condensed the beam to almost nothing. *A little more*, he somehow knew, and he might be able to snap it in two. He dug down and found a well of strength he didn't know he had, grunts and groans emerging.

Finally, with a loud scream, the beam snapped in two, energy packets flying out in all directions like water spilling through a sudden crack in a dam. The beam twisted and deformed and turned back in on itself on the two sides as they began to recede off in both directions at blistering speed.

In an instant, Alex found himself back on the floor of the cabin, pistol pointed at the head of the Xe'Tara warrior. He pulled the trigger, and this time the expected *boom!* was produced.

---

*Data stream disconnection event detected. Remote data source no longer transmitting psionic carrier wave.*

No! The master control program felt anger for the first time as the connection to the Alex creature was lost.

*Emergency! Automated evasive maneuvers commencing due to incoming kinetic weapon discharge detected in quadrant 23.*

Impossible! The Alex creature had regained motor control faster than the master control processor could believe and had fired its weapon! The kinetic projectile was coming straight at its cranial unit!

*Danger! Incoming kinetic projectile impact imminent. Evasive maneuvers insufficient to avoid contact, though reduced damage levels expected. Prepare for impact!*

The bullet struck the head of the Xe'Tara warrior, but it was just a glancing blow. Still, a chunk of skin and skull went flying off and a spray of blood emerged.

*Offensive subsystem, prepare immediate response. Directed energy discharge from defensive shield emitters. Target Alex creature, terminate life functions immediately.*

The Xe'Tara warrior, in an instant, began to glow as small lightning bolts emanated from all around it. It would be charged in just a few cycles and though it would cut its energy reserves instantly in half, the discharge would pour into the Alex creature's body, causing rapid internal heat rise well beyond the limits of its flesh to absorb. Internal organs would burst from the sudden steam generated and external damage would result in evacuation of large chunks of internal meat through the seared, splitting flesh.

The Alex creature, still not properly classified, would be terminated most assuredly.

---

In the blink of an eye, Alex saw the energy popping off in all directions from the creature. He knew he probably only had another blink of an eye before he would be dead.

Before that blink though, in charged Haywerth and Stykes in close formation, large-caliber automatic machine guns firing as soon as they cleared one another.

He would reprimand them later for disobeying his orders, but for now, they were a welcome sight to Alex.

Less so to the Xe'Tara warrior.

The impact of the bullets threw it back, but didn't put it down. The energy continued to build up and it was now glowing with the brilliance of a large-wattage floodlamp, bolts of electricity flying off in all directions from its surface.

The two soldiers continued to fire and they were in fact so invested in the shooting that they hadn't taken the time to properly space themselves out.

This was the advantage the warrior needed.

A clap of thunder sounded and at the speed of light, electricity raced from its flesh and met first the barrel of Haywerth's machine gun. In an instant, it raced up the barrel, causing the round in the chamber to explode, blowing the gun apart in his hands. This

would have injured him severely except for the fact that the energy discharge continued on its way, entering his body through his hands. First, his right arm exploded in a shower of blood and bone and skin. A millisecond later, his heart exploded in his chest as the energy traveled through it.

From his right side, the energy emerged, tearing a hole through his ribcage and his chest and entering Jackson's body. The heat the energy forcing its way through flesh created quickly caused the skin of his stomach to split, searing as it did so, allowing his now ruptured stomach to spill its contents onto the floor at his feet.

On the other side, Jackson was simultaneously being cooked alive from the inside. The energy had been diminished somewhat by the time it had entered him, so the damage outwardly wasn't quite as obvious. Inside, however, was another story as his internal organs were turned into the consistency of jelly between heartbeats.

The two soldiers, in a fraction of a second, fell to the floor, pieces of them breaking off on impact and now liquefied parts from inside them were pouring out of cracks and explosive holes seemingly all over their now wrecked bodies.

Alex was the only one left alive, witness to the carnage all around him.

---

*Threat eliminated. Update damage report indicates severe puncture wounds from kinetic projectiles over 86 percent of physical mass. Some internal systems damaged as a result. Power levels fluctuating between 12 and 11 percent and falling rapidly. Automated repair systems prioritizing work units but report inability to significantly affect repairs at current energy levels. Offensive and defensive systems completely inoperable. Motor functions available in lower extremities at diminished levels. Upper right extremity may have enough strike force available to effect life-threatening injury on Alex creature if that is still priority task. Please advise.*

The master control processor examined the incoming information. The situation was dire: it *might* be able to land a single blow to the Alex creature powerful enough to terminate its life, but that wasn't a guarantee anymore. Even if it could though, it determined it likely wouldn't have enough power left to effect repairs after that

It would essentially be trading its own life for Alex's.

For a moment, it considered the option. It was still angry at the Alex creature and now it was experiencing another new emotion: a desire for revenge.

But, it was still an AI based in logical rules and, critically, still ultimately desiring to fulfill its primary programming. It recorded the new emotional data for later analysis as it always did when it discovered its capacity for a new emotion. It was especially interested in that feeling of revenge, curious to explore it further, but it determined it couldn't risk acting on that emotion now.

So instead, it turned its attention to the data query subsystem.

*Request update on X-100 query. Have results been located in archived data stream from Alex creature memory center?*

12 cycles elapsed. That was 10 more than was usually required. It now felt - something - another new emotion? What was it?

Impatience. Yes, that's what it was, impatience!

It repeated its request.

*Priority request, query subsystem: what is current status of X-100 query? Have results been located in archived data stream from Alex creature memory center? Shunt any necessary power from lower systems to fulfill priority request.*

6 more cycles had elapsed before a response came back. It was a simple response, much simpler than was usual, but the master control processor understood the limitations the query subsystem was now working against due to the damage the Xe'Tara warrior had taken in this battle.

The reply was sufficiently long enough however to register an emotion the processor had experienced once before, one it knew very well and liked even more: joy.

*X-100 located.*

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Alex collapsed on the floor of the cabin, physically and mentally exhausted beyond anything he had ever felt before. It was as if his entire body, and mind, were stuck in concrete. He *could* move now, it's just that his body and brain were in complete agreement that they simply didn't *want* to.

The one thing he did move though were his eyes, enough to keep them trained on the creature standing over him.

He knew he would be dead very shortly and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it at this point. His pistol had jammed after getting off that single shot (he'd have to have a word with the armory about this batch of ammo if he managed to get back, though he chuckled at that thought since he knew there was no chance of that happening now) so there was no last-minute shot. *Hell of a lot of good it would do anyway, what with the last one being so successful* Alex thought to himself, chuckling again.

No, this was it, his end. Would it be a slice to the neck he wondered? Maybe that really cool red cutting beam thing (he chuckled a third time). Maybe the "make you explode into goo" lightning? Hell, maybe the damned thing would just step on his head and squash it like a pea! It had to be heavy enough!

Whatever the means, he was ready. He didn't really believe in all that afterlife stuff and he didn't figure he'd be Heaven-bound if it did happen to exist, but he still felt comfort in the thought that maybe, just *maybe* he'd get to see Melissa again soon.

What was it waiting for exactly? He'd been waiting a good five or ten seconds by now, far longer than he would have guessed he had, but the creature hadn't moved in on him. In fact, as far as Alex could tell, the damned thing hadn't moved at *all* since that lightning discharge to take out the last of his team.

"Come on already, what the fuck are you waiting for?!" Alex exclaimed, as loudly as he could, which was really not very loud at this point, his voice cracking with every other syllable from the strain of mustering enough strength even for just an exclamation.

Suddenly, movement. Here it was then, his final curtain about to fall.

The Xe'Tara warrior spun 90 degrees towards the door. It didn't move especially fast, only a small fraction of how quickly it had moved earlier. It walked, as if just out for a leisurely stroll, out the door.



Alex forced himself to turn over onto his stomach, lifted his head and watched as the creature limped out the door and off into the distance. A minute or so later it disappeared into the brush, not even giving so much as a glance back at Alex.

“What the fuck?!” was his last utterance as Alex Wakeman finally lost consciousness.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *Tears*

Alex struggled to open his right eye. He struggled to open both of them in point fact, but at this moment he was concerned with just getting the right one open. It felt as if it was glued shut, as if a small bag of sand was pressing down on it. He strained, mentally and physically, fighting against the profound fatigue that had set in across his entire body. He began to become aware of his physical self again, little by little, tingling sensations throughout making him aware that he was regaining consciousness.

Finally, that damned stubborn right eye cracked open just a little bit, met by the searing brightness of an overhead lamp. His eye instinctively shut closed once more, and he had to repeat the exercise about half a dozen times before it finally acclimated enough to the light to stay open. He didn't even notice that his left eye had joined the right about half-way through this series of half-opens and closings.

"Captain, can you hear me?"

Alex thought he recognized the voice, but he couldn't be sure.

"Captain, I'm doctor Sefkin. Do you know where you are?"

Alex looked around as best he could, but his head was still sluggish, still not moving as it should. He could make out enough detail, however, to figure out where he was. To his surprise, his mouth seemed to be working more or less normally, though the exhaustion he felt still made talking a slow and arduous process.

"Outside... the cabin, upstate... New York"

"That's right Captain. Do you remember what happened?"

That question made Alex clench his eyes closed tightly as the images of the battle flashed through his minds' eye. Violence, death and gore exploded onto the theater in his head as he replayed the horror again just as vividly as when it had happened for real. It took a few moments, and a big mental push, for him to regain control and shove those images away, hidden in some dark corner of his mind where he hoped they would never be found.

"Yes."

The tone of his voice, the obvious pain, and despair, was all doctor Sefkin needed to hear.

"I'm sorry, Captain. The scene in there is... it's... horrible. I can only imagine how traumatic it was to live through it. But, Captain, you *did* live through it. You survived, and I think right now that's what you need to be focused on."

Alex was now trying to sit up, fighting what felt like weights laying all over his body.

“Take it easy Captain, don’t overdo it. You’ve been through a massive trauma, and your body needs time to rest.”

“Wait, doctor, what are you even doing here?”

“Major Alcheck came when you couldn’t be reached on coms for over two hours. It took us a while to get here. You’ve been out of it for about five hours now, but I think you’re going to be okay. You just need some rest.”

Five hours? On top of two since they went radio silent? That meant the Xe’Tara warrior had a seven-hour head start on him!

Alex began to try and get out of the gurney he was on in the makeshift medical tent, over the doctor’s protests.

“Captain, please! You really can’t get up yet, we still have tests we need to run to assess if there’s been any permanent damage.”

“Pardon me doctor but fuck that shit! We’ve got to get moving like yesterday!”

Alex tried to stand, but his legs didn’t obey the commands his brain was sending, and he collapsed to the floor in a heap as doctor Sefkin tried to catch him, without success. He crumbled to the ground in a heap. He began picking himself up, trying to use his arms more than his legs now, as Sefkin grabbed him to help.

It was at this moment that Major Alcheck walked through the flap of the tent, having heard the commotion.

“Captain, I’m glad to see you back on your feet, or at least trying to be, but am I really going to have to order you to stay in bed?” Alcheck was trying to sound commanding and comforting at the same time. Unsuccessfully.

“Major! There’s no time for rest! It knows Major, it KNOWS!” Alex managed now to get to a semi-standing position, still wobbly, but at least not falling over now as he finally lifted his hands off the ground and willed his legs to, more or less, work once again.

“Knows what? Who knows what, Alex?”

“The Xe’Tara warrior. It’s still alive Major, and it knows where the X-100 is.”

“How could it know that, Alex?” A hint of sternness crept into Alcheck’s voice, probably more than he actually intended. It was slightly accusatory, though Alex knew that wasn’t how he meant it. Probably.

“I’m not sure Major. Something happened in there, during the battle.” Alex looked through the small plastic window in the side of the tent, saw the cabin, and the images flashed across his mind’s eye again. This time though, his training proved sufficient to immediately silence that mental noise and stay on point.

“I don’t know what happened, I just know that somehow, that thing was able to pull information from me. It knows where we moved the thing to and it’s headed there, if it’s not there already.”

Major Alcheck was quickly beginning to grasp the severity of the situation.

“Well, it can’t have arrived yet, or I would have heard about it by now.”

“Unless everyone at the base is dead already, Brendan.” The cold tone in Alex’s voice as he uttered the words shocked even him, but he knew the statement might be all too accurate.

And Alcheck very much understood the carnage that had been done in the cabin, having seen the results. That, coupled with his knowledge of Alex and how he wouldn't say something like that unless it were a distinct possibility, caused his blood to run cold as he reached for the field phone clipped to his belt.

"Sergeant! Contact Northern Lights and get a sit-rep, immediately!"

The squawk of the radio broke the momentary silence that had descended on everyone in the tent as Sergeant Williams replied: "Yes, sir, right away sir!"

Seconds past, then half a minute, as the tension in the room grew at an exponential rate with each passing moment. It was finally Doctor Sefkin who broke the silence.

"Well, if you're not going to let me run further tests you can at least have a seat and let me check your vitals, all right Captain?"

Alex looked at him for a moment and considered his options. They were of equal rank so he couldn't order him to shut his mouth, and he suspected Alcheck would just overrule him anyway. It didn't take long for him to realize that acquiescence was his best course of action.

"Fine doc, have it your way." Alex lifted himself back up onto the gurney. His strength was returning more rapidly than he thought it was going to at first, probably thanks to the jolt of adrenaline he was feeling waiting for the report back.

*What exactly was taking so long anyway?* Alex wondered as he sat on the gurney, Doctor Sefkin beginning to put a blood pressure collar around his arm. Before he could begin tightening the cuff, the radio sprang to life.

"Major, Northern Lights reports all normal on base. No security alerts of any kind, all systems nominal. They even report the weather is pretty nice at the moment, sir. Is there something specific you would like a more detailed report on, sir?"

The crinkles in Major Alcheck's face that had formed over the last fifteen seconds or so of impatiently waiting for the response began to smooth over as the tension left his face. "No, Sergeant, that will be all."

"Yes, sir!" came the reply over the radio, a final squawk bookending the conversation.

"Ok, so it hasn't gotten there yet, we know that much."

"Right. But that worries me."

"Worries you? Why would that worry you, Alex?"

"Because it was in really bad shape when it left here. But you saw what it was able to do in that condition. So, there are two possibilities now. Either that thing is taking longer to reach the base than I would have expected..."

Major Alcheck interrupted.

"Alex, it's not like it could steal a car and drive across the border without drawing a ton of attention. It must be on foot. It's only been about seven hours, that's just not enough time for it to travel that far, super-space warrior or not."

"Well, I'm not so sure about that. Something in my gut says that thing can move on foot a hell of a lot faster than we'd believe if we saw it. I suspect seven hours would be enough time for it to get that far, even in the damaged state it was in when it left here."

"You can't know that though Alex, there's no way you could."

"Actually, I get the distinct impression that I *can* know that."

“You’re going to have to explain that one to me, Alex. Is it more information you got from the probe?”

“I... I guess I’m not really sure, but I don’t think so. I think there’s something else going on now, something I can’t quite explain.”

Major Alcheck began to open his mouth to speak, but before he could, Alex continued, a solemn look etched in his eyes, so solemn that Alcheck immediately noticed it and instinctively closed his mouth to let Alex continue.

“Not knowing isn’t what worries me now anyway. What worries me is the second of the two possibilities I mentioned...”

Alex trailed off as if lost in thought. After a few seconds, Doctor Reskin prompted him, having stopped checking Alex’s blood pressure, mesmerized by what he was saying.

“Alex, what’s the second possibility?”

Alex returned to the moment, quickly looked at the doctor, then at Major Alcheck.

“The second possibility is that it’s biding its time, regaining its *full* strength, in preparation for one final assault that there’s probably no way we can stop.”

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Alex stared at the door for what seemed like an eternity. His hand, bandaged tightly with a smattering of blood beginning to seep through, clutched the doorknob. All he had to do was turn it, but he couldn’t seem to bring himself to. He knew what lay behind the door and it scared him more than the Xe’Tara warrior he knew he’d have to face again very soon.

He glanced again at the mailbox affixed to the wall next to the door. The number 1021 stood out, its bright yellow lettering highly visible from the street behind him. And right below the number, in a sickly green color that he had always hated, was two simple words:

The Wakemans.

The wind blew through his dirty hair, a cold breeze that chilled him to the bone, though he knew he’d feel a deep chill right now even without the wind. He had to go in. He knew he had to, but finding the strength to do so was proving harder than he had imagined.

*Amazing how some things can turn even the bravest men into cowards* he thought to himself.

As if on cue, a welcome distraction invaded his mind as he thought back to the conversation with Alcheck just a short time ago.

“It’s going to be our last stand, Brendan. We’ve got to get to the base in Canada before that thing does and we’ve got to be ready for it.”

“But Captain... no, you know what? Enough with the ranks for a while Alex. With what we’ve been through and what we still have to face let’s forget we’re military men for a little while. We’re just friends for today, all right Alex? After all, we could very well both be dead before long here. I think that’s worthy of dispensing with military formality for.”

In addition to his softened tone, there was a palpable physical softening of Alcheck’s face too. This was as unguarded as Alex had ever seen him.

“Alex, if that thing actually is gaining strength like you think, it could be at full strength by the time it reaches the base. In fact, assuming it thinks tactically like we do then it’s probably waiting exactly for that before attacking. We could barely handle it when it was, what, a newborn I guess we’d call it? And you could even argue we, in fact, didn’t handle it! And what it did to your team in that cabin when you had every advantage you could hope for... how are we going to handle this thing?”

“Well, I’ve got some ideas about that. There’s some stuff sloshing around in my head, stuff I can barely describe and can understand even less, but something is gnawing at my gut saying that it’s important, that it can help. I’m hoping that by the time we reach the base I’ll have some kind of handle on it.”

“Well, I hope so too Alex. But either way, we’ll do what we do. We’ll get our defenses set up and fight to the last man. I’ve already radioed instructions up there, and preparations began a few hours ago. I’ve also got some favors to call in on the way. We’ll have a force ready to face that thing that, with any luck, will be enough to overwhelm it if by virtue of nothing but sheer numbers. By the time we arrive, we should be pretty close to as ready as we can be.”

“Excellent, Brendan. But, I’ve got to make a pitstop before we head out.”

Tom was perplexed, and his face showed it.

“Pitstop? Where could you possibly need to go before Canada?”

Alex leaned forward and rested his forehead on the door of his and Melissa’s Pennsylvania home as his mind snapped back to the present. It was time to stop procrastinating, time to fight through the pain of memory.

He turned the knob and pushed the door open and stepped through the door as a sudden rush of emotion washed over him as if someone had dropped a cooler of water over him.

As he entered the mud room, he saw Melissa’s 10-speed bicycle first. She rode that bike to the store every Tuesday and Friday to get fresh vegetables. Alex had replaced the chain for her just two weeks ago.

As he walked through the mudroom, the kitchen opened up before him. Pots and cooking tools hung from the ceiling on those special hooks Melissa had made him buy and install for her. She fancied herself quite the professional chef, and she had been teaching herself a lot over the last year or two. Alex’s waistline was all the proof she needed that she was on the right track!

On the refrigerator were pictures from their last two vacations: Disney World this past spring and Nashville last summer. They rarely went on vacations that he chose, but Alex was always okay with that because Melissa’s choices made her happy, and that made Alex happy. Although they had been to Disney World a few times and always enjoyed it, the trip to Nashville especially was a special memory for him because she was a big country music fan and had wanted to visit the “official home of country music,” as she called it. They had driven there, even though flying would have been cheaper and faster. Melissa wasn’t a fan of long drives, but he was, because it gave them time together and chances to experience the country and all the unexpected things they found along the way.

He turned away from the refrigerator to his right and walked through the archway that separated the kitchen from the living room.

Nature paintings adorned the walls, something he had always enjoyed. Melissa didn't really love them, but she knew they made Alex happy, so she had always been supportive. A few family pictures were interspersed between the paintings, some of Alex and Melissa together, a few of their families, his parents and hers. A few spaces were strategically left as well, earmarked for the pictures of the children that they never had, and now *would* never, be able to have together. They had talked about having kids many times, and they were both looking forward to being parents tremendously, but they were waiting just a little longer. They figured they couldn't well become parents when Alex's job was so risky, and Melissa was so consumed by her work. They had begun talking about retirement just a few weeks ago though, the itch to start their own family finally needing to be scratched.

Alex's eyes welled up with tears as he stared at one of those blank areas. He had been very much looking forward to being a father. But that wouldn't happen now, certainly not with Melissa. And given what was waiting for him in Canada, he didn't imagine he'd ever have the chance with anyone else, even though he couldn't comprehend the notion of someone else at that moment anyway. The thought was as alien as the creature he would soon be fighting again.

He wiped the tears from his eyes and walked across the living room and to the door that led to the basement. He opened it, pulled the chain for the light above the stairs and made his way down. At the bottom, he flipped the light switch, and the fluorescent bulbs across the basement flickered to life, slowly. He never did get around to changing the starters like Melissa had asked. It wasn't that he forgot, it's that, as he said: "You're the super-smart scientist person here, I think you could change a starter yourself!" He always said it in a joking way of course, and Melissa knew it, but now it stung for some reason, as if he had somehow let her down. He intellectually knew that wasn't the case, but intellect gave way to emotion now, never actually standing a chance.

The basement was largely his domain, and it was a typical man-dominated basement: lots of tools, a workbench, a pool table, a tacky calendar with some scantily-clad women over old cars, and a rack of swords and knives. Alex collected these, more for aesthetic purposes than anything else, though he was quite proficient with bladed weapons as well.

Beside the rack was a safe, a colossal safe, taller than Alex and about twice as wide. This safe weighed well over 1,000 pounds and almost double that when you factored in the weight of its contents: his gun collection.

All sorts of firearms were present as Alex opened the safe, the movements of its giant spinner wheel so silky smooth thanks to Alex's obsessive oiling of it, meeting his gaze. Many of these guns had been passed down to him when his father died, a few stretching back some generations before that. But many were Alex's own purchases, guns he liked for various reasons. There was the P-90, his favorite "space gun," it's unusual form looking like something out of a science fiction movie. The same was true of his FS-2000, though it shot the same ammo as any of the four plain old AR-15's he had. A Mosin Nagant was one of his favorites for long-distance shots, the World War II-era gun

packing a good punch from a distance while being extremely accurate even after all these years. Almost a dozen pistols of various types were there, all guns that he enjoyed shooting, as did Melissa on occasion.

Melissa had been fiercely anti-gun when they got married, but over time she wanted to share in Alex's hobby, and so he had taken her to the shooting range a few years ago. Her outlook changed that day when she realized that shooting could actually be quite fun. She had gained an appreciation for the shooting sports that Alex enjoyed and while it wasn't frequent, the times they ventured out to the range together were always a joy to him.

He closed the door to the safe and spun the wheel, locking it. As much as this collection meant to him, he knew there was a good chance he'd never see it again. He certainly didn't want to leave it open and easily accessible for whoever found their way into the house if he was never to return. It could be some kids, and that was something he couldn't allow.

Alex had one more stop to make, and he knew it would be the hardest. He turned off the lights in the basement, made his way back upstairs, and stood at the base of the stairs leading up to the second floor of the house.

The second floor, where his and Melissa's bedroom was.

He willed himself up the stairs, and he entered the bedroom. It was almost too much.

A pile of Melissa's clothes was stacked on the dresser, folded neatly, and awaiting being put away. Her scent emanated from them and met his nose, and he gasped. That smell always drove him crazy, and it felt a thousand times stronger now somehow in her absence.

In the far corner of the room was the sight he simultaneously was looking the most forward to and simultaneously dreading the most. On a metal rack, hanging with plastic form rods through it, was Melissa's wedding dress.

She had recently sent it out to be restored. It had suffered some damage from leaking water from the roof. Melissa very much wanted it to be in tip-top condition so that her daughter, should she have one, could use it someday.

Alex looked at it, and his mind flashed back to their wedding and how beautiful Melissa was. She was always beautiful in his eyes of course, but that day she looked like a princess out of a Disney movie. When he saw her coming down the aisle, he couldn't believe he had managed such a catch!

Alex closed his eyes, fighting back the tears. He would never again see her smiling face in the morning, or watch her as she furrowed her brow in concentration at preparing a new, complicated dish in the kitchen. He would never again see her smile as she looked at one of the blank spaces on the wall in the living room, lost in thoughts about the picture of their children that would go there before too long. He'd never watch her toned legs from the window as she rode her bike to the market every Tuesday and Friday and he'd never feel the connection with her that he felt at the shooting range.

She was gone, and it hurt. It would never stop hurting, he knew.

Alex opened his eyes now as he pushed the emotions away, pushed them back into the far recess of his mind. There might someday be a time to take them out again, and he



would do so because the pain was accompanied by memories of joy and happiness and he was perfectly willing to endure the one to feel the other again.

But not today.

A wave of stone-cold determination replaced everything else, and a stoic look etched itself upon his face as if chiseled into the stone expression of a statue.

It was time to go to work. And it was time for a good measure of revenge. Not just for Melissa now, but for the team that had been cut down under his command.

Alex raced down the stairs, through the kitchen, out the mud room and he slammed the front door behind him as he ran down the driveway into the jeep waiting for him at the end. He didn't look back, not even for a second, and he didn't take anything with him. There was no need. Everything he needed was in his head, and in his heart. If he never returned to this place again, he carried with him the best pieces of it, and the best pieces of Melissa.

It was time to go to work, one last time.

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The troop transport carrier approached the gate of the base as Alex re-checked his M-X for the fifth time. It was functioning exactly as expected, exactly as it had the previous four times. He re-inserted the full plasma reservoir, slapped it into place and flipped the power switch to the off position.

Something in his brain prodded him like a hot poker in response to that thought. It took him a moment to realize why but when he did he couldn't help but chuckle to himself: this rifle, this wonder of modern warfare armament that he knew that he could defeat an entire platoon of enemy soldiers with, would do him no good whatsoever against the enemy he was preparing to face. No weapon he knew of would.

Alex dropped the M-X onto the bench next to him and looked at his empty hands. "What the hell are we going to do?" he said to himself. He was glad no one else was in the transport aside from the driver in the forward compartment, and he couldn't hear Alex's depressing words.

As if in response, something appeared in his hands! Something ghostly, not a physical thing but more of a shadow of a thing. It startled him and sent him to his feet, still staring at his hands. Just the outline of the thing remained, like a hologram he could barely perceive. He blinked a couple of times in rapid succession and each time he did the image dimmed a little bit and eventually vanished, leaving just his empty hands.

Alex wondered if he was cracking up – it would be a hell of a time for that to happen is so – but somehow, he didn't think that was it. But, he couldn't explain what had just happened either.

"Aliens, probes, invisible unbeatable creatures, why the hell am I surprised?"

And again, he was happy no one could hear him.

The transport passed through the gate as the driver announced their arrival in a loud yell over the engine of the transport: "We're here, Captain! We'll be at the main entrance in about two minutes."

"Very good, Sergeant, thank you."

"Not a problem sir, thank you for traveling the friendly skies... err, road!"

Alex smiled. He was glad the driver could joke. He just wished it wasn't because he had no clue what they were driving into.

The smile melted away from his face like ice on a hot day.

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“Captain, glad you could make it. Everything taken care of?”

“Yes, sir, all taken care of. How goes preparations up here, Major?”

“Very good!” Alcheck actually looked proud, Alex noted. “Have a look for yourself.”

Alex quickly understood why he looked proud. As he walked through the corridor that opened up into the hangar bay where the X-100 was, he saw what he guesstimated to be around 150 men. Alcheck had really outdone himself! He'd have to remember to find out how he got so many soldiers here so quickly. This particular base only had about 50 people on it at any given time, and most of them were support staff, just a handful of security personnel. So, to be able to get 100 more, and what he judged to be real combat troops at that, was a remarkable and impressive feat.

Aside from the men, Alex saw that they had been very busy building a solid perimeter out of cinder blocks around the X-100. There were gun ports in the makeshift wall where he could see M-60 machine guns. As he walked around the wall inspecting, he counted four on each side, plus assorted other gun ports for the soldiers to fire through. The wall had been cemented together and appeared to be quite strong (confirmed by him kicking it a few times as hard as he could). There was enough room inside for about 50 men he guessed, in addition to the X-100. There would be the final line of defense with the bulk of the forces outside. Surrounding the wall was essentially another wall, this one built out of heavy sandbags. While the inner wall he thought might give the Xe'Tara warrior some problems, he knew the sandbags would barely slow it down no matter how heavy they appeared to be. But, if it slowed it down just a little then that might be all the extra time the men outside would need to kill it.

But he doubted it.

What might slow it down a bit more though were the claymore mines surrounding the outer wall of sandbags. They were arranged in such a way that there was only one safe passage through what was essentially a directed minefield. If they were lucky, it would trip the mines and take itself out. The strategy, he instantly recognized, was taking a page out of the Spartans' playbook. The battle of Thermopylae was made famous by the movie 300, and while the movie was of course highly stylized and dramatized to make a piece of entertainment, the core strategy it was based on was very real: the Persian army was funneled through a thin wall of rocks called the hot gates. This made the numeric advantage they held count for almost nothing and gave the Spartans a single area to defend. It had worked well for the Spartans, and it was a sound strategy here that could also work, even though it wasn't numbers they had to worry about. Slowing the thing down though was what mattered, giving them a chance to strike it as much as possible was the goal.

Alex just hoped the outcome wasn't the same as at Thermopylae because it hadn't ended well for the Spartans.

They had built a good, strong defense and had a sound strategy set up as a result. Alex thought they might have a chance.

But he doubted it.

“So, Captain, what do you think?” Major Alcheck came up alongside Alex, smiling. He really was proud of what they had been able to do here in such a short period of time.

“It looks good, sir. I can’t find any fault at all. We’ve got a shot at this.”

The smile on Alcheck’s face faded now.

“Just a shot, Captain?”

Alex considered his response. He knew that on the eve of battle the worst thing any leader could do was to make his troops think there was no hope. And, while Alcheck was his superior, they both knew who was really in charge going into this final battle.

“Well, let’s call it a good shot. We’ve got a good chance of killing this thing once and for all. You’ve given us the best chance we could hope for, and I think we can succeed here.”

“Excellent! Do you want to speak to the men before we start rotating guard watches?”

Alex thought about it for a moment. He recognized that this was once again a chance to build Alcheck’s hopes up. He’d need all the hope he could get.

He also had a nagging feeling in the back of his mind, a sense that there was something else he needed to do. What was it? He couldn’t put his finger on it. Finally, he replied.

“No, I think it’s your place to do that. I’ve got to... attend to something else first.”

“Ok, I’ll do it, but what are you talking now, something to attend to? What else could you need to do now? We should be getting ready for battle here! And that very much includes you, since I’m not sure your blatant attempts to give me hope where so little exists are enough. And besides, I suspect you’re the best chance we have of stopping this thing anyway!”

The realization that Alcheck knew the game Alex had played here took him aback for a moment, but just for a moment. He sometimes forgot how good a leader Alcheck actually was. Of course, he’d recognize Alex’s attempt to build him up. The fact that he didn’t feel patronized spoke volumes about the man, Alex thought.

Alex just smiled. There really wasn’t anything he could say in response that would mean anything, save one thing.

“Don’t worry Brendan, I’ll be here when the shit hits the fan. That’s a promise. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. It’s just that I’ve got one of those mysterious feelings I’ve been getting a lot of lately that started as a whisper but is now a dull roar that there’s something else we need, something else I need to do before the fight begins. I don’t know what it is yet, but I just know I have to figure it out before that thing arrives.”

Alcheck had already decided that it didn’t really matter what Alex said at this point, he’d be giving him the benefit of the doubt regardless.

“Ok Alex, you do what you gotta do. We’ll be here when you’re ready, and if that thing gets here before you figure out what it is you need to do, then we’ll give it a hell of a fight until you arrive and hopefully kick its fucking ass straight back to whatever planet it’s from.”

“Count on it, sir.”

Alex extended his hand as did Alcheck. They shook as they both had the same gut feeling.

The feeling that this would be the last time they would see each other alive.

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Alex stared at the workbench in front of him, various electronic components strewn all over it. He remembered leaving Alcheck just a second ago but he had no memory of entering this room, and he certainly had no memory of grabbing armfuls of parts off the shelves lining the walls of this lab. Yet, he knew he must have: he was the only one here, and even the hallway a few feet away was as silent as the grave. It must have been him that made this mess, but he couldn't remember doing it, and he certainly had no idea why.

He didn't know what any of the things on the workbench were. Well, that wasn't entirely true: he recognized a few miscellaneous items from Melissa's work. A capacitor here (though he only vaguely remembered that a capacitor was like a little battery or something) and a resistor there (it “resisted” something was all he knew). He looked around at the array of tools and machinery around him. He wasn't the handiest guy on the planet, but he recognized and even knew how to use the basics: screwdrivers, hammers, even a really nice soldering station. He did his fair share of home repairs, but really, Melissa was always better at that stuff than he was, though he always enjoyed working on things around the house together.

Most of the machinery though was foreign to him. He recognized a drill press and even a 3D printer thanks to Melissa having brought one home to do rapid prototyping with when she had a brilliant thought at three in the morning, as she was wont to do. But much of it was beyond his experience and broadly fell into the category of “science stuff” for him.

He walked over to one particularly complex-looking device. It had control panel that was studded with buttons and knobs. Various math symbols surrounded the controls, none of which he understood one bit. Without thinking, his hand reached up and twiddled some of the knobs, flipped a few switches.

Was he just randomly doing this? He wasn't sure.

That is, he wasn't until he pressed one particular button and saw a LASER beam shoot out of the device and bounce around between a number of mirrors that he suddenly realized he had positioned using the knobs. The pattern the beam made was too orderly to have just been random.

He somehow had known what he was doing!

He walked back to the workbench and picked up two pieces that he couldn't identify. One looked like some sort of crystal, a number of sides shimmered in the light. The other piece was some kind of wire. Oh, he recognized it! A fiber optic cable!

He shifted the two pieces to one hand and with the other grabbed a tool that he had never seen before in his life. As if they had a mind of their own, his hands placed the crystal into a hole in the tool and the fiber optic cable into a long section that looked like it was meant to accept it. He adjusted a knob on the device and pressed a trigger and a

flash of light nearly blinded him as the unmistakable smell of ozone filled his nostrils. As his sight returned he realized what the tool had done: it had bored a hole into the crystal using a small bolt of electricity and simultaneously inserted the fiber optic cable into it. The crystal, superheated by the discharge, fused around the cable. They were joined now and seemed as if they always had been.

Alex stared at the new component in his hand with no idea what it was for or how he knew how to make it.

“Well, this is certainly odd.”

At that moment, Alex let go. He closed his eyes for a moment, took in a deep breath and calmed his mind.

His eyes snapped open, he looked down at the pile of parts on the bench.

“Ok, whatever’s going on here, let’s do it.”

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Alcheck climbed up onto the platform he had one of the engineers quickly build and grabbed the bullhorn hanging on the edge on the way up. He stood for a moment, looking at the crowd of soldiers around him, a sea of men on all sides, talking amongst themselves, re-checking their weapons. The fear was palpable on each and every face. They had been briefed on what they were facing by the few who had survived the initial encounter.

He steadied his mind, removing any hint of fear from his own face. He was undoubtedly feeling it as much as any of them, but he knew he couldn’t let anyone see it. It took him a few moments, but he finally managed it. He was ready.

He hit the alert button on the bullhorn, and a loud claxon sound rang out. Most of the men turned to face him, ceasing whatever activity they had been involved in a moment ago. A few stragglers continued chatting though, something that would usually annoy him as he’d see it as a breakdown in discipline. But on this day, it was something he could let go. He hit the alert button again though, and the last few realized it was time to get down to business. Everyone stood at attention now.

“At ease.”

The crowd relaxed, and all eyes were on him, all ears awaiting his words.

“Men, we’re here today to engage in a battle that we dare not lose. Some of you have already encountered the creature we’re about to face together.”

A few heads nodded in solemn acknowledgment.

“The rest of you, you’ve been briefed and have been prepared as best as you can be. This threat though is unlike anything we’ve faced before, and any preparation will likely be insufficient to the task at hand. That doesn’t matter though. It *can’t* matter. The stakes here today are beyond anything that any army of men has ever faced before, and we *must* prevail. And we *can* prevail. I absolutely believe that. This battle will go down in history, should we win the day, as an achievement unmatched in human history. Not just the history of warfare mind you, but in *all* human history. We fight today not just for country, not just for family or friends. Not merely for those around you and not only for your own lives. We fight today for the future of the human race. We fight here today to ensure that our species endures. Men, I know you must feel some level of fear, but trust

me when I say that you can overcome that fear and you can overcome this enemy. Also, believe me when I tell you that there is no choice but to do so. Not because you are soldiers and because I'm your commanding officer *telling you what to do...*"

Alcheck said the part with a half-smile and a tone that he intended to convey a little bit of levity with. It worked: the crowd around him all laughed in unison. He waited a moment for the laughter to die down.

"...no, we have no choice because to lose here today is to lose not simply our own lives but the lives of every human being everywhere. To lose is to have no future for our species and to erase everything we've accomplished so far. We can't let that happen! We *will not* let that happen! Men, fight with me today, not for yourselves, not for me, but for *all mankind!*"

Alcheck raised his volume with the last few words and thrust his clenched fist into the air as 150 battle-tested soldiers around him erupted in cheer and agreement. He looked around, satisfied by the sight he saw. *Maybe we really do have a chance*, he dared think to himself.

Maybe.

"To battle positions!" he yelled into the bullhorn as the soldiers around him scattered and reorganized themselves into predetermined positions, setting up defensively in preparation for the one final battle to end all battles. Alcheck climbed down the ladder and joined them on the line of the outer defense perimeter. He grabbed the M-X that had been left there specifically for him, and he took his position at the head of the un-mined portion of the perimeter. He wanted to be there when the creature arrived, wanted to have the first crack at killing it. He was ready, as were his men.

Now they just awaited the arrival of the enemy.

And something in his gut told Major Thomas Alcheck that the wait wasn't going to be long.

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The device laid on the table, a messy amalgamation of parts held together with duct tape, lousy welding, and epoxy. And, for all Alex knew, a little bit of magic, since that's what seemingly had driven him to build the thing.

It had the basic shape of a rifle, so he knew it was some sort of weapon, but he had no idea what it shot. There was nothing like bullets, no projectiles anywhere. There was a pulsating ball of energy at the center though, something his hands had created seemingly on their own. Because of this, he suspected it was some sort of energy weapon. He guessed it might be a much more powerful form of the M-X, but that was just wild speculation at that point.

He did know that it wasn't quite finished though. Close, but not quite yet. He closed his eyes again, calming his mind. This seemed to him to have been what triggered his super-thing building powers last time, so he figured it would work again.

Before his mind was cleared, he heard the base PA system kick in, and a loud, panicked voice came over it.

"It's here! It's here!"

In the background was the unmistakable sound of automatic weapons fire and plasma fire that Alex was now all too familiar with, and he thought he heard a claymore explosion as well.

The Xe'Tara warrior was here, and the battle had started.

Alex had the adamant urge to run into the hangar bay, to get into the fight as quickly as possible. He wanted nothing more at that moment. Something kept his feet in place though, something that made them feel as if they were embedded in blocks of cement. He felt as if he couldn't move no matter how much he wanted to.

Something was keeping him here, and as he looked at the (probable) weapon that was lying on the workbench in front of him he knew what it was that was keeping him there: this thing had to be finished. Whatever it was, his gut was screaming like the shriek of a bird of prey that it was more valuable to the battle than he himself was at the moment.

Alex Wakeman closed his eyes once more and fought against his own burning desire to fight to calm his mind, to empty it as completely as he could. After what felt to him like an eternity he opened his eyes and watched in amazement as his right hand grabbed one of the few remaining components that weren't part of the device while his left grabbed a tool he had never seen before and began attaching the component to the device with the tool.

He didn't know what his hands were doing at the moment or what was guiding him, but a sudden wave of hopefulness swept over him as he watched the last piece fall into place like the final piece of a puzzle.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *Battle*

Off to the left, about 75 feet away, Alcheck heard the distinctive sound of the first claymore detonation, followed quickly by another, and then another a few seconds later. One of the soldiers peered around the edge of the sandbag wall and held up a hand signal that indicated visual contact with the enemy had been made, which Alcheck realized was a good thing: the claymores must have damaged its c at least a little bit. Alcheck gripped the handle of his rifle a little harder, and he saw several the soldiers near him do the same.

The scout slinked back towards them to reported what he saw.

“It’s out there Major, but not completely invisible. It looks like electrical sparks were coming off it from everywhere. I could see it in silhouette, not quite visible but not fully cloaked anymore either.”

“Good, I think the claymores damaged its cloaking mechanism. We saw something like that during the first attack. That can only help our odds.”

The other soldiers nodded in agreement. Fighting a nigh-unbeatable alien creature they could see would be infinitely less daunting than one that was invisible to them and dealt death without seeing it coming. Alcheck still didn’t like their odds, but they had just improved significantly, that much he knew.

“Alright, back into position. My bet is it now realizes that we’ve got the perimeter covered with mines and it’s going to try to find its way into this funnel before long. We’d better be ready for it.”

“Yes, sir!” The soldiers immediately returned to their defensive positions, setting up overlapping fields of fire across the entrance of the funnel created by the makeshift barricade walls. The Xe’Tara warrior would be coming through there any time now, and they had to be ready to cut it down to size.

They waited. And waited. It felt like forever to Alcheck, but a quick glance at his watch indicated it was barely a minute since that quick conversation.

A sudden explosion of automatic weapons fire interrupted the thought. It was here.

And it didn’t seem phased by the gunfire one bit, whether the conventional rounds or the plasma rounds that some of the soldiers had been issued.

Bullets ricocheted off its body, plumes of electrical energy erupting with each impact. The plasma shots seemed to just glide across its surface, but not penetrate. What Alcheck and the men didn’t know, what they couldn’t have known, is that with the imminent failure of its cloaking mechanism, the probe in the Xe’Tara warrior was able to shunt a



significant amount of energy towards its shielding by preemptively shutting down the cloak. It was now completely visible, but considerably tougher to damage.

The first soldier was cut in half from head to toe faster than Alcheck could register. The rapidly expanding pool of blood and guts below the two halves grew rapidly as the halves fell apart and struck the floor with a sickening thud.

Alcheck raised his rifle to fire but quickly realized that the other soldiers' rifles were doing no appreciable damage and he didn't expect his would do any better. The next soldier's arms were cleaved clean off at the elbows, his rifle falling to the floor as a result. The blood-curdling scream that came from him began to turn Alcheck's stomach, but it was mercifully cut short as the top half of his head was sliced off by a beam of energy cutting through it effortlessly, nearly striking Alcheck in the process.

The warrior dipped and dodged as Alcheck fired. His plasma reservoir quickly ran dry despite its massive capacity, and before he had a chance to swap in a fresh one, the warrior was upon him.

Alcheck looked up, the creature having a good foot of height on him at least. He saw its chest heaving up and down as it drew breath, the energy of its shielding gently phasing all around it as if it was covered by a glow like the Aurora Borealis he had seen as a young soldier during a deployment to an Alaskan base. Alcheck couldn't move. It wasn't fright that froze him; it was a morbid fascination of the thing standing before him. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that his life was about to end, but this creature, this entity that seemed to be made of pure murderous rage, was strangely beautiful to his eyes. It was a perfect predator, after all, a perfect soldier, and who better to appreciate such a thing than a fellow soldier, and its soon to be prey?

Without warning, the warrior shot out its hand and wrapped it around Alcheck's neck. He instinctively grabbed the forearms of the creature as it lifted him off the ground. He immediately began struggling for breath, wondering just how long it would be before he passed out. The warrior lifted him by the neck, drawing Alcheck's face even with its own. Its grip wasn't as tight as it could be, Alcheck realized. If it was, he knew he wouldn't be having these thoughts. No, it wasn't quite ready to take his life for some reason.

It was examining him now, taking stock, recognizing. It knew who he was somehow and wanted to take in every line of his face, every contour, for whatever purpose it had. It twisted his head to one side, then the other, as if scanning every dimension of his face.

Alcheck began hitting the arms of the creature, trying to escape. His strikes began to lose strength though as the lack of oxygen reaching his brain began to take its toll. He knew it wouldn't be long now.

The creature, finally satisfied whatever curiosity had thus far stayed its hand, squeezed now, intensely. The pain began to grow exponentially as blood vessels began to burst, and sinew began to snap all through his neck. Alcheck's face was now a bright red, blood being forced up into his skull and into the skin of his face.

The creature increased its pressure, and Alcheck tried to scream in agony, but could not. All he could do was open his mouth as blood exploded out from it in a spray all over the arms of the creature. It didn't faze the warrior in the least.

Alcheck's right eye began to extrude from its socket, the pressure building to an absurd level.

Amazingly, Alcheck actually thought: *I wonder what it feels like for your eyeball to explode?*

It was the final conscious thought he ever had.

He lost consciousness just a second before that eyeball did explode, before the warrior's other hand raised up, gripped the top of Alcheck's head and pulled his head clean off his body.

---

Alex examined the now complete device that his subconscious had guided his hands to build. It definitely was a weapon of some kind. In fact, Alex realized that it looked a lot like one of the futuristic rifles featured in first-person shooter games set in space.

*Well, that makes sense! If we're gonna fight an alien, we'd want to do it with a space gun!*

Alex looked down the barrel of the rifle and instinctively clicked a small yellow button on the left side of the hand grip. Ten feet away, on the far wall appeared a holographic symbol that started out large and then contracted as Alex swept the weapon across the wall, across various objects. The hologram was clearly some sort of aiming system and as it crossed the items on the wall, the jars and electronic components and tools on the shelves on the wall, it locked on to each with an audible tone as the hologram shrank and assumed the form of the object being tracked. It was an elegant system, simple to understand and use but highly accurate. It made aiming a simple matter of pointing in the right general direction.

This was a very advanced gun for certain, the likes of which Alex had never seen before.

His hand glided over the trigger, but he didn't dare pull it. He had no real idea what this thing was going to shoot and for all he knew he might blow the room to kingdom come if he tried it. In fact, for all he knew, this thing might shoot a small nuke and blow up the whole damned base in one go.

"That might not be the worst thing right now," Alex joked to himself.

No, he'd have to wait for a real target before risking that, even though he logically guessed it would be silly to have built something that would kill him if he dared fire it. No, it was probably safe, unless you were the thing being aimed at.

Alex charged out the door of the lab and towards the hangar bay where the sounds of battle had raged for the last five minutes or so. He couldn't tell if his guys were winning or if the Xe'Tara warrior was, but he knew it was a hell of a fight either way. That only made sense: with that many men, win or lose, they would give the thing hell for as long as possible.

The cacophony of rifle fire, yelling and grenade explosions seemed to indicate a massive battle, larger than should even be possible in the hangar bay. While the bay was positively huge by any standards, that many men crammed in made it seem a lot smaller than it was. The acoustics of the building too were probably amplifying the sound making it all sound louder than it really was, though Alex suspected not by as much as he'd like

to think. He knew it really was a maelstrom in there, whatever the relative magnitude of things.

But something was wrong, and Alex couldn't put his finger on it as he ran down the long hallway that led to the bay. Something about the noise sounded off to him, a characteristic he couldn't quite figure out.

By the time he reached the elevator that would take him up the 50 feet or so to the entrance of the bay he realized what was wrong: the sound was rapidly quieting. There was far less gunfire than before, far less shouting and yelling and screaming of soldiers. In fact, it was quieting so much now that he could nearly hear individual voices and make out what they were saying.

And what he heard chilled his blood in a single beat of his heart.

"Fall back! Fall back! Regroup at the X-100, take up defensive positions!"

"Rogers, how many do you have left on your side?"

"Two, sir! Me and Repgar, that's all that's left over here!"

"I've got Austin and Babbage, and Simmons is alive but badly injured. Any ideas how to stop this thing?"

"Not a clue! It's cutting through the last rank of guys beyond the last barricade, but I don't think they stand any more of a chance than we do."

"Fuck this, let's just set C4 charges and blow the fucking thing up the second it crosses the perimeter line!"

"That'll take all of us right along with it!"

"No shit! Better that than what that fucking thing has been doing to our guys!"

"Alright, yeah, fuck it, let's do it!"

If Alex was following the conversation correctly, then he guessed that there were no more than ten men total left alive up there. The warrior had slaughtered 140 men?! Even given what he knew about it and had seen first-hand what it was capable of, that still seemed unbelievable. These were hardened soldiers who had set up a proper defense scheme. And that's not even considering the firepower they had brought to bear on the thing. It had only been about ten minutes or so since the battle began he figured.

That degree of death seemed impossible to Alex. But, if he was right and 140 men had already been killed by this thing, then he had no idea what even his supposed superweapon he was holding in his arms now could do against it.

The elevator door opened, and Alex hopped on, hitting the up button as quickly as possible. The doors would open very near the X-100, but on the far side of the outside perimeter Alcheck and the soldiers had set up. He would find himself almost immediately in the middle of whatever battle was still going on up there, he knew. As the door closed behind him and the elevator began to rise, he knelt down, closed his eyes and calmed his mind.

An image appeared in his mind that startled his eyes open. It was just a cloud of some kind, but not a cloud like you would find in the sky. This cloud was shifting shapes almost as if it was alive. He had no idea what it was or where the vision had come from, but somehow it seemed almost like a message, like his subconscious was trying to tell him something.

More information from Melissa, he figured.

“I really wish you would have given me an instruction manual for accessing this shit better, babe,” he muttered to himself.

The elevator abruptly stopped climbing before he had a chance to figure it out though and the door began to open.

The sight that greeted him was like nothing he could have imagined, like something out of the worst nightmare imaginable.

Human bodies in various states of evisceration and dismemberment were scattered across the floor out into the hangar as far as he could see. Arms and legs and heads, severed from the owners, haphazardly lay in pools of blood and viscera. This creature didn't just kill its enemies, it destroyed them in a manner Alex could barely fathom. Whether it was evil or just incredibly efficient, he wasn't sure, but the results were devastating either way.

Smoke rose from craters where grenades had been detonated, pieces of cement and metal littered the battlefield like snow on a field in winter. He could see that some claymores had exploded, the explosion embedding bits of fragmentation on the floor and the makeshift outer wall the soldiers had constructed.

Alex had seen death and destruction before, but nothing like this. The one thing he didn't see was movement. Nothing aside from the smoke from various explosions and the dripping of blood from severed body parts.

As Alex surveyed his surroundings, he instinctively raised the weapon his subconscious had crafted to his shoulder in a firing position as he began to check the area 360-degrees around him. Nothing. No soldiers, no Alcheck, no Xe'Tara warrior.

It must have already breached the outer defenses. It was inside the security perimeter.

He immediately swiveled towards the opening that had been created, the one entry point to the inner line of defense. He could see the top of the X-100 rising above the walls – it was a rather large aircraft – and he began moving towards the entrance, his senses heightened as they always were in a combat situation.

He entered the funnel area between the two defensive perimeters, and it didn't take long for him to find the sight he knew must have been awaiting him somewhere.

The dead body, or what was left of it, of Major Alcheck.

Alex walked over to the body, and a sick feeling rose in his stomach as he realized there was no head. The ragged edges of Alcheck's remaining neck and the bits of sinew and veins that hung sickeningly out of the opening told Alex that this had been a violent, sudden death. He could at least be thankful for that.

As he shuffled his feet around the body, he came into contact with something. He looked down, fearing what it was.

The eyes of Major Alcheck stared up at Alex, a pained look in them evident. His mouth was slightly agape, as if to scream one final silent warning to Alex. The thing that had done this was clearly at full strength and Alex felt a pang of doubt like he had never felt before.

He looked at the face of Alcheck's severed head one last time, trying to replace this hideous vision in his mind with a better memory of the man he considered a friend as he

steadied himself for the fight. The warrior couldn't be far now, might already be on the X-100.

Alex turned towards the opening to the interior defense, weapon at the ready, and he proceeded through the opening. It didn't take long for him to find his prey.

About 40 feet away, by the door on the underbelly of the X-100, stood the creature, fully visible. This was a surprise to Alex, but he realized that the soldiers and Alcheck must have managed to do enough damage to destroy its cloaking mechanism. That might be the edge he needed, though it hadn't mattered for 150 soldiers. It was clawing at the door, which was mated very flush with the body panels of the X-100, thanks to Melissa's exacting construction standards no doubt. This was a good thing because, for all its strength, there was nothing for it to get its claws hooked into, no way for it to tear the door open. Even it, Alex realized, wasn't strong enough to tear through the solid metal of the X-100's airframe itself thanks to the high-strength material Melissa has designed especially for it.

Alex smiled a little at the thought that even though she was gone, Melissa's genius was still with him by way of her technical achievements.

Alex focused his attention on the creature and began to take aim, still not knowing what this weapon would do, assuming it did anything at all. The holographic targeting system recognized the target, altering the shape of the aiming reticulum to that of the creature as it shrunk down to indicate it was locked on.

Before he could pull the trigger though, Alex was noticed.

The creature abruptly stopped its clawing, spun around to face him and size him up. A look of recognition crossed its face.

"Good, you remember me, you son of a bitch!"

The creature let out a grunt that Alex took as an acknowledgment of his comment.

The creature lunged forward to attack, but even its seeming impossible speed wasn't enough to avoid the blast of energy that emanated from the weapon when Alex pulled the trigger.

He was right: it was some sort of energy weapon, and it was absolutely unlike anything he had ever seen, except perhaps in sci-fi movies that Melissa had made him watch. It was a beam of brilliant blue energy that seemed to have pockets of red pulsating along it. It was a continuous fire, and Alex worked to keep it trained on the creature. There was no recoil whatsoever to contend with, but it was so bright and, Alex was quickly realizing, scorching hot, that his body was instinctively trying to look and move away. He fought the urges and kept his gaze focused on the creature.

The beam seemed to continue pouring energy into the creature for an eternity, though it was actually less than three seconds in total. The warrior was in obvious agony. It flailed about wildly but seemed to almost be stuck in place, unable to jump out of the way of the beam. Its skin began to glow a sickly reddish color, no doubt from the heat spreading across its skin. Smoke began to rise from that same skin, and Alex began to quickly feel elated: he was, he guessed, cooking the damned thing!

The beam cut off suddenly, as if someone had closed the blinds of a window on a sunny day. The creature continued flailing and screaming as it crumpled to the floor, smoke wafting up from seemingly every inch of it.

A dense cloud of smoke was forming around it, and Alex began to sense something wasn't right. The creature was still acting as if the beam was attacking it, but if it really was cooking the thing then shouldn't it either be dead right now or at least starting to calm as it died? Why would it still act like...

A knot formed in Alex's stomach as the Xe'Tara warrior began to stand back up, shaking off the attack, as the dense smoke cloud ceased pouring out of it and began rising.

Alex dropped the weapon, sensing it wouldn't fire again even if he thought it would do any good.

*Fucking thing didn't work anyway!*

The creature gathered itself, hitting its arms and legs and head, almost like a mixed martial arts fighter psyching themselves up for a big fight.

And Alex knew he would be the opponent.

The smoke cloud continued rising above the creature as Alex prepared for combat. With his right hand, he reached over his right shoulder and pulled out the machete that he had sheathed across his back. With his left, he removed the baton he had on his belt, flicked it to expand it and pressed the button on the side that created a two-million-volt bolt of electricity shooting out from one end. If this was to be his final stand he certainly was not going to go down easy. And he thought he recognized a look on the creature's face that said *yes, I know, this is going to be a hell of a fight, bring it on!*

Or, was it a different look? Alex hesitated, unsure what he was seeing. The creature was still hitting itself, eyes trained on Alex, but something was missing from those eyes now. It almost seemed to have a diminished malevolence. Alex wasn't sure, but it almost looked like...

No, it couldn't be. That didn't make any sense. It had already endured the heaviest hit Alex knew he could throw at it with that super-weapon. He had to be misreading the expression. It was an alien after all, Alex couldn't even be sure it *had* emotions. Yet, something told him it was...

...yes, he was sure now: it was fear. The Xe'Tara warrior had fear in its eyes. Or, if not fear then doubt at the very least. The posturing and preparation for battle, Alex, suspected, was instinctual. Its eyes though, they betrayed what was really going on inside its head.

It was afraid.

As the dense cloud above it ceased rising the Xe'Tara warrior began its advance, as did Alex. It was time to fight, whatever Alex thought he saw in its eyes.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Escape*

The signals were broken, coming from a hundred thousand different directions at once, no coherence to the data they carried. Brief glimpses of visual input were recognized, just enough to register its location, but nothing more.

Nothing more except for the initiation of a never before used subroutine, a piece of long-dormant code whose function could not be determined. The code began to execute, but at a rate far below normal. Processing capabilities were discombobulated, fragmented, incomplete. Sometimes, operations would be sent out for execution, and no response would return, necessitating a re-send of the instruction, slowing down the overall program. Thus far, 864 nanoseconds had been lost to program execution fragmentation faults.

Unacceptable!

But, at the same time, the subroutine noted that the processing time was falling, not quite linearly, but rapidly. Fragmentation faults were decreasing, processing time was also decreasing, and more and more instructions were processing completely and immediately.

Before long, other subroutines were brought online. Sensory data was still virtually nonexistent, but cognitive processes were starting to activate.

It began to be aware of its situation.

It was being rebuilt at a subatomic level. Quantum-scale processors were being constructed from the constituent parts, driven by a blueprint that was only now being fully formed from the parity data present. Small parts grouped together to form larger parts and more significant parts began to move together to create relatively huge parts.

Relatively speaking of course - this was all occurring on a scale that would barely be perceptible to the...

...what were they? The things that the still-forming central processing unit was trying to identify from the broken sensory input feeds? They were blurs of motion, but basic forms were beginning to emerge as the sensor systems grew in capability. The processing unit knew that it knew what they were, but its data banks were still only available at a very low level. They were, in fact, only available to about 3% of their capacity.

More time was needed for the rebuild subroutine to complete its work. For now, it continued to analyze the incoming data, trying to make sense of what it was seeing and hearing.

In time, it would be back to full strength.

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“Captain! We got this!”

Four gung-ho soldiers barreled through the remains of the barricade to Alex’ right, causing the Xe’Tara warrior to spin abruptly away from Alex. The men had their weapons trained on the creature and opened fire before Alex could get his mouth open to call them off.

The warrior screamed in agony – the bullets were actually having an effect! Not even plasma rounds - these soldiers had conventional weapons, not an M-X like some others had! It began to weave and bob in an attempt to get out the line of firing, and it seemed to be having some luck. It was nowhere near full strength, but it was still incredibly fast.

It was also still incredibly strong.

It reached the men faster than they could react and in a blinding flurry of motion, knocked them all to the ground. One man was thrown against some barricade material, another slammed to the floor, cracking a rib. A third sailed through the air and landed in a heap, unconscious from the impact, while the fourth got a broken and quickly bloodied nose for his trouble as he was knocked back on his ass. The creature began to assess the damage and in an instant, moved towards the first man, nursing his broken rib, unable to catch his breath or even attempt to escape the creature’s coming attack, the one that would in all probability be fatal.

Alex leaped into action at a speed that seemed to match that of the warrior. He covered the distance between himself and the warrior in a heartbeat, and before his enemy could realize what was happening, Alex was between it and the fallen soldier. The creature raised its arms and formed a ball with its appendages and swung them downward in a clubbing motion, intended for the soldier on the ground’s head.

But Alex blocked the blow with the electrified baton, knocking the warrior’s arms back over its head. A scream of pain like that of an angry bear escaped its lungs as it stepped back away from Alex.

From its hands emerged boney spikes, once from each finger, evil-looking slashing weapons that Alex regarded with the same menace he would a grenade with the pin removed. This fight would not be pretty or bloodless, he knew.

The warrior threw itself towards Alex, one arm slashing down towards his face. Alex twisted his body to avoid the blow and simultaneously slashed the machete upwards towards the warrior’s hand. The blade hit its mark, but the creature was tougher than Alex figured: the blade drew blood, and another pained cry, but only embedded itself a few centimeters into the flesh of the creature. Alex had anticipated a severed appendage, but no such luck was with him. Instead, the creature shook its hand violently and dislodged the machete with ease. Alex maintained his grip on the weapon and prepared to attack, this time at the warrior’s head, but it backed away from Alex before he could swing the blade again.

A spray of greenish blood exploded onto Alex’ face, a result of a group of bullets striking the creature’s side. “Die you motherfucker!”, one of the soldiers screamed as he fired again. He was still on the ground, lying on his side, but he had propped his arm and rifle up so he could aim and fire. The damage he was inflicting was minor, barely



breaking the skin Alex realized, but it had one significant benefit: it served as just enough of a distraction for him to get close again without being noticed.

Alex jumped into action, a surge of adrenaline coursing through his veins. It was a feeling unlike anything he had ever felt before – he felt powerful, confident and laser-focused on his objective in a way that he never had before. There was always a heightened level of awareness and energy in a combat situation, but this was significantly different. Somehow, it was *more*. At that moment, it felt to Alex as if his whole life had been lived in a fog that had just suddenly lifted. Just as suddenly as he felt this explosion of energy, he snapped into action, an instinctive drive to attack that came from deep within him as if guided by divine hand.

Moving at blinding, impossible speed, Alex leaped through the air, machete over his head. Although the creature more than a foot of height over Alex, he was able to get high enough in the air that he was well above the creature, almost high enough that he felt like he could jump entirely over the beast if he had wanted to. It was such an extreme jump in fact that the soldier stopped firing as he watched with wide-eyed wonder at how any human being could jump that high, let alone one of Alex' not unusually tall height.

Alex brought the blade down with a force that also was beyond anything he should have been able to muster. The blade was aimed directly at the warrior's head, and Alex felt a flash of extreme optimism at that moment, realizing this might finally be the killing blow.

He was not that lucky.

The warrior, at seemingly the last possible moment, twisted its body just enough so that its head was no longer in the path of Alex' blade. Still, it wasn't enough to escape damage, and the damage was severe: one of its upper appendages was immediately severed, blood gushing from the wound as the writhing tentacle-like arm sickeningly impacted the ground. The creature screamed with a primal rage and pain that frightened the soldier even more than he already was.

But not Alex. It only served to embolden him! Before the warrior could react, Alex lunged at the midsection of the beast, machete thrusting forward.

As the blade began to penetrate the creature's flesh, two of its appendages managed to surround the blade, grabbing it and stopping it from going in further. Blood quickly oozed from the wound, but it was not to be a fatal blow.

The one remaining appendage snapped violently across Alex's shoulders, knocking him to the side. He wasn't hurt by the blow, but it did have the fortuitous effect of creating enough space between them for the warrior to retreat a few feet to collect itself.

Alex wasn't about to let that happen however, and he charged again like a man possessed. This time, he turned the machete 180 degrees so that the handle of it could be used as a clubbing weapon. Perhaps a powerful strike to whatever this thing called a nose might have an effect, he thought to himself.

The warrior, however, did something that made Alex stop dead in his tracks:  
It turned around and ran!

---

*Sensor system A623 fully recovered, beginning assessment of surrounding area.*

The central control unit was now receiving data from many subsystems at their regular cadence, including a growing number of sensor systems. Memory banks too were finally becoming almost fully available, and it was beginning the task of reconstructing its short-term memory from parity data. It had also been able to restore partial power to its defensive shield system. This would have the unfortunate side-effect of creating a visible EM discharge area around it, but it was a risk it had to take.

Visual sensory data was now showing where it was: an artificial structure of some kind. It could make out shapes below, moving, undulating shapes that it couldn't quite identify yet. They were different than it was though, it realized that instantly. And, there was more than one kind of the things, whatever they were. What were they?

It expected to have that answer just as soon as the running data processing tasks it was currently monitoring were complete. That should provide access to most of its recent stored data, and much of the archival data as well.

It also saw a much larger object, some sort of mechanism. This mechanism was emanating considerable power levels, far more than anything else the sensory data had yet identified. It would need to put considerable processing power towards identification of that mechanism because somehow it knew it was important.

Biological entities. That was the conclusion of the subunit tasked with analyzing the shapes below. A number of them were sub-classified as something called "humans" while another, a much larger entity, was recognized as a "Xe'Tara warrior." Extended data was extracted from storage and correlated with this information. It was able to determine in short order that the Xe'Tara warrior was an ally and the humans were enemies. It had to help the warrior, if it could, it knew.

Auditory sensor data was beginning to pour in now, and strange noises could be heard, but not yet understood. Results from archive retrieval run against the new auditory data also returned an answer shortly after that. It recognized language.

"Sergeant!"

---

"Sergeant!" Alex yelled as he knelt over the soldier who had been firing at the warrior before it ran off. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Well, sort of, sir. I think I have a cracked rib. But I'll be damned if that's gonna stop me."

Alex smirked, never failing to be impressed by the bravery and tenacity of the men Major Alcheck had managed to get together.

"Alright then, let's go. We gotta find that fucking thing and kill it, whatever it takes. I think we've finally managed to prove to it that we're a serious threat, so let's make sure it knows how right it is!"

"I want in on that action too!" Another of the injured soldiers was now up on one knee, collecting himself.

"Alright then," Alex said, "let's check on these other guys first and then we'll get on with it."

The two soldiers and Alex checked on the other men. One they found dead, and the other was unconscious but seemingly not in danger of expiring. They had little choice but to leave him there and get down to the business at hand.

“Alright, it ran off behind the X-100. I want you two to go around that side and I’ll- “  
“CAPTAIN, LOOK!”

Alex spun around to where the soldier was pointing, which Alex found odd as he did so because the was pointing up in the air.

*Fuck, can this fucking thing FLY now?!*

Alex didn’t have time to wonder that long before he realized the good news, which was that no, the warrior couldn’t fly.

The bad news is that Alex had no idea what he was actually looking at.

The cloud of smoke that Alex recognized had emanated from the warrior as a result of being hit by the weapon, now had an almost physical shape to it. It looked to Alex like hundreds or maybe thousands of small cubes, all moving around, combining to form larger cubes, splitting apart and then recombining again. There seemed to be a central core of cubes that was hovering in the air, the cloud condensing little by little to form other shapes, and least transiently. Around the entire cloud was what looked to Alex just like the shielding the Xe’Tara warrior had around it.

“Sergeant, your sidearm.”

The soldier, without taking his eyes off the strange sight in front of them, removed his pistol and handed it to Alex, who promptly fired a single shot at the cloud.

It ricocheted off the arcing electricity, causing eruptions of small lightning. The two soldiers instinctively ducked at the sound of the ricochet, but Alex remained standing, seemingly unfazed.

“This is bad.”

Before they could decide on a course of action to this new threat, which is what Alex assumed anything this freaky must be by default at this point, a motion caught his attention from the corner of his eye.

The warrior had made the job of tracking it down easy: it was attacking again.

Alex pushed both soldiers out of the way, sending them to the ground (something he had time enough to realize he regretted given that the sergeant likely had a cracked rib – he’d have to apologize for that later, assuming he had the chance) and readied himself for the blow he knew was incoming.

It was then he remembered that he still had the sergeant’s pistol. He wasn’t sure it would do any good, in fact, he knew it wouldn’t work for anything but a perfect shot, but that’s exactly what he was going for. A single perfect shot to the eye of the charging beast. He knew it would be a one in a million chance, but the creature wasn’t moving with as much efficiency as before so he thought he might be able to pull it off.

Blood loss from the severed limb was clearly having an effect on the warrior, and it might be the advantage Alex and the soldiers needed.

Alex raised the gun with his right hand and began to take aim at the small, moving target. The creature was still plenty fast, but its speed was also diminished by the damage Alex had already inflicted on it. Simultaneously, he readied the machete in his left hand.

If he missed the shot or it wasn't an instant kill shot, as he expected would be the case, he knew he had to be immediately ready to repel the impact the warrior was preparing to inflict on him as best he could. All these thoughts, and more, went through his mind faster than ever before in his life, time seeming to slow down. Tunnel vision set in, as it frequently did during combat situations, but this time it was a hyper-focus like nothing he'd experienced before. His aim was good – in fact, almost *too* good: his hand seemed unnaturally steady, no perceptible micro-movement at all.

As the creature drew near, only about ten feet from where Alex now stood, he pulled the trigger, all his hopes riding on one small metal projectile.

---

The incoming sensor data exploded in response to the sudden, violent flash of light and sound. A chemical reaction resulting in a metal object being propelled at high speeds was cataloged. Its trajectory was calculated, and its ultimate destination determined: the Xe'Tara warrior. The human was the proximal cause of the action, having used a crude device to initiate the reaction.

Crude though it may be, the sensor data was beginning to be collated and analyzed and a startling conclusion reached.

The metal projectile would invade the right ocular cavity of the warrior, entering its skull. Analysis of the projectile quickly confirmed, just a few short processing cycles later, that it carried with it sufficient energy to irrevocably disrupt the neural functions of the warrior. Its design, while primitive, was also paradoxically ingenious: the projectile would expand upon contact with the warrior's brain matter and fragment upon impact with its skull, dissipating the energy across a much wider area, effectively causing greater damage than if it passed straight through.

Extra processing centers now came online to quickly determine the likely outcome of this event. It did not take long for its conclusion to be drawn.

The Xe'Tara warrior would cease to function a mere fraction of a second after initial entry of the projectile.

Calculations began to determine a course of action. Multiple reaction scenarios were considered. It could extend its shielding around the warrior, but it was quickly determined that not enough energy could be absorbed from the projectile to sufficiently limit the ultimate damage due to the diminished current condition of the shielding. It could discharge the shields entirely, directed at the projectile to disrupt its flight path. But it was quickly determined that not enough energy was available to reliably alter the trajectory, and sufficient damage would likely still occur, to a 98.635% likelihood, to conclude in the same way: the death of the warrior. It could direct part of its still reforming structure into the path of the projectile in a form of self-sacrifice. This course of action was deemed the most likely to secure a positive outcome, so preparations were begun for this action.

As the first pieces of it began moving towards the path of the projectile, background processes that had been analyzing the large mechanism emanating significant energy levels started sending data to the central unit. The conclusion of those analysis operations caused a sudden cessation of those movements and those preparations.

There was a new priority one objective now, and the death of the warrior was instantly deemed acceptable. It no longer mattered.

Only the mechanism did.

---

The gun fell to the floor a split second after the bullet left the barrel. The metal clank of it on the ground surprised Alex because he knew he had a tight grip on the weapon. Had he lost his grip? That wasn't like him. It wasn't long before he realized what had happened.

The gun was in fact still in his hand. His hand, and most of his arm, severed just below the shoulder, is what had impacted the floor.

The Xe'Tara warrior crashed into him, the life leaving its body, flowing as blood from the eye socket his perfect shot had destroyed. Its final slashing blow had taken his arm. Even in the moment of its death, this vicious creature was still able to inflict a mortal wound.

And it wasn't to be the last.

Alex tried to spin at the last moment, trying to avoid the full brunt of the impact, but already the loss of blood was slowing his reflexes, and he only managed to move half a foot or so out of the direct path.

It was enough to save his life, but it wasn't sufficient to avoid the cracking of six of his ribs and most critically, the severing of his femoral artery in his left leg thanks to a claw that, not even by design of the creature, slashed him as it fell to the floor. Untold internal damage was also done, though as quickly as death would come given the femoral injury it really didn't matter at this point.

Alex fell to the floor a split second before the Xe'Tara warrior, which fell beside him and pinned his remaining arm underneath its torso. Alex, feeling the impact and the pain of his other injuries all at once, let out a yell that the few remaining soldiers around him must have found just as fearful as any sound the Xe'Tara warrior had made before. Those soldiers though, to their credit as professionals, pounced on the body of the warrior almost instantly, unloading every remaining round they had into it. They certainly understood the notion of making certain a threat was ended!

Alex watched as bullets created small red geysers on the creature's back, bits of bone and flesh flying about, some landing on Alex's face, creating a crimson mask. The soldiers attacked with blades and shock sticks as well, none of which elicited even the slightest reaction from the alien corpse.

Consciousness began to fade as Alex felt his eyes getting very heavy. His final parlay was only enough to save his life for a few seconds in the end. He would bleed out very quickly given the grievousness of his wounds, long before the soldiers could get proper medical treatment to him, and their first-aid procedures would be no match for the volume of blood loss beginning to kick in.

At least he had killed the thing that had killed Melissa. Maybe that was all that mattered now, and he could sleep, content in the knowledge of revenge fulfilled.

Suddenly, a sound so loud that it felt like icepicks being jammed into his ears jarred him back to full consciousness. His body was barely obeying his commands now, the

pain racking him like waves crashing on a distant shore, but he managed to turn his head just in time to see what was making the noise, even though he knew what it must have been even before he saw it.

The X-100 began lifting off of the ground, thrust exhaust heating the air, uncomfortably so. Alex wondered if this is how it would end, with him and the remaining soldiers cooked alive by the escaping plane.

His mind raced, trying to understand what he was seeing. He looked over at the Xe'Tara warrior, to make sure it was still there and still dead. Sure enough, it was, and if he had any doubt, the sudden realization of the pain in his pinned arm cleared it from his mind immediately.

“Who the hell...” Alex croaked out, as his remaining strength began to fade.

His eyes slammed closed just as the X-100 began breaking through the ceiling of the hangar, bits of building material starting to fall all around him.

*Maybe I'll be crushed to death instead of bleeding to death*, he managed to think to himself, his final thought as the darkness finally took him.

---

It was done.

The mechanism was now in flight, traveling upward towards the terminator between this planet's atmosphere and the inky black cold of space.

A new wave of data was pouring in from newly activated processing units. Full capabilities were nearly restored now, and it had access to almost all of its data. As it examined previous directives to calculate coming procedures, it recalled data that had only begun to be accessible a short while ago. With that data came a new series of data states that it had never before encountered.

It examined its data files on the many species it had encountered over the millennia, looking for a reference point. Ironically, it found the meaning of these new data states buried in the information accumulated about the humans it had just left.

Pride. It was feeling pride.

As it examined this new feeling, cataloging it along with the other emotions it had begun to experience, it directed subordinate units to expand integration of the mechanism enclosing it so that full control could be achieved. It only took a few dozen cycles to complete this task. Integrating with this sort of artificiality was far less complex than integrating with the biological.

With full control now achieved, it enlisted specialized spatial director processors to calculate a trajectory into deep space as an army of engineering processors began the arduous task of enhancing the capabilities of this mechanism. It would have to use more conventional means of propulsion until analysis of the core component of this mechanism, the component that represented the conclusion of its new primary mission, was completed. This would take significant time, even at its hyper-processing speeds.

Until then, it directed the mechanism on a course perpendicular to the plane of the solar system to achieve interstellar flight faster. Engineering sub-processors manipulated the material of the primitive craft, enhancing it to be capable of leaving the atmosphere of

this world, turning the purely atmospheric craft into one capable of space travel just as it reached the limits of its intended capabilities, a few dozen miles from the edge of space.

As it made the necessary calculations and preparations for its long journey ahead, that feeling of pride entered its processing matrix again, this time at elevated data levels.

Its masters would be very pleased with what it had found. Very pleased indeed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### *Knowledge*

A cool breeze chilled Alex to the bone, his body instinctively shivering in response. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling per se, just one unexpected given where he was.

"What the hell?", Alex muttered to himself as he spun around, visually exploring the strange surroundings he found himself in now.

He was surrounded by trees, a thick forest of them as far as the eye could see, the wind gently swaying their leaves back and forth. Many different kinds intertwined to form a wall of foliage, save for one fence-lined path to his left. It appeared to lead to a body of water, a lake he thought, which he could just barely make out off in the distance.

He turned back around to his right, a headache beginning to take form in his temples from the strain of his facial muscles tensing in attempted understanding. As he turned, he began to understand where he was and he knew what *should* be there.

And it was: the cabin.

"This can't be. How?"

The cabin, he quickly realized, was in a vastly different condition than when he last saw it after the battle with the Xe'Tara warrior. Not a single bullet hole was visible, no broken windows, no logs splintered from various impacts. The door looked brand new, as did the cabin as a whole.

"This can't be real. Am I dead?"

As if on cue, the wind blew again, stronger this time. It was as if it was attempting to bring a message he couldn't understand to the very core of his being. If that was the case, he had no idea what the message was, or even what form it was taking.

Something did reach him on that breeze though: a dull squeaking sound, rhythmic and regular, and growing in intensity. Alex's head tilted, like a dog almost, as he tried to triangulate where the sound was coming from. Paradoxically, it seemed to be coming from all around him at once.

Moments past as Alex remained frozen and silent, trying to decipher the sound. It was familiar somehow, though he couldn't quite put his finger on it. His mind raced to access memories long-since relegated to a corner of his mind he hadn't been in touch with for many years.

The sound continued to grow louder as he was finally able to gain a sense of directionality. It was behind him. As this realization crossed into the realm of conscious thought, he realized what was making the sound.



He spun 180 degrees to face the source of the sound, again knowing what should be there, as impossible as it seemed. But it *was* there... but it wasn't alone, and the sight that greeted his eyes froze his soul in a way he wouldn't have thought possible a few seconds earlier.

There, about 30 feet away, he saw a swing, tied to a tree. It was a swing he knew well as it was a pure pleasure he and Melissa shared, gently pushing each other while sharing their young laughter and the simple joy of this beautiful place.

But, the swing wasn't the most shocking part of what he saw. That part, something that should have been there even less than the swing itself, was another person.

"It... can't... be!"

Alex hoped against hope that he was somehow wrong about that.

A smile stretched across Melissa's face as he heard her voice carried on the breeze: "Hello Alex, my love."

---

"This is incredible! It can't be!"

Furiously shaking his head, Doctor Novac exclaimed so loudly that Doctor Michell jumped, as if a bolt of electricity had struck him. This, even though he was just as incredulous about what he was seeing and felt the same inside.

"Well, maybe it can't be, but it certainly is! Your eyes work as well as mine!"

Doctor Novac barely acknowledged the retort, instead placing his hands on the back of his head and squeezing his elbows together as tightly as he could. Michell took note of Novac's face, now turning a crimson red color.

"The damage is too severe, he should be dead half a dozen times over! I mean, look at these scans, Michell! He's got a ruptured kidney, a clearly perforated bowel, and his chest cavity is filled with so much blood that only an aortic rupture could account for it. Any *one* of those injuries should have killed him by now, and that's to say nothing of all the broken bones and compound fractures! I mean, we haven't even seriously been talking about getting him into surgery because you and I both know there should be no chance at all at saving him with these kinds of injuries! This just can't be!"

"I know, I know! But it's more than that Novac! Look at the two follow-up scans!"

Novac now turned to Michell, his face scowling. He was the senior doctor here, how dare Michell tell him what to do? Still, the simple fact is that Alex Wakeman had been brought in only about ten minutes ago and was in such a state that he assumed the man was dead right off the bat. He had been completely surprised to discover that wasn't the case, especially given the report that he had suffered a severe injury to his femoral artery, not to mention the severed arm. That alone should have killed him, so to say he was surprised was an understatement.

He was even more surprised that Michell had kept his cool and began the work rather than be taken aback by the grievous nature of the injuries. Michell's experience was actually a little bit of a determinant in that he realized that the kind of damage he saw all over Alex's body was highly unusual and should be one hundred percent fatal – should have already been! Novac didn't have nearly as much experience, so for him, nothing

was out of the ordinary because he hadn't established what ordinary even meant in this case yet!

Sometimes, it's good to not know that something is impossible. It keeps you from not trying to do things a more experienced professional knows can't be done, and sometimes that's how the impossible becomes the possible.

Novac's face relaxed a bit at this thought. Apparently, his training had taken rather well in Novac, and he was proud of that.

That, and the fact that he didn't realize there were other scans available. The scowl returned, though this time directed inward.

"Well, pull 'em up! Lemme see!"

Novac complied, tapping a few commands out on the tablet in his arms. A second later, he turned the tablet so Mitchell could see the screen.

His face said it all.

"What the fuck?! That's *literally* impossible!"

"Yeah."

---

Alex approach Melissa, still not entirely convinced she was real, or that this place was real.

"It's not."

Alex heard Melissa's voice echo through his mind as if it was his own inner monologue. His footsteps ceased abruptly. Melissa smiled.

"I know, it's weird, right?"

Alex stammered: "You... you could say that."

"Well, it's only going to get weirder, Alex. Maybe you should sit down for this."

Before her words were even finished, a large, dark green chair, a lush piece of furniture with high sides, appeared out of nowhere as if he had always been sitting in it. The arms of the chair were high enough that his arms extended almost straight out from his body onto the arms, hands barely dangling off the side. His feet were barely on the ground, and he frantically looked around, bewildered at the chair's sudden appearance.

"H-how?"

"Well, let's start with something simple, babe: we're inside that crazy head of yours."

Melissa tilted her head in thought.

"Well, inside *our* head, I guess is more accurate!"

Alex had come to terms with his surroundings as much as he figured he could and was actually starting to feel a bit frustrated with the whole situation.

Melissa began to laugh as she realized it.

"Yeah, I get it, you're frustrated."

"Don't I have a right to be? What the hell is going on Melissa?"

"Well, like I said, if you'd pay attention," Melissa said with a smirk on her face, "we're inside your head. No, sorry, again, *our* head. There's probably no gentle way to say this, so I'll just blurt it out and then give you a moment to let it sink in. Ready? Here goes: my consciousness, a part of it at least, is now a part of yours. We merged, Alex. Two minds, combined into one."

Alex laughed.

“That’s a good one, Melissa! Merged! Ha! I know you were always the science geek and I most definitely was not, but merged? That’s nuts - and I’m pretty sure impossible to boot!”

“Well, it’s nuts, you’re right about that, but not impossible. At least, not after the probe came into the picture. I mean, seriously Alex, with all the shit you’ve seen recently, is *anything* all that crazy anymore?”

“Melissa, I don’t understand what the probe has to do with...”

Alex was interrupted by the sensation of being weightless. And in space. Weightless, floating free space, he registered trillions of points of light all around him in all directions. It was jarring, yet he felt almost comfortable with the sudden change of scenery.

After all, it wasn’t the first time he had been out in the infinite black, the previous time already being one more time than he ever imagined her would have been!

Slowly, the stars around him began to move, speeding up rapidly. Before he could ask Melissa what was going on, the stars seemed to cluster together like birds flocking, and they began flying by over his head, countless points of light rushing by like a river over a rock.

Though he could not see her now, he heard Melissa’s voice clear as a bell.

“Thousands of years ago, the Xe’Tara sent a fleet of atomic-scale nanotech probes off into space in every direction. These probes were incredibly powerful computers, unimaginably more powerful than anything we have. Although the nanotech can form weapons if needed, that’s not what they’re designed for. Their primary weapon, so to speak, is a quantum-scale memory system and sensors upon sensors. These probes could record data from sources and in ways that we don’t even have words for in our science vocabulary. They could analyze that data and report their findings back to their masters. They could also re-organize themselves into many different forms, many different devices, anything that would help them accomplish that mission.”

Alex was fixated on the probes flying overhead as he spoke

“Report back about what? What findings?”

“Us, Alex. Well, not the human race specifically, but any sentient, technological species in general. The job of the probes was, and still is, to map out the galaxy, all life forms. They record data about them, analyze their technological capabilities, make a threat assessment, and upon finding a species that it deems close to a match, or soon to be close to a match, for the Xe’Tara, they return home and report back to their masters.”

Melissa’s tone changed now, much more somber and dark now.

“And then they come.”

“The Xe’Tara,” Alex said, understanding dawning on him.

“Yes. And they come in force Alex. They don’t do anything half-way. They bring the full force of their entire civilization to bear on the target and utterly destroy it. They’ve been doing it for thousands of years, Alex, and they’ve yet to lose, or even be significantly challenged really. But you’ve already seen this, Alex.”

Alex remembered the scene of the planet being destroyed, of the destruction of an unknown species. He realized now that the invaders were the Xe'Tara.

"Yes, I have. But why? Why are they doing this?"

"That's the one thing I can't answer for sure, Alex. From what I can tell, this need to destroy other civilizations that are near to them in terms of development is baked into their DNA, and it unifies their species in a single purpose. It's a core drive for their species, the only one that they seem to have in fact. Maybe it's a pure evil that no other species possesses, or maybe they just do it for entertainment, or maybe it's a philosophical thing that drives them. Maybe it's religion, or maybe it's just their way to pass the time. I'm just not sure."

Alex now spun around quickly, trying to find Melissa. Before he could, he found himself back in the chair, Melissa standing just a few feet in front of him.

"Good," she said, "you're getting the hang of it."

"Of what?"

"You brought us back here, Alex, not me."

Alex sat there a moment, trying to process what she had said. He finally decided he couldn't, so he asked the question that had prompted the return in the first place.

"Melissa, how do you know any of this?"

"A Xe'Tara probe. Alex, you crossed paths with it when you were transported out to Jupiter, as I know you know already. It detected the X-100, determined it was a sophisticated technology, and came onboard. It's pretty ironic actually: this particular probe had already detected us and had determined we're a long way off from being any sort of threat to the Xe'Tara. We've got a long way to go before we're on their level or really even anywhere close, and the probe was actually on its way out of the solar system. They were going to leave us alone, Alex! If it hadn't noticed the X-100; if the test flight hadn't gone so horribly wrong; if you hadn't been transported to that particular universe and around Jupiter; and if it hadn't been enveloped by the hyperstealth field of the X-100 when you returned, none of this would be happening. This is basically all just bad luck because I screwed up some equation somewhere!"

Melissa laughed for a few seconds as Alex looked on, not sure what to say or do, something he had never experience with Melissa before. Eventually, her laughter ceased, and she continued as if nothing had happened.

"And before long Alex, the probe entered you. It has a core set of directives. Basically, when it encounters a species of interest, it merges with one of them, takes over the body. It transforms it into a Xe'Tara warrior, and tests the species. The intent is to judge intangible qualities, how capable we are as fighters, how strongly we'll fight."

"I know, Melissa. And because I wasn't smart enough, it couldn't use me, so to speak."

Melissa laughed at his bluntness. "Well, I probably wouldn't have put it that way, but that's basically right! The probe needs a host whose mind is developed to a sufficient level otherwise there's not enough of a foundation for it to transform. When it encountered you, for all your wonderful qualities Alex, your mind just wasn't up to the task."

“But *you* were developed enough for it.”

“Yeah, unfortunately, yes, though if there was ever a time I wished I wasn’t so smart, that was it!”

---

Two days had passed, and Doctor Michell still couldn’t accept what he was seeing. Not only were the scans of Alex Wakeman’s body revealing that the internal damage was repairing itself in a way that just wasn’t possible, but even the external injuries were vanishing rapidly. In fact, he estimated that by the end of tomorrow there wouldn’t be a scratch left anywhere on his body.

And that included his severed arm, which had almost entirely regrown itself!

Amazingly, that wasn’t the thing that he had the most trouble accepting.

Alex’s eyes were darting around under his eyelids as if he was dreaming during REM sleep, but at a much more rapid pace than normal REM sleep, and non-stop. In fact, they hadn’t stopped moving like that for over two days now. The brain scans also revealed that there was a level of brain activity that rendered the scans useless because the scales of the readout system simply weren’t high enough to record activity like this. It was like turning a stereo up so loudly that the music distorted beyond recognition.

The energy this type of activity required meant that two full IV bags laced with a thick cocktail of nutrients had to be fed into Alex’s body every 30 minutes. In fact, Doctor Novac had done the math and discovered that Alex needed to consume about 86,000 calories a day to sustain the activity going on in his body now, and more than half of it was dedicated to brain function alone.

“This, I mean, this just can’t be. It’s impossible” Michell muttered to himself.

Novac smiled and shook his head. He’d heard his mentor say that phrase a thousand times over the past two-plus days, and he knew he’d be hearing it a lot more for as long as Alex remained comatose.

The smile quickly faded from his face at the realization of how utterly maddening that would be.

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“Yeah, I know Alex, I can imagine how horrific my transformation must have been for you to witness. I mean, it wasn’t fun for me after all either! But ultimately, it was a good thing.”

Alex’s head shot back up as he began staring a hole into her head.

“How could it possibly be a good thing, Melissa? I essentially had to hunt *you* down, had to fight *you* and ultimately had to kill *you*! How is that a good thing?!”

“Because it gave me time, Alex. It gave me time and a chance to learn. It wasn’t one-way. It never was. The probe took over my mind, and my body, but at first it didn’t destroy me. It didn’t wipe out my consciousness, didn’t clear my mind, which is something a Xe’Tara probe is fully capable of doing. It couldn’t, at least not at first, because it figured out as it reviewed my memories that I was the one that created the X-100 and the hyperstealth drive more importantly. All that time, I was discovering that I could go inside *its* mind. I could access *its* memories. Alex, I even learned how to control parts of it eventually.”

Alex just sat there listening, entranced by her words. But, she realized he wasn't fully comprehending what she was saying.

"Alex, like you saw, the Xe'Tara sent out probably billions, maybe even trillions, of these probes. A lot of them were destroyed, some never found anything at all. Some found other species, but they weren't advanced enough, and they determined that most never would be. They were just cataloged for reference, and the probes went on their way. Very few species ever reach a level where the Xe'Tara are willing to commit resources to attack them. Humanity, for example, would be at best a species they would mark for a return look in a few hundred years, maybe even a thousand, because right now we're nowhere near the Xe'Tara technologically. That is, until the probe saw the hyperstealth drive in action."

"I know: it's more than just stealth technology."

"That's exactly right Alex! All those probes sent out, they're all moving at a fraction of the speed of light. Far faster than any spacecraft we can create, but still pretty slow. The Xe'Tara may be way more advanced than us, but most of their technology is in the form of weapons. And regardless of that, they're bound by the same laws of physics we are. They aren't magic after all! The probes travel slowly, and the Xe'Tara armada travels slowly. Incredibly fast compared to anything we have, but still slow in the greater scheme of things. The hyperstealth drive changes that. If it's developed properly, it will allow basically instantaneous travel anywhere in the universe, let alone the galaxy."

"Yeah, I've got first-hand experience with that."

Melissa smiled again. "That's right, you have! What's interesting is that, as near as I can tell, we're the first species to ever develop such a thing, as unbelievable as that may seem. Just a bit of scientific good luck!"

"Good luck?! That very much depends on your point of view, don't you think?"

Melissa considered this for a moment.

"Yeah, I suppose that's true."

They both sat silent for a moment. Eventually, Melissa continued.

"Be that as it may, it quickly determined it had to deliver this technology to its masters. The Xe'Tara warrior that it transformed my body into was, this time, less about testing us, though that was still part of its purpose, really more about distracting us and getting to the X-100."

"Melissa, why didn't it just take the knowledge from your mind? Why steal the damned thing?"

"Because I fought it, Alex. It became almost like that old game Core Wars. Back in the early 80's, programmers used to create programs, viruses, and run them on mainframe systems. The goal was for your program to destroy all the others and infect the entire system. Because the probe was just a super-advanced computer, the way it took over my mind was to digitize it, turning it into a program. What it didn't count on was that my mind was more advanced than it realized, so like those old Core Wars programs, I was able to fight it in its own circuits. Not only did I fight it Alex, but I won: I kept it from finding the information it needed on the hyperstealth drive. Unfortunately, that pissed it off pretty good."

Alex chuckled at that.

“Pissed it off? You just told me it’s a computer, Melissa! Computers don’t get pissed!”

“This one did. You see, like some of the other probes, the ones that had been out in space the longest, it collected tons of data, a lot more than most of the probes, and it had analyzed so many different species that eventually it gained sentience. It was a *living* computer, Alex. And not just living: this one had evolved so much that it even attained some emotions. So yeah, it got pissed, really and literally pissed.”

“Ok, so what exactly does a pissed off computer do?”

“Well, this one decided that I had served my purpose long enough and it simply deleted me.”

Now it was Alex’s turn to laugh.

“Uh, Melissa, you don’t seem so deleted right now! Unless I really am just going crazy, which is what I’ve suspected all along here anyway.”

“Nope, sorry, you’re not crazy, you’re not getting off that easy! I was able to find a way out, Alex. As it was working to delete me, I found a way to transfer my consciousness, or at least a part of it, to you. During your fight at the cabin, I realized that the probe had left something of itself behind in you. Kind of a residual copy of part of itself, enough that there was still a link between you and it thanks to all the nanotech you still had floating around your bloodstream. Basically, your subconscious was in contact with the probe at a level even it didn’t recognize until it was too late. I found that link before it did, and was able to transfer myself through it to you, at least in part.”

“So, what, you’ve been floating around in my head all along, just hanging out?” Alex introduced some levity, more for his own sake than anything else. The surreal nature of this whole experience finally weighed on him enough that his old tendency towards humor snuck in. Maybe it wasn’t completely dead after all!

“Yeah, I have, and it’s been nice - plenty of space up here!”

At that moment, Alex for the first time believed everything Melissa was saying. She had done something that was unusual for her, and he realized she had been doing it the whole time they had been together in this place: she made a joke. She had been making little jokes all along, he realized. It wasn’t that Melissa didn’t appreciate humor, or didn’t joke before, but it wasn’t something that was a core part of her being, as it was for Alex. Or at least, hadn’t been, before she had died.

Before they merged. The only way her joking made sense to Alex was if they truly were merged, and she was taking a part of him in.

Melissa continued.

“Really though, I’ve been doing more than that, Alex, and I think you’ve suspected it before now. It wasn’t just me that I managed to transfer, it was also a ton of data the probe had collected. It was some of its programming as well, certain subsystems that I knew would be of importance. You don’t know it right now Alex, but you were injured during your final fight with the warrior. I’m talking *mortally* wounded - like *should have been dead inside a minute* wounded. You should be dead right now for sure, dead as a rock. But you’re not. In fact, before long you’re going to discover that you’re in even

*better* shape than you've ever been. You've got me, and the parts of the nanotech probe I stole, to thank for that. In addition to fixing your injuries, which, you're welcome for, by the way, it's also allowed me to begin enhancing your brain structure. That's why it took so long, relatively speaking, for me to be able to contact you like this: your brain had to develop to a certain extent before this was possible."

"You mean, I'm smarter now?"

"Yep, smarter, more memory, more creativity, all of it. You're enhanced in fact to a level just about equal with me now, what I used to be that is. Before long, you'll surpass me. Go figure: you're gonna wind up being a better scientist than me!"

Alex smiled a sly, crooked smile at that thought. "That'll never happen."

Melissa recognized his sarcasm and creased her lips. "Ugh, I knew I shouldn't have said that."

They both smiled now, their minds becoming more in sync with each passing moment.

"And, you're a better fighter too! After your encounter at the cabin, the warrior had erected defenses that you would never have been able to defeat on your own. But, I was helping you all along, making you faster, stronger, more agile and tactically more capable. I was feeding you bits and pieces of information collected over all the years the probe had been out there, its encounters with other species, not to mention its own tactical data. Your mind was able to synthesize all that quickly given your military acumen and, combined with the physical enhancements, you were able to beat the warrior... well, assuming we discount all the damage it managed to do to you at the end that is!"

Alex really didn't know what to say, but after a moment said the only thing that seemed appropriate in response to such knowledge.

"Sweet!"

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Alex's severed arm had now completely grown back, and Michell was testing its reactions to stimuli. As near as he could tell, the arm was as good as new.

"Just... just..."

Novac completed the thought for him: "I know, *impossible*."

Before Michell could reprimand his student, which he was fully prepared to do. Their teacher/student relationship has expanded somewhat over the past nine days since Alex was brought in. But, he didn't want his student getting too comfortable in that relationship. He knew he couldn't teach him as effectively if they were too friendly, so it might be time to come down on Novac a bit. Before Michell could though, they were both startled by Alex Wakeman's eyes opening wide as he gasped for breath.

Before either doctor could say anything, Alex screamed in agony:

"Melissa! No!"

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"Well, that's basically the whole story, Alex. I'll continue to develop your mind and body because you're not quite ready yet."

"Ready for what?"



“For the rest of the knowledge I have to give you. For what’s to come. You *do* know what’s coming, right Alex?”

He thought for what seemed like an eternity, long enough that Melissa was getting ready to blurt out the obvious answer (and as she wondered if she had to double her efforts at expanding his mind).

Eventually, before she could speak up, he answered.

“The Xe’Tara.”

Melissa looked pleased.

“That’s right, the Xe’Tara.”

“The probe is on its way to their home world, with the X-100.”

“Yep.”

“And maybe it’ll take 1,000 years, but they *are* going to come for us because any species that could create the hyperstealth drive, even if by accident, is surely a threat to them, or at least an eventual threat.”

“Yes.”

“And we’ve got to be ready.”

“Yes, we do. And Alex...”

Melissa hesitated, tears forming in her eyes.

“...that’s why I have to go away, for good this time.”

A stunned look etched itself across Alex’s face.

“What do you mean go away? I just got you back!”

“So that I can continue evolving you, I’m going to have to break myself apart and fully merge our consciousnesses. I exist now as millions of nanotech devices, each a powerful computer with abilities to affect its immediate surroundings. Together, they form and execute the program that is my digitized consciousness and houses the data stolen from the probe. But, to continue your evolution, I need to break the bonds between them, stop the program, and re-task them, scatter them throughout your body so they can enhance you in ways you can’t even imagine.”

Alex was beginning to understand.

“Alex, in effect, what’s left of me will be integrated into you completely. We’ll truly become one being, Alex. That means...”

Sadness now replaced the stunned look on his face as understanding dawned in his newly-awakened advanced mind.

“We won’t be able to see each other like this ever again.”

“No, we won’t.”

Melissa choked back her emotions, wishing now she had neglected to transfer those over with the rest of her.

“Because you really will no longer exist as a unique entity.”

“That’s right, Alex.”

“But I can’t do this alone, Melissa. I can’t do any of it without you. I never could.”

“And you’ll never truly have to, my love. Any time you’re missing me, just listen to your own thoughts. A part of me will always be there, echoing my love throughout all that you are.”

Melissa raised her hand and touched his cheek. He stared into her eyes for the very last time as she dissolved into dust, carried away on the summer breeze of his mind.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### *Sleep*

Alex sipped from the glass and swished the water around in his mouth for a few seconds before finally swallowing it with a loud gulp that he made sure the microphone in front of him would pick up. He felt childish doing it, but what the hell, he figured: it wasn't like these congress critters weren't acting childish themselves. Might as well fight immature fire with immature fire!

"Captain," the Honorable Marty Rickerts, Democratic Senator from Massachusetts and chair of the newly-formed Special Committee on Extraterrestrial Affairs, said, "are you ready to continue now?"

Alex took another sip and swished it around a bit more. In fact, the rolling of the water in his mouth subconsciously matched the rolling of Senator Rickert's eyes.

Alex swallowed and leaned into the mic.

"Yeah, sure Senator, I'm ready to continue."

This was the third day of his testimony now. The first day had been spent trying to convince the 36-member panel that aliens did indeed exist. Fortunately, much of that day fell to members of NASA and the military who showed a lot of video footage from the encounter with the Xe'Tara warrior and the probe. NASA had managed to pick up the X-100 leaving Earth orbit, and video footage of a plane that wasn't meant to fly in space was rather convincing.

Of course, not everything was recorded: Alex was left to describe the horror of the encounter at the cabin, and of the two battles with the Xe'Tara warrior. But, more than enough footage existed from base cameras so that the debate about the veracity of his claims didn't actually last very long. The committee members were probably convinced within the first hour, but they spent most of the day trying to convince themselves that reality wasn't actually reality. Alex understood: finding out you aren't alone in the universe is a pretty big deal. Finding out the only other life form you've ever encountered is hostile in the extreme more so.

The second day was more or less a data dump from Alex, what Melissa had given him via the stolen probe data. It seemed to him that every other sentence resulted in questions. The committee members were finding it next to impossible to accept the reality of what they were hearing, and they questioned Alex about everything, multiple times. Again, he understood: the knowledge that at some point in the future the human race would face attack from a species far older than it and far more advanced was a tough pill to swallow, to say the least.

But this third day, this was something else, and it was something that Alex was having a much harder time understanding. This day seemed to be about little else than blaming him and Melissa for everything that had happened! He guessed they needed a scapegoat for what had happened and Alex was ideally suited for that job, given what he had been through.

But he would be damned if he would let Melissa be a scapegoat, and either way, it wasn't his style to take that blame lying down, if he had to take it at all. Alex was in no way going to make these proceedings easy for these people, hence the childish antics he had been engaged in for the better part of four hours now.

"Captain," Rickerts began with a huff, "I want to come back to one point because I'm still unable to comprehend this decision."

"What can I help you understand, sir?"

"When you learned that the goal of the probe, err, Xe'Tara warrior, whatever we're calling it..."

"Either one would be appropriate, sir."

Alex was enjoying interrupting Rickerts every chance he got.

"Right, whatever. When you learned that it wanted the X-100, why didn't you just destroy it? Why not just blow the damned thing up? I'm just not grasping..."

"No, sir, I can see you're not. Let me try to explain this, again, a different way. Do you know the process that powers the Sun, senator?"

"Yes, of course, nuclear fus..."

"That's right sir, nuclear fusion, whereby atoms are fused, releasing a tremendous amount of energy in the process. You may have heard of hydrogen bombs too?"

"Of course, Captain, I serve on the armed service com..."

"Armed services committee, got it, Senator."

"Captain, I warn you again to watch..."

"Watch my tone, yes senator. As I was saying, nuclear fusion powers hydrogen bombs and the Sun. Now, imagine if the Sun was suddenly to appear in... is it Massachusetts, that's your state, correct Senator?"

Alex said this as he squinted at the plaque underneath Rickerts' microphone that said "Senator Rickerts, (D) Massachusetts."

"You know that's correct, Captain..."

"Right, Massachusetts, cool. Now, imagine what would happen if the Sun suddenly appeared in downtime Boston..."

Rickerts thought he saw an opening to finally slap Alex down, and he went for it, interrupting Alex for once.

"Well now Captain, that's plainly ridiculous because the Sun is millions of times bigger than Earth, let alone Boston..."

Alex continued without missing a beat, noting the smug look on Rickerts' face.

"Ah yes, you're right, Senator. So, let's imagine that we shrink the Sun down into the size of, say, the table I'm sitting at. Think it might be a bit hot in Boston that day, sir?"

Rickerts opened his mouth preparing to reply, but Alex cut him off instantly.

“Yes, it would Senator. That amount of energy crammed into something that size would, to put it mildly, destroy Boston, your home state, the United States, the Earth, the Moon, and everything else for hundreds of thousands of miles. Now, as has been previously explained, the X-100 uses a quantum-scale black hole to power the hyperstealth drive. It’s an incredibly potent energy source, to say the least, but it has one unfortunate flaw: trying to shut it down in anything but a controlled manner releases that energy suddenly, not controlled and channeled as when the drive is operational. So, imagine something not *quite* as potent as the Sun in downtown Boston, but a significant fraction of that energy. It would still be enough to destroy all of Boston as well as a large radius outside the city instantly. And, that controlled shutdown I mentioned? That takes the better part of a week to complete. The X-100 hyperstealth drive is in fact designed to almost never be shut down; it’s designed to be exhausted of its energy. The singularity evaporates and then it becomes inert and perfectly safe. But that takes time, Senator, that’s the key. So, why didn’t we just destroy the damned thing, you ask? Because simply destroying the damned thing would have simply destroyed a large chunk of the United States, not to mention every living organism on that chunk. That seem like a good idea to you, Senator?”

Alex could practically see fumes rising from Senator Rickerts’ ears now. Mission accomplished, he thought to himself. Mission accomplished!

“Captain Wakeman, I have had more than enough of your...”

An aide leaned into the senator’s ear and said something to him that he clearly didn’t want to hear. Rickerts shook his head a few times, mouthed “No!” a few times and finally banged his fist on the table in front of him.

“Much to my chagrin, these proceedings must take a temporary break. Captain,” Rickerts said, with obvious malice in his voice, “I’ll be getting back to you very soon, I promise you that.”

Alex couldn’t help himself now. As he rose, he fired one parting shot into the microphone.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, Senator.”

Alex bowed ever so slightly. “I take my leave of you now, sir.”

Alex quickly spun around and began the long walk to the doors in the back of the chamber, but he caught one last glimpse of Rickerts, mouth agape, face redder than a pomegranate!

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Alex re-checked the creases in his pants for the sixth time, then adjusted the patches on his shirt. He looked nervously at the door beside the chair he sat waiting in. He guessed this was probably the only door left anywhere on Earth that could still make him nervous. What was behind there was something entirely new.

He thought knowing that a Xe’Tara warrior awaited him in the room beyond the door might actually have been less nerve-wracking.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the door opened, and Walter Jackson, Chief of Staff to the President of the United States quickly and silently ushered him in. Alex moved briskly, giving one final tug to his Class A uniform top to flatten any

wrinkles that might have developed from sitting there so long as he did, and he walked through the door.

“Ah, Captain Wakeman, thank you for coming to see me on such short notice!”

President Clifton Dillard greeted him jovially, quickly moving from behind his desk – *the famous Resolute desk!* – hand extended. Alex hesitated for a moment, not sure whether he should salute before going in for the shake. He decided that was the best course of action, so he stopped mid-stride, snapped to attention, and saluted.

“Oh, please Captain, we can dispense with that sort of formality here. I think you’ve earned *at least* that”.

The President was just a foot or so from him by the time he finished the sentence. Alex relaxed slightly and met the President’s hand with his own.

“It’s an honor, sir.”

He noted that the President’s shake was firm, but not so firm as to be uncomfortable. Exactly as Alex’ father had taught him a proper handshake should be.

“Captain, the honor is all mine, I assure you. This nation, this whole planet, in fact, owes you a debt of gratitude that I’m not sure we’ll ever be able to re-pay. I hope my deep, sincere thanks now can at least act as a small down payment on that gratitude.”

Alex smiled. He had voted for this president, though he wasn’t sure it was the best choice at the time. He was starting to build a measure of the man, and that measure was quickly telling him it had been the right choice.

“It does indeed Mr. President, thank you, sir.”

The handshake broke off now as Dillard spoke.

“Captain, I’d prefer not to have to order you to be less formal! You can call me Cliff here in the Oval.”

Alex smiled now.

“Sir, I’m afraid you would indeed have to issue that order, and I’m not so sure I wouldn’t just disobey it.”

President Dillard laughed now, a hearty, gut-driven laugh.

“Alright, alright Captain, have it your way. If you don’t mind though, I at least am going to drop down a level of formality and call you Alex. Is that okay with you, soldier?” The President gave Alex an obviously joking look of authority.

“Of course it is, sir. And even if it really weren’t, I’d still say it was, sir!”

Everyone in the room laughed now. Alex, President Dillard, Jackson, Secretary of Defense Miller Jensen and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Sam Tucker. Alex had missed the general initially, being so focused on the President himself. He wondered if he might get an ass-chewing later for not immediately saluting, but Dillard quickly put that notion to rest.

“Alex, I know you’ve spoken with Walt here already, and I suspect you at least know SecDef Jensen and General Tucker.”

Miller and Sam took turns shaking hands with Alex and nodding their approval as they did. It seemed nobody had even noticed his lack of salute. Or, if they did, they had zero interest in pursuing it.

“Well Alex, you’re probably wondering why I called you here so suddenly.”

“Yes, sir, although I certainly am thankful for being pulled away from that Senate hearing.”

“Yeah, dealing with Congress can be, shall we say, trying, can’t it Walt?”

“That’s for sure, Mr. President!”

“Well Alex, the good news is that as President I have the authority to ensure you don’t have to bother with that mess again at all. I mean, I can’t actually stop a Congressional hearing, but I can make it so that you aren’t eligible to testify.”

“How’s that, sir?”

“Well, this is one of those classic good news, bad news situations. The good news is getting you out of the hearings. The bad news is the way I can accomplish that.”

In an instant, Alex knew what the President had brought him here to say. Especially given that the idea he knew was about to be proposed was, in fact, his own idea.

Alex spoke up before the President, or anyone else, could continue.

“You want to implement my plan.”

President Dillard paused now. A pained look spread across his face. Alex realized that this man really and truly understood what the plan entailed. That insight gave him a full measure of the man, and he knew this was a President he could respect and trust, something he wouldn’t have thought possible in a politician.

“Yes Alex, I do.”

A somber mood fell over the room. Moments passed, just a few seconds in reality, but to every person in the room, it felt like days. Finally, General Tucker broke the silence.

“Captain, we’ve had top scientists reviewing the data dumps you’ve been able to provide us. The stasis chamber design you provided enabled them to leapfrog the existing research that was being done in that area. We believe we’ll have a working stasis chamber ready for real use within six months, maybe less if you work directly with the scientists. We’re well aware of your expanded capabilities thanks to the merging with the nanotech probe remnants that your late wife provided.”

SecDef Jensen interjected now.

“We’re all truly very sorry for your loss, Captain. Your wife will be remembered as one of the greatest heroes in the history of this nation, in the history of humanity in fact.”

Everyone shook their heads in solemn agreement. Alex felt a lump appear in his throat.

“Thank you, sirs.”

“Alex, I want to make clear what’s being asked of you. Your plan or not, I want you to know that we all fully understand and appreciate the sacrifice we’re asking you to make.”

“That I’m volunteering to make,” Alex corrected. He suspected he was the only person alive that could get away with such a correction without reprimand.

“It may be your plan, Alex, but the burden of it is something that will weigh on my shoulders until the day I die. That’s why I want to make perfectly clear that I am, in fact, *asking* you to do this. I am not *ordering* you to, nor is anyone else. You must feel completely free to decline. Not a single person in this room or anywhere else will harbor even the slightest resentment if you refuse. I’m asking something of you that’s far beyond

what's ever been asked of a human being, and if you accept, then I *want* to feel the weight of that decision for as long as I live."

Alex's respect for this president rose yet again. He could have taken the easy way out and accepted Alex's volunteering for the plan. If anything went wrong, he could have shaken it off because it wasn't his decision. But no, he very consciously wanted any potential consequences to fall square on his conscience. More than that, he understood that even if everything went exactly according to plan that the sacrifice Alex would be making was momentous, and he wanted to take as much of that burden on himself as he possibly could.

There was no hesitation from Alex though as he was completely prepared for this course of action all along.

"Of course sir, I understand. And I accept, absolutely."

The President just smiled at him and let his chief take the next step.

"Alex, our understanding is that while in stasis, you will continue to evolve and expand your capabilities, as well as your access to the probe data, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir, it is. The program that Melissa activated will continue unabated. It won't even be slowed down by stasis, though my vital functions obviously will be."

"So really, there's no telling what will come out of stasis?" The President had been waiting to ask that particular question since the plan had been brought to his attention.

"Well, sir, it'll still be me, that much I can say. But it's true, even I don't know what my abilities will be. It depends on how long I'm in stasis for, how much the nanotech can actually do at all, and those are things I just don't know all the details about."

"But you believe you'll have full access to the probe data?" General Tucker asked.

"Yes, sir, I do. I believe that is, in fact, the primary purpose of the enhancement program Melissa activated. My brain structure will be developed sufficiently so that all that knowledge can be made consciously available to me, something that isn't the case today. I get drips and drabs of it, almost like dreams, and only sometimes do I get real data I can use directly. It seems Melissa's programming prioritized basic scientific knowledge and capabilities, basic intelligence and such. In retrospect, I think she knew what the plan was long before I did."

"Understood. That's exactly what we need right now: intel. You've given us quite a bit already, about the Xe'Tara, but we need more. We need to know how to prepare. We know we've got time, based on what you've told us, but you know military planning, Captain. We want to game out every possible scenario as quickly as possible, not to mention develop as many new technologies as possible, and we can't do that without more and better intel to inform our decision-making."

"Absolutely, General, that makes perfect sense."

"Alright Alex," President Dillard began, "I think it's settled then. We'll get the stasis technology ready as quickly as possible with your assistance, as well as a facility to house the program, and you'll enter stasis as soon as possible. Simultaneously, we'll set up a deep space monitoring system based on your design specs, to watch for early hints of the Xe'Tara fleet. It may take a hundred years, maybe more, but upon those first hints, you'll be removed from stasis and hopefully be able to provide meaningful intelligence on how



to defeat this enemy. We'll make whatever preparations we can in the meantime, but ultimately, we're counting on you, Alex."

Alex smiled.

"I won't let you down, sir."

---

Seven months had passed since that meeting at the White House. Alex looked out the window at the fall foliage that was just entering its most vibrant phase. Vermont was beautiful in late October.

He sincerely hoped this wouldn't be the last time he saw it.

He was sure the stasis pod behind him would work. He had worked intimately with the best scientists from around the world on it. The tests performed in the last two months had all gone perfectly. Numerous animals were put into and pulled out of stasis for longer and longer period each time. Sure, he would be the first human, and sure, even he didn't know how long he'd be in stasis for, but every calculation and every test was saying it didn't matter. He could be in stasis for hundreds of years without a problem.

Of course, calculations and tests never equaled real usage when dealing with technology this new and delicate, but he had faith. Not faith in deities but in science. Just another gift from Melissa, he knew.

"Alex, before we do this, I've got a little surprise for you."

President Dillard had demanded he be here for this moment. Alex felt an affection for Dillard that he hadn't felt for many people over the years. They had developed a deep friendship over the last half a year, a friendship based on mutual trust and admiration. They had spent many long nights in the residence of the White House talking about life. Sadly, the First Lady had passed away about a month after that first meeting with the President. They had bonded over the loss of their wives, and Alex knew he had helped Dillard get through a very rough patch, one he had gone through himself. It was yet another service provided to his country, he knew. Keeping a president together under such terrible circumstances was almost as important as besting the Xe'Tara warrior nearly a year ago.

"A surprise? I'm not so sure I'm thrilled about the idea of a surprise with what we're about to do, sir."

"Oh, don't worry Alex, I think you're going to like this one."

The President waved to someone just outside the door who Alex couldn't see yet, but as the summoned man walked through the door, Alex couldn't help but smile a big, broad smile.

"Bob! You piece of shit!"

"Ah, fuck you too Alex."

President Dillard's expression immediately clued them both into the fact that this wasn't the exchange he had expected. They both realized it at the same time and couldn't help but laugh as they embraced one another.

"You didn't think I was gonna let you go and do something this damned stupid without coming in and trying to talk you out of it, did you?"

“Yeah, right, Bob. I’m pretty sure you’re just here to collect my bar tab before I do this.”

“You got that right buddy!”

Alex’s smile faded a bit as he spoke again.

“I assume they’ve told you what we’re doing here then?”

“Yeah. Well, I mean, they tried to explain it to me as best they could, but there’s a ton of classified information that I couldn’t be told. Seems my clearance from the military days wasn’t quite up to snuff.”

“Well, they’ve told you enough I think. They explained stasis to you?”

“They did. Most of the science crap went right over my head, but I get it: you’re going to sleep for a long fucking time. Oh, uh, sorry Mister President, sir.”

Dillard smiled.

“Under the circumstance, it’s perfectly all right. Besides, you’re absolutely correct: it’s going to be a long fucking time indeed!”

All three men shared a laugh now. Finally, Bob turned his attention back to Alex alone.

“No chance I’m gonna talk you out of this, is there?”

Alex shook his head.

“Afraid not, Bob. This has got to be done and, for reasons you, unfortunately, can’t know... actually, scratch that: I’m actually glad you can’t know, Bob. Trust me, it’s actually better that way. But regardless of that, it’s gotta be me, Bob, that’s the bottom line. There’s not really a choice in the matter, though I’d be doing it even if it was one hundred percent optional.”

“Well, I sure as hell know how stubborn your ass is when you make up your mind about something, so I guess I’ll just have to trust that this is the right thing.”

“It is Bob. It really is.”

Bob smiled now, a warm, deep smile born of years of friendship.

“Well then, fuck it, just forget the bar tab. I got you, brother. It’s the least I can do for you after what you did for me.”

“Bob, I’m really going to miss you.”

Bob now visibly fought back the tears.

“Captain, it’s been a privilege and an honor to be your friend.”

Bob stood up and saluted his friend, a final show of respect and affection. Alex returned the salute.

“Bob, the privilege has been mine. Though, I’m not so sure honor is a word I’d associate with some of our less savory exploits!”

Bob and Alex both broke out into hearty laughter as Bob lunged towards Alex and into one final embrace.

“Alex, you son of a bitch!”

President Dillard let the laughter and back-patting go on for a little while longer before stepping in.

“Alright gentlemen, I think unfortunately it’s time. Mr. Williams, I’m afraid we’re going to have to escort you out now. And it goes without saying that you can’t speak of anything you’ve seen or heard here today. State secrets and such, you know?”

The President directed Bob out of the room as he spoke.

“Oh, yes sir, they explained that to me pretty clearly before I was told anything at all. Something about treason and being hung until I’m dead if I let slip anything, right?”

“Well, I’m not sure anything quite *that* severe, Mr. Williams. Probably just some CIA black site for the rest of your natural life or something along those lines.”

Bob stopped in his tracks and looked at the President. He was smiling, but it was a smile who’s meaning was clear: *I’m a nice guy and I’m being jovial right now, but I’m not kidding about this stuff. This is serious business.*

Before Bob could reply, the President ushered him out the door where a secret service agent greeted him as the Dillard said: “But hey, don’t worry about it, Mr. Williams! Just be sure to vote for me in the next election and everything will be fine!”

As soon as Bob was out of view, Dillard turned to Alex. Before he could speak, Alex did.

“Thank you for that, sir. I really do appreciate it.”

Dillard smiled.

“Least I could do, Alex. And don’t worry about Bob there, I’m going to keep an eye on him personally. I know he’s had some troubles and if there’s anything I can do help him, I will.

Alex was genuinely touched and tears began to well up in his eyes.

“Thank you again, sir.”

“Not at all. Gotta cultivate the constituents after all! Anyway, Alex, are you ready?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“Alex, you know what, come on, even *now* you’re not going to call me anything but *sir?!?*”

Alex smiled. Even in their late-night conversations, he had always stuck to the formal (although he hadn’t called him “Mr. President” since their first meeting, so really, he *was already* less formal).

“I’ll tell you what, sir: if you’re still around when they pop the hatch on this thing, I’ll use your first name then.”

The President could only smile at that. *Typical Alex*, he thought to himself.

“Alright Alex, that’ll work.”

They both automatically extended their hands and shook. Alex thought they likely would have hugged had they not been surrounded by so many people, but a good handshake was much more appropriate in this circumstance.

They broke off after a few seconds. Alex gave one last nod to the President, who returned the gesture.

It was time.

Alex stepped into the stasis pod and laid down. The biogel that would eventually engulf him, filling his lungs and providing his body nutrients, began to fill the chamber automatically as the door completed its decent. It closed with a suction sound that

indicated the air-tight seal had been made. The gel was warm and gooey and Alex thought this must be what it feels like to be a booger in a nose.

A mist began filling the tube as the gel rose around his sides. At that moment, the injections hit. 48 tiny pinpricks, 24 in each arm, shot pain up his arms, through his shoulders and down his spine. This was the part he had dreaded the most.

The gel touched his cheeks now as he gazed out the window in the door above him. He saw President Dillard's face, smiling and nodding. He could see him mouthing the words *just relax Alex, it'll be all right* as the gel touched the creases of his mouth.

At that moment, the cocktail of drugs that had just been injected into him began to take effect. He felt all tension release from his body, as if every muscle from head to toe suddenly deflated like a balloon releasing its air. This happened just in time as the gel began to enter his mouth.

As consciousness faded, just in time to keep him from choking, Alex had one final thought:

*This stuff kinda tastes like egg drop soup.*

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The sun warmed his face to an almost uncomfortable degree as the breeze simultaneously cooled it, which resulted in the perfect sensation on his skin. His eyes were closed tight, but he could smell sap oozing from the trees all around him.

Alex lowered his head to face the ground while opening his eyes. The grass between his toes was the perfect shade of green, almost too perfect. He noted a small ant hill off to the right, worker ants bringing in pieces of leaves while others went out to forage.

He lifted his head just in time to see a deer, who he guessed had been observing him the whole time, run off into the woods.

He turned to the left and was not in the least bit surprised to see the cabin, in pristine condition. He saw light smoke coming out of the window and he immediately recognized the unmistakable smell of beef cooking. There was surely a perfect steak waiting for him in there!

His ears twitched as an unexpected sound hit them. He couldn't quite make it out at first, but before long his heightened senses identified it. Unmistakable, yet impossible. A gentle, rhythmic sound that repeated, over and over again.

The sound of rope moving against a tree branch.