

# STARGAZER 2

DISPLACEMENT VECTOR



## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

Dedicated to:

My mom, who encouraged me to put pen to paper...

My dad, who taught me to commit to everything I do...

My sister, who shares and inspires my interest in the arts...

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

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## Preface

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### On Profanity

I was raised in Northeast Oklahoma – in the small suburban town of Catoosa. My family attended a Pentecostal church a town over, and I was raised with morals that guided me into adulthood. One value (that had been instilled in me since birth) was that of the importance of words and their connotation.

My mother was (and still is) an English teacher for middle school students. One year I even had the pleasure of being a student in her class. It was certainly an interesting semester spent calling my own mother by “Mrs. Phillips”.

Further back, from the time I was an infant until I was six years old, my mother stayed home with my sister and I to prepare us for school. We learned to read and write at very young ages. We learned the importance of knowing what to say and how to say it effectively. We learned what happened when we said something inappropriate.

My parents were mostly hands-off disciplinarians. On many occasions I recall wishing I could have a quick swat

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rather than spend an hour in my room without a thing to occupy my time.

One of my few lingering memories took place in my room at a small apartment inside the Catoosa city limits. We lived there just a bit over a year while my parents built their beautiful house in the country. The room was dark, with the door just barely open. My cousin, Josh, was with me – and we were playing a game that had been conjured up just moments before.

Josh was one of my oldest cousins, but he and I were the oddballs during our younger days. My other male cousins were into sports, and the girls paired up to defend themselves. My sister was too young to play with anybody at that time. So Josh and I hung out whenever his family would come to visit.

The game we had created consisted of two parts – the barely-opened door, and a Frisbee. The first to toss the Frisbee through the cracked door won. We tried over and over, our non-sporty bodies lacking the tuned precision needed to accomplish our goal. It became exciting, as we



got closer in each try to throw the disc across the room and through the small gap. Over and over it smacked into the wall or behind the door. We began to razz each other after every miss. What happened next, I cannot explain, nor can I excuse. It jumped from my mouth before I even thought about the words or the outcome.

“Throw it through the crack!” I yelled, “The *butt* crack!”

Immediately my mother entered the room, grabbed my shoulder, and asked me what I had said. She knew already. I knew that she knew – but that she wanted me to feel the shame of repeating it to her face. I served fifteen minutes in the slammer for that one – and earned a lifetime of remembrance. It was like a scene out of *A Christmas Story*.

Fast forward to now. I knew when writing this book that the story was destined to be darker and grittier than the first. The origin of Faith’s abilities was out of the way, and it was time to move her further along her path toward the realization that she must use her power to serve a greater purpose. A cartoon-like foe (like the theatrical Dr.

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Truman) would not be enough to force Faith to make a decision. It had to be something more adversarial mentally than physically. Faith needed a driving force. A nemesis.

However, she also needed a sidekick. With Nick's loss of abilities, a new character needed to step in when times grew tough. When Faith experienced trauma, she needed a contingency plan. I set up the character briefly in the first book to establish a bit of back-story. He was rough, spent a lot of time on the streets, and found himself tied into an organization that used his enthusiasm to its benefit.

Both the hero and the villain that materialized were blunt, and mostly uncaring about how others perceived them. Characters like these could not go around using daycare profanities like "crud" and "fiddlesticks". It had to be real. It had to be calloused. It had to be profane.

I cringed at the thought that my mother might read such horrible things. She would show the book to her friends, and inevitably they would flip through a few pages and spot one word out of more than forty thousand – it

would have four letters and be one that was banned from broadcast television.

That is the funny thing about words. They can have so many meanings and be taken so many ways – often in ways unintended. I wanted to be truthful to my characters, though. I wanted them to have heart, or a seeming lack of it when necessary. I wanted them to be clear. I could only accomplish that with the correct words.

In the end I feel justified. My mother may not want to read my book, but she can feel honored to know that the lessons she taught me so long ago still stick in me today. I know the importance of properly used words, the written language, and honesty to the world (as well as oneself).

I know that the only way to do something – is to do it right.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brandon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "B" and a long, sweeping underline.

*Brandon Cole Phillips*

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## Prologue

Orb Quandary

“There is nothing more gratifying than the unexpected sting of a surprise ending.”

“Let me... the hell... out of here...”

“Mr. Pontius. No, no, no. That’s no way to speak to your host. You simply must learn some manners.”

The room was cold – the floor flooded with an inch of water and rising. Cracks in the corners of the rusty converted shipping container spat short bursts of salty spray into the room with varying irregularity. A string of Christmas lights along the center of the ceiling provided the only illumination. Pontius blinked his eyes several times in a failed attempt to regain some of his vision. He felt a warm, slow ooze trickling down the back of his head. *A sucker punch, he thought, Damned coward.*

His captor was dressed rather casually, from what Pontius’s blurry eyes could detect. Light blue pinstripe shirt, top two buttons open. Black leather jacket cut like a sport coat, with matching gloves. He carried a cane. He wore a respirator of some sort, with sunglasses perched

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atop the crest of the plastic mask that covered his nose. The man's hair was long and greasy. Pontius took in as many details as possible – he wanted a good description for the police that he hoped were waiting outside.

Pontius looked at his left wrist. It was bound with duct tape to the table in front of him. His feet were taped to the floor. The only décor in the room was a pivoting scale on the table directly before him. The captor checked his watch and, apparently satisfied with the time, leapt atop the long granite table.

“Since you can see that this place won't be above water for long, here's what we're going to do. I will ask you what you know about the Stargazer, and you will tell me,” the masked man said as he took two spheres from his pocket and placed one on each side of the scale, “If I like your answer, I'll tell you which orb you *don't* want to pick up.”

“I don't know anything,” Pontius replied, “I haven't seen her in—”

“Stop talking!” the captor yelled, slapping his hostage with the back of his hand, “You stop talking. You’re being annoying.”

“I’m trying to tell you, I don’t know what you want me to know!”

“Do you know how many people have died saying that exact same thing? Fifteen! But the last – he gave me your name,” the man grinned beneath his mask, “He told me that you actually spoke with the girl.”

“It was only for a few seconds!” Pontius yelled.

The masked man jumped down from his perch atop the table and danced lightly on the water-covered floor.

“It was only for a few seconds!” he yelled mockingly, before he swooped in nose-to-nose with his captive, “What did she say?”

His breath became steam, wafting into the cold air and fogging his sunglasses.

“She didn’t say a word.”

“You held a gun to her head for nearly twelve hours and she didn’t speak? Mr. Pontius, I don’t like that answer.”

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“It’s the truth, asshole! Once I got out of that godforsaken volcano I forgot all about her.”

“What’s her name?”

“If I tell you, are you going to let me go?”

“I wonder what I’ll do if you don’t tell me? I might throw a little fit!” he said with a cackle, “What’s her name?”

“Faith. I don’t know her last name.”

“Oh, see? See? Now – now we’re getting somewhere! What else do you want to tell me?”

“She has a boyfriend. His name is Nick. That’s seriously all I know, man,” Pontius said, staring deep into the blackness of his captor’s sunglasses.

“Good answer. Good answer! Survey says?”

The man hopped back onto the table. He eyed the orbs, then looked back to Pontius.

“Take the one on your right. It’ll be quicker!”

The captor hopped down, kicked the chair from beneath Pontius, and swung open the door. He hopped out onto what Pontius could barely discern was a shipping barge. The door closed sharply and sealed behind him.



Pontius stood, knees bent, his feet still attached firmly to the floor. He clawed with his free hand at the tape holding down his other. The water had risen to nearly four inches. The tape came off in strips. The cold humidity of the room had caused it to become brittle, but the adhesive held strong. After pulling off several strips of ripped tape, his hand was freed. He fell hard backward into the icy water. The cold pierced his bones. *Shit! I'm going to end up freezing in here,* he thought.

He knew he could not sit in the frigid water for more than a few moments. The wet tape peeled easily off of his shoes, but he could not lift his feet. The shoes had been nailed to the floor. He tore through the laces, ripping a fingernail in the struggle. The water was coming in quickly, and it had reached his belly button by the time he had pulled his feet free from the high-tops.

He jumped up, sloshing through the knee-deep bath. He searched with his hands for a way out on each wall. Not even the door would move. There were no hatches to be

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seen on the ceiling – nothing was in the room but a table, chair, and the scale.

Pontius climbed onto the table to escape the cold. He leaned down and inspected every inch of the contraption as quickly as he could. There was a switch under each of the dishes.

“The damned thing’s welded completely shut,” he said to himself.

The masked man had told him to take the orb on the right, which would be the one on the left, since he was facing opposite direction. Pontius briefly reevaluated his choice. He grabbed it.

The scale tipped, and the entire place shook. The room tilted hard toward the rear. The chair slid across the floor and slammed against the wall. The orb began beeping loudly and blinking. *What now?* Pontius thought.

He threw the orb at the far wall. It rolled slightly back – its blue lights illuminating the dark water. It exploded. Water began gushing into the room. Pontius had just a brief moment to grab a breath before he was submerged in

the salty seawater. The hole in the floor was large – definitely wide enough for him to swim through. He knew there was little time, so he quickly dove under the torrent and through the hole. All he saw was a deep black sea beneath him, and a sinking metal box and dark sky above him.

He swam hard and fast. The water was like ice, but he began to feel warm. The feeling rushed over his body. The pain of the salt water washing through the gash in his head fueled his strokes. It was like a caffeine rush. His feet kicked fast – his arms pumped like turbines. He craned his head back to see the shipping container sink into the abyss. There was a barge chugging away from the scene in the opposite direction.

His body felt good and strong, and he swam harder and harder until he noticed the belly of a boat traveling toward him. He surfaced, barely out of breath. The boat slowed, and a crewmember tossed Pontius a life preserver.

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"You were wearing jeans and a t-shirt, Mister. In the Bering Strait. You should be dead," spoke a deckhand with a heavy Russian accent.

"Yeah," coughed a naked Pontius, wrapped in a blanket, "Tell me about it."

"Whoever dumped you off that barge was not intending you to be alive still, I don't think, huh?"

"No. I need to speak to the police. I have a description of the guy."

"Police? They won't help you with this guy."

"What?"

"No. No, you need UIPA," the Russian said confidently.

"How the hell will those bureaucratic bastards help me out?"

"He's killed a couple of their men. We found their bodies tied to buoys floatin' randomly out in the crab grounds. He's a sick bastard, that guy."

"Where do you fellas unload?"

“Headed to St. Paul now. You can catch a flight from there to the UIPA West Embassy in Seattle. It’s your best bet at kicking his ass, eh?”

“I appreciate it,” Pontius said with a smirk, “I do.”

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Pontius waited patiently in a debriefing room at the West Embassy. The flight had only taken a couple of hours, and the United Inter-Planetary Assembly had even footed the bill. The building was old – apparently a former hotel. The walls were covered in paisley wallpaper, but dark oak could be seen in areas where the glue had not held. The UIPA, business-focused as they were, had not invested any of their new funding into renovating the building for appearances.

In the two years following the unplanned disclosure of the UIPA, major political changes had taken place in the world. The old United Nations model had been abandoned in favor of an exploratory assembly that would devise plans to unify the governments of the world within a half-century. It was an ambitious goal, but never before had

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humans needed representation before a presumptive higher political and military threat.

Having worked as a low-level guard in Fusion's disclosure initiative, Pontius had a lot of interest in post-disclosure activities. He harbored some resentment toward the assembly for safeguarding and restricting the flow of information about technologies.

The UIPA had devised a timetable with the New United Nations for pushing new technology out and implementing it all worldwide. The timetable was fair, considering the amount of technological and economic change that the rush of revolutionary advances would bring. But Pontius thought it could be sped up. As a kid who grew up in Harlem, he had experienced a fair share of the technological limitations that kept a lot of his friends and family members in poverty. He was more than ready for those limitations, such as fossil fuels, to be replaced with environmentally friendlier and more economical solutions.

The door opened and a gruff figure walked through. He was tall and had a large build. As he stepped out of the darkness, his unearthly figure became apparent.

It was no longer uncommon for extra-terrestrials to mingle with humans. After disclosure broke, a large group of aliens were refugees on the planet for nearly a month before ships could be sent to take them home. Some chose to stay. The UIPA was allowed by both the United States and British governments to set up a series of embassies to cultivate welcome for the otherworldly visitors. In the years following, several thousand aliens began to call Earth their home.

The figure stepped lightly toward Pontius, who immediately recognized the creature from television. He was the mouthpiece of the UIPA on Earth, and had invested a significant amount of work into human-alien relations. He was a figurehead, which meant that there was some sort of greater interest in the case than a couple of missing agents.

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“How you doing there, Jonathon? My name is Chon Tom.”

“Mr. Tom, it’s an honor to meet you!”

“Likewise. You can call me Chon, though. And I hear you prefer Pontius?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Chon.”

“I understand – and it’s just Chon. No mister required.”

“Gotcha. So you being here, that means I got myself into some kinda mess, huh?”

“Oh no, no mess, Pontius. Actually we have been following your progress for some time,” Chon explained, as he placed a cigar between his lips and rifled through some notes, “Says here you swam underwater in the Bering for about fifteen minutes before you were rescued.”

“Yeah it was exhilarating! Never felt a feeling like it. Felt alive, man! It was like a spiritual experience I’m tellin’ ya!”

“Mind if I ask you how you ended up out there in the drink, my friend?”



"No clue. I was in my apartment feeding my fish, next thing I know I'm waking up in a shipping container with some whacko asking me shit about that Stargazer girl."

"What did he ask you?"

"Her name. And I gave him her boyfriend's name too. Don't know their last names though. He was satisfied, I guess..."

"Damn it, you gave him their names?"

"He was going to kill me! Not like I'm in the military or some shit..."

"He was going to kill you anyways. Damn it!" Chon yelled, frustrated.

"What's this all about, man? And what do you mean you've been watching me?"

"Have you heard of the Treehouse Projects?"

"Government conspiracy bullshit, yeah."

"If that's your opinion, then I guess you're part of that bullshit. You are one of the few surviving experiments, Mr. Pontius. Nick, Faith, and Faith's brother are the others."

"Okay, you lost me."

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“You’re not a bastard kid, like your mom always thought, Jonathon. You were created. In a lab. You’re like Faith. Like your old boss, Dr. Truman. How the hell did you think you swam underwater that long without dying? Adrenaline? Come on, Jonathon – the pet fish, the YMCA swim team champ, all that. It’s instinct. It’s in your blood.”

“I’m still lost.”

“Your body is significantly resilient against high pressure and oxidation loss. You are a swimming machine, always have been. We first noticed it when you fell off the pier at Coney Island when you were seven years old. The current pulled you underwater for over five minutes and almost a half mile down the coast.”

“Is that all I can do?”

“Based on the admittedly limited information we have about the strains that were used, we believe so.”

“And why did you not tell me about this crap before now?”

“We were waiting for the proper moment.”

"It's all about timing with your organization isn't it?"

Pontius yelled, standing from his chair, "Oh, can't have free energy technology yet – we need to roll it out in higher-income areas first! Trickle it down! Humans can't have teleportation technology yet – they have too many hang-ups about privacy rights! Can't tell Pontius he's half alien, he might not understand what that means! He's just another dumb black kid from the 'hood!"

"I promise you that's not the case at all," Chon offered humbly, "You have to understand the greater picture here."

"I think I understand pretty well. And I want to go home."

"We need your help, Mr. Pontius, please..."

"I'll wait for the proper moment."

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## Chapter One

### It's Been A While

"No, put the Venus flytrap over there, on the coffee table," Faith said with a giggle.

"I don't understand why you keep these things, they're creepy," Nick moaned as he centered the plant on a large doily on the marble tabletop.

"For one, they keep the bug population in this place down. And for two, they're a lot cooler than your silly African violets."

"Don't mock the violets. They're bound for an uprising at any time," Nick joked.

In all the years Faith had lived next door to Dale and Margaret Jones, she had never once cooked dinner for them. It had always been the other way around. It was her night to show Margaret that she had learned a thing or two about running the kitchen. But firstly, the place was in major need of a cleaning-up.

"We really should clean a little each day, rather than a lot in one day when its gotten really bad," Nick offered.

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“But think of all the quality time we’re spending together, Babe,” Faith said with a wink.

“I can think of infinitely more ‘quality’ things we could be doing with our time...”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that!”

“What are you cooking anyways?” Nick asked, as he sniffed the air with interest.

“I thought I told you – in fact I know I told you – it’s a *surprise!*”

“Smells like a lemon-pepper chicken and hot rolls...”

“Gosh darn it, Nick...”

“Well, hey, at least it smells like what it is!”

Nick dodged a pillow that barely missed his head.

“Maybe while we’re cleaning we could build a pile of stuff for a yard sale? I mean seriously, some of this stuff, this can’t be in our house when we move!”

“If you so much as nudge a piece of my furniture, you’ll be spending the evening on the ceiling, Mister,” Faith laughed.

“So stubborn! At least we’ve got the new kitchen table. Seating for more than two was a must.”

“Yeah,” Faith said, adjusting the photos on the end table, “Now I feel like I can actually entertain company.”

“Kind of exciting, huh?”

“What?”

“This is our first time to entertain company together! A step closer to being a married couple...” Nick pondered the thought.

“If only we were a few steps closer...” Faith remarked.

“Hey if you hadn’t refused the UIPA money, you’d have your ring by now!” Nick joked.

“I know, I know,” Faith said, “But I want to make something of myself, I don’t want it handed to me.”

“And that’s respectable. And you’re close, too. One semester left until I’m Mr. Doctor Faith Forester.”

“Maybe by that time you’ll be Mr. Doctor Faith Rutherford...” Faith said with a wink.

The doorbell rang and was immediately followed by a few pounding knocks. Faith could tell just by the sound

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that her neighbors were more than excited about the meal with their surrogate daughter.

“You get it,” Faith said, “I’m going to go to the kitchen and pretend to be busy!”

“Always a planner,” Nick laughed.

Margaret and Dale burst through the door as soon as Nick opened it. He received a big kiss on the cheek from Margaret and a hearty handshake from her husband. The couple loved Nick, and knew that he was the perfect match for their favorite girl. They had grown very attached to the boy in the two years since they had met, enjoying not just his wit and willingness to help out, but also the fierce competition he posed in Scrabble. Nick valued their parental affection just as much Faith did.

“Come in, have a seat!” Nick greeted the grinning couple.

“Nick, boy, you’re looking more handsome every day!” Margaret said, playfully pinching his cheeks.

“I’ve been working out, just for you Maggie. Trying to get ripped!”



“Don’t get too handsome or I’ll have to box you!” Dale joked.

“You’ll always be the most handsome man in my life Dale!” Faith yelled from the kitchen.

“Hey now!” Nick yelled back, “Don’t make me jealous or I’ll sick Maggie on you!”

“Does she need help in there? I just know I could be washing some dishes or something...” Margaret offered.

“I have strict orders to keep you out of the kitchen, Maggie,” Nick laughed, “There’s apparently some serious cooking going on in there.”

“Smells like lemon-pepper chicken and hot rolls to me,” Dale guessed.

“Dale!” Faith yelled from the kitchen, “I can hear you in there, you know!”

“Sorry, ma’am!” Dale laughed.

“So when’s the wedding, Nick?” Margaret whispered.

“Still saving up for the ring, Mags,” Nick replied, “Luckily with all the jobs Dale and I have been getting, the

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money's starting to come in steady and I'm starting to build a little nest egg."

Nick had showed up just in time, when work had become sparse for Dale. With Dale's experience and Nick's technical prowess, they had built up a nice clientele in auto and electronics repair in Ravenwood. *D & N's TechEtc* was quickly becoming the go-to place to have computers, cell phones, and cars repaired and serviced. The two men's talents complimented each other perfectly.

"Well you have to let us know immediately when you set a date," Margaret said in a playful demand, "Because you know I want to help with the planning!"

"I guarantee that you will be the first to know, Mags," Nick grinned, "Hey want to see something cool?"

"Oh boy, another one of your creations?" Dale asked.

"Oh, come on Dale!" Margaret said, patting her husband on the knee.

"You'll like this," Nick replied, pulling it out of his pocket, "But it's a secret!"

Margaret motioned across her face that her lips were zipped. Nick revealed a small metal box and handed it to her. She opened the box, but it was empty.

"A ring box?" she asked.

"Yes, see the LED inside?" Nick asked, pointing to a little bulb in the lid of the box, "And on the bottom is a microphone".

Nick leaned in and whispered in Margaret's ear. She shot him a confused look.

"Abracadabra?" Margaret asked with a questioning half-laugh.

The LED flickered as bright as a camera flash against the mirrored lid of the box. A cheap trinket ring had appeared inside.

"That's fantastic!" she exclaimed.

"Shh!" Nick hushed her politely, "I'll reprogram the word to be something more romantic. It's actually really simple, it's just pushed up through the felt by a spring."

"That's actually pretty good, Nick," Dale admitted, "Faith will love that."

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“Love what?” Faith asked, peeking around the corner of the adjoined kitchen.

Margaret had just enough time to quickly conceal the device before the secret was out.

“It’s a surprise, like your dinner!” Nick spouted back.

“Sounds like my dinner isn’t too much of a surprise!” she joked, as she waved the group in to eat.

“It smells simply divine,” Margaret complimented as she sat down, “And the new table is gorgeous!”

“Thanks Maggie! I just hope the meal can live up to your legacy!”

“As hungry as I am, I doubt you could disappoint if you tried, Faith!” Dale remarked with a hearty laugh.

“How is school coming along?” Margaret asked, with a spoonful of gravy held above her plate.

“Great, just three classes left to go. I’ll be so relieved to be done!”

“I’ll bet!” Dale said, his mouth full of chicken.

“Your hard work will pay off, girl, you just keep trucking,” Margaret said with a smile.

“I’m definitely not stopping now!” Faith laughed.

“I forgot to tell you, Faith, that plant you gave me a couple years ago – it did the weirdest thing the other day. I go to water it and I notice this ball hanging from a vine off the side of the plant. Wasn’t there the day before. Anyways, a few hours later, I noticed that the ball had fallen off, cracked open, and there was a little flower inside it. I meant to bring it over with me.”

“You know,” Nick said, stuffing his mouth with a bread roll, “Those plants are edible. You boil ‘em, and they stink like none other, but you can eat them like you would a boiled turnip or something.”

“Really? What’s it called, I’ve never seen a plant quite like it!” Margaret asked.

“No idea,” Faith replied with a stern look at Nick, “We picked it up at a tourist trap in Texarkana.”

“Huh, well that’s interesting, I’ll have to give it a try,” Margaret said with a smile.

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“I have to tell ya, my girl, this dinner is just delicious,” Dale said, before he sucked the last bit of meat from a chicken leg.

“Well then, I’m relieved!”

“You really did a great job, girl,” Margaret said proudly.

The discussion stifled for a moment as the food took priority. It really was Faith’s best-cooked meal.

The silence was broken in the only appropriate way possible, as Chon Tom blinked into place in the middle of the dinner table. Nick, Faith, and the dinner guests screeched back in their chairs just in time to dodge the tabletop as it crushed the legs of the new furniture into splinters.

“When did you get a new table?” Chon asked as he picked himself up from the floor.

“What are you doing here?” Nick exclaimed.

“Someone care to explain what’s going on?” Dale asked in shock, clutching a mop handle in his hands.

“It’s okay,” Nick said, “He’s a friend.”

“Don’t you people watch TV?” Chon asked as he flipped on the television on the kitchen counter.

A masked man stood in a dark room. Another man, seated in an office chair, was visible in the shadows. Duct tape was wrapped around the chair. It looked like an entire roll had been used to secure him in place.

“In conclusion,” the masked man said, “I have forwarded the coordinates to the UIPA East Embassy. Have the girl at those coordinates by noon tomorrow...”

He spun the office chair around.

“Or your Vice President becomes a popsicle.”

The screen flickered to black before cutting to a news anchor that had been standing by. Chon flicked off the set with his gigantic forefinger.

“So, I kinda need you two to come with me. Sorry for interrupting your dinner party. And crushing the table. We’ll have that replaced. You really should let me know about stuff like that so I can reset my transport point next time.”

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“What do you mean – come with you?” Faith yelled back, “I thought we agreed that our involvement in stuff like this was minimal?”

“Yeah, Chon, we really can’t...”

“Three UIPA agents are dead. Probably more than ten civilians as well. Your veep is going to be next.”

“I am very confused Faith...” Margaret whispered.

“It’s... complicated...”

“I had a feeling,” Dale spoke up, “I had a feeling that was you on the TV, Faith.”

The group turned to look at Dale.

“It all made sense, the more I heard about it. You go get ‘em little superhero!” Dale said with an enthusiastic crescendo.

“Dale!” Margaret said, shocked by her husband’s delight.

“You can’t fight destiny, Maggie,” Dale said with a smile.

“I promise we’ll explain more when we get back. I’m so sorry about all this ...”



“Don’t worry about a thing, Dear,” Margaret resigned, “We’ll get the place cleaned up for when ya get back.”

“Alrighty, we’ve got a lot to do,” Chon said impatiently, “So if we could just hurry it along, and you both could please take a hand...”

Nick and Faith each grabbed a large green hand, and Chon squeezed a small silver button between his thumb and forefinger. The trio disappeared right before Dale and Margaret’s eyes.

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“Incoming!” yelled the Chernulan helming the transport deck of the *Ruengale II*, “Three passengers.”

Chon, Nick, and Faith quickly appeared on the deck. A gathering of aliens had already amassed along the perimeter wall.

“Bring your autograph pen?” Nick joked.

Faith jabbed an elbow into his ribs. In the two years following what came to be known as the *BlackHole Recovery Incident* among inner circles, Faith had tried to suppress the ‘world hero’ aspect of the Stargazer persona

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as much as she could. However, she could not refuse an invitation by the former President to fly into Wrigley Field and help throw out the first pitch of the major league season. She also could not decline a request to appear as guest of honor at the World AIDS Summit. Nor could she turn down a speech to the MIT graduating class about Alien-Human integration. It was all a character to her though, and totally anonymous under the guise of her increasingly popular jumpsuit and helmet. *The New York Times* had listed 'Stargazer' as number four in their list of the top ten Halloween costumes the previous year. Faith was only a little bit humbled by that.

"Ship looks great, Chon! How long until the base is functional again?" Nick asked, knowing full well that Chon liked to gush about his work.

"Few more months. There were issues with the air recycling system we ordered," Chon said with a dull, expressionless tone, "Let's go to the main conference room, a few dignitaries are waiting."

“Can you give us a brief explanation about what’s going on here?” Faith asked, “I’m still a bit confused about why exactly we’re here...”

“We don’t know who the guy is, but he wants to talk to you. He says it’s important. We have a feeling he wants you to help him with whatever it is he’s up to. But we won’t know for sure until you go talk to him.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold your stones, right there. I’m not going to talk to that guy.”

“Uh, yes you are, Faith,” Chon said, very matter-of-factly, “At this point you don’t have a lot of say about it.”

“He’s like a serial killer or something!” Faith popped back.

“You know, for a super-human, you’re not very brave,” Chon chuckled, “This way please.”

Chon led the pair into a familiar theater-style room. Several alien ambassadors congregated at the front in discussion, and well-guarded man stood in the rear of the room. The man stepped forward as Faith and Nick entered.

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“Not every day you meet the President!” Nick exclaimed running forward to shake the hand of the Commander-in-Chief.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Bob Reynolds,” the President greeted him.

“Yeah I know!” Nick laughed, “Speaking of which, when the meeting is over I have some healthcare issues to mull over with you—”

“Nick,” Chon begged, grabbing Nick’s sleeve, “Seriously.”

“I’ll just leave you my cell number...”

President Reynolds nodded politely with a smirk.

Bob Reynolds had secured the Presidency a mere eight months after the initial disclosure event. His campaign benefited greatly from the cover-up coverage due to his previous platform of government transparency and advancement of science and technology – with emphasis on energy independence. In a campaign that had been only moderately ahead in the nationwide polls, it was a boon. He beat out the incumbent by an Electoral College

landslide. In a time of severe economic stress, Reynolds had inspired Americans and re-energized the scientific enthusiasm that John F. Kennedy had ignited so many years before.

Vice President Mueller had been a life-long friend and confidant to Reynolds. His friend's abduction was personally troubling – to the degree that the President felt that he should be actively involved in the recovery strategy.

“If everyone could take their seats. I'd like to thank United States President Bob Reynolds for joining us. Some of you may have recognized him in the audience,” Chon began, “Here's the situation, as we currently understand it. Our target has given us coordinates that correspond to the Mayan ruins of Uxmal. It's a pretty touristy location, which is somewhat odd, but he also included depth coordinates at seven hundred fifty-six meters. Apparently there's some room underground there. He has also specified that the United States Vice-President is not being held at this location. Faith is the only person permitted to enter, and she is to bring with her no electronics, other

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than her transport chip. We can only take him at his word, but he assures that Faith will be allowed to return safely."

"Is a swizzle stick considered an electronic device?" Faith asked nervously.

"No weapons," Chon replied, "I'm just going on a gut feeling here, but I'm almost certain he isn't planning to hurt you. He needs help with something he cannot do on his own. I just wish I knew what that was."

"It is United States policy that we do not negotiate with terrorists," Reynolds reminded the audience, "The fact that we are sending Faith is to be kept in strict silence."

"Understood?" Chon asked.

The couple nodded.

"As long as I'm just going to talk, I'm in," Faith said after a pause, "But why do I have a feeling it's not going to be that easy?"

"You're a trusted ambassador," a familiar blue-skinned alien spoke up, "You are a beacon of hope to help end this situation and bring justice."

“Maybe I’ll take the reward money this time...” Faith joked dryly.

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The *Ruengale II* was a gorgeous re-imagining of the previous ship. It was more of a space station outpost than a vessel – nearly double the size of its predecessor with a pair of extra levels for an increased number of dormitories. Faith admired a faint star field through the clear acrylic shell of the transport deck. She still loved to stargaze.

“Don’t I get some kind of cool suit or something to wear?” she asked as Chon tucked the transport chip into the lining of her hoodie.

“We’re working on a suit for you, but it won’t be ready for this trip. It will, however, provide significant advantages if you ever decide to go full time for us,” Chon grinned.

“Funny,” Faith grumbled with a roll of her eyes.

“You’ll do awesome,” Nick said as he hugged her good luck.

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“Just keep your brain intact and everything should be okay,” Chon reminded her.

“Chon! That’s morbid!” Nick gasped.

“What?” Chon asked with a shrug of his shoulders, “Just making sure she remembers.”

“Yeah, but seriously, come on...” Nick said in a feigned disgust.

“I’ll try to remember that as I’m being dismembered, Chon,” Faith said as she motioned for the transport tech to send her down, “Let’s get this over with.”

With only the dullness that a seasoned cynic like Faith could conjure, she disappeared from the transport deck and found herself in a darkly lit stone room. A motion-detector blinked in the front corner of the room next to the open doorway. The floor was wet with a half-inch of musty, stagnant water. The room smelled like stale air, trapped in a void for a thousand years. A wall-mounted speaker crackled to life.

“Mr. Savant will be joining you shortly. Please be seated on the bench behind you.”



Faith looked behind her at the stone slab in the rear of the room. *Some bench*, she thought. Disregarding the ridiculousness of the term used to describe her seat, she lowered down onto the cold rock to wait. Moments later, a voice bellowed down the hallway.

"Ms. Stargazer, so glad you came!" Jonas yelled.

A cane tapped inside the frame of the doorway, dragged along the floor and up the opposite side. The cane came to rest between the two walls of the doorframe and traced a line slowly toward the rear of the room. A scraggly-haired man wearing sunglasses and a respirator mask followed the cane toward Faith. His gloves and coat matched with such an obsessive-compulsive perfection that Faith would have needed to struggle to have *not* noticed.

He rested both hands atop his blue-orb crested cane and cocked his head to one side.

"Since we have not yet had the pleasure, my name is Jonas Savant. The tiny lady in the speaker probably already spoiled my entrance though, hmm?"

"Why am I here?" Faith jumped to the point.

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“Shh. Stop talking. Stop talking. I want to know about *you* first.”

“What are you interested to know?”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Yes I do. Why is that of any relevance?”

“Hmm,” Jonas pondered as he reached out to touch the outline of Faith’s face with his gloved finger, “You feel pretty.”

“Why am I here?” Faith asked again.

“What does he do?” Jonas asked, ignoring Faith’s question.

“Who?”

“Your boyfriend, what does he do?”

“He works on electronics. He fixes things. I don’t see how any of this is rele—”

“Does he... satisfy you?” Jonas asked as he traced a circle on her cheek.

“Okay, I’m done here,” Faith said, reaching for her transport chip.



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“Ah, ah, ah! I have transporter dispersion fields enabled right now,” Jonas warned, “You don’t leave until we have our chat. That’s how these things work.”

“Don’t treat me like a child you condescending prick,” Faith replied, “Get to the point so I can get out of here.”

“Fine, you’re no fun anyways, Cupcake,” Jonas hissed, as he threw a foot onto the stone slab next to Faith.

Faith scooted away. The man smelled terrible, and looked like a complete mess. She could hear the faint pumping noise of the respirator strapped somewhere on his back.

“You are in Uxmal. The location of a recently discovered and strikingly accurate Mayan calendar, complete with some sparsely inscribed documentation. And a map. And here’s the really fun part. You’re going to follow the map, with your precious little UIPA resources.”

*This guy is a nutcase,* Faith thought.

“Fill me in on this calendar you’ve discovered,” she politely demanded.

“Have you ever heard of the Twelfth Baktun?”

"Not in the least," Faith replied.

"According to previous records, it was to end on December the twenty-first, in year 2012. Fortunately or unfortunately, according to our new calendar it was off by a year and some change. We feel ours is more accurate. Now tell me what you know about Nibiru."

"That would be nothing."

"It's a planet in our solar system that is on the UIPA blacklist. And when this Baktun ends, it's going to be just a hop and skip away from Earth. And a few months after that, bam! Right into the sun. Rumor has it they may already be amassing an army for a surprise ambush," Jonas cackled.

"How do you know this?" Faith questioned.

"I've got people," Jonas said with a smug smirk.

Suddenly a body toppled from a hole in the ceiling and splashed face-first into the floor.

"Whoo! There's one now!" Jonas laughed.

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He followed his cane across the floor and to the body, which he raised up by the collar. He sniffed the neck of the body, and raised the head toward Faith.

“Smells like a Claman? Am I right? I mean seriously get this guy some cologne...”

Faith recognized the man immediately. It was Skree.

“Okay, give me the map,” Faith demanded.

“Hmm... done,” Jonas said curiously, “When you get the coordinates of Nibiru, give me a call!”

He danced out the door, tapping his cane about as he went. Faith dove atop Skree and activated the transport chip. In a flash they were back in the *Ruengale II*.

“He’s dead, but still warm!” a Chernulan announced, as she inspected Skree.

“Quick, get him to the cognitive transfer lab immediately!” Chon barked.

Nick clutched Faith tight.

“How was it?” he asked.

Faith dug into her pockets and pulled out a USB flash drive.

*How in the hell did that get there?* she thought.

"Nick, pop it in, let's see what we've got," Chon ordered.

"He said it was a map," Faith offered.

Nick pulled a very Earthly notebook computer from underneath the transport console. It chimed as the blue login screen appeared.

"Still keep one under there just for me?" Nick laughed.

"Well, USB isn't as 'universal' as one might think," Chon said with a deliberate eye roll.

"No map," Nick said, confused, "It's just a text file with latitude and longitude – and depth, again."

"Run it against known locations in the database," Chon suggested.

Nick slid a finger across the transport console and accessed the main geography database. He chose Earth, and input the coordinates.

"Just one file on it in your database," Nick reported, "A closed, and locked, case file number seven hundred twenty-one. Do you have authorization?"

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“I don’t,” Chon replied, “But I don’t need it. I know seven hundred twenty-one by hearts.”

“What is it?” Faith asked.

“I thought it was more of an urban legend. Never expected to hear of it on the job,” Chon said, pulling a pack of Morleys out of the interior pocket of his blazer.

“Crap, you know it’s serious when Chon heads to the airlock,” Nick whispered to Faith.

The pair followed Chon into the large airlock of the hangar bay runway. Chon was running his palm back and forth over his lumpy head. The airlock closed behind, cutting the trio off from the rest of the ship. Chon paced and sucked down a whole cigarette before speaking. The smoke swirled inside his translucent gullet as he breathed.

“Seven-two-one was a rapid development experiment that reportedly did not go so well. Like the Treehouse Projects in a sense, but about four thousand years ago – right around the start of the Minoan Age. The UIPA, still fairly young at the time, tried to speed human evolution along at a more rapid pace. The assembly had just



branched off of the larger parent body, and some of the members were anxious to increase funding. So they devised a way to prove their value. They moved a group of about a thousand humans to a remote, underwater city and genetically modified each generation of children for ten generations. Next thing they know, they go there for an exploratory update mission a couple centuries later and the place is abandoned. Well it's not until about a century later that the colonists were found."

"Where'd they go?" Faith asked.

"This ocean planet with an irregular orbit. They called it Nibiru," Chon explained as he lit another cigarette, "But when the UIPA tried to re-establish contact, they were met with ion canons. Seems the colonists had enough of being messed with by the UIPA and decided to go at it on their own. The planet's been blacklisted since. We don't even track it anymore."

"Jonas," Faith whispered, "He said Nibiru was coming back to intercept Earth and take over. Because their planet is on course to hit the Sun. He told me to follow the map."

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“I’m going to assume he hopes to get the location of Nibiru from there. And he doesn’t have the scratch to do it himself,” Chon replied.

“But what’s the end game?” Nick asked, “I mean, naturally to save the planet would be anyone’s motive of self-preservation, but why kill and kidnap people and involve Faith?”

“I agree it doesn’t make sense, but if it’s true, we need to get an ambassador to Nibiru with a quickness,” Chon replied.

“Something just occurred to me,” Faith remarked, “What was the name of the colony in seven-two-one?”

“Atlantis... What else?” Chon replied with a half-smile.

## Chapter Two

### The A-Team

"We're going to need a linguist," Nick said.

"And a swimmer, for safety," Faith added.

"I know a great ancient language linguist we can enlist," Chon offered, "And a swimmer too, but he may be difficult to engage."

"Is he the best?" Nick asked.

"Oh yes, definitely the best suited for a safety job," said Chon, "But my last encounter with him didn't go so well. Name's Jonathon Pontius."

"Why does that sound familiar?" Nick asked.

"You may remember the name as the fourth surviving Treehouse Project experiment."

"Oh, wow! Right! So that's what he can do? Swim?" Nick enthused.

"Yes, fantastic breath-holder, too. He'd be a great asset if you'd like to go talk to him."

"Awesome," Nick said, more excited than before, "And we need Milo as our weapons specialist. Little guy is good with non-violent detainment."

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“As far as we know, the place is totally devoid of life,” Chon argued.

“You never know what kinda octopus or kraken might be creeping around down there!”

“Fine, Nick, you can take Milo,” Chon resigned.

“What about Skree – quick thinker, and his technical knowledge would be a huge help,” Faith suggested, “How’s he recovering?”

“Doing well, should be up and kicking in another day or so,” Chon answered, “We’ll ask him if he’s interested in going along.”

“Just noticed you used the words ‘going along’,” Nick said with a raised eyebrow, “If you planned to go with us you would have said ‘coming along’, as in ‘he’s coming along’ with us.”

“Nick, you know I’m in no shape to be out globetrotting with you. I can barely make it up the one step to the transport deck without running out of breath.”

“But you’re the most knowledgeable person we have when it comes to the Atlantians,” Nick countered.

“We’ll see what the medics say about that. If they say I’m clear to go, I’ll go,” Chon grumbled, “But I cannot promise to be happy about it!”

“You love us, Chon!” Faith laughed.

Chon scratched his gruff neck and rifled through some notes on his tablet computer. It had been millennia since anyone had stepped foot inside Atlantis, and he knew that there was no guarantee that the computers inside would even function. It would take a miracle for Nick and Skree to access any significant data, even with the help of an experienced Greek linguist. He wondered if Jonas knew more than he was letting on.

“Now say we get down there and we actually access something significant,” Chon groaned, “Are we actually going to turn that information over to this nutcase?”

“That’s not my call! I’m just here for the adventure,” Nick joked.

“Nick, come on, this is serious. The dude has V.P. Mueller and no telling who else,” Faith leveled, “With his limited resources, I don’t see an issue with giving him

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

whatever information we find out about Nibiru's return and plans. The greater picture here is what will happen if we are headed for war? Does the UIPA have the resources to help out?"

"The UIPA is not a military organization," Chon stated, as if reading from a handbook.

"So how long is this to be kept under wraps?" Faith demanded, "How long should the people of Earth be kept in the dark about the possibility of impending attack?"

"First things, first. We need to confirm that we are indeed under *impending attack*. Only a trip to site seven-two-one will confirm it. If anything, perhaps we can at least pull the coordinates of the rogue planet and send ambassadors there to offer peace and negotiate refuge if they seek it," Chon reasoned.

"Well then," Nick bluntly interrupted, "Let's collect our crew."

"We'll transport you down to Manhattan with Mr. Pontius's address. Take a second transport chip with you and give it to him to decide," Chon grumbled.

“Just to check,” Faith queried, “But couldn’t we take a ship instead?”

“Why?”

“Because it’s safer,” Nick laughed.

“You damn kids,” Chon argued back, “No one has ever died using the transport system!”

“That may be so – but I saw a guy come up with an arm attached to his neck once!” Nick stated as he pointed a finger directly at Chon.

“Simple configuration malfunction, we had it repositioned in minutes,” Chon said bluntly, “Now I’ve got an appointment with a Yale Greek History professor, so you’ll have to excuse me. I have real work to do.”

With that, Chon hobbled up to the transport deck and disappeared.

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“Whatcha doin?” Faith asked, as she let the warm vapors of her beverage waft up her nose.

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

“Just reading up on Mr. Pontius one last time before we make the jump down,” Nick answered softly, “Looks like he was a low-level employee at Truman’s hide-out.”

The couple sat on a red velvet sofa in the commons area of the *Ruengale II*. Service bots, alien workers, and new human recruits were busying themselves with lunchtime activities. Life had returned to normal for the crew – one would never guess that there had been a massive battle there – just years before.

There was one species noticeably absent from the ship, however. Zeta Reticuli had been given a probationary period from the UIPA following the events of the *BlackHole Recovery Incident*. All Zetans – no matter their position or relation to the incident – were removed from post and deported back to Zeta Reticuli. It was a serious statement that if one muddles in UIPA affairs, one would be removed from UIPA affairs. The probationary period was to last the equivalent of seventeen Earth years, which was assumed to be enough time to weed out any ill sorts that lingered.



“Can you believe that Dale knew about me this whole time?” Faith asked with a grin.

“Dale’s a smart guy – give him some credit,” Nick replied quietly, “I just hope Mags doesn’t worry herself sick over what we’re doing.”

“Yeah, imagine living in a world for half a century – then one day waking up and finding out there’s all this stuff going on out there that you don’t know about and couldn’t possibly understand.”

“I suppose everyone has that sort of experience at least once in his or her life,” offered Nick, nose still buried in his tablet.

Faith pondered that thought for a moment, and marveled at how deep her fiancée could be at times. It brought a loving smile to her face.

“Nick, you young little bastard!” a familiar voice rang out from behind their seat.

“Holy crap, that sounds like a walking Nerf ball with antennae!” Nick joked.

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“Milo! Nila!” Faith said as she fell to her knees to hug her little friends, “It’s been since... What? Christmas?”

“Yes!” Nila replied, “And we’ve been traveling Earth!”

“Girl’s about to break my bank!” Milo joked.

“You did see my boy Antonio in Venice like I suggested, right?” Nick asked with a haughty grin.

“Best damned garlic bread and meatballs this side of The Pleiades!” Milo boasted in praise.

“Antonio, huh?” Faith asked with a smirk.

“I have friends. In places,” Nick cracked, barely able to hold in his laughter.

“It was fantastic! Now if only you had a suggestion for somewhere to buy an engagement chalice...” said Nila, poking her boyfriend’s bare belly.

“Don’t listen to her, Nick!” Milo laughed.

“There’s a great antiques shop in Jericho...” Nick began.

“Nick, shut it!” Milo joked.

The group was always delighted to reunite. Because of Faith’s choice to remain anonymous after her arrival back

on Earth, it had been hard for the couples to spend any time together. While aliens were becoming more and more prevalent on the planet, Ravenwood had remained mostly conservative about alien-human integration. Milo and Nick were still close friends, however, and spoke to each other via webcam almost weekly.

“But seriously,” Milo said in his familiar Bronx accent, “We hear there’s trouble and you might need my help. You know whatever’s up, I’ll be right there by your side.”

The two and a half foot tall alien’s antennae receded slightly as he spoke. He could sense tension building, and felt that Nick was worried about asking for his help.

“It might be dangerous,” Nick began, “There’s this lunatic that has America’s Vice President, and he doesn’t plan to turn him over until he gets what he wants.”

“What does he want?” Nila asked inquisitively, her antennae also in motion.

“We don’t know,” Faith replied, “We just know there’s something he wants – information of some kind – from a hidden underwater city.”

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“There’s a planet that may be preparing for conflict with Earth. Whatever the case, the guy gave us word of the attack, but no word of exactly what his interest in all this is,” Nick added.

“Sounds fishy,” Milo replied, his eyes lost in thought, “Whatever’s up, count me in.”

“Nila?” Faith turned to her friend.

“Milo’s always been fighter, I can’t take that out of him,” Nila admitted, “I’ll be waiting for you all when you get back. And I’ll make cobbler, just for you Faithy.”

“You’re such a sweetheart,” Faith said, embracing the little alien.

Nick turned to his old friend, “Milo – Chon wants us to go enlist the help of another Treehouse Project survivor.”

“Pontius?” Milo asked with a squinted eye and upturned lip.

“Yeah... How’d you know?” Nick asked, surprised.

“We’ve met... Accidentally.”

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Chon immediately felt out of place as he climbed the steps to the Yale Linguistics building on Temple Street. A group of professors marched in a row down the steps, whispering hushed comments about the gargantuan tweed-adorned alien. Chon had grown accustomed to the stares he would receive in public, and was always amazed at how long it took humans to adjust to change.

The door creaked open and a woman greeted him immediately as he entered. She was watering a pair of potted plants at the entrance. She seemed startled, though not alarmed, by his appearance.

“Good afternoon!” she said with a humble smile, “Looking for anyone in particular?”

“Hello there, my name is Chon Tom. I’m looking for a Doctor Marcus Braun.”

“His office is in room two hundred eight. Just hang a left when you get off the elevator,” she said, pointing down the hall.

“Is there a weight limit on your elevator?” Chon joked.

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“There is a stairwell, just a bit further down,” she replied with a chuckle.

Chon nodded politely and made his way down the hallway. His heels clicked in rhythm as his four feet moved past each other with a surprising grace. The building was old, but nonetheless beautiful in its scholarly elegance. *The ability to learn is not fostered by ornate architecture*, Chon thought to himself. He was happy that some humans still valued function over form. The composite brick walls made it look like a school – just as Chon felt it should.

A scurrying student dropped a book at the sight of Chon lumbering up the stairs. It slid to a stop at the stair before him, and he lowered down to pick it up for her. She trembled a bit as she took it from his large green hand and placed it with her others.

“Those things are too expensive to be throwing around these days!” Chon joked, as he continued his climb.

She smiled as she watched the kind old alien struggle up the stairwell.

The door to room two hundred eight was closed. A placard on the wall read *Doctor Marcus Braun PhD, Department of Linguistics*. There were photographs, notes, and a class calendar pinned to a small bulletin board on the door. The photographs showed Doctor Braun in various locales – the Acropolis and Parthenon in Athens, and Olympia, the site of the original Olympic games. There were also photographs of the professor with students, other faculty, and a curious shot of him in a toga drinking from a goblet.

He was an older man – likely in his fifties, from what Chon could ascertain. Chon had not actually investigated much about Doctor Braun. He preferred to learn about the man from the man himself. Chon adjusted his tie and knocked twice on the hollow wooden door.

“It’s open!” yelled a heavily German-accented voice from inside.

Chon fumbled with the tiny doorknob until he caught it in his grip. He wondered briefly why all humans did not

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

opt for door handles that could be simply pushed down to unlatch.

Chon rounded the corner of the short interior hallway to find an open door to a small office. A grey haired man with thick black-rimmed glasses and a scraggly beard sat hunched over a pair of books at his desk. One book appeared brand new, the other several centuries old. A CRT monitor sat on his desk, though the computer tower lay covered in dust – its power cable unplugged from the socket. Two clocks hung on the wall, one set to Eastern Time, the other to EET – Greece’s time zone. Beside his desk was a map of the Mediterranean Sea. It was obvious that the man was passionate about his area of interest.

Chon cleared his throat, prompting the man to look up and over the frames of his glasses.

“Chon Tom, is it?” Dr. Braun asked politely.

“Yes sir,” Chon replied.

“You made some big waves a couple years ago with that surprise landing, Mr. Tom.”





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“Yes sir,” Chon admitted, “Somewhat by accident, I’m afraid.”

“I can only assume by this unexpected visit that I am in store for yet another bit of Earth-shaking news. But why the personal touch?” asked Dr. Braun, as he set his glasses down atop the aged manuscript that lay before him.

“I feel that I have a situation that requires a person of your expertise. And I feel that it may be valuable to your area of study.”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t become involved with your incessantly bureaucratic organization even if you provided me a vacation in Atlantis,” joked the doctor.

“Is that so?” Chon asked with a knowing grin.

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“This is the place,” Milo announced.

He, Nick, and Faith stood at the foot of a twenty-four-story apartment building. They spied an illicit trade take place on the street corner, and a pair of young boys bouncing a basketball back and forth just yards away from the deal. An elderly woman stood out on the stoop shaking

dust from her rugs and gossiping about her minister to a blind man puffing away on a pipe.

“Oh, you folks don’t look like you’re from around here!” the woman said in feigned surprise.

“Just visiting!” Nick joked.

“Boris, they’ve got one of them yellow guys with ‘em,” she said to her blind friend.

“Oh boy, them little critters all over nowadays,” he replied with a laugh.

The group continued up the stairs and through the double-doors of the entrance. A dank-looking yellow wallpaper covered every square-inch of the walls. An intricately detailed wooden baseboard, uncharacteristic of such buildings, ran along the floor. The lights on the walls were encased in frosted glass and trimmed in brass adornments.

“It’s number nine-zero-nine,” Milo said as he pressed the elevator call button.

The ride up was quick, and Pontius’s apartment was directly across the hall from the lift.

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

“You knock,” Milo said sheepishly.

“Not it!” Faith proclaimed, with an elbow jab at Nick.

“Fine, you wimps,” Nick said with a quick bang on the door.

After a nearly eternal wait, the door opened and a dark black figure appeared. He was a handsome African-American fellow, with a jaw that could chisel diamond. His head was wrapped in a bandage, and he held an open book in his hand. At the sight of Milo he threw the book directly at the alien’s head.

“You’re that little bastard that was diggin’ in my garbage!” he yelled, running into the apartment.

“Whoa, calm down now!” Faith warned, “Not here to cause trouble.”

“I knew it. I knew I hadn’t imagined you. How long have you been following me?”

“Just let us explain, I swear it’ll all make sense,” Milo begged.

“No, get out of here! Get the hell out of my apartment.”

Pontius grabbed a goldfish net and pointed it at the group.

“Seriously?” Faith asked politely.

“You two – Nick and Faith, right?”

“Yes,” Faith replied calmly, “We need to speak to you, please.”

“Yes, put down the goldfish net, so we can talk,” Nick said with an annoyed shake of his head.

“Okay, but that little prick stays in the living room. We talk in the kitchen.”

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“Unbelievable,” Dr. Braun whispered, as he slid a finger across Chon’s tablet computer, “If I had a computer like this I might actually plug it in!”

Chon shook his head in frustration.

“So do you think you can assist us?”

“Oh yes, right,” began Dr. Braun, still enamored by the technology that he held in his hands, “Uhm, well... I assume that the dialect did not evolve too significantly over the few hundred years that the culture was separated from

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the rest of civilization. Certainly any data you manage to retrieve could be interpreted. Were there any non-Athenians brought in?"

"As far as our documentation indicates, there were only Athenian Greeks, to maintain a clean test sample. But we do not have access to all of the data."

"It's a pity they've all left, and remarkable that the people were able to pull together such a feat of technology at such an age in time," Dr. Braun marveled.

"Would you be willing to come with us?"

"While I disagree with your organization's shady political dealings, I feel that the pursuit of new knowledge trumps any moral withholdings. It's a give-and-take."

"Excellent," Chon said, pleased.

"But I refuse to use that flawed transport technology of yours. In no way are you sucking *me* through that thing."

"I'll send for a ship," Chon groaned.

:: :: ::

Pontius's apartment was full of fish tanks, fishbowls, and the occasional water lily in a crystal saucer. His

affinity for ocean life was no secret, nor was his swimming ability. A set of plastic shelves next to the kitchen area was adorned with dozens of swimming-meet trophies and medals.

“So this bullshit about the Treehouse Projects is legit?” Pontius asked, shakily pouring a cup of coffee for Faith.

“Yes, and I can prove it if necessary,” Faith replied as she took the mug.

“That’s not necessary, I’ve seen what you can do,” he replied, “I saw the playback from your little high-flying scuffle with Fusion on the island.”

“I knew you looked familiar,” Nick thought, “You were that guard... What was it you said? ‘Sometimes radicalism is the only alternative’?”

“Yeah,” Pontius moaned, “That was a rough couple of months.”

“Look, we’re heading to an abandoned underwater colony, at the request of a man named Jonas Savant,” Faith explained.

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“Yeah, I think I know who you’re talking about. He tried to drown me, and then I recognized him again on TV. Cowardly asshole thinks I’m dead right now. I’d love to mess his ass up.”

“You come help us, and you might get that chance,” Nick offered.

“Only if the situation calls for it,” Faith warned, “There’s something suspicious about Jonas’s motives.”

“Lunatic doesn’t have motives,” countered Pontius with a snarl, “Just a psychopath running crazy and looking for attention.”

Milo piped up, “I don’t think so, the guy is obvi –”

“No one asked you, Doughboy,” Pontius yelled back, “I’m in to help out. But I want a gun. And armor.”

“We’ll see what we can put together,” Nick said with a nod, “Just press this button when you’re ready.”

Nicked tossed Pontius a transport chip, grabbed Milo by the scruff of the neck, and the small group disappeared back to the ship.

: : : :



“Hey guys, that was quick!” Chon remarked as he approached the transport deck, “Seems you had better luck with him than I did.”

“Incoming!”

Pontius snapped into presence on the transport deck next to the group.

“Holy shit! That was wild!” he proclaimed.

“Glad you enjoyed it, my boy,” Chon chuckled.

“I’m not here for you, Fatboy,” Pontius popped, “I just want my shot at Savant.”

“You may just get that shot,” Chon replied happily, “I just got back myself – from meeting with Dr. Marcus Braun. He has that funny human distrust of our transport system, and will be arriving via a ship instead. Skree is waiting for us in the primary development lab. Braun should be with us in an hour or so.”

“Well, let’s head down and see the guy!” Nick glowed.

“I’m certain Skree will be looking forward to seeing Faith, at least,” Chon replied with a modest wink.

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The development lab was small – its appearance made smaller by the sheer amount of contraptions it housed. It was where Skree spent his time during his stints at the *Ruengale II*. He worked one month on, one month off, developing technologies that would be implemented at the revamped lunar base. It was tiring and often stumping work, but the month-long reprieves he spent on Waikiki Beach more than made up for the stress.

“Faith, my girl, I cannot thank you enough!” Skree shouted as the group entered the compact quarters.

“You’d have done the same for me, Skree,” she said politely.

“I have no doubts about that! Now have a look at what I’ve put together here,” he boasted, as he pulled a sheet off of his carefully arranged gadgets, “First off, we have the sleeve. Faith, Nick, you probably remember this one. Rather than using it as a weapon, I have converted it into a detainment tool. The electric shock is high voltage, and medium amperage, with a polarized arc. Crank up the

intensity and the polarized ends become attracted to each other, pulling the stunned captive right to you.”

“Very nice,” Chon complimented.

“I see the focus is still on non-fatal detainment,” Faith sighed.

“Hence the term *detainment*,” Skree grinned, “Nick and Faith, you will both recognize the swizlakuli, these both only have minor upgrades, the interior is now lined with graphene for added durability.”

“I call the green one,” Faith joked, as the weapon leapt from the table into her hand.

“Lastly, earpiece communicators. Goes in your ear, lets you hear what everyone else in the group has to say,” Skree said.

“No guns?” Pontius questioned loudly.

“At least in Atlantis, there should be no threat,” Skree reasoned, “It’s been abandoned for more than three millennia.”

“I want a gun or I’m out,” Pontius demanded.

Skree sighed and opened a drawer in the table.

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“Freeze pellet pistol. Non-lethal as long as it’s not aimed at the head or torso. Shoot for the limbs,” Skree instructed, “Thirteen shots. Hurts like hell.”

Pontius took the weapon and tucked it into his pants.

“Pontius brought up another point earlier – armor,” mentioned Faith.

“Glad you asked, you’ll each be outfitted with a graphene lined, faux-leather suit. Should offer enough protection from small caliber weapons to walk away with nothing but a few bruises.”

“Does that come in green as well?” a fashion-conscious Faith asked.

“Anything for the savior of the world,” Skree grinned, “Now follow me!”

The group moved down the main corridor to the hangar bay. In the years following the *BlackHole Recovery Incident*, the vessels housed on the *Ruengale II* had been standardized into three groups: large transports, small transports, and submersible aircraft. The standardization was an attempt by the governing body of the UIPA to keep

better tabs on which vehicles were out at all times and to prevent unauthorized usage. The change seemed nonsensical in the minds of the crewmembers of the *Ruengale II*, but few bothered to argue with official decree.

"Since we are limited in our aircraft, we'll be venturing down in a T-8 submersible vessel, such as this," Skree explained, "Nick, I believe you've piloted one before?"

"Yes sir. Easy as all get-out."

"Since we have no idea of the status of site seven-two-one, we will be converting the photon combustion chamber into sealable exit point for our friend Mr. Pontius, here. This will allow him to exit and swim out to open a hatch or what-have-you, and allow us entry to the structure."

"You do your part, I'll do mine," a bold Pontius remarked.

"Yes... Indeed..." Skree mumbled, stunned by the man's brashness.

A service bot rolled up and bumped Chon's left rear leg.

"Message, sir. Ship approaching. Cargo: Dr. Marcus Braun," it hummed.

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“Right on time,” Chon groaned.

The group watched as the small transport vessel entered the airlock, hovered during recompression, and entered the hangar bay. The doctor exited the vehicle sporting a grey blazer and matching fedora. He walked briskly, briefcase in hand, to meet the cobbled crew. The leather-patched elbows of his jacket were worn thin. His dark framed glasses hung just on the tip of his nose, and slipped a bit as he spoke.

“I hope I am not too late,” he said with sincerity, “I had to collect some documents for reference.”

“No bother,” Chon said, “I’d like you to meet Mr. Jonathon Pontius, Mr. Nicholas Rutherford, Milo Pip, and Ms. Faith Forester.”

“Faith Forester, hmm?” Dr. Braun said curiously, “It wouldn’t happen that you might be associated with a young lady who uses the alias *Stargazer*, by any chance? I saw that masked man ask for her on the news.”

“Nice connection, Doctor,” she said smiling, “But let’s keep that a secret.”

“Certainly. Glad to make your acquaintance. All of you!”

“Dr. Braun will be our linguistic assistant on this assignment. He will be helping to interpret any data we can uncover about the whereabouts of the Nibiruans and their planet,” explained Chon.

“I’d make a pun about how it’s all Greek, but I have a feeling you’ve heard that one, Doc,” Nick joked, only to be met with groans.

“Let’s hope for an in-flight movie rather than your stand-up routine, I’d say, Nicholas,” quipped the professor.

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***



## Chapter Three

33.15 ; 28.79

"Are you familiar with the *displacement vector*, Vice President Mueller?" Jonas quizzed his captive.

"I'm afraid not, sir," he responded politely.

Mueller's arms were duct-taped to the arms of the office chair in which he sat – his feet attached firmly to the wheeled legs. The room was dimly lit, but as Mueller could discern, it was some sort of abandoned office building. Cubicle walls were seen scattered on the floor, and an out-of-order copy machine sat beeping a quiet plea for help in the rear corner of the room.

"The displacement vector is the actual distance from the starting point of a trip to the ending point. No matter what route taken, the displacement is always constant. If you travel from Houston to San Francisco, your displacement will always be the same, no matter if you drive straight there or detour through, say, Salt Lake City, where your mistress lives. The shortest distance from point A to point B, will, as fourth grade math tells us, always be a straight line."

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“I have no mistress, sir. And my wife is probably worried sick about me,” Mueller pleaded.

“Oh, it’s okay,” Jonas assured him, “She knows about Erica. That’s why she’s been sneaking off to spend quality time with your golfing buddy!”

“What? Tom? I don’t believe a word of it!”

“I could show you photos, but I doubt you’re interested,” said Jonas with a sly wink, “Besides, we were talking about math.”

Jonas shoved some of the cubicle barriers out of the way with his feet and adjusted his respirator mask. Mueller noticed a significant tan-line underneath the edge of the plastic. It looked like it had not been removed in ages. The man’s greasy hair stuck to the mask, and he adjusted the ratty mess several times to keep it out of his face.

“Displacement vectors are fascinating, do you know why?” Jonas asked, as he spun the Vice President around in the chair and faced him towards a fire extinguisher on the floor against the opposing wall.



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“Why are they interesting, Mr. Savant?”

“Because...”

Jonas placed a foot on the back of the chair and shoved it toward the side wall. He then danced his way across the floor to the fire extinguisher. Mueller’s chair ricocheted off of the side wall and rolled to a stop at the fire extinguisher.

“If someone else’s path deviates ever so slightly from your path, you can always get to the finish line faster!” Jonas exclaimed.

“That’s very interesting, Mr. Savant.”

“Yes, yes it is, isn’t it? And practical too, Mr. Mueller! Do you know why?”

“Please tell me, Mr. Savant,” Mueller said, now growing weary of being artificially courteous to his captor.

“Because, Silly! It can be applied to more than simply spatial distances! Time is far from a constant.”

Jonas pulled a silver briefcase from near the doorway, and sat it on Mueller’s lap. He unhooked the brass latches and removed a piece of deep blue cloth from within. He

danced oddly backwards, shaking the sheet before him like an oddball stage magician.

“Does your wife satisfy you, Mr. Mueller?” Jonas asked with a slight throaty hiss.

“That’s quite an inappropriate question, sir,” Mueller answered.

“No, no, no... Shut up, stop talking,” Jonas hushed his captive audience, “I asked you a question, and I expect a direct answer.”

Jonas held the sheet before him ten yards in front of Mueller’s chair. He shook the sheet a few times and raised a curious eyebrow.

“Now tell me, *Vice President* Mueller. Does your wife *satisfy* you?”

“I don’t know how to answer tha—”

“Answer it!” Jonas yelled in a sudden rage, “Answer the damned question!”

“No! She doesn’t!” Mueller screamed.

“Ooo, survey says?” Jonas asked as he whipped the sheet up and to his right.

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Mueller's wife, bound at the hands and feet sat in the floor before him.

Jonas grinned a disgusting smirk, "I'm sorry – bad answer..."

Mueller and his wife sat motionless in stares of disbelief.

"See, while I took the long way across the room, Annabelle here opted for the shortest displacement vector. Math is so fascinating!"

"How... We haven't approved the quantum transport systems for manufacture yet... How did you..."

"Stop talking, you're being annoying! I don't need the quantum mumbly-bumbly. I have something better... Now – you two have a lot to talk about, so I'll leave you be!"

Jonas pranced happily out of the room and slammed the door.

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"These suits are ridiculously tight," Pontius complained as he tried desperately to pull the thin faux-leather-covered graphene mesh over his hips.

"You shoulda tried on the last ones," Nick groaned.

"They're tight for a reason," explained Skree, "You want a little tension on the graphene."

"I've definitely got a little tension on my graphene," Pontius chuckled to himself.

"Hey, Pontius, never got a chance to ask you," Nick said as he pulled on the skin-tight boots, "How'd you get involved in Fusion's organization?"

"After I saw *Nosey* here digging through my garbage can in the middle of the night," Pontius said with a finger pointed at Milo, "I started researching aliens and stuff online. I met a guy through some of the sites and told him what I saw. He said he could blow my mind with info the government was covering up. I went to meet him, and he told me what he went through and what he knew. He told me he could help me prove to my family that I wasn't crazy – that I did see what I said I saw. I guess in a way he was right."

"In all honesty, we were just trying to make certain you were safe," Milo said unapologetically, "Just trying to make

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sure no one had caught on to what you really were. There was no reason to smack me upside the head with a can of goldfish flakes.”

Skree passed out the earpiece communicators to each crewmember. They were smaller than his previous design, and could barely be seen inside the ear canal. The flexible grey rubber fit snugly and comfortably.

“New design?” Nick asked as he took the small pellet from Skree.

“Yes sir, smaller and lighter!”

“I’ve been thinking of an add-on module for these things that might just fit in the extra space you shaved off,” Nick pondered.

“Come up to the lab here in a bit before we leave, and we’ll have a look,” Skree said with a grin.

“Just got a message from the East Embassy,” Chon announced as he entered the room, one of his typical tweed suits covering the goofy jumpsuit he wore underneath, “The Vice President’s wife has been kidnapped as well. Jonas is claiming responsibility. He hijacked a D.C. local



news affiliate and displayed the text 'Send the A-Team my urgent regards' for seven minutes and twenty-one seconds."

"I take it that was directed to us," Nick quipped dryly.

"We leave in an hour," Chon ordered.

:: :: ::

Jonas stood in a corner office in front of a notebook computer. Atop the computer – a model likely older than building itself – was a webcam attached with several strips of shiny grey tape. A dark figure, clad in a matte-black robe appeared on screen from the waist up. A poorly synthesized voice, like that of a text-to-speech computer program from the 1990s, crackled with a monotone murmur from the speakers.

"Do... You... Have... Nibiru's... Coordinates?" the voice slowly spoke.

"Not yet," Jonas grumbled, tossing his hands into the air, "The damned girl and her ragtag crew are taking forever. I went ahead and nabbed Goober's wife though,

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and tossed them together to hash out their relationship issues. I like to think of myself as, you know, a therapist.”

“Do... You... Remember... Protocol?” the synthesizer asked as the figure on the screen pointed a finger outward.

“Yes, yes, don’t you worry, you’ll get your war long as I get my gold.”

“There... Is... Only... One... Opportunity. Do... Not... Fail,” the mechanical voice demanded before the screen went blank.

“What a jerk-off.”

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The crew lined up for role call. All seven members were present, and took their seats inside the submersible craft. It was long and cylindrical, with seating for eight. Nick and Faith sat in front, followed by Skree and Pontius in the second row, Milo and the professor in the third, and Chon sprawled across both seats in the rear.

The converted photon combustion chamber was merely a pressure-sealed door in the floor. Skree and Nick had reworked it to operate much like the airlocks of the

*Ruengale* ships. Pontius could enter and leave the ship with only a wait for re-pressurization and water expulsion on the return trip. It was a simple mechanism designed for a complicated endeavor.

“Everyone ready?” Nick called back.

“Let’s move!” Chon ordered.

The ship rose from its spot at the end of the row and lurched toward the airlock. Although he had flown a similar craft a few times before, Nick had not ever piloted one with such significant modifications. He felt its weight beneath him as he maneuvered it out of the hangar. He knew his skills might be rusty – he had not flown anything at all for nearly two years. He felt the ship’s belly screech along the floor of the landing strip.

“My bad – up we go!”

Nick pulled hard on the control stick and lifted the craft up and out of the airlock.

“Two hours and counting,” rattled Nick, as he set the autopilot, “Anyone up for a nap?”

The group stared back.

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“Alrighty, just me, then...” Nick joked, as he reclined his chair and threw his feet up on the console.

“Mr. Tom, you really think we’re gonna be able to get into this place?” Pontius asked.

“Well I don’t see why not,” Chon thought for a moment, “Should be as simple as waltzing in, attempting to power on the hardware, and seeing what happens. Worst outcome is we don’t get anything and Jonas just has to deal with that.”

“Damn, you guys get wrapped up in some crazy shit,” Pontius groaned.

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“Arrival time: two minutes,” came a voice from the console, “Prepare for manual pilot.”

Nick snorted awake with a kick to the chair from Skree.

“Take us in, Champ,” Skree instructed.

The professor arose to peer out the windows as the ship broke through the thin cloud cover. It was like a view of the Mediterranean map on his office wall. He had never been so far above the region. In his travels, the highest he

had flown was just a few thousand feet. It was a marvelous landscape – befitting the gods of Olympus.

“The Mediterranean Sea?” Dr. Braun asked, “It’s in the Mediterranean Sea?”

“It’s under the Mediterranean Sea,” Chon corrected.

“Jonas’s notes say that it’s two thousand one hundred meters deep. The Mediterranean is only about fifteen hundred meters at its deepest,” Skree added.

“He gave exact coordinates down to six points, so we can only trust his numbers,” said a hopeful Chon.

“Buckle up!” Nick hollered, “We’re diving in!”

“How delightful that it’s in the Mediterranean Sea!” Dr. Braun again announced.

“We get it, Doc, you like the Mediterranean Sea,” Pontius remarked sarcastically.

“I *love* the Mediterranean Sea!” Dr. Braun said with a grin.

The greenish blue water slowly enveloped the craft as it plunged into the sun-basked sea. Schools of small bait fish and larger game fish swam in circles, curiously inspecting

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the vehicle as it sank. The water was slightly murky, as the coordinates fell in a flow of the sea that was high in salinity.

“We’re, like, right on the coordinates guys!” Nick bragged, “Just a straight float down, now!”

“This is where the fun begins...” Faith lamented.

Nick flicked on the subsurface density sensor – a sonar-like device that used amplified tonal waves to sense the mass, viscosity, and size of geological formations. He saw a black spot in the center of a mass of red. The viscosity displayed the same properties as the surrounding water.

“There’s our entry point,” Nick said proudly.

“An underground cavern. Brilliant!” remarked the professor.

Pontius hopped up from his chair, handed Skree the freeze pellet gun, and began to stretch in preparation for a swim. He was surprised at the enthusiasm of the professor and wondered why someone would have such an affinity for a civilization that thrived so many thousand years

before. Pontius had never been one to study – much less care about – history. *If people are dead, he thought, they must have been doing something wrong.*

“This is wild!” Faith enthused as she leaned forward for a better look, “Did the UIPA carve all this out?”

“The larger parent body of the UIPA has kept detailed geological maps of the earth for millennia,” Chon explained proudly, “We had our cartographers here before humans even understood that there was more to Earth than the ten mile radius that they lived in. This is one of the best-hidden places on your planet, and was the perfect spot for the experiment. Just a shame the experiment went too well...”

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“I’m so sorry,” Mueller spoke sincerely, “I...We... We were caught up in the moment. It’s just... All the pressure... I’m making excuses, though...”

“I’m just as at fault as you, Dear,” Annabelle beckoned, “When I overheard you and her outside your office, I... I overreacted... I don’t love him, James, I don’t...”

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“When we get out of here, I promise, we’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Jonas interrupted as he walked through the doorway.

“You bastard! Let us go!” Mueller demanded.

“I need your warm company just a bit longer,” Jonas pleaded, playfully stroking Annabelle’s hair.

“Why do you need both of us? Why not let Annabelle go?” Mueller begged.

“Because there will come a time when I need to kill someone, and I don’t want to be without company.”

“You’re sick!” Annabelle shouted as she spit at her captor.

“Are you trying to make the decision easier?” Jonas grinned, “We go live in two hours on Larry King!”

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The submersible tagged a small outcropping of rock at the edge of the opening into the underwater cavern. Nick waved it off, and continued in downward descent. As the surroundings became black as pitch, he slid a finger across a yellow line on the console and activated the auxiliary



lighting system. Immediately a dark dome was visible in the distance.

"The colony was established first as a central dome structure, then branched out over a few years to six outer domes. Each could comfortably house two hundred fifty people. The central computers should still be housed in the trunk that anchors the place down," Chon explained.

"I thought you didn't know much about this project?" Faith asked.

"It was a popular bedtime story," mumbled Chon.

"This structure is massive," Dr. Braun marveled, "Was it all constructed down here?"

"By robotic engineers, yes. No life forms we know of would be useful for construction in this sort of environment," Chon chuckled.

"What was done? To the people?" Dr. Braun inquired suspiciously.

"For the most part," Chon began, "They were simply given significant amounts of technology, like computing tablets, communication devices, stuff like that. But there

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were some experiments involving a selection of the colonists and DNA supplementation for about a century's worth of generations. Just to speed things along, you know."

"Fascinating," the professor marveled, "And befitting that the Greeks were chosen!"

"What would come to be called The Minoan Age was just beginning, and it was a perfect chance to see how two groups would diverge – one on land, and one under the sea," Chon remarked.

"But the UIPA hadn't taken into account the Greeks' love for the heavens when planting a civilization so far under the sea?" asked the philosophical professor.

"I suppose not. Apparently they continued to plot Nibiru's orbit and blasted off to meet the gods at their next chance," Chon guessed.

"How did they know how to escape orbit?" Faith piped up.

“The UIPA goofs gave them submersibles sorta like this one,” griped Milo, “Not much of a stretch that they figured out how to convert them.”

“Project seven-two-one was the inspiration for a significant amount of protocol regulations in the organization,” Chon lamented, “Nothing on that scale has been attempted since – nor will it be.”

“Up there, look!” Pontius interrupted, “There’s a rip in the metal underneath that dome on the left.”

“Sure enough,” Nick agreed.

“Looks like if it was opened up some we could get the ship in there,” Milo offered.

“My guess would be... That the dome’s probably full of air that’s under enough pressure to keep the water out – like a cup turned upside-down and pushed into a bathtub,” Nick replied, “But we’d better send Pontius in to have a closer look before we pull out the respiration helmets.”

Pontius strapped on a pair of headlamps and stretched one last time. It had been a few weeks since he had last gone for a swim, but his adrenaline was pumping hard in

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anticipation. His body was already so warm that it tingled Skree's fingers as he helped Pontius squeeze into the tight airlock chamber in the center of the floor.

"I'll widen it up for you," Faith said as she gave Pontius a good luck pat, "Stay warm!"

Faith walked to the front of the ship. The viewing window was just a few meters from their desired point of entry. The metal was torn, and its bolts had popped off. Underneath was a shattered glass dome that looked as though it was several feet thick.

"It looks like it was hit by a torpedo that ripped clean through," Faith speculated.

Chon wanted to refute her assumption, but on close inspection it appeared that she was correct. Through the tear in the metal covering he could clearly see a circular blast hole in the protective glass enclosure.

"Just past the airtight barrier should be a thin veneer floor, just a few inches thick. Ceramic, if I remember correctly," Chon said.

Faith extended her hands toward the sheet of metal. She had never before attempted to move an object suspended in water, but she had moved much larger objects in recent months with varying success. In fact, she had discovered that her abilities factored greatly in successfully parallel parking.

Pontius was ejected from the bottom of the submersible and floated cautiously away from the dome. The crew inside watched as the particulate suspended in the murky seawater began slowly flowing toward the metal scrap. One of the bolts still attached to the plate fired off and into the abyss – followed by two more. The sheet rolled back from the underbelly of the dome like a peel off of a banana.

“That should be good!” Nick exclaimed, as he touched Faith’s shoulder.

She tossed her head back and sighed in exhaustion.

Pontius popped up in front of the ship and gave a thumbs up. A few bubbles escaped his nostrils as he turned towards the dome. With a few kicks of his feet he

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disappeared inside. The communicator broadcasted faint rustling noises to the vessel's console speaker. The group listened intently for any signs of entry.

The speaker crackled with three blunt pounds followed by the sound of a babbling brook.

"Pontius, what's your status?" Nick asked with a finger on the ship's transmitter.

"I'm in!" Pontius proclaimed, "And my god, does it smell in here!"

"How clear are we for entry?" Chon asked.

"Looks great to me. It's a ceramic floor like you said. Should be no problem just to pop through," Pontius stated confidently, "Just had to give it a couple punches. It's real brittle."

Suddenly there was a squeal from the speakers and several loud electrical cracks.

"Pontius's transmitter just fell offline," Nick whispered.

"What do we do?" Faith asked.

The crew sat silent for several seconds, all fixated on the hole in the underside of the dome.

“We go in,” Chon ordered, “Milo, take the pellet gun. Nick and Faith, arm up with your swizlakulis.”

The small ship slipped through the blast hole in the dome’s exterior. The group inside spotted glass blobs that had apparently been melted and re-solidified on the edges of the hole. As they turned upward, they spotted the crest of the water and a small hole chipped into the grey ceramic veneer. Mossy vines interweaved like spider webs under the thin floor of the dome.

“Just ram through,” Chon ordered.

The nose of the craft broke open the floor like a baseball bat through a pane of glass. It stopped in a hover over an unbroken portion of the floor.

“There’s no way I can walk on that,” Chon laughed nervously, “I guess I better stay here with the ship.”

“We’ll take it from here,” Skree agreed, “Keep an eye out for Pontius, and let us know if you see anything unusual.”

“Nothing is ever straight-forward when we’re involved,” Faith moaned to Nick.

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“It’s the randomness of life that inspires us to explore,” Dr. Braun offered, “Predictability is the assassin of discovery.”

“Come on,” Skree interrupted, “Let’s go.”

He helped the others gently out of the ship and onto the fragile ground. It creaked and popped under their feet as they navigated far around their entry hole and toward the center of the dome.

Beautifully ornate statues of the gods encircled a recessed courtyard at the dome’s center. It was eerily dark – the team’s headlamps did little more than illuminate their immediate path. Nick motioned to a set of stairs leading up to the second level of the dome, and the other three followed him.

“This level,” noted Dr. Braun, “It appears to be a set of dormitories.”

The walls were lined with doors three stories high and exterior lifts rather than staircases. Each housing unit had its own decorations near the lowest door – former potted plants, small statuettes, and even hand-woven rugs. It was



all relatively well preserved and untouched since its abandonment.

"This is not a typical Greek housing style. The Greeks rarely built up," Dr. Braun observed, "This is servant housing."

"I thought Atlantis was a utopian society," Faith remarked.

"Apparently that is... Myth," replied the professor, "Although there are many aspects of their cultural influences here. For example, this dish..."

Dr. Braun leaned down to inspect the clay artifact.

"It's a dog dish," he said gleefully, "The Greeks loved dogs, and our colonists must have brought a few with them."

"You'll have time for further study when you return with your own team," Skree offered, "Right now, we need to get to the computers and see what we can find."

"And find Pontius..." Nick added.

The sheer size of the domes impressed Faith. She could tell that the glass dome that encased the top of the

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

structure was once transparent – there were furnished viewing platforms scattered about the perimeter of the rounded ceiling. She tried for a moment to imagine what the place would have looked like when illuminated and polished. It must have been beautiful.

The group reached a series of exit doors at the interior end of the dome. They discovered an inclined walkway that led to the gigantic center dome. There was ample room for several hundred people to pass on foot if necessary. Faith imagined that it was busy with foot traffic during the days at the colony. A row of small booths lined the center of the walkway leading all the way to the central dome's entrance.

"Vendors," Dr. Braun wagered, "Probably stood here during the days and sold food and other wares to passing colonists."

"My best guess – from the limited information we have – is that there should be a service door on the interior wall near a security observation deck. That should lead to the

maintenance sector – and hopefully – the data center,” said Skree.

The group felt dwarfed upon entering the central dome. Its size was overwhelming and awe-inspiring. It rivaled any structure that the group had ever seen – Skree included. The ceiling was so high that the beams of their headlamps barely tickled its surface. There were dozens of large platforms suspended over the floor of the dome in varying heights. Each held a roomy housing unit – more in the classic Greek style – two or three exterior rooms, with a small interior courtyard for the family to spend time in.

“This is where the upper class would have lived. This is high class Greek,” whispered Dr. Braun.

“Over here!” hollered Skree, his headlamp bobbing as he waved the team over.

Skree rubbed hard with his sleeve against a door on the wall. As crumbs of rusty dirt fell to the floor, a series of symbols appeared. It was Greek.

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“Finally, I may be of use after all,” joked Dr. Braun as he donned his reading glasses, “Roughly translated, it reads ‘Enter To Machines’.”

“I’d say we found our door,” Skree sighed.

## Chapter Four

### The Remnants

"It's stuck," Skree complained, as he pushed on the door.

Faith placed her hand on the thin slab of metal. It immediately flew back and landed flat against the floor.

"I'd say it's a good thing we brought your girlfriend along," Dr. Braun whispered to Nick, "I can only imagine to what extent her abilities can be beneficial in everyday activities..."

"I'd really prefer it if you didn't continue," Nick laughed uncomfortably.

Faith and Skree had already run ahead. The hallway was narrow, sloped, and direct. Every hundred meters it hair-pinned back and then under itself to accommodate the limited space. There were dusty display consoles on the walls every few meters, as well as touch-input terminals similar to those still used in stations such as the *Ruengale II*. The aesthetic design of the terminals' housings, however, was clearly very archaic.

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

“Data center should be just a bit further down!” Skree yelled back, “Nick, ready some ferromagnetic duplicators so we can make this quick.”

Early data storage used on interstellar missions relied on burning binary information to sub-molecular threads of gold nanowire. The nanowire was so dense that many terabytes of information could be stored on a chip the size of a human fingernail. The advantage was that solar radiation and other cosmic rays could not easily damage data on the chips – as it was literally burned into the nanowire. A depth-sensitive ferromagnetic reader could pull off all the bits simultaneously, reducing the latency that could sometimes cause data corruption during duplication or reading. The storage technology still had practical uses in modern day applications, but due to lead-carbon alloy insulation on shielding arrays, its use was becoming less and less popular. Luckily for the crew, ferromagnetic data duplication devices still existed. The team would be able to recover any leftover data – providing the chips were still intact.

The group moved quickly down the corridor and turned to face the last leg of the descent. In the dark, far in the distance, they could just make out the central database. It was framed by a small doorway. A hobbled figure sat hunched against the tall machine, eclipsed by its height. When the lights of their headlamps met, Faith immediately recognized the man.

“Pontius!” she yelled, running towards him.

“Faith, wait!” yelled Nick.

Faith dove down to check Pontius’s pulse. He was alive and breathing, but barely conscious. The group caught up to her in seconds, but quickly discovered that they were not alone.

The light from their panning headlamps revealed a group of more than twenty pale humanoid beings gathered at each side of the perpendicular hallway. Their eyelids were fused – the eyeballs themselves recessed to near non-existence. The foreheads of the beings were large, protruding an inch or more past their faint eyebrows. Each had large, flat, bare feet – with toes so small they were

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

almost nothing but the nails. They were gaunt and boney, barely covered by tattered togas. One held a rusted pipe in his webbed hand.

The being spoke softly, like a whisper. His words were broken Greek.

“He says,” Dr. Braun thought for a moment, “He says that we are intruding.”

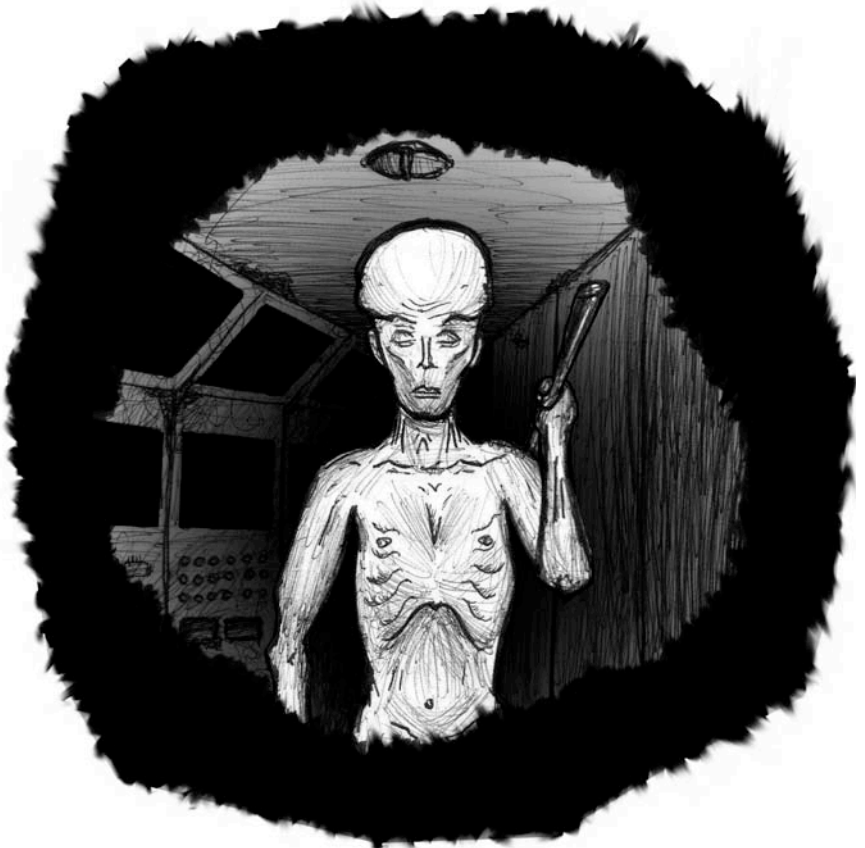
The pipe-wielding creature shook his weapon toward the group as he spoke again.

“He says that he knows that we’ve come for the data,” interpreted the professor, “He says that people from the ‘Traveling World’ are not allowed here.”

“They think we’re from Nibiru,” Skree determined aloud, “They must have been abandoned. Tell them our objective.”

Dr. Braun tried his best to relate their mission in the broken ancient dialect. It was difficult – the being used words that were not known to modern Greek researchers. The language had evolved after so many millennia under the sea.





## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

“He understands, I think,” Dr. Braun suggested, “But he says that when the ‘Elite’ escaped, they destroyed the machines. His kind was not allowed refuge on the escape vessels.”

“What were they escaping from?” Faith asked.

“The gods,” Braun replied.

There was a long pause as the group tried to make sense of what they had been told. The survivors had somehow managed to adapt to the depths after being abandoned by the upper crust elite of Atlantis.

“Ask them how we can find the ‘Elite’,” Skree ordered.

Dr. Braun relayed the question several times before he was confident that the man understood. The man spoke for more than a minute, gesturing several times with his hands.

“He says they first traveled to ‘The Platform of Stone where the world rests’,” said Dr. Braun, “Then to the ‘Traveling World’, not to return until the gods had died.”

The pale, feeble man spoke a short sentence, before he pulled a small crystalline wafer from within another man’s

clothing. The trinket was offered to Dr. Braun, who graciously accepted it and turned to his crew.

"He says to go to the 'Tail of The Devil' and open 'The God Box'," Dr. Braun relayed.

Silence pierced the narrow hallway.

"Corwell's Cube," Milo whispered.

"What's that, Milo?" Nick asked.

"Corwell's Cube," Skree repeated.

"I think I'm missing something here," Faith groaned.

"Alexander Corwell was a Mayan researcher for many decades," Dr. Braun explained, "About a decade ago he discovered a seamless black cube inside a hollow stone box within an astronomical map room at the Mayan Temple of the Jaguar. An unknown assailant murdered him in his flat in London, but not before he could donate the artifact to the Smithsonian Institute. The word 'Chicxulub' is translated to the 'Tail of the Devil'. It is speculated that the artifact was discovered or created by the Mayans near that site – based on additional findings discovered within that same map room."

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“So what’s so special about the cube?” Nick asked, confused.

“It was the only Mayan artifact ever recovered that was inscribed with Greek characters,” Dr. Braun said humbly.

“What did it say?” asked Faith.

*“Where we go we conquer. When gods betray we leave. Knowledge within held. Knowledge within key,”*

Dr. Braun recited.

“A riddle?” Faith asked, still confused.

“Possibly, though I assume this wafer of crystal has something to do with it,” Dr. Braun suggested.

“Ask them what we’re supposed to do with the thing,” Skree ordered.

The professor briefly conversed with the gaunt man, and then turned back to the group.

“He says: *Where you go, you will know. When you do, you will see. Only those with knowledge welcome. Knowledge is your key,*” Dr. Braun repeated, “Kind of funny, the English translation rhymes.”

“Thank him, so we can get out of here,” said Skree, “We’re off to the museum.”

“Hey, what’d I miss?” moaned a disheveled Pontius from the floor.

:: :: ::

“Alrighty, Veep! We’re live and in color!” Jonas hissed at the camera as he fumbled with the tripod.

He followed his cane to join the two captives, who were each secured tightly to an office chair.

“Don’t you worry, Mr. King only has about a million viewers a night,” Jonas cackled before he leaned in to whisper in Mueller’s ear, “It’s not like anyone’s watching.”

Jonas adjusted his respirator mask and jacket to act as if he cared what the co-opted viewers at home thought of him. He had not captured all of the show’s audience, and he lamented that fact, but he only had access to a few satellite television feeds. His broadcast was seeded into the encrypted stream of bits on its way up to space by a simple mechanism that Jonas had installed at several of the broadcast centers. The devices were simply gutted

## **Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector**

satellite receiver set-top boxes reconfigured to decrypt the signal at the source and pass on a feed streamed from the internet.

“Hello, little blue-haired beauties of middle-America,” Jonas began with a flip of his hair, “You may already be aware that I have been enjoying the company of your sexually promiscuous and maritally dissatisfied Vice President and his vengefully whorish and mournfully uninteresting wife. In the interest of partial disclosure, it seems the secret mission to give me what I want – sponsored by United States Government – has not progressed far enough within the understood time constraints. So now I’m going to have to make them suck on my balls.”

Jonas pulled a dark blue orb from each of his pants pockets and stuffed one in each captive’s mouth.

“Now, to be fair,” he stated with a snide sincerity, “If I hear from the little ragtag team of boy scouts before one of these idiots *drops the ball*, their lives will be spared to bore

me another day. But if one of these balls hits the ground, somebody's gonna have one hell of a headache! Tick tock!"

:: :: ::

Chon sat on the edge of the submersible as it hovered a few feet above the ceramic floor. He took a long drag on his cigar and held the smoke for a few seconds as he admired the glowing tobacco embers on the end of the butt. He exhaled a long, slow breath – blowing the sweet scented haze from his tiny pinprick nostrils. It amused him in his consuming boredom. He pondered dieting to slim down his gargantuan frame, but shuddered at the thought of living a day without high-fructose corn syrup.

"Chon!" Faith yelled from the distance.

"Finally, what the hell took so long?" Chon barked.

The group ignored the question and continued toward the ship. Faith had tucked the crystalline wafer tightly into her armored jumpsuit for safekeeping. She and Nick helped the still-groggy and no less confused Pontius make his way to the ship, as Dr. Braun, Skree, and Milo hurried to inform Chon of their encounter with the Atlantians.

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When Faith and the rest finally reached the ship, the news had already broken.

“I only made out a bit of your conversation back there. Damned ear buds. So they’re still alive?” Chon murmured with a somber curiosity.

“Yes, with some spectacular adaptations as well. I think they’ve evolved a primitive echolocation for navigation...” Skree guessed.

“Well, what did you find out?” Chon asked anxiously as he pulled the crew up into the ship.

“We were given an artifact and told to take it to, we believe, Corwell’s Cube. Apparently we’ll somehow learn something about Nibiru,” explained Skree.

“Well, I’ll have *Ruengale II* notify Jonas. I got word while you were gone that he’s threatening to blow the heads off of the veep and his wife. This should tide him over for now.”

“I believe I’ve learned more in the last half hour than I have in ten years,” Dr. Braun joked.

:: :: ::



“Just an update,” Nila’s voice rang from the console as the ship crested the sea and took flight, “Jonas called off the broadcast when we sent him the news. Says you’d better hurry up, though.”

“Copy that, Nila. Over,” Nick rattled, “Now how are we going to convince a Smithsonian curator to let us get ahold of the cube?”

“Luckily for you, it is being held at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum to be a feature at their upcoming *Space Through Time* exhibit,” Dr. Braun said as he closed the lid of his aged laptop and placed it back into his briefcase.

“Lucky for us why?” Faith asked, noting to herself that she was remarkably full of questions that day.

“Because the primary curator used to be a frat brother of mine,” the professor chuckled.

“You’re becoming more and more useful,” Chon chuckled back.

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## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

“I’m taking a team down to D.C. for a little sight-seeing, you should come. You seem like the salted pretzel and cotton candy type,” Jonas boomed to the duct-tape covered webcam.

“Why... Are... You... Going... To... Washington... D.C.?” the synthesized voice slowly sputtered.

“You’ve really gotta keep up with things, Mr. Roboto,” Jonas balked, “The A-team just phoned a few minutes ago. They need to swing by there to pick up some pamphlets or something – I wasn’t really paying attention. But I figured I’d pop in for a little progress report.”

“Good... Work.”

Jonas kicked the notebook computer across the room. It slid to a crushing halt against the wall. He sucked in a breath and pulled the air canister from underneath his shirt. It was marked ‘N/86, O/12, Trace/2’ – denoting the percentage of elements in the pressurized container. His lungs were slowly adjusting to oxygen-rich air. He was well on his way to being able to breathe free from the

respiration system. He pushed a replacement canister in and sucked down several fresh breaths.

He threw open the door to his hostage room to interrupt Vice President Mueller, who was attempting to chew through the tape that bound his wife's right hand to her chair.

"You are just plain silly, Mr. Mueller," Jonas hissed, "Just plain silly! Unfortunately your wife is no longer useful to my little operation here, so we're going to have to say our goodbyes!"

Jonas clicked his cane on the floor until it stopped atop the aluminum briefcase. He unhooked the latches and removed the dark blue cloth. He slowly covered Mueller's head with the fabric, blocking the Vice President's view of his wife. She screamed in blood-boiling panic as Jonas reached into his jacket and produced a .50 caliber pistol with a blue velvet grip. He fumbled to find her left temple with the barrel and pressed it gently against her skin.

"For the love of god, no!" she cried.

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Mascara ran down her face like tears of crude. Her mouth became fixed in a morbid grimace as she felt the cold realization that she was amidst her final fleeting seconds of life.

Jonas smiled beneath his mask as he held the cloth just above Mueller's head and the barrel of the gun to scalp of the man's trembling wife. The intensity of the moment empowered him as none had before. *This is what it will feel like to be king*, he thought. And that thought fueled him even more.

"Abracadabra," Jonas whispered.

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"Nice suggestion on the take-out, Doc," Nick said approvingly.

"Goody's is the best fast food in all of the Mediterranean," Dr. Braun praised.

"You really think you should be eating while driving?" questioned Chon from the back.

"He does it in the car," Faith spouted sarcastically.

"We're almost there, I can see the Pentagon," announced Milo as he gnawed on a hunk of eggplant musaca.

"Speaking of which," Skree warned, "Don't forget about airspace restrictions. We don't need any unnecessary hold-ups."

Nick winked and activated the restriction grid on the console display to appease his friend. To his surprise, Nila appeared on the screen from the *Ruengale II* communications deck.

"Crew – I'm patching through a local communication signal – FM radio station. I think you'd better hurry it up down there."

The screen went dark and static crackled through the speakers as a voice came through. It was a female reporter.

"...Still unclear, though police are strongly speculating it to be in connection with the masked man who preempted Larry King's nightly broadcast yesterday evening for about one hundred fifty thousand satellite television subscribers. Again, if you're just tuning in, the body of the

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

Second Lady of the United States has been discovered this morning in a hotel swimming pool in the lower Boston area. Details are still—”

Nick silenced the audio feed.

“This just got really serious,” he grimaced.

Moments later Nick landed the ship on the lawn outside the National Air and Space Museum. An older gentleman with a flowing white beard of curls and a flat cap approached the vehicle in smiles.

“I’ve been giddy as a goat all morning waiting for you to arrive, my old friend!” he said as he helped Dr. Braun out of the craft.

“Thank you, Jeffery, allow me to introduce the crew,” Dr. Braun insisted, “Team, meet Doctor Jeffery Sherwood, head curator of the National Air and Space Museum!”

Dr. Sherwood was a short, portly old man. His salt-and-pepper hair peeked out under his cap and blended right into his beard. He stood crooked, one of his legs visibly shorter than the other. His eyes were clouded with

cataracts, though he could apparently see quite well – he examined each face closely.

Each member introduced him or herself, including the still-recovering Pontius – who was finally able to see straight. It was the second time in a week he had taken a sucker-punch and he was beginning to grow accustomed to the lingering gash on the back of his head.

“So I hear you would like to see Corwell’s Cube!” exclaimed Dr. Sherwood.

“Yes,” Chon said, as he slid down off of the ship’s ledge, “And it’s urgent.”

“Indeed, right this way.”

He led the group inside the museum and immediately down several flights of stairs to the basement.

“Corwell’s Cube is a fascinating relic,” began Dr. Sherwood, “It was discovered quite by accident as Mr. Corwell stumbled over an ornament while taking photographs of the most detailed Mayan star map ever discovered. The ornamental box crumbled under his feet and revealed the cube, made of seamless black onyx.

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Surface scans only reveal the obvious Greek inscription, and CT scans and x-rays only show some sharp interior fractures, like ribs. Or stacks of crackers. But as we can tell, there is no way to open it.”

“Do you know what it is, or what it was used for?” Faith inquired.

“We have no idea, though it is speculated by some that it was the inspiration for the Mayan astronomical maps and Baktun calendars – that their discovery of the artifact may have prompted the search for knowledge in their culture, and ultimately their advanced ancient civilization,” Dr. Sherwood explained.

“Quite a little piece of stone, then, huh?” Pontius asked, interested.

“It’s a mysterious little relic!” Dr. Sherwood enthused, as he led the group down another flight of stairs and to the storage room. A coded keypad provided entry through the door, though it remained ajar as Chon squeezed through last.



The room was filled with tables set end to end in two rows that spanned the length of the space. There were objects of various ages and types atop the tables, each tagged with a color-coded sticky-note containing information about its history. In the far back corner sat a shining black cube marked with a yellow slip of paper. Dr. Sherwood picked up the object and brought it to the group, who looked on with interest.

Faith felt a cold sting against her chest, but upon trying to scratch it away, she noticed that it was the crystalline wafer. It glowed blue against her skin. She pulled it out and showed it to Skree – whose eyes widened as he noticed its new appearance. She walked toward Dr. Sherwood. The cube was vibrating wildly in his hands. It hummed a mid-range tonal chord and Pontius immediately recalled a music theory class from his brief stint in college. The chord was a D-minor seven, but he doubted that fact served any relevance.

Dr. Sherwood placed the cube on the table behind him and stepped back. Just as Faith touched the top of the

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

cube with the wafer, its black walls split to reveal hundreds of small ferromagnetic nanowire chips stacked tightly together and connected in series to a data acquisition port. The port was a standard for interstellar computers, similar to USB on Earth.

*"Knowledge within key,"* Faith whispered, "The wafer is the key – it unlocks the knowledge stored inside the cube!"

"Brilliant," marveled Dr. Braun.

One of the nanowire chips was not hardwired, and fell out onto the table due to the softening vibrations. Skree quickly grabbed it and scanned it for data. When the information appeared on his wrist-screen he nearly doubled over.

"This one's got a ten thousand year orbital projection for Nibiru," he muttered, "I'd bet they're all orbital cartographs, for probably thousands of worlds. If these are accurate..."

"It could be the most detailed collection of information humankind ever built," whispered Chon.

"But... But how?" Dr. Sherwood asked, baffled by what lay before him.

"I'll have to explain it over a baklava and a bottle of retsina," Dr. Braun joked.

"Good morning, Christmas shoppers!" a voice bellowed from the single doorway.

The group turned to spy Jonas leaning against the doorframe while a dozen men in black hoods flowed past.

"Looks like you've got a present for me?" he cackled.

The guards rushed to surround the small group. They were each armed with a stun gun in one hand and a steel baton in the other.

"Now are you going to tell me what you got me, or am I going to have to kill someone to get an answer?"

Faith slipped the crystalline wafer off of the table and stepped forward. The cube snapped shut behind her.

"It's an orbital chart of Nibiru," she stated calmly.

"It's just what I always wanted!" Jonas cried with delight, "How did you know?"

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

His masked grin secretly intimidated Faith, but she refused to let it show.

“Well then, I’m delighted that the release of Mr. Mueller was timely,” Jonas hissed, “Lets just hope he didn’t tip the scale...”

“Where is he?” Nick demanded.

“Oh, Boston’s finest have already been notified,” Jonas grinned, “But we really must be going, time is tick-tick-ticking away.”

The guards pushed the group out the door and up the stairwells. The museum staff-members were huddled together near the front desk, held captive by another half-dozen hooded guards. When the group stepped through the front door, they were greeted by a tunnel of hooded men that stretched all the way back to their ship. A guard jabbed his baton into the small of Faith’s back to motivate her down the stairs. More than a hundred helpless onlookers were gathered near the parking lot to watch the scene.

Jonas produced a putty knife from his jacket as the group reached the ship. He slid the knife into the lower seam of the vessel's side door and popped the seal. The door shook open and slid up on its mechanical track.

"Seating for eight I hear? Well, seven if you include Pudgy here," Jonas remarked, poking the putty knife lightly into Chon's abdomen, "Ditch the Claman and Chernulan – I'll take the lovebirds and the rest."

Faith, Nick, Dr. Braun, Pontius, and Chon were shoved into the vehicle and forced to sit in the front. Jonas hopped up into the back and called for a guard to join him. Skree's equipment was handed up and piled into the floor. The guards shoved Milo and Skree to the side of the ship and barked at them to 'get lost'.

"Close the damned door!" Jonas yelled to Nick, who promptly obliged.

"What are you doing?" Faith demanded.

"Just ensuring I get my reward," Jonas commented calmly, "I need to see the gold before I hand over the coordinates."

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

“What’s he talking about?” Pontius muttered under his breath.

“It would take years to collect it all,” Chon reasoned, “It’s pointless to try.”

“Oh, we’ll find a way,” Jonas hissed.

“I swear to god, I’m gonna lose it if someone doesn’t explain to me what the hell is going on!” yelled Pontius.

“Sit down,” Chon ordered, “He’s talking about the Nibiru atmosphere. The planet itself is covered entirely in ocean, but the atmosphere is thick with gold nano-dust. It’s partly how the planet retains heat when it gets into deep space. The molten core boils out energy as heat, which is held in the air by the conductive gold particles.”

“You’re taking us all the way to Nibiru for gold dust?” Faith shrieked.

“There’s more waiting for us on Nibiru than dust, Cupcake,” Jonas said, as he laid his cane on his lap, “Now please enter the orbital data and set a course.”

As the ship burst through Earth’s atmosphere, Jonas decided to familiarize himself with the cabin of the vehicle.

A quick inspection revealed little of interest. A cargo closet in the rear held a few weapons – pellet pistol, swizlakulis, and some sort of arm or leg covering. His cane traced a door in the floor, which he made note to avoid. It was a simple transport vessel, nothing more.

“Nicholas, how long till we arrive?” Jonas asked quietly.

“This is a fairly underpowered transport—”

“*How long* until we arrive?” Jonas demanded.

“Twenty-two hours, give or take,” Nick replied.

“Well, I hope everyone took a potty break before we left!” Jonas cackled, “I brought Scrabble.”

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***



## Chapter Five

### The Skolopendra

Twenty-one hours, thirty-two minutes, sixty-eight seconds, and seventy-two Triple Word Scores later, the thruster array cooled to cruising velocity. A green speck appeared in the distance. The hooded guard had stood watchfully by during the entire trip with little motion and no rest. Jonas appeared exhausted as he pulled a canister from his jacket to refuel his respirator. Chon stepped carefully over a hard-sleeping Pontius as he moved toward the front of the craft. Nick yawned and followed, almost too tired to even think about switching the ship to manual pilot mode.

Faith tried to imagine what she would be up to if she were safely at home. The typical Thursday evening began with Nick arriving home from work promptly at six o'clock. Faith would have been home from classes two hours before, and would have brewed a kettle of tea or mixed up a pitcher of fruit punch from a can of frozen concentrate. Nick always cooked, as he rather enjoyed the therapeutic satisfaction of creating, sharing, and enjoying food.

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

Thursdays were pasta days. Faith imagined a creamy fettuccine alfredo sprinkled with grilled shrimp and side plate of garlic bread slathered in butter and sprinkled with dried parsley. Faith was the farthest from home she had ever been – or ever wanted to be.

Nick had been guarding the crystalline wafer for hours. He slyly slipped it into Faith's side pocket with a brief hug before she moved to the rear of the craft. Unattended on the floor next to the rear left seat sat the onyx cube. Its simplistic and mysterious beauty beckoned for touch as Faith approached. She lifted the object to eye level and admired its majesty. She hoped the secrets held inside could be kept from her malevolent captor.

Faith sat the cube in the cushioned chair and turned to admire the view out the bow window. The green speck grew larger as they approached. It was dark, though some light glowed beneath its atmosphere. So far from the Sun, it was a miracle life could even survive there. Faith pondered the Nibiruans' fates. Their planet was on course for complete disaster. It was quite possible that, in their

desperation, they had already amassed fleets for attack and conquer of Earth. She made a silent wish that some sort of diplomacy would come of the impromptu voyage.

“Best start broadcasting across all frequencies,” Chon suggested, “Have the computer transmit the standard diplomatic greeting in basic Ancient Greek. Start with twenty-seven megahertz and push on up to thirty-two gigahertz on the FM bands. Also scan for laser pulses in case they’ve made a transition to photon telegraphy.”

“What makes you think they will be looking to communicate with outside visitors?” Dr. Braun inquired with a yawn.

“A civilization on the brink of war always keeps an ear to the ground,” Nick replied with a smirk.

“Alright then, what makes you think they will allow us to land?” retorted Dr. Braun.

“This,” Faith whispered as she lifted the cube from its resting place.

The cube hummed a mid-range tonal chord and began to vibrate. The hum grew slowly louder. It was ominous

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

and unnerving. When Faith had turned toward the front of the cabin, the wafer that Nick had secretly slipped into her pocket had moved close enough to trigger the cube.

“Put it in the storage compartment,” Jonas ordered, “God, that’s annoying.”

Faith sat the object carefully in the compartment and shut the door. The hum ceased as she stepped back. Jonas and his guard stood facing her. She noticed that the bow window was filled with the dark green planetary sphere and spied Nick and Chon typing a message into the console. Something seemed oddly amiss, though for a moment she assumed it was her deprivation of rest playing tricks on her mind.

Suddenly, Pontius and Dr. Braun leapt up from behind the captors. With perfect synchronicity both Jonas and his guard were clubbed and toppled to the floor. The professor and his newfound cohort each held a pilot’s control stick in their hands. Nick and Chon turned around to reveal a dismantled console and the auto-pilot display still glowing.

"That was... A quick disassembly," Faith said in a stunned stupor.

"Dale hired me for a reason," Nick joked, "But seriously, nice distraction."

Nick pointed to her hip pocket. She reached in and pulled out the crystalline wafer.

Faith groaned, "Nice, using me for bait, huh?"

"You can thank Dr. Braun for devising that while you help stuff these bozos in storage," Nick laughed.

"I can't believe we didn't get an opportunity sooner, those guys must never sleep," Chon sighed, "So glad that's over. We can stop at the outpost on Io on our trip back for food and facilities."

"Y'all can just turn your heads," Pontius joked while pulling the guard into the storage compartment, "I'm pissing in the airlock right there in the floor!"

"I'll set return course for home and we can send a real ambassador out here," chuckled Nick, as he turned back to the console.

The ship suddenly fell dark.

## ***Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector***

“Well, that’s weird,” Nick mumbled, “Switching to auxiliary...”

He pressed one of the few switches on the console, but to no avail. Nick quickly hopped down to his knees and slid his forefinger into a hole in the console’s aluminum façade near the floor. The covering slid back easily to reveal the ship’s mechanical innards. Nick pulled a wire to his mouth and snipped it with his incisor. He pulled another wire’s end from its socket and yanked the connector off with his teeth. A touch of the exposed tips produced nothing.

The ship quaked and shifted, slowly beginning a descent toward the planet below.

“Are they pulling us in?” Faith asked in a whisper.

“Apparently they were listening, but had their own ideas of how to respond,” Dr. Braun offered, “I hope your transmissions were polite.”

The darkened ship sank slowly through the haze of the thick atmosphere with ease – its course unknown to the passengers within. As it drifted loftily downward, the

cause of the green coloration became apparent. The air was rich with smoky gold dust, but the planet's surface was an illuminated bluish ocean. The combination of hues had given Nibiru its odd greenish appearance.

The submersible moved slowly to the surface of the still, wave-less sea. Gold particulate on the surface of the water gave it an oily appearance. The crew sat helpless as they proceeded downward into the deep. The illumination source remained unclear for miles until the vessel grew close enough for its inhabitants to spy several large domes spaced widely apart on the ocean floor.

"They've recreated the Atlantian colonies," whispered Dr. Braun in hushed wonder.

"Feel the walls," Faith noted.

Pontius placed a hand on the door of the craft, only to pull it quickly away.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, "It's hot!"

"We always assumed the planet had a wildly nuclear core," piped Chon, "It would have to – in order to remain habitable so far out from the Sun."

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The group's destination soon became clear as the ship moved directly toward the largest dome in sight. It was transparent glass, likely manufactured from the silicate sands that covered the seabed. Dormitories and larger housing units were visible within the dome, as well as commercial structures and courtyards. In the center of the dome sat a Parthenon-like building with residents mulling about on the steps. Around the outskirts of the dome's interior were dozens of rows of small ships.

"What's all that about?" Faith asked, pointing to the ships.

"Look like short range vessels, possibly armored," offered Chon.

"Already amassing a fleet, I bet..." Nick trailed off.

The submersible approached a small airlock chamber, entered, and halted. Water began draining through pipes at the floor while fresh air piped in from above. After a few minutes the chamber had pressurized and the ship continued on its rogue journey.



The Nibiruans visible outside the cabin were strikingly human in appearance – the only noticeable oddity being the pale tone of their flesh. Children ran alongside the ship in attempt to nab a curious look at their visitors. The adults of the colony stood still upon noticing the defunct vessel as it floated silently toward the center of the dome. The surrealism of the experience chilled the hearts of the helpless team.

“We’re going to die,” Pontius resigned.

“Oh, stop that,” Faith argued.

“Nick, lock up the cargo hold,” Chon suggested, “Make sure it seals tight. If they search the ship, the last thing we want is them finding Jonas and his crony.”

Nick quickly moved to the rear of the vehicle and secured the compartment.

“Given that they were awake for nearly a day before these guys clobbered ‘em, I doubt they’ll budge any time soon,” Nick guessed hopefully.

The ship came to rest on the path leading up to the Parthenon-like structure. A group of men clad in white

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robes exited the building and descended the stairs. Their faces were expressionless and grim. The group gathered outside the door of the craft as the colonists began to form a perimeter further back.

“I’m assuming this is where we get out,” Nick offered with a nod to Faith.

She focused attention on the locking mechanism of the door. She could almost see the door’s internal latch in her mind. It unhooked instantly and the door slid up into the ceiling with a hiss.

The white-clad men stood motionless in a semi-circle outside of the vehicle. Pontius climbed out first and received gasps from the gathered crowd. His dark skin clearly inspired no familiarity in their sheltered eyes. Dr. Braun exited next, followed by Nick and then Faith. Chon hopped out last, only to be greeted by the sounds of crying children and loud whispers. The members of the ragtag group were the first non-natives that the people of Nibiru had ever seen, and their company felt immediately unwelcome.

"I suppose I'll take it from here?" Dr. Braun whispered to Chon.

"Good luck," Chon muttered, as he sucked a deep breath into his throat's air sack.

The professor walked forward toward one of the robed men. The man appeared typically human to Dr. Braun. He had wrinkles, grey hair, and his irises were clouded at the rims by age. The man stood a few inches taller than Dr. Braun, and tilted his head downward to meet eyes.

Dr. Braun greeted the man as casually as his nerves would allow. He suspected his dialect would differ greatly from the Nibiruan's, but was surprised to be well understood and greeted with curious restraint.

The group watched their translator for several minutes as he conversed with the man. None of the other Nibiruans spoke, nor did they move a muscle. Everyone in the vicinity watched with interest as the conversation progressed. Faith and the others wished dearly that they understood even a single word of the exchange.

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The professor bowed slightly in respect before he turned back to face his confused crew. His face crinkled and he stepped slowly and thoughtfully back toward the ship.

“What’s the word?” Nick asked with a hopeful but withheld smile.

“Well, in the positive, they seem to have a great respect for their language, and it is relatively unchanged from the ancient Greek dialect. Also, we have been invited to speak before their high council to explain our visit formally.”

“That’s fantastic,” enthused Chon, releasing the air from his throat sack.

“Though,” sighed the professor, “We will face exile outside the domes if we prove unconvincing in our justification for trespassing.”

“Why didn’t they just blow us out of the sky?” questioned Nick, “Chon said the last time a ship got close they were warned off with canons.”

“It seems that they have grown uncertain about their planet’s destiny. He says they are aware of the short time

they have before the planet meets its demise, and have been expecting a visit from Earth people for many years," Dr. Braun explained.

"So what now?" Faith asked with a stressed grimace.

"Our ship will be placed in lock-up and we will be allowed stay in a hostel for the evening. Seems they have protocol in place for just these circumstances."

"As long as I get to eat," groaned Pontius.

His stomach echoed the groan.

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Yet again held captive, though with at least a shred of diplomacy involved, the group sauntered through the doorway of their temporary home. It was strikingly modern, with the modest amenities one might expect to find in a hostel back on Earth. It was one large room, with the only private space being the restroom area. There were six bunk-style beds – three against each of the two longer walls. There was a kitchen area with a cooking surface and washbasin, as well as a refrigeration unit. The room was well lit and comfortable.

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A man delivered meals in plastic canisters not unlike the bento boxes of Japan. Each lunch box contained a salad, a soup, a small loaf of bread, and a piece of cured fish-like meat. He also brought bottles of water and an alcohol similar in appearance and taste to wine. The door was shut and barricaded behind him, with guards posted outside all exits.

The crew assembled in the floor between the rows of bunks and unpacked the food they craved so urgently. The smell was intoxicating and identifiably Greek. Each loaf of bread had been imprinted on top with an image of a sea serpent. Dr. Braun sniffed the alcohol slowly before consuming his entire glass. It tasted just like a full bodied Lagorathi wine – so much so, that he wondered if the Nibiruans had brought grape seed along on their journey.

“Do you suppose they’ll come across Jonas and that schmuck in the cargo hold?” Faith asked as she picked apart her meat.

“Based on how hospitable they are being, I doubt they will investigate the ship to any great degree,” Chon replied.

"I could really care less about all that," Pontius barked through a mouth full of bread, "I want to know how the hell we're planning on gettin' home."

"How long, again, till this place boils over?" wondered Nick.

"Roughly three months. The orbital velocity is accelerating at an alarming rate," muttered Chon.

"The man," Dr. Braun piped up, "He said something else. Something I couldn't repeat at the time..."

"What?" asked Nick and Faith simultaneously.

"He said," the professor paused, "He said that they need our planet. That their leaders feel there is no time to negotiate refuge."

"Do they plan to attack?" Faith asked.

"I did not get any information about that, though I feel that they may come armed and with a short fuse," Dr. Braun speculated.

Nick thought hard for a moment, in attempt to remember anything useful from a physics or calculus class. He drew a blank. His mind was specialized to think like an

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engineer. He was an instinctual problem solver. He hated to admit to being stumped.

“What if we could save their planet?” Nick asked, “What if it didn’t have to explode, or whatever. If it didn’t have to careen into the Sun?”

“How can that possibly be stopped? It would require a significant amount of force to alter the orbit of a planet, especially one with such irregular travel,” Chon reasoned.

“But say there was a way,” Nick offered, turning his attention toward the professor, “Do you think that they might change their minds about re-colonizing Earth?”

“Any speculation on my part would be purely a guess,” Dr. Braun replied, “I had very little conversation with the man. Based on Greek culture, however, they were and still are a very proud people – even in modern Greece. One would assume that, given the opportunity to continue to cultivate their unaffected culture here, they might jump at the opportunity. Purely a guess, though, my boy.”



“I have a feeling that I know what you’re proposing,” Chon said, tossing his napkin upon his emptied plate, “The UIPA would never, ever, go for that.”

“It wouldn’t be in their hands,” Nick countered, “It would be in the hands of those who still hold the parts.”

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The next morning the group was whisked from their room with a surprising earliness. It did not seem befitting to label the early hours of the day as morning, however, as deep beneath the Nibiruan seas there was never any visible darkening of the sky. The group piled into a shining, solid white vessel – its appearance not unlike that of a large pill capsule. A row of silver-tinted circular windows lined the sides of the craft, with a larger oval-shaped window at the bow. The propulsion system was lit, emitting a blue pulsating haze from the craft’s three rear boosters.

The unwitting captives were transported out of the dome through a second-level airlock and moved miles over the sandy ocean floor to another, smaller dome. There were similar craft circling around the dome with large

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sweepers underneath. Dr. Braun politely whispered a question to the pilot of their submarine.

“He says that they’re fishing vessels,” he translated, “Sweeping up crustaceans.”

“Sounds like this place has a lot in common with Earth,” Faith replied.

“I would assume that they brought a lot of their resources with them. As far as I recall, Nibiru was a lifeless planet before it was settled,” Chon explained.

The pill-like submarine entered the airlock, paused for the water to drain, and entered the dome. Within were uncharacteristic smaller dome-shaped buildings. The buildings were white, like the craft, and plastic-like in appearance. Each was small – about a thousand square feet interior – and they looked like igloos atop the polished stone floor.

The ship’s pilot spoke briefly to Dr. Braun, who translated once again.

“We have arrived at The Home of the Scholars,” the professor said, pausing to take in the next sentence, “And we are to explain our visit personally.”

“Great,” Pontius groaned.

The ship’s door hissed open. The mechanical staircase unfolded to rest on the ground, and the nervous crew walked down to join a group of men in white togas. The man that had conversed with Dr. Braun the previous day approached with a solemn fixation. He placed a palm on the professor’s back and led him – before the others – toward one of the buildings.

Inside was an enormous white circular table with seating for a few dozen. At the far end sat six men and six women wearing beautiful gilded robes. Dr. Braun was seated next to the woman on the end, with Nick, Faith, Pontius, and Chon lined up in the chairs beside him.

A woman with deep red hair and stark sapphire eyes was the first to speak.

“We are the scholars of Nibiru and the governing body of the domes. In Nibiruan culture, the governors and

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governesses adopt the name of an Olympian god or goddess. Thusly, you may call me Hestia," the woman explained, "We are each specialized in one or more of the languages of Earth, as studied by the sparse fictional and historical broadcasts we have received from your planet over the last half-Earth-century. My specialty is the English language, which I hope will be beneficial to ease your communication with our council."

"Well that should make this easier," Nick whispered to Faith.

She promptly elbowed him in the stomach.

"My name is Chon Tom," the toad-like leader boomed from the back of the line, "I am an official of the United Inter-Planetary Assembly."

"We have no affinity for your organization, Mr. Tom," the woman said lightly, "Our society was established by an inexperienced group of enthusiastic young researchers four thousand years ago. You may be familiar with their studies. They taught our ancestors, gave them technologies beyond their comprehension, and showed them the path

toward true liberation. But a day came when the 'Enlightened', considered at the time to be the Earthen bodies of the gods and goddesses from Olympus, suddenly turned on their followers. Weapons of immense fire rained into the city. When the dust had settled, many Atlantians had perished. The strongest and wisest of the remnant colonists banded together and escaped the planet, the Atlantian technology at that point rivaling that of their gods. They knew there was only one chance to be free, and thusly colonized this rogue ocean world."

Hestia paused to read the dumbfounded face of each visitor.

"The original Nibiruan settlers vowed not to allow visitation or refuge of any future non-natives. And also to one day return to our home planet," Hestia explained, "And in just a few Earth months we will be forced to return, as Nibiru will be consumed by Helios – Sol – the Sun. We are a peaceful society, and ironically so, must clean the wound that has been delivered to your planet.

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We must eradicate the war-waging human pestilence so that our new society may live in peace.”

“Oh, hell no,” whispered Pontius under his breath.

“Why do such a thing to an unsuspecting victim?” Faith asked.

“We must. We would not be allowed our seclusion in refuge on your planet. We would be – for centuries – seen as invaders, then visitors, but perhaps never as citizens,” Hestia sighed, “Your people have no sense of acceptance and are vicious. We cannot co-exist. And we are the superior human vessel and mind. We have transcended the primal instincts that the humans of Earth still possess.”

“But what if we could save this planet?” Nick interjected.

“Yes, we have a theory as to how we could distort the orbit of Nibiru to a safer path, putting off the problem at least another thirty-six hundred years,” Chon offered.

Hestia relayed the question to her peers. The scholars conversed in their native Greek for a few minutes. It

seemed to Faith that they might actually consider the proposition.

Hestia broke the conversation, "Tell us this plan you speak of."

Chon nodded to Nick, who gulped down a lump that had jumped into his throat.

"Back in the mid-1940s AD, an extra-terrestrial ship crashed in the United States," Nick began.

"Roswell, New Mexico," Hestia interrupted, "I have heard it many times on your television transmissions."

"Yes, well, this ship had a special experimental power source in the thruster mechanism. The government of the United States had a hand in converting the device into a weapon that could generate a black hole," Nick explained.

"A black hole," Hestia clarified in an oddly encyclopedic way, "A high-gravity anomaly capable of devouring massive quantities of matter."

"Yes," Nick replied, "We feel that with enough study of Nibiru's orbital velocity and position, we could use a

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similar device to pull Nibiru away from the Sun... err... Helios. It could save your planet."

Hestia relayed the plan to the council to unenthusiased murmurs. Several of the men pounded their fists on the table and pointed fingers at Chon. A woman took control of the conversation in a loud holler before being hushed by two others. Hestia calmed the group and took count of a vote of raised pairs of fingers.

"The council," began Hestia, "Does not agree with the decision to allow the Earthens to build a weapon of such power and place it near Nibiru's path. This is trickery. You are to be exiled."

"But wait!" Nick yelled as guards bearing pikes rushed into the room and grabbed each of the crewmembers.

They were pushed to the ground and guards began to shackle Nick and Dr. Braun. Upon hearing a loud lurching bellow from outside, the guards suddenly stopped and the council froze instinctively. The sound stopped. Then another bellow – but louder. It sounded like a whale song, but with none of the high tones. It was guttural.



“Skolopendra!” Hestia yelled as the council jumped under the table for cover.

The guards leapt off the captives and raced to the door with their pikes held firm.

“What the hell now?” Pontius griped as he picked himself up from the ground.

“The Skolopendra was a mythical Greek sea serpent with a tail like that of a lobster and many legs like you might find on a millipede,” Dr. Braun explained calmly.

Suddenly water began to sprinkle outside the open door of the dome. It looked curiously like rain. The droplets of water grew more and more numerous. Faith could not believe what she spied out the door and past the guards, as a large millipede-like creature the size of a small dog fell flat on its back from the stream of water. A guard attacked it quickly with a pike and kicked it away.

“That’s it? Pontius groaned, “Homeboys hiding under the table from a bug?”

As the group peeked out the door, their grins turned sour. More than a dozen of the creatures were crawling out

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of a hole in the top of the dome. Beyond that, hovering weightlessly just outside in the deep, was an eight-meter long sea creature. It vaguely resembled the beast Dr. Braun had described so shortly before.

Faith sighed, "You ready to swim, Pontius?"

"What? No I ain't goin' out there," he mumbled in response.

Faith grabbed him by the arm and took flight through the door.

"You take care of Mama outside!" she yelled back, "I'll handle the kids."

Faith flew Pontius up to the peak of the dome. She held his feet as he wiggled reluctantly through the crack and into the ocean. She then shot down to assess the smaller creatures. There were two by the dome she had just left, three feasting on an already-dead man near their transport submarine, another group of five or so flocking towards a fishing vessel that had just cleared the airlock, and more than a dozen tearing apart the courtyard.

Faith swooped in and ripped a pike from a guard's hands. She held it firmly to her side like her trusty swizlakuli. She skewered the two creatures threatening the guards of the council dome and then tossed the pike like a javelin into the ground. A guard tossed her another pike as she flew gracefully by, hopeful that the girl could stop the freshly born menaces before their wings dried. His hopes were quickly dashed.

The three bugs that had been devouring the helpless man began to flutter their wings. The animals took flight and swarmed Faith as she struggled to skewer the beasts in the courtyard. The pike of four skewered bugs fell to the ground as she swung her arms around to beat the beasts away. Nick ran from the steps of the council dome to come to her aid.

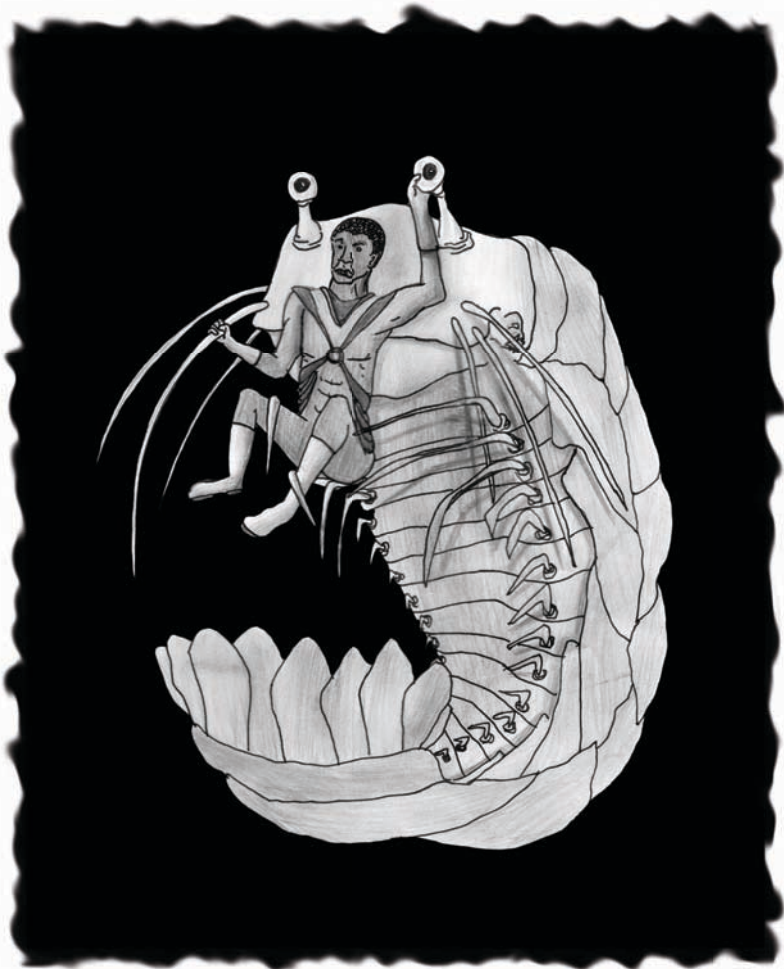
Pontius held in a deep breath as he swam nervously toward the skolopendra. He spied a team of emergency workers spraying foam to seal the leaking crack – and his quickest way back. The creature had a head similar to a catfish, with long whiskers protruding from each side. Its

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eyes were clearly crustacean, though – and on stalks like a lobster’s would be. The tail also resembled that of a lobster, with a plated exoskeleton and a fan. Pontius counted fifteen legs on each side of the beast, with the six top-most legs being the longest. The creature had a protruding gland on either side of its mouth that leaked black ink as it moved side-to-side in its examination of Pontius.

*Looks like a Chinese parade dragon,* he thought.

Pontius rocketed toward the beast, which quickly dove to dodge the blow. It turned around in time to catch Pontius’s fist square in the eyestalk. It reacted with a release of its glands. The inky black substance irritated Pontius’s skin and dissolved the hairs on his arms as he tried to swim away. The beast lunged forward, but received a kick to its other eyestalk. Infuriated, the creature spewed more acid into the water. Luckily for Pontius, the defense mechanism was not dangerous when diluted in the ocean water – though the inkiness clouded



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his vision like a smokescreen and tasted like vinegar as it seeped into his mouth.

Nick ran through the courtyard kicking the giant bugs with full force. Faith shot up and around the streams of foam and back toward the flying infant skolopendras. She concentrated hard as she sped toward the small group of three, pulling all available energy into her core. A blue light grew at her fists. She threw the fists out, shot open her palms, and a shockwave of energy blasted the creatures into goopy bits.

By the time she arrived at Nick's side, only three of the beasts were still walking. He had stomped the rest into fidgeting piles of broken shells and guts. The bugs lined up side-by-side as Nick and Faith cornered them at the edge of the courtyard wall. Faith was still too exhausted to muster up the energy for another blast, but guards were en route to their aid with pikes.

"Hurry!" Faith yelled, out of breath.

She turned around to see the middle bug convulse and sputter out an inky liquid onto the stone floor. The varnish

of the floor was immediately eaten away and the acid tore through nearly an inch of the stone in a matter of seconds.

"Now they're spitting at us! What is this crap?!" Nick groaned, just as the guards arrived and hastily skewered the remaining infant bugs.

"Where's Pontius?" asked Faith as she looked upward at the bellowing beast just outside the dome.

It moaned and thrashed in a violent convulsion. Its tail slapped the dome and its six forelegs flailed wildly. Acid poured from the glands alongside its mouth. It was in pain. Suddenly a light ripped through its abdomen – and then another. Its plated exoskeleton expanded and separated before the beast suddenly exploded in a milky, inky, fibrous mess.

"There!" Nick yelled, as he pointed to a lifeless, drifting figure sinking away from the oozy debris field.

The guards quickly commandeered a fishing sub and took off to retrieve the helpless man.

Faith collapsed to the floor, exhausted. She looked up to see Hestia standing over her. The woman's face was

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fixed in a stare of shock – and she was looking to the floor near Faith's hip. Faith peered down and noticed that the crystalline wafer had slipped out of her pocket.

"The Knowledge Key," Hestia whispered.

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"It was incredible," Pontius marveled, "It was like the most amazing adrenaline rush, mixed with the most powerful caffeine rush."

The disheveled man had been pulled from the water unconscious, but still holding in a breath. All of the hair on his head and arms was burned off, as well as bits of his clothing. Although, after he awoke, Pontius felt remarkably well.

"Cold feeling in the stomach?" Faith asked.

"No, hot, like I was on fire. Like, I could see steamy bubbles on my arms!"

"Huh..." Faith pondered.

Dr. Braun slipped through the door of the hostel to join the others. His expression was gleeful, though restrained.



“Due to your little acrobatics and our possession of their sacred key, the council has re-evaluated their votes and elected to allow us to return to Earth in attempt to save their planet,” the professor explained, “They said that since we have the key, that indicates that we are worthy of presence on Nibiru. Funny though, they didn’t even ask how we got it.”

“They left it for the lower class,” Faith remarked, “I get it now...”

“What do you mean?” Pontius asked.

“They thought the lower class was worthy of coming to Nibiru with them,” explained Faith, “But they didn’t have the capacity to transport them all. The leftover Atlantians were always welcome back.”

“Perhaps we’ll have to thank them for the trinket when we return,” Dr. Braun said with a wink.

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## Chapter Six

### The Engineer

The crew packed their few belongings into their craft, which had been restored to full operating capacity. A Nibiruan man stepped forward from the crowd, spoke to Dr. Braun, and handed him a case. Within the case were a laser-transmitting communications satellite and a ground-level radio module. The device would allow Earth to send mission updates to Nibiru with relative ease.

When the goodbyes had been dealt and the hatch had been sealed, Faith ran to the rear of the transport and swung open the cargo bay door. Jonas and the guard were positioned as they had been left, though it had been more than twenty-four hours. She kneeled down to check the men's vitals. The guard was dead – but Jonas was alive. His heart rate was very slow, but Faith guessed that it would be sustainable until they reached Earth.

Nick zipped the ship into and out of the airlock and thrust full speed through the waters and into the sky. The console thermometer read sixty-five degrees Celsius as they climbed. The air was surprisingly hot. They burst

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through the atmosphere with little combustion, and Nick set a course for the autopilot to fly them home.

“You have to tell me more about this, what we have,” Pontius said to Nick.

“Wish I could, man, but I lost my abilities.”

“What? How?”

“I died,” Nick explained politely, “I was reanimated, but the abilities didn’t come with me.”

“Faith,” Pontius beckoned, “Tell me how this works. I was inside that thing – he devoured me – and I felt overwhelmed with rage and passion and the will to live. I felt hot, red-hot. It felt like a bomb went off inside me, and the next thing I know you guys are huddled around waiting for me to wake up. I want to know how to control this thing.”

“It takes years of work,” Faith replied truthfully, “Years of focus. And we don’t even know what the extents of your abilities are.”

“I want you to help me learn,” Pontius begged, “I can help you – with whatever it is you guys do.”

"We don't do anything," Faith giggled, "We're only here because Chon asked for our help. We lead normal, typical lives with work and school and all that boring stuff."

"I thought you like, fought crime and apprehended bad guys and shit like that," said a disappointed Pontius.

"Nope, just a boring, young unmarried couple living paycheck to paycheck," Faith smiled.

"You would be living in luxury if you had taken the UIPA reward cash," Chon reminded her.

"Well I'm going to fight crime," Pontius said confidently, "There's no sense in having the ability if you don't put it to use."

"Oh believe me, I put it to use!" laughed Faith, "I just don't go playing superhero."

"What are you gonna call yourself Pontius?" asked Nick, "Aquaman is already taken."

"I don't know, I'll think of something awesome. Like *Steam*."

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“Okay, that’s actually pretty good,” Faith replied with a giggle, “But a vigilante life is dangerous, not to mention illegal.”

“They won’t find out that it’s me,” winked Pontius.

“Chon, what do you suppose we should do with the cube?” Nick asked, “Do you think the UIPA will want to offload and examine the star charts and orbital data from the chips inside?”

“The data in there may be more accurate than some of the data our organization has,” Chon admitted, “After all, the UIPA is more interested in finding, encouraging, and befriending new life than recording orbital data. But if someone’s done the work for us, there’s no sense in disregarding it. I suppose the humans would like a copy as well.”

“I hope it doesn’t have to be destroyed,” Faith said, “It sure is a beautiful piece.”

“Indeed, I’ve never seen anything like it out of the Greeks,” Dr. Braun added.

Suddenly a message signal glowed on the console. Nick immediately tapped it with his finger. Skree and Milo appeared on the screen.

"Oh my god they're still alive," Skree muttered.

"Don't sound too disappointed, my friend," remarked Chon.

"What happened to Jonas? And did you guys make it to Nibiru? Where are you?" Milo asked.

"Jonas is in storage taking a little unexpected nap," Pontius announced proudly.

"Yes, we met with the Nibiruans," Chon replied, "And we have quite a bit of work ahead of us. We're en route to UIPA Embassy West, and should be there in roughly twenty-two hours. But Skree – Nick's uploading the Nibiru orbital coordinates now, can you feed that into a pipe along with the a gravitational field projection of both Earth and the Sun and give us the coordinates of the nominal breakage point?"

"Just give me a moment," Skree said as he pulled a chip from the console and placed it into a neighboring slot, "I'm

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seeing... Quadrant B-1985, Sector 23, Marks sixteen and zero seven."

"Copy that," Chon replied, "We'll see you soon."

"Roger that," Skree said, "Fly safe."

Nick nodded and deactivated the communicator.

"Naptime!" he grinned.

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The sun shone bright and the birds sang brighter as the small transport vessel landed on the lawn of Embassy West. The dismal little craft had seen enough action in the last seventy-two hours to warrant an honorable decommission – and possibly its *own* place in the Smithsonian.

"Looks like I'm off on my way," Dr. Braun smiled as he shook the hands of the crew, "I hope that you will be successful in your venture and spare me a few more years to spend with the Atlantians."

"What do you mean?" Faith asked, a bit confused by his phrasing.



“I was wondering if my research team and I might be spared a ride in a few weeks to Atlantis. There’s quite a bit yet to learn about it, as well as its inhabitants.”

“We can certainly arrange that as thanks for all of your help, Doctor,” Chon replied with a grin, “We would be dead if it weren’t for you.”

“Perhaps not dead, but certainly in a bit more distress,” the professor joked, “But in seriousness, you four have a meeting with someone special to get to. I’ll leave you to saving the world!”

The group waved goodbyes to Dr. Braun as he hopped aboard a cleaned and polished *Stargazer-F3*, tipped his hat to the pilot, and took off into the skies.

“Let’s take out the trash,” Chon grinned, as he lumbered to the rear storage compartment to retrieve Jonas.

It took a firm tug on the door to release the seal. Upon opening the compartment, a putty knife fell from between the door latch and frame. The crew looked down in horror to find only the guard laying in the hold. Chon shoved the

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guard with his front left leg. The dead man flopped over – his hood caked to his face with dried blood. His throat had been slit. Jonas had escaped.

And he had taken the cube.

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Jonas picked himself up off of the floor slowly. His joints wavered and his bones ached. A thread of saliva hung from the edge of his respirator mask before splattering onto the floor before him. As he made it to his feet, he pulled the sweaty hair away from his face and slicked it down in a bloody, oily mess.

He pulled a canister from his jacket and examined the hand-scrawled label: 'N/80, O/18, Trace/2'. He was close to his goal – he would soon be relieved of the bulky respirator and regain free range of motion.

Jonas removed his jacket carefully and handed it to a waiting guard. He disrobed quickly to inspect the electronics wrapped around his nude body. Each limb was wrapped with wires, sensors, and molecular assemblers. His fingers were tipped with cup-like sheaths that had been

pinned through his fingernails directly into the bone of the distal phalanx. His toes had similar sheaths. He wore a metallic cuff on each wrist and ankle that had been sewn with heavy wire through eyelets embedded in his hairless flesh. A circular disc was similarly sewn into his chest – usually protected by a Kevlar vest, it was rarely exposed. The disc glowed blue under its rim against his chest and under its clear acrylic dome sat parts appearing to be from a consumer-grade computer. It had a solid-state storage drive, RAM sticks, and eight processors under a large heat sink. Jonas was as close as life and machine should ever marry.

“Get me the laptop,” he barked to a nearby guard.

The guard returned quickly with the mangled computer. With a chime, it booted up and connected to the wireless network. A transmission came immediately.

“Where... The... Hell... Have... You... Been?” the synthesized voice boomed through the static-plagued speakers.

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"I went on a little vacation to the ocean," Jonas replied with a grimace.

"You... Killed... The... Crew... I... Assume?" asked the dark, hooded figure on the screen.

"Well, there was a little hang-up, I guess. They sucker punched me. Can you believe that?"

"What?" the voiced blared, "What... About... The... War?"

"It seems that the Nibiruans aren't as war-waging as we'd hoped," explained Jonas calmly, "From what I overheard, they let the retards go in hopes that they would be able to pull Nibiru off its orbit. Get this – they think they can make a black hole!"

"Perfect..." said the voice with an odd, mechanical tinge of delight, "Did... They... Discuss... Coordinates?"

"Yeah, what's a nominal breakage point?" Jonas asked, as he cleaned his exposed flesh with a sponge.

"It's... The... Lowest... Solar... Gravitational... Point... In... The... Orbit... Of... A... Planet..." the voice explained.

“Interesting,” Jonas pondered, “They said Nibiru’s nominal breakage point was at Quadrant B-1985, Sector 23, Marks sixteen and zero seven.”

“Excellent,” the figure nodded, “I... Will... Be... In... Touch.”

The figure faded to black on the screen. Jonas handed the computer to a guard and continued to carefully scrub the grime from his body. He turned to the north wall of the abandoned high-rise and walked casually to the window overlooking the street. He raised the blinds and admired the UIPA Embassy West, merely a stone’s throw away.

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President Reynolds sat amidst a group of secret service agents inside the conference room of the UIPA Embassy. His advisor warned him a last time of the dangers of meeting in such a place – but was waved off by The President himself. Reynolds did not feel that his advisor had any expertise in extra-terrestrial matters.

In walked Chon, Faith, Nick, and Pontius. The crew was tired, filthy, and sans the kidnapper. They took seats

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at the far end of the conference table. Each face showed shame and embarrassment.

“I was radioed that you had apprehended the lunatic,” President Reynolds said with a confused, questioning glare.

“He escaped,” Faith admitted quickly, “He was locked in the cargo hold when we left Nibiru, and wasn’t there when we opened the door this morning when we landed.”

“I’ll notify the FBI to get back on the hunt,” the President groaned, “What did you find out at this Nibiru place?”

“The planet will smash into the Sun in a few months. Their plan was blind attack, but they were convinced to hold off until we had a chance to develop a plan to save their planet,” Chon said with little confidence.

Pontius sat nervously quiet, amazed that he sat just across the room from the President of the United States.

“You’re familiar with the *BlackHole Recovery Incident* of two years ago?” Nick asked.

“I was informed of the confidential details when I took office, yes.”

“Well, we need to build a replica of the device. With today’s technology we can build it safer and better. We need to set it off in some very specific coordinates, but the recursive—”

“You want to create another *BlackHole* device and set it off in space?” the President clarified.

“Yes, and if our numbers are correct it would give enough of a tug on Nibiru’s orbit to prevent it from destruction and keep it safe for at least another thirty-six hundred years,” Chon remarked.

“Your organization will never approve it,” the President laughed.

“We need yours to,” Chon said as he rolled a cigar between his lips.

“Where will you get the parts?” asked Reynolds with an upturn of his brow.

“Your Air Force has in its possession a Zetan saucer that crashed in Mexico in March of 1947. It was pretty

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much smashed into bits, and moved to the storage facility underneath the Groom Lake Air Force base after its examination at Wright-Patterson. That ship has the parts we'll need," explained Chon.

"You bastards better be right about this," Reynolds mumbled, "If we do this, guarantee me that you won't kill us all – and that the invasion will not take place."

"Guaranteed!" boasted the still-giddy Pontius.

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"Damn guys," Pontius exclaimed as he finished off his sandwich in the embassy cafeteria, "That was the *President!*"

"Yeah, thanks for the vote of confidence in there, by the way," Faith groaned.

"What? What's the problem?" Pontius asked honestly, "Gizmo here builds the bomb, we set it off in space, we save *two* planets, and I do an endorsement deal with Nike!"

"It's not gonna be that easy, I'm sure," muttered Nick.



"It is never is with you two involved!" Chon joked at Faith, "But seriously, we need to hurry up and pay a visit to a very special little old man."

"What? Who is that?" questioned Nick.

"Name's Abner Monroe, he was the lead reverse-engineering specialist at Groom Lake and the designer of the original *BlackHole* device. Mind as sharp as a tack."

"You really think he's going to help you?" Faith asked with a laugh.

"I hope so," Chon wished aloud, "You not coming with us?"

"I think you boys can handle it from here," Faith replied, "I have some explaining to do back home."

"Say hello to Mags and Dale for me," Nick said, "Tell 'em I'll be home soon."

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It had been three days since the hapless group returned from the rogue planet. Faith sat across from Margaret at her newly replaced kitchen table. Margaret was frantically peeling potatoes. The countertop television repeated a

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news report stating that the mysterious kidnapper was still at large, though the Vice President was recovering nicely. The nation mourned the loss of the Vice President's beloved wife, and flags were flown at half-staff.

"So tell me a bit more about Nick," Margaret broke the silence, "I don't believe you've ever told me how you two met."

"You want me to be totally honest, don't you?"

Margaret nodded.

"We met when I first began work at the hospital. Actually we met the night before. But that next day, Nick was rushed in very ill, eventually he was diagnosed with testicular cancer," Faith explained.

"That's terrible – I assume he made it through okay?" Margaret asked.

"Well that's the thing, he actually developed a brain tumor. But that's not the half of it," Faith gushed, "He developed these abilities while he was under our care..."

"Like what?" interrupted a curious Margaret, "Like dunking a basketball?"

"No," laughed Faith, "Like he could move things, with his mind. He could see things that people thought."

"Oh, Honey, that must have been some kind of magic trick," Margaret reasoned.

"No..."

Faith struggled to explain, but instead opted for a visual aid. She extended her fingers and Margaret's coffee mug effortlessly slid across the aged cherry table and into Faith's hand.

"See, he taught me how to use it, too. We thought we were special because we had figured it out. But then Nick died."

Margaret stared in confusion.

"Margaret, you have to understand this because even I didn't believe it at first, but Nick and I were part of a very bad experiment when we were first conceived. It was with aliens and all kinds of weird stuff. But the thing is, the aliens, the UIPA, they saved Nick. They brought him back to life. And then we got involved with this secret project because they needed humans, and... Well there's just so

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much to tell you that you'll never believe!" Faith craned her neck in frustration.

She opened her eyes to Margaret's hand atop her own.

"Faith, I've always been able to tell when you're telling the truth or telling a white lie to try to protect me when you think I won't understand. And I know you're telling the truth, though a fantastic one it is," Margaret assured her.

"See the last thing we had to deal with was this weapon that would have destroyed Earth and everything around it," Faith said in full confidence, "And we got the weapon and destroyed it, and that's when we crash landed back here with the UIPA crew. Now Nick's off trying to rebuild the thing because we need it to bend the orbit of a planet before it crashes into the Sun. And if we don't do it right, the aliens are going to come down and blow us all away."

Margaret gulped.

"You're serious aren't you?" she asked, a bit startled.

"Yeah, it seems we're doomed to stay involved," Faith said with a forced laugh, "We never asked for all this craziness and now we can't escape it."

“I don’t have to tell you,” Margaret began, “That both Dale and I believe that every person has a path set before them. It’s a path with rocks, and crevices, and cliffs. It’s steep and perilous. But it takes you right to where you’re destined to be. But we all have a choice. We can take the flat, smooth, circular path or we can take that path that seems isn’t worth it – but it’s our choice, given to us by someone much wiser than we are. Seems to me you’re doing well so far with your rocky road, and deviating now would be a shame. We can choose to be heroes or we can choose to be the passerby on the street. But in the end, our choice determines whether we defeat the enemy or if we’re just collateral damage.”

“You’re telling me to pursue this?” Faith asked with a stunned flutter of her eyelids.

“I’m telling you to choose to do the right thing, even if it means you take a kick to the seat of the pants once in a while,” Margaret smiled, “You’re like a daughter to me. You’re my girl, and will always be my girl. Don’t let your

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worries about Dale and I interfere with your destined path.”

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“This place is weird,” Nick groaned as he, Chon, and Pontius arrived on a Greyhound bus in League City, Texas.

The sign over the entrance read ‘Space City Mobile Haven’. It was a modestly sized place with more mobile homes than recreational vehicles. There were dogs tied to trees and an abundance of lawn ornaments – but overall the place was well maintained.

The men were looking for lot fifty-eight. Postal records indicated that Abner Monroe had signed for two packages recently at that address, so the odds were high that he would be at home. Chon felt more out of place than he had in days as he received glares and sporadic epithets from the park’s inhabitants. He knew he was in the south, a part of America still known for its slow acceptance rate, but he was surprised at how open the residents were about their disdain for extra-terrestrials. Granted, it had only been

two years since disclosure had broken, but Chon was somewhat of a poster boy for the UIPA.

"I can't believe the man who invented the apocalypse lives in this dump," Pontius laughed.

"It's not so bad," argued Nick, "It looks comfortable, at least."

"I suppose," muttered Chon, "Seems a bit backwards though."

The men continued walking down the long, unassuming driveway until they came upon a beat-up newspaper box marked with '5-8' in hand-painted letters. The trailer behind it was whitewashed, though rusty stains ran down where the gutters had leaked. There were flower boxes under the windows and a gnome statuette in the yard. It reeked of Middle America.

"Cute little sign on the door says 'Welcome To The Monroe House'," Pontius pointed out, "Bet that was the wifey's idea."

"Let's just go knock," said Nick, trying to contain his laughter at the inappropriate remark.

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Before they reached the door, the men heard a woman's voice from inside.

"Abner!" she yelled, "There's some men here to see you! A boy, a negro, and one of them green fellers!"

"I think you got it the worst," Pontius whispered to Chon with a smirk.

Chon chuckled quietly at the jab and rang the doorbell. A woman in curlers answered the door and smiled the fakest smile that Chon had ever seen from a human.

"Right this way, gentlemen," she said, "Mr. Alien would you like me to take your coat?"

"I'm fine, thanks. We're here to see Mr. Abner Monroe," Chon said politely.

"He's in the back, that way, at the end of the hall," the woman said, her voice raspy from years of sucking down Virginia Slims.

The band of three moved carefully down the small hallway, dodging dog toys as they passed. There were framed Norman Rockwell prints hanging on the laminate wood paneled walls. The carpet was a deep red with little



blue diamonds – the thin firm kind that one might find in a movie theater or department store. The place smelled strongly of cigarette smoke, animal urine, and severely underpowered air freshener spray. A cat ran from the room with its tail raised as Chon entered first.

“You won’t take me alive you bastards!” the man yelled, as he waved a baseball bat in the air with his frail arms.

“Whoa!” Nick yelled back, “We’re here to ask for your help!”

“Oh,” the man sighed, dropping the bat.

“Well don’t be so disappointed,” Pontius groaned.

“I’m Abner. Have a seat,” he said while he fumbled with an empty hard pack of Morleys.

“Here,” said Chon with a fresh pack in his hand, “Take a couple for your time.”

Abner Monroe was very old – ninety-five years old. His head was completely bald, save for a bit of fuzz that simply would not give up. His face was remarkably wrinkle-free, though his cheeks hung slightly like a bulldog’s and a small flap of skin dangled underneath his chin. Abner’s plaid

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pearl snap shirt had a few bleach spots on the shoulder, and he wore a pair of Wranglers so tight that Pontius worried that the button might not hold on throughout the meeting.

Abner struggled to even light the cigarette as his hands trembled with rheumatism. When he finally lit it, he sucked on it for a few breaths, barely able to inhale. He was weak and feeble, but still bright as ever.

"We hear you used to work at Groom Lake?" Nick began.

"Oh yes, Area Fifty-one they called it. Some horrible shit went on there," Abner mumbled, still holding the cigarette with his fingers to his mouth, "It was all black ops, hush-hush crap."

"What can you tell us about the *BlackHole* project?" asked Nick.

"I'm not supposed to tell you anything about it," Abner said politely, as he fiddled with a remote control.

A toy train on a wall-mounted track churned to life and began chugging around the perimeter of the room.

"I'm supposed to pretend like I don't know a thing about it."

"We already know about it," Nick replied, "My girlfriend and I had to destroy it a couple of years ago when it fell into the wrong hands."

"My god, it was still around after all these years? Those Air Force bastards really were a crazy bunch," Abner laughed.

His wife came to the room and handed each guest a glass of lemonade and a napkin – as if to warn them not to spill a drop.

"Here's the thing," Chon said seriously, "We need to know if you can help us build another one. We need to use its gravitational pull to shift the orbit of a planet. Do you have any plans, blueprints? Any files we can utilize?"

"They don't let you bring anything out of Fifty-one," chuckled Abner, "You consider yourself lucky when you make it out at the end of the day."

He paused and scanned the visitors.

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“The blueprints are in here,” he said with a tap on his temple.

“There is a rogue planet that will soon pass through on a path toward the Sun. The natives there plan to make the hop to Earth and take out every inhabitant here unless we can save their world,” Chon explained.

“I’m sorry, but I gave up the weapons business a long time ago,” Abner replied politely, “I don’t deal with shifty explanations and mysterious visits anymore. My family has been in harm’s way far too many times.”

“But we need your help,” Nick argued, “You could be dead in a month if you don’t do something to stop it.”

Pontius shifted in his chair as the leather began to stick to his clothes. The trailer felt increasingly stuffy. He gulped down a mouthful of warm lemonade. The ice had completely melted.

“Your friend here looks a little ill,” Abner remarked, “Perhaps you should check his temperature.”

“Mr. Monroe, please,” Nick begged, “We’ve been through so much to get to this point, and the only Zetan

parts we have are in a dozen bins at Groom Lake. You're the only person who can walk us through putting it together."

"I'm sorry, boy," Abner dismissed him, "I've retired from that business."

Pontius was angry, his blood boiling. Abner looked down to notice a wisp of steam rise from Pontius's glass. The men made eye contact, and Abner grinned.

"He's one of them, isn't he?" asked Abner, "He's a Treehouse kid? Did you bring him to kick my ass if I didn't comply?"

"We brought him 'cause he's been through just as much as we have," Nick replied in attempt to calm both frustrated men, "We just want desperately for you to do your duty to this planet and help us prevent an all-out war."

Abner grew furious at the stubborn boy.

"I did my duty before and did what I was asked," he yelled, "And all it brought me was secrecy, deception, and a life of thankless poverty. I couldn't tell my children what

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daddy did for a living. They thought I was a garbage man, for heaven's sakes. I was tired of being blindfolded on my way to work. I was tired of pretending that every failed engineering project was a weather balloon. I was tired of being beaten to a pulp when I didn't deliver an assignment on time. I built something that only God should have the power to create! I created a device that could destroy humanity!"

Chon grimaced, "Now we need you to create one that could save it."

## Chapter Seven

### Building A Better Bomb

Though he certainly had no lingering affection for war games, Abner knew in his heart that his help was necessary to prevent a catastrophic accident. He did not trust the boy or the obese, tweed-wearing toad of a diplomat to do the job right. If anyone were to reconstruct the most dangerous device ever devised, it would be he himself.

Chon had opted for ground transport and traditional air travel for the comfort of Mr. Monroe, but the delays stressed him to his limit. *We can travel to their Moon in two hours, but they get from Texas to Nevada in three*, he thought.

The plane finally landed on an airstrip at McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas. The four men were moved immediately to a black military helicopter with windows that had been tinted on the inside and a divider between them and the pilot. They could not see out of the vehicle, though after about a half hour they felt a sudden drop in altitude. A few minutes later they had landed.

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Above ground, the mysterious Groom Lake Air Force base consisted of a large hangar and a paved airstrip. A woman in a non-descript uniform and a group of men carrying M-16 rifles greeted the crew as they exited the chopper. All the memories of Area 51 flooded back into Abner's mind.

A few Ford F-150 pickup trucks zipped past the hangar. The large doors opened to each side with enough space for the group to make its way through. A pair of elevator platforms, each large enough to hold a Boeing 747, sat side-by-side in the middle of the hangar floor. Aside from that detail, the hangar was mostly unassuming – housing aircraft maintenance parts and a variety of tools.

The woman and her entourage of soldiers escorted the small group to one of a half-dozen lifts located at the rear of the hangar. The woman keyed a code into a touchpad affixed to the rusty bars, causing the lift to lurch downward. As it slowly sank into the ground, the woman and soldiers piled into the other lifts to follow.



The descent lasted only a few floors before it stopped in a large, white, remarkably clean expanse. The floors were tiled with white ceramic panels and dark black grout. The walls were polished white and the cement ceiling painted to match. Chon grinned at how closely the interior elements mirrored the Moon base. He wondered if the decorators had been inspired by one of the Air Force visits to the moon when news of the *BlackHole Recovery Incident* initially broke to the UIPA's governing body.

The woman quietly led them through a series of hallways and down another, larger lift. Nick had counted at least seven stories that they must have traveled. He wondered how much square footage had been dug out underneath the base to accommodate such a structure.

Nick and Pontius assisted Abner as they finally trudged down two flights of stairs to a low-level workshop area. The room was large and well lit. The walls were covered with a coarse, crudely applied layer of cement. It almost seemed as though the room had never been completed – or was perhaps an afterthought.

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There were several tables set up for the men to work on, as well as a variety of tools to choose from. A team of men and women in white jackets stood near the tables comparing notes. In the center of the room, on an aluminum platform, sat the aged wreckage of the almost seven-decades-old saucer. Some parts hung by wires suspended from the ceiling. It was a layman's attempt at reconstructing the craft in three dimensions.

"These engineers will provide you with any additional information or materials required," spoke the woman for the first time.

"First thing's first, we'll be needing a Mr. Coffee, some oatmeal cream pies, and a carton of Morleys," joked Chon.

"I'll have the same, but with Zebra Cakes instead," piped Abner.

"I'll take some Funyuns, Vienna sausages, and a sixer of IBC root beer – while we're putting in orders," Nick stated approvingly.

"Double Whopper with cheese, no pickles or onions, and a large Dr. Pepper," requested Pontius.

The woman rolled her eyes, annoyed, and motioned to one of the lab coat-wearing engineers to fill the order. Disgusted by the allowance of such a disheveled crew into her ranks, she briskly disembarked. Her entourage faithfully followed.

“Mr. Chon Tom!” the presumed lead-engineer enthused, “We look forward to your team’s input on this ambitious project!”

“I think that’s what we should be saying to you,” Nick muttered sarcastically.

“Well, your help will certainly be appreciated as we complete this build,” the man said, “We know all about each of your records. Very impressive history in this group.”

“I hope you’re not under the assumption that your team will do anything more than run errands for us while we work?” Nick asked bluntly, “None of you have any idea how to build this thing, do you?”

“I hope you’re not under the assumption that you are not constantly within the crosshairs of a sniper’s scope

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while on these premises," the man said with presumptive testicular fortitude, "What makes you think you can come in here and run the show?"

Nick grabbed a clipboard from one of the engineers and tossed it to Pontius. It immediately caught fire in his grip and the papers went up in a billow of smoke. Pontius tossed it to the ground enthusiastically to be met with wide-eyed attention from every engineer.

"You know for a lead engineer who can't even put a ship back together with the hull facing the correct way," Nick began, as he pointed to the reassembled craft, "You sure do have a lot of cojones to think that you have any clue how to put this device together. We are the ones who just rediscovered Atlantis, saved the Vice President of the United States, and traveled half way across the solar system to halt a war with a technologically superior race of advanced human beings. So instead of standing here trying to think of a retort that doesn't involve a mention of some defunct project that ended up getting sold to a mattress manufacturer or commercial airline, I would

suggest you go and grab my friend Pontius here something to cool off with while the real engineers get to work.”

The man mumbled a few obscenities under his breath and left the room through a side door.

“Anyone else care to piss me off with any uppity college degree-waving douchebaggery?” Nick asked with polite sarcasm.

None moved a muscle – many were still fixated on the charred remnants of the clipboard.

“Alright, Abner, what are we looking for?” Chon asked.

“Well,” Abner said as he removed his glasses to rub his eyes, “Inside the heart of the craft will be a black cylinder. You’ll need to torch that open to get at the platinum cylinder inside. Some of that may already be exposed. As I remember it, this ship was in about a zillion pieces. The platinum cylinder is sealed with a special laminate both inside and out. We ended up having to use a strong corrosive acid to finally eat it away – aqua fortis – nitric acid. Inside that is a delicate silica sphere suspended in a

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thick gelatinous insulation of biological matter. The sphere is what we're after."

"Alright, let's grab it," said Pontius as he grabbed a cutting torch from an engineer.

"One of you get us a canister of that acid," Nick ordered to the lab coats as he followed Pontius to the ship.

Abner began to draw a blueprint in a ruled notebook on the table before him. One of the young engineers approached and offered him a notebook of sketches. The cover of the notebook bore his signature and a date – August 14, 1947. Abner flipped through a few pages and handed it back to the girl.

"We're not here to build the past, my girl," he whispered with a nostalgic half-smile, "We're here to build a future."

Nick followed Pontius up into the mostly-crushed craft. Parts of the flooring and walls had been welded together and braced with two-by-fours underneath for support. Nick located the rear magneto-repulsor array and motioned for Pontius to begin cutting with the torch.

Once the hole had sufficiently cooled, Nick dropped carefully down through it into the dusty innards of the ship. It appeared the lower half of the saucer had sustained less damage than top. Nick guessed the ship had flipped before the crash. In the heart of the craft sat a large metal cylindrical façade. Nick and Pontius lifted the heavy, torn, metal covering off of the power supply. Underneath was another shattered cylindrical casing, bolted to the floor.

Pontius carved through the casing inside the ring of bolts to separate it from the floor. He and Nick lifted its scarred shell and tossed it to the side. Whatever had cut into the unit had sliced all the way into the black cylinder. Sensors and a heat exhaust pipe were still attached to the device, as well as a small sticker that read 'DAMAGED CORE: CONSIDERED UNSTABLE – DO NOT TAMPER'. Pontius carefully torched through it on four sides and across the top. The men peeled the black metal away easily to reveal a platinum canister inside. It was dented on top and cocked to one side.

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Nick noticed that the canister was threaded like a screw at the bottom and asked Pontius to help him twist it. After a few minutes the long threading had been unscrewed from the floor and the power supply was freed. Pontius handed it carefully to Nick.

"I don't think I should hold that thing right now," he laughed nervously.

Nick slipped the canister from a hole in the hull of the ship down to Chon's waiting arms. Abner already had a full design drawn up when the men returned to the workstation. His drawing greatly resembled the previous device, from what Nick could recall, complete with the intersecting ring-like arms, the central sphere, and the fiber optic key. Nick noticed something else, however, buried deep into the core of the device between the shell and the radiation insulation layer.

"Looks like a transmitter?" he asked, with a finger pointing to the detail.

"A receiver, actually," Abner corrected, "So that it can be remotely disabled from within a couple mile vicinity."



“Unfortunate it couldn’t be farther,” Chon remarked.

“Agreed,” Abner replied, “Though we unfortunately don’t have much time to integrate anything so complex, this late in the game.”

“Definitely,” Nick agreed, “The priority is that we get it built and functional in enough time to correct any errors if it happens not to detonate.”

“Pontius, can you go cut about a one meter by one meter square out of the seamless part of the craft’s underside?” Abner requested.

“Sure thing Chief,” Pontius said as he jogged with the torch back to the ship.

“We’ll also need a blacksmith and smelting pot, and a spherical blow mold, a tray-less microscope, about thirty feet of fiber optic cable, and well, just bring an entire parts bin from RadioShack,” said Abner with a twinge of enthusiasm.

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“So explain what it is that Nick’s up to again?” Margaret asked as she pulled a hot red velvet cake from Faith’s oven.

“He’s at an Air Force base working on building a black hole generator for the UIPA,” replied Faith as she pulled a jug of milk from the refrigerator and grabbed a couple of glasses off of the dish rack.

“He’s in no danger is he?”

Dale walked into the kitchen, rubbing grease from his hands onto a handkerchief.

“Radiator problem’s fixed on the Tempo,” Dale grinned, “Oh, and cake!”

“Faith was telling me again about how Nick is working at an Air Force base with the aliens,” Margaret said while dishing out a slice of cake for Dale.

“So you’re the only one of you two that’s got this, mojo thing?” Dale asked, chewing away.

“Yeah,” smiled Faith, “Nick lost his... Abilities... But there’s another guy that can do things too.”

"There's no chance that thing they're building could go off here?" Dale asked with interest.

"If it did, we'd never even know it," Faith replied, "We'd be gone in an instant."

"Must be why we haven't heard about it on the news or in the papers," reasoned Margaret, "People would flip if they knew such a thing was being done."

"They'd also flip if they knew an army of people much more advanced than us was waiting for a chance to take over our planet," Faith mumbled.

"Well," Dale sighed, "God works in mysterious ways, and perhaps this is all a path to some greater good. When it's all said and done, maybe we'll look back and see that it was all necessary."

"Forever the optimist?" Faith asked with a giggle.

"My glass is always half-full," Dale said with a raise of his cup of milk, "Speaking of which, I'm getting close to empty!"

Margaret playfully smacked him on the head with a potholder as she refilled his glass.

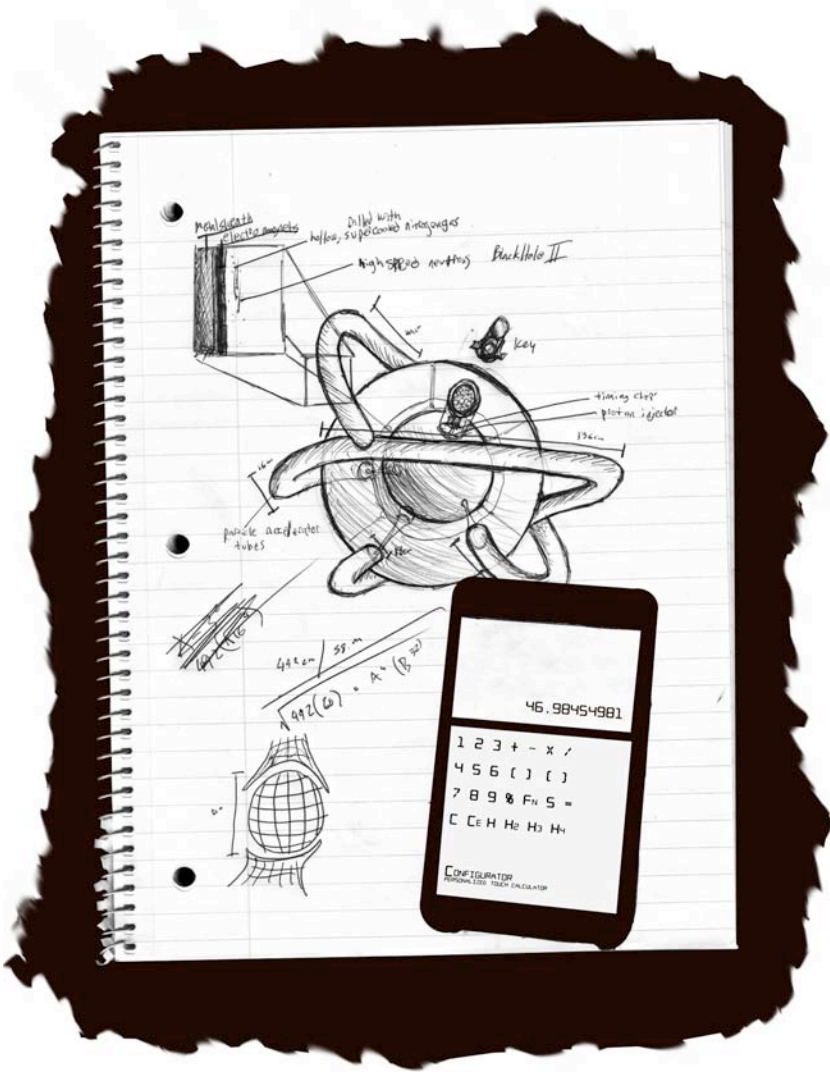
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“The rings, here,” Abner explained while pointing to his diagram, “Are composed of the same platinum alloy as the metal Pontius cut from the underbelly of the ship. Inside is a coating of carbon filament insulation, followed by lateral rings of copper, followed by a seamless ceramic interior. The copper rings are charged and will work as magnets, polarizing the vacuum of thin nitrogen gas inside the rings. It works somewhat like a heart, feeding neutrons as fast as light in and out through very specific channels in the central orb. If at any time the interior dark matter is breached through an unsealed channel, the neutrons will be released into the open air between the outer and inner spheres and the device will implode with enough negative force to eat this entire planet. It all seems so simple, in retrospect.”

“So the channels need to be drilled in a vacuum?” asked Nick.

“Yes,” replied Abner, “And with the microscope – it’s extremely tedious. If the interior is breached too far to



$$\frac{498.5m}{59m} = \sqrt{992(6)} = A^2 (B^2)$$

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either side, we'll all be toast and there won't even be any black holes."

A half an hour later, the base blacksmith was working to forge the necessary housing parts for the device. Nick nodded approvingly and fed his hands into a pair of gloves affixed to the side of a plexiglass vacuum tank. A microscope sat half-in and half-out of the chamber and was sealed in the middle to prevent air leaks. The orb sat atop a small pedestal inside.

"Under the microscope you must find three small symbols etched into the surface," Abner explained while the vacuum powered up, "Two are outlets, one is an inlet. The places where we will drill our holes were originally used to cycle and charge the device before insertion into the craft. Subsequent wreckage that we recovered from the same species had the markings removed from the device. Though with these devices, it took only a few days to decipher the markings, since we had a nice library of their text already established. They were some careless little critters."

"This could take hours – or even days!" Nick exclaimed.

"Once you find your first one, the other two should be easy enough," Abner grinned.

"How precise does this need to match your measurements?" asked the blacksmith.

"As close to on-the-money as possible," Abner replied, "To hedge our bets some."

Abner joined Chon at an empty table. The young engineers in white coats walked back and forth in front of them in attempts to soak in every bit of the information overload. Chon tossed a pack of cigarettes to Abner and poured him a cup of coffee. The aged, but still sharp-witted man picked up the styrofoam cup and took a sip of the strong brew.

Abner found it ironic that he and an alien could share the same passions and habits. He had never actually spoken to an extra-terrestrial prior to Chon's visit, and knew little about their personalities and characters. But this alien felt more human than foreign. The two puffed

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away slowly as they watched the action unfold in nervous anticipation.

“This is your one shot, huh?” Abner asked softly.

“Yep,” replied Chon, “We could probably acquire a similar power supply, but that would require telling UIPA headquarters what’s up, and they’d blow a gasket. As far as they can ever know, this was a human endeavor.”

Chon sipped his coffee.

“You know I had a totally different concept of this job when I first took it,” he laughed.

“No idea about all the secrecy and danger, huh?” Abner laughed.

“You humans were just another species under study, and after I was put in charge of the Moon base and eventually interacted with a few humans, they started to grow on me. There’s something really inspiring about your people’s will to live and to enjoy life. Believe it or not, most intelligent species out there could care less about a sport, or the beauty of nature, or love. They think they’ve evolved



a higher intelligence, but I would beg to differ," Chon pontificated.

"They've lost what makes life worth living, you would say?" asked Abner.

"The word 'human' isn't just a noun – even in intergalactic speech it has become an increasingly common adjective," Chon said with a smile, "Your people have taught even the oldest Type Three civilizations a thing or two about the meaning of what it is to be alive."

"Abner!" Nick yelled.

"What, my boy?"

"I found something. Looks like a crop circle!"

"Three circles or five?"

"Three!" replied Nick.

"Bingo!"

Abner pulled himself up from his chair and shuffled over to the vacuum chamber.

"Just mark it with that felt-tip pen," Abner instructed, "And rotate so that the line in the symbol points

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downward. Now rotate thirty degrees to the right and twenty-two degrees down. And start looking again!"

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After nearly an hour, Nick had successfully located the two remaining symbols. He prepared for the procedure with the precision surgical drill by carving his initials into the side of a paperclip. When he felt confident, he motioned for an assistant engineer to maneuver the sphere in front of him.

"You must drill directly into the center of the smallest circle in each formation, then plug it quickly with one of the microscopic valves," Abner instructed, "The hole is small enough that you will be fine if you just hurry when you plug it up."

"Gotcha," Nick replied in a whisper, "Valve in left tweezers. Does it automatically seal?"

"Yes, there is a strong adhesive around the back that will react to the metal."

A bead of sweat ran down Nick's forehead as he focused on the pinprick target. The room fell silent as everyone

waited to breathe. He pressed forward on the small joystick in his right hand to edge the drill closer and closer. It nudged the surface of the sphere just slightly below his target. He adjusted, repositioned, and moved it forward again. The bit was perfectly centered.

“Just barely penetrate the surface,” Abner advised.

Nick gulped and slowly spun up the drill bit. Microscopic particles of metal tore away leaving a tiny depression. He pushed the drill just a bit further until – success. Nick quickly inserted the valve and relaxed back for a moment.

“I admire your steady hand, Nick”, Abner praised, “I wasn’t that steady even when I was your age.”

“Thanks,” Nick said with a smile, “Now for round two...”

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“Have a look at this,” Faith said as she pulled the crystalline wafer out of her pocket.

“That’s beautiful!” Margaret marveled, “What is it?”

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“It’s an ancient Atlantian artifact,” Faith announced proudly.

“Oh, and it has a little hole in it there, you could put that on a little silver chain! Oh it would be so cute!” Margaret gushed, “I have just the chain, you just wait right here!”

“Atlantian – like from Georgia?” asked Dale in his wife’s absence.

“No, like Atlantis, the lost city,” Faith laughed, “But believe me, it’s not as glamorous as you might think.”

“This really is one crazy world we live in, Faith,” Dale chuckled, “Just when you think you’ve got life figured out, you discover that aliens are real and that your neighbor can fly!”

“You know, I don’t know why I thought you and Maggie wouldn’t understand all this,” Faith remarked, “It seems so silly in retrospect to think I needed to hide it from you.”

“Well, I can understand why you wouldn’t want people to know you’re the girl who brought aliens to Earth. The attention from that might get tiresome!” Dale laughed,

“But you don’t have to think that all of us religious folk are too stubborn to accept reality. If God made aliens, he must love them as much as all of us.”

Faith smiled at her neighbor. He was such a kind, paternal man. The older Faith grew, the wiser Dale seemed. She wondered briefly if that was what it felt like to have real parents.

“Here it is!” Margaret beamed as she returned from her apartment.

“Oh, Maggie, it’s so elegant!” Faith complimented as she inspected the fine silver chain.

Margaret slipped the small wafer off of the table and threaded the necklace chain through the hole in its corner. She then wrapped the necklace around Faith’s neck and struggled for a moment to couple the clasp. Faith could make out the faint lines of the interior wiring of the wafer against her green hoodie.

“A beautiful charm for a beautiful girl,” Dale said with a fatherly smile.

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## **Stargazer 2: Displacement Vector**

“Okay,” Nick whispered, “The last valve is in place.”

The gathered group exhaled a collective sigh of relief.

“What next?” Nick asked.

“Well,” Abner thought for a moment, “You can begin soldering together the circuit board by these diagrams, and I’ll have Mr. Pontius help me assemble the housing.”

The team worked tirelessly into the night lining the arms of the device with copper rings and filling its hollow interior with layer upon layer of ceramic – inside of a three-axis centrifuge. Finally it was assembled in the vacuum chamber and sealed with a coating of silica-based laminate. After the stress of completing the build, the team spent another four hours constructing the key and a set of keypads for remote disabling of the device. Nick christened the completed construction by scrawling *BlackHole: Take II* across its exterior.

“Damn good work, team,” Chon congratulated the crew, as he puffed a celebratory cigar, “Let’s put this thing in the sky!”

## Chapter Eight

### Spirit In The Sky

Nick declined to go with the team to place the *BlackHole* at the target location. Skree and Milo headed up the mission, while Nick felt that his priorities finally had a home – Ravenwood. So he packed his belongings, including a Groom Lake branded screwdriver as a souvenir, and requested transport home.

“The boys will do fine up there,” Chon assured him while they rode the lift to the surface, “And I guess Pontius will be taking up residence on the *Ruengale II* for a while.”

“Already missed my rent payment ‘cause of this fiasco,” Pontius joked, “Just gonna pick up my fish and my stuff and abandon the place. Got a lot to learn!”

“Well, have fun up there,” said Nick, shaking his new friend’s hand, “It can be quite an experience.”

Three helicopters, similar to the one that had brought the men in, landed just outside the hangar. To Chon’s annoyance, two Air Force soldiers had been assigned to guard the *BlackHole*. The men loaded the device – protected by little more than a wooden crate and some

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straw – into one of the helicopters and climbed aboard. With a significant tug, they pulled Chon up into the chopper as well. Pontius hopped in laughing, while Abner boarded the second helicopter.

Nick climbed into his ride and disappeared behind the blacked-out windows. He wondered how long it would be before he and Chon met up again. In an odd way, Nick missed his days at the Moon base. He had resigned to be carefree once his mother had passed away, and only when Faith came back into his life did he choose to grow up again. The base had been fun, though – and he had learned so much in his year there. His friendships with Chon and Milo had meant the most to him during the stay, and he felt a slight emptiness inside him back on Earth. There he was technically a dead man, and nobody knew his past but Faith.

Though Nick attempted to protest, he was taken directly to the apartment complex in the unmarked military chopper. The neighborhood children rushed to the vehicle to gaze in astonishment. Nothing like *that* ever



happened in Ravenwood. The gathered crowd of youths jumped back as two soldiers hopped out of the vehicle, followed by a sheepish Nick. Faith heard the commotion and looked out her kitchen window.

“Maggie! Dale!” she exclaimed, “Nick’s back!”

The three rushed to the front door and fell into laughter as they watched the children swarm Nick, hollering about the helicopter and how *cool* it was. He was a trifle embarrassed, though he would never show it.

“Welcome back, my boy!” Dale said with a hearty handshake.

“Thanks,” Nick replied humbly.

“I’m gonna go cook you two a big meal, you come over in about an hour,” offered Margaret.

“Sounds great, I’ll be there with knife and fork in hand,” Nick said with a playful rub of his belly.

Nick walked through the door, after his first long trip away from the modest apartment. As he gazed upon the lackluster and varied furnishings, trinkets, and wall hangings, he truly felt that he was home. It was an odd –

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although not unwelcomed – feeling. He had not expected to miss the place so much.

“Have fun out there?” Faith asked as she took the clothes he was hastily stripping off.

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say. That’s top secret,” Nick winked.

Faith rolled her eyes.

“Seriously though, we built the thing and I think its gonna work. Just hope Skree and Milo get it in the right place.”

Nick showered quickly. He had never been so ready to just be still. The soap clung to the hair of his arms as the oily sweat fought hard to stay put. Nick realized that it had been days since he had taken a good shower – his last was a brief experiment with the Nibiru shower pods that ended as quickly as it began. It felt good to stand under the hot water of the pulsing showerhead and feel insignificant for a fleeting moment.

Nick settled into the couch and flipped on the television. A local network news affiliate's broadcast was on, the anchor beaming with joy at his scoop.

"KKHO Channel Five's *Your News First* team was unable to confirm the reports, though Air Force sources out of Nevada seemed confident that the device exists and was manufactured there not only by American civilians, but by United Inter-Planetary Assembly representatives as well. We'll have more on this report as details surface."

Nick flipped the channel with a snicker.

"You know anything about that?" laughed Faith as she plopped down on the sofa next to the sprawled-out Nick.

"Not a damned thing," he replied with a nudge of his foot to her side.

"Maggie was asking yesterday about how we met..."

"What'd you tell her?"

"The truth," replied Faith.

"How'd she take that?" asked Nick as he scrunched forward a bit.

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“She and Dale both took it well,” Faith paused for a moment, “You know – I don’t know why we didn’t tell them sooner.”

“Huh,” Nick thought, “I guess sometimes you don’t give people enough credit. I figured they would think we were crazy, but even Dale said he suspected something all along.”

“Dale’s a smart guy. I bet he recognized my voice as soon as he saw the news coverage, but was too polite to ever ask.”

“Well, the timing *was* pretty coincidental. And he *did* ask once about the helmet that fell out of the closet when he went in for the vacuum,” laughed Nick, “I told him you found it at a flea market.”

“Oh right,” Faith scoffed, “I’m sure he believed that!”

“Well I was on the spot!”

Faith rolled her eyes at Nick.

“Well,” he said, “It’s good that they understood.”

“And understood why we kept it from them,” Faith added.

The couple stared lovingly at each other for a few seconds before a ringing phone shattered the moment.

"Probably Margaret needing to borrow something," Faith guessed as she tapped the speakerphone button.

"Hello!" Nick yelled before catching a pillow to the head from Faith.

"Hello?" Faith answered politely through her restrained laughter.

"Hey kids, it's Chon! Just letting you know that Skree and Milo dropped off the payload and it is set to detonate, oh, about six hours from now. Nibiru has been contacted and is awaiting regular status updates."

"Good news Chon!" hollered Nick from across the sofa, "Now you should really get some sleep!"

"Right after I finish off this box of oatmeal cream pies," Chon joked, "Night kids."

"Goodnight, Chon!" the couple exclaimed in stereo.

"Well, that's good news," offered Faith.

"Yeah, let's hope it works..."

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Margaret crossed the kitchen with a steaming roast. Dale licked his lips in anticipation – Margaret's cooking was one of the top reasons he had married the woman so many years ago. Nick hopped out of his chair to help her carry the remainder of the dishes over. She had prepared a veritable feast – potatoes, green bean casserole, and croissants.

"Looks amazing yet again, Mags," Nick said as he resumed his seat.

"Thanks, nothing special though," she replied humbly.

"Say we heard the news coverage about your little trip to Nevada," Dale joked.

He tore through a hunk of pink meat with his teeth and smiled as he chewed.

"Yeah," sighed Nick, "Seems nothing's a secret nowadays."

"Well at least they didn't drop any names," Dale offered, "Anyways if they actually knew what it is the thing was made for, they would be thankful."

"Sounds like Faith's filled you in," Nick said with a squint toward his fiancée.

"Well we think it's real impressive that they picked you," Margaret said with a soft country voice, "We're real proud of ya."

"Heck yeah we are!" enthused Dale, "If word ever gets out that you helped the Air Force save the world, everyone in Ravenwood city limits will be bringing in their computers for a tune-up!"

Everyone at the dinner table enjoyed a laugh at Dale's speculation. They all felt a sense of family when together, something each of them craved and cherished.

"Now I don't mean to be morbid," Dale began, "But just what are the chances that the contraption you built will do what it's intended to?"

"Well, we had the guy who built the original one working with us. Over ninety years old and still sharp as a tack," Nick replied, "As long as it doesn't drift too far off course we should be fine. Projections are showing that the black hole created by it will likely collapse on itself in

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months. We specifically built it to be a smaller reaction than the last model.”

“That’s all very scientific,” Margaret commented with unusual sarcasm.

“Basically, yes, I think it will work just fine,” grinned Nick.

“Now that’s an answer I can understand!” Margaret joked.

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Back in their apartment, Nick and Faith sat waiting for metabolism to kick in. Margaret had filled them to the brim with her feast, and it pained them both just to move. They were tired, deprived of alone time, and home.

“I love you,” Faith whispered into Nick’s ear.

“I love you back.”

Faith pushed him back onto the couch and threw her leg over his waist. She lay down on his chest with her head nuzzled into his shoulder and kissed him lightly on the neck.

“So good to be alone,” she whispered.



"If only we had something to do with ourselves..."

Their lips met slowly. Every kiss felt like the first. Faith always marveled at how perfect Nick was for her. He thought the same of her, though he was too shy to ever vocalize it in any dramatic way. Faith slid her right hand down Nick's left arm. He trembled a bit, with a cold chill of anticipation. *Faith is in rare form*, Nick thought to himself.

Suddenly, a crash in the kitchen area sent Nick to his feet and Faith to the floor.

"Oh crap, sorry," Nick said as he helped her up.

"What the hell was that?" Faith yelled, a palm extended to the kitchen.

Nick grabbed a swizlakuli from the hall closet and ran in to investigate.

"I'm alright, I'm alright," Chon said from atop the crushed replacement dinner table, "I'll have that replaced again. You guys really shoulda warned me."

The toad-like alien rubbed the back of his head.

"Do I even need to ask why you're here?" Nick groaned.

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“A Zetan beacon was detected in the area of the payload. Area was surveyed, and the *BlackHole* was gone. We’re tracking an anomaly now that’s not in the registry – it’s most likely our bogey.”

“Where’s it headed?” asked Faith.

“Earth.”

“Let’s suit up,” Nick said as he grabbed Chon’s arm.

Faith reluctantly took Chon’s hand and held her breath.

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Skree, Pontius, and Milo were waiting at the transport deck as the trio arrived.

“The bogey just breached Earth’s atmosphere,” Skree said as he began passing out jumpsuits and equipment, “It’s a Zetan saucer, cruising down over the Pacific. We’ve got satellites trained on it. Here are some updated earpieces – each has a GPS transponder and, well, one of Nick’s modifications. There’s one for each ear.”

“So I guess there was enough leftover room after all?” Nick asked, excited.

"Yup," Skree said, "Just enough space to squeak it in. I re-wired your watch with all the controls."

"Damn, you work fast," Chon said proudly.

"Try my best," replied Skree.

"Since the ship is so close to course, we're going to have to perform an IOST," Milo explained as he helped Faith suit-up.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Inter-Orbital Ship Transport," Milo rattled, "There's a ship waiting back in Earth's orbit that we have the transport system tracking. We can send you directly over to it."

"Whoa!" Pontius exclaimed, "Is that safe?"

"Yeah," Nick agreed, tugging on his jumpsuit's velcro straps, "I'm not so sure about that."

"No time to argue," Chon countered, "Just stand still and hold tight."

In an instant, Faith, Nick, and Pontius disappeared from the transport deck. They were surrounded with white light and a spectrum of colors, and then found themselves

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inside an empty *Stargazer-F3*. For its third incarnation, the ship looked remarkably refined. Black faux-leather covered the interior walls and seating. The flooring was a seamless glossy white sheet and the ceiling glowed white with illumination. The control panel was a solid semi-circle display screen that spanned the length of the front of the ship. The exterior was painted a deep green and finished with a glossy coat of wax.

“I’m keeping this ship,” Faith said bluntly.

“What’s the plan?” asked Pontius, as he took a seat behind the pilot’s chair.

“There’s never any real plan,” Nick groaned, his jumpsuit itching his back, “We hopefully will just fly in, ask for the *BlackHole*, and quietly apprehend whoever took it.”

Pontius laughed, “Yeah, right man.”

Skree appeared on the screen.

“The ship just set down in the Aleutian Islands,” he said, “You three might be familiar with the landing site.”

“You’re kidding,” Faith moaned, “I half thought I would never set foot there again...”

“Roger that, Skree,” Nick said dutifully, “We’ll call back when we have the *BlackHole*.”

“Enjoy the ride!” Skree said as he disappeared from the console.

The ship cruised down over the surface of the ocean. Nick pointed out a pod of white orcas running under the water in front of the ship before swinging sharply left and firing the thrusters. The island chain was visible on the horizon.

“Hey Nick, you don’t think...” Faith trailed off.

“Yeah, I already had,” Nick replied, “And I bet we’re right.”

“You two are very confusing,” Pontius groaned.

Nick piloted the ship toward the disheveled terrace outside Fusion’s former office on the side of the abandoned volcano base. There was just enough room for the ship to land on the balcony. The small crew jumped to the ground through the floor hatch and raced down the hallway towards the former launch room.

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Upon their arrival in the large expanse, they noticed a pair of hooded figures fumbling with the doomsday device in the center of the mucky ash-covered floor. The taller of the figures rose to its feet, floated a swizlakuli from its shoulder strap into its gaunt grey hand, and hovered above the ground. Nick quickly slid a finger across the face of his watch and tapped an onscreen button to deactivate the *BlackHole* detonation mechanism.

The figure removed its hood as an ear-piercing tonal blast entered each youth's eardrums. It was like the sounds penetrated their very minds and they each fell to their knees, disoriented. Nick focused his eyes just long enough flick a yellow circle on the face of his watch. Their eardrums fell silent and Faith leapt to her feet, swizlakuli in hand.

"Noise cancelling earbuds," Nick yelled as he pulled himself from the ashy ground, "Originally intended to make sleep between Earth and the Moon annoyance-free, apparently it also works on your silly Zetan paralysis mojo."

Vic, former commander of the UIPA, and fugitive Zetan ambassador, hovered effortlessly before them. He motioned casually for Nick to disable the noise-cancellation devices. Nick flicked the yellow circle on his watch, but kept his finger just over it to be safe.

"Bastards," Vic's hissy voice rang inside the heads of the crew, "I had hoped to swoop in undetected."

"Are you an idiot?" Faith yelled across the room, "You honestly thought that you could just steal the *BlackHole* and be off with it to destroy Earth and nobody would be watching?"

"If I can't set it off here, I can just dispose of it elsewhere," Vic's voice hissed, "Either way, Earth dies. By implosion or by war, it's your choice."

"So you were working with Jonas?" Pontius asked.

"A mere pawn," Vic snarled, "He was promised a few things he was never destined to receive."

"You're one evil son of a bitch," Pontius yelled at the alien.

"Clever," Vic hissed.

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His assistant stood up and looked toward him. There was a silent exchange, followed by Vic clubbing the hooded alien with his swizlakuli and firing a blast into his chest. Vic rose higher off of the ground and pointed the weapon toward the interrupting trio.

“You know I have to kill you.”

“Try it,” yelled Faith, as she and Nick activated their swizlakuli shields.

Vic shot towards the group. Faith flew forward and blocked the attack, sending Vic to the ground. Pontius took off to where the *BlackHole* lay and grabbed it with a firm grip, then spun and started toward the exit. How he wished he could fly at that moment.

Nick charged Vic, but was met with a swizlakuli to the chest as Vic launched himself up from the ground. Faith circled the expanse in flight, bounced gracefully off of the volcano wall, and shot toward Vic. A barrage of particle blasts from Vic’s modified weapon sped toward her, prompting a quick, deep dive.



Vic swirled around and spotted Pontius attempting to escape with the *BlackHole*. He shot a single blast that connected with Pontius's arm. The man fell to the ground and lost hold of the device. Vic scooped it up mid-flight and shot up toward the mouth of the volcano crater.

Before he could reach his exit, Faith tumbled into him and grabbed his torso. Vic kicked free, though too late to notice that he had turned upside-down and flew face first into the grey, dusty ground.

He recovered quickly and lurched toward Nick, who held his shield firm in his right hand and the recovered *BlackHole* in his left. An out-of-breath Pontius joined him at his side. Vic fired a warning shot, which Nick effortlessly deflected.

"Enough, Vic," Nick said firmly, "Turn yourself in."

"Never, human scum," Vic replied in his raspy telepathic voice.

"Come on, Vic, this is ridiculous," Nick reasoned.

"We all choose things to be passionate about," Vic said as he released a round of particle blasts from his weapon,

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“Some choose sports. Some choose the arts. I chose redemption.”

Vic sprayed Nick’s shield with blasts as he approached. Pontius darted behind the shield, helpless.

“Prepare!” Vic’s voiced hissed in their heads.

With a burst of blue energy, Faith smashed to the ground behind Vic and crushed the side of the alien’s skull with a direct upward blow. Again and again she thrust the swizlakuli into the Vic’s lifeless body until she was confident that he would never get back up.

“Dude your girlfriend is wild,” Pontius whispered.

“Here,” Nick said as he tossed Faith the *BlackHole* from a few meters away, “I think you’re most qualified to protect this.”

Faith caught the device and shot Nick a grin.

Flashes of blue light flooded the room. In their disorientation, Nick and Pontius failed to see Jonas Savant club Faith in the back of the head and grab the *BlackHole*. When the young men’s eyes had regained focus, Jonas stood at the far side of the room holding the unconscious

Faith around the torso and the doomsday device in his other hand. Hooded guards encircled the perimeter.

"I shoulda known that retard would bring this thing here," he said from beneath his mask, "Glad we tagged all the transports at your stupid embassies."

"Jonas, come on—"

"Shut up Nick! Shut the hell up!" Jonas said, dropping Faith to the floor, "This was all going to be so simple, but you *idiots* just won't stop pestering me. And I should have guessed Lightbulb-Head over there would try to screw me. Always keep a contingency plan, am I right? Well now we're doing it my way. Want your girlfriend and the bomb? Want to stop this war? Have a metric ton of gold inside the Paul Revere House in three days. If you don't, well, we'll see what happens."

Jonas yanked a blue cloth from within his jacket and draped it theatrically over Faith. In a flash, she had disappeared. He waved sarcastically at Nick and Pontius before disappearing, along with the amassed guards – all in a flash of bright blue light.

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"I think this is the part," Pontius whispered, "Where I ask *what now?*"

## Chapter Nine

### Beacon of Hope

"You are *very* annoying!" Jonas yelled as he kicked Faith in side of the head, "Damn it!"

Faith was weak and bloody. Jonas had beaten her nearly to a pulp in the few minutes since their disappearance. Her eyes were blurry and her forehead throbbing. She could make out the room, though. It was where she and Jonas had first met. Jonas paced back and forth in frustration.

"What do you think you are? Some kind of superhero?" he barked under his breath before kicking her again, "I'm gonna let you in on a little secret..."

Jonas hopped onto the table and removed his jacket, placing it carefully down. He peeled off his tight, striped, button-up shirt to reveal a torso covered in a mesh of wires and electronics. Faith was pulled close by the hair on the back of her head to inspect his handiwork of technology fused with flesh. She saw scarred muscle tissue through the eyelets embedded in his skin. In his chest was a computer motherboard. Wires ran from the device up and

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down his arms and to a collar around his neck. His face was illuminated by a blue glow that emanated from his torso.

“Are you familiar with the displacement vector, *Stargazer?*”

“No,” she coughed.

“The shortest distance from point A to point B is a straight line. The straighter the line, the shorter the distance. It is true for both space and time.”

Jonas snarled under his respirator mask, and pointed to his chest.

“It’s the *Single Organism Molecular Emancipator* – the only personal space and time shifter that you can wear under your clothes! I call it *S.O.M.E. Wear!*”

Jonas spun for Faith like a model on a runway.

“And the timeshifter cloaks – pure genius. Only issue is that you have to be using *S.O.M.E. Wear* to make them work. My men are all equipped with *S.O.M.E. Wear* devices similar to mine, though only I have the ability to program coordinates into my men’s devices. It would be

too risky to let civilians run amok with that sort of power," he paused a moment, "You know what the problem is with *S.O.M.E. Wear*, Faith? Only enough power to jump moments ahead and miles away. Not enough to, say, jump to another planet or another century. That and it itches like hell. But with enough gold wiring – gold that I had hoped to simply pipe out of Nibiru's atmosphere – and with that little collection of star charts you gave me in that cute little black box, I will have the ability to travel to anywhere or any time."

Jonas pulled the crystalline wafer from his boot. He spun it around his finger by the silver necklace and sneered at Faith with an evil grin.

"So when your friend Vic and I first began to chat on our little webcams, he told me he could help me acquire the materials needed to build something bigger. Primarily, the metric ton of gold required to wire this thing up. Gold for the conductivity, of course, as well as its Earthen value."

Jonas blew Faith a little kiss and walked to the table to dig in his jacket pockets. He pulled out a canister. The

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label read 'N/79, O/21, Trace/<1'. With a quick motion the air canister in his respirator was replaced.

"I love humanity," he said, as he moved in very close, "I love Earth. I've always wanted to *be* human."

His face almost touched Faith's as he slowly removed the sunglasses that hid his blindness. Faith looked in horror upon the open black pits. Jonas flared his eyebrows and replaced the frames.

"I've been blind for years, Faith," he lamented, "Before I had my epiphany. Before I knew my destiny. So I had the eyes removed. See, when I visit the past I don't want them tipped off to my little secret."

"You're a Claman," Faith muttered in a short breath.

"Yes, much like that bozo friend of yours, Mr. Skree," Jonas replied, "But unlike Skree, I have aspirations to do something useful for humankind, rather than be its bitch. When my machine is complete, I will be able to carry myself, a few of my men, and enough weapons and technology to ensure my dominance over any culture. I will be an alien leader among men and will hopefully



change humanity for the better. I will bring the wealth of gold and a wealth of technological knowledge and conquer any Earthen civilization I choose.”

“What about...” Faith sucked in a painful breath, “The grandfather paradox...”

“If such a paradox existed, we wouldn’t be in this situation now.”

Jonas cackled loudly, snatched his cane from the corner, and followed it out the door. A wall of steel-forged bars slid into place and locked behind him.

“Oh, one more thing!” Jonas yelled down the hall, “We go live on Keith Olberman’s show in ten minutes!”

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“We have to do something!” Nick demanded with a pound of his fist.

A recovery team had been assembled at the *Ruengale II*. Pontius, Skree, Milo, Chon, and a host of others were present – including a pair of presidential advisors.

“We don’t have a signal, she must have lost her right earpiece,” replied Skree.

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“Just give him his gold,” Chon remarked, “Whatever it is he’s doing with it, we can deal with it in the long run. Right now the priority is on getting the *BlackHole* back and in place in time for detonation. There’s no way that Jonas can detonate it – that’s not a concern. Concern now is in preventing interplanetary war.”

“The concern is on getting Faith back in one piece!” Nick argued, furious.

“He said he would return both if he got his gold,” Pontius offered.

“He didn’t say that she would be alive,” Nick barked back.

“Until we get a beacon from her earpiece, it’s a waiting game,” Milo reminded the group, “It’s powered by heat, and right now it’s apparently ice cold.”

“Let me remind you that the United States government does not negotiate with terrorists,” an advisor piped up, “If this goes public, we won’t have any ability to be officially involved.”

“It’s already going public!” yelled Nila from the doorway, “Nick patch in stream eighty-eighty.”

Nick punched a few buttons on the glass console before him and activated a holographic screen in the center of the table. It was Jonas on a hijacked cable feed. Faith sat on her knees, blindfolded. Her hair was caked with blood and grit – her jumpsuit torn at the shoulder. The dirty hair hid her face only slightly – but effectively enough for her to remain anonymous. The backdrop was pure black, disguising the location. It was a further frustration for the assembled team.

“Alrighty, now that the stage is set, we’ll continue,” Jonas said lightly, “In the interest of full disclosure, we’re going to go over what your American government, military, and the UIPA-holes have been up to the past week. Planet Earth is about to come under attack by the inhabitants of another, doomed planet. The future invaders have given Earth an opportunity to help by allowing them top secret construction of *this*.”

Jonas held the *BlackHole* up into frame.

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“This little doozey will create a black hole with enough gravity to swing that other planet’s orbit off and save it from its trip into the Sun. But since I enlisted the help of your little ‘Stargazer’ here to get some information for me, she has had the annoying habit of not going away.”

Jonas stepped forward. The lens of the camera reflected on his sunglasses.

“So I have asked very kindly that I be provided with one metric ton of gold, to be delivered to the Paul Revere House in three days. If these demands are not met, your little hero girl will be delivered to the Paul Revere House in about a thousand pieces. Toodles!”

The image fizzled into static before returning to an on-going broadcast of *Countdown with Keith Olberman*.

“Can’t do it,” said the advisor.

“What the hell do you mean you can’t do it?” Nick yelled, before he jumped up and slammed the man into the wall.”

"I don't care what you and this little operation do about it," the advisor replied, "But it would take a literal act of Congress for us to do anything to help."

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"Seems your government doesn't give a shit about you, Faith," Jonas laughed, his feet dangling from the table, "But oddly enough, a lot of little blue-haired old ladies and seven-year-old girls do."

He pulled an envelope from his jacket and displayed it for Faith.

"This one is from Kirsti Johnson, from Little Heights Elementary School in Frankfurt," Jonas read with a sarcastic cuteness, "She sends a locket she received for confirmation to the Catholic Church and a letter telling you about how much of an inspiration you are to little girls like her. Thousands of these things showed up overnight by the boxful at the Paul Revere House. The curator made sure to place them in a stack out back for my men to pick up. But in all of that mess, there were no gold bars marked Fort Knox. Shame."

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“Please let me go,” Faith whispered. She was weak and dehydrated.

“You will be let go when my machine is done,” Jonas replied, “We’re smelting, spinning, and soldering the gold filament now. If your little fan club keeps it up, we may be done by tomorrow. But for now, I’m going to go supervise. Hang tight.”

Faith watched Jonas skip out the door. She wanted badly to escape, but could barely find the energy to sit up. Hand over hand, she scooted across the ground to rest in the corner of the room, which gave her a better view out through the cage door. As she shifted, she felt something small flex under her palm. It was one of her earpieces. *It must have fallen out of my ear*, she thought. It was quickly stuffed inside her ear canal as she began whispering for help and hoping someone was listening.

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“I’ve got a signal!” Skree yelled, breaking an hours-long silence, “No voice, but I’ve got a lock on the beacon.”

“Well, where the hell is it?” Nick demanded.

“Shit!” Skree exclaimed, as he pinpointed the location, “She’s in the damned temple where he first met with her.”

“Get everything down here that we’ve got on that temple!” Chon barked, “I want maps, charts, historical data – even the friggin’ Wikipedia article, if there is one. We need a way into that place – and a way out!”

Nick sprung to action and called up every file with the word ‘Uxmal’ located anywhere within. Skree hopped to the second console and called up Earth’s internet. The men searched, passed files from screen-to-screen, and began building the most complete architectural reconstruction they could.

“Her original coordinates included a depth of seven hundred fifty-six meters. That’s about a half mile?” Skree guessed.

“Yeah, and from all accounts, we only have data for a depth of about three eighths of a mile,” Nick groaned.

“If I had to guess, I would wager that Jonas tunneled down from these air outlets and built a custom detainment

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room that would not show on any map or reconstruction,” said Skree.

“Yeah,” Nick agreed, as he plotted the original room’s coordinates and displayed the reconstruction on the holographic projector, “Check it out – if he went down at a roughly thirty degree angle—”

“Bingo! We’d end up right at that room!” Skree cheered.

“So if we head down through this tiny cavern,” Nick said pointing to the projection, “And keep along the east side of the underground river, we’d just need to scale that wall and go in through the left-most air outlet. Looks like it would be easier than the right one.”

“Yeah, from the data the right-most outlet looks to hang directly over the cavern. I bet we could set a transport craft down at that left outlet and save ourselves a climb,” concluded Skree.

“Sounds good,” agreed Nick, “Chon, are we good to go?”

“Make it happen,” Chon ordered.



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“Faith, you are a very lucky girl,” Jonas said as he again entered her cell, “The Stargazer fan club has completed my order, no thanks to your respected leaders. They will find the *BlackHole* at good old Paul Revere’s place and have plenty of time to get it into position. Too bad, though, that it won’t matter a bit in a few days when history is forever altered.”

“History already happened,” Faith whispered, “It can’t be changed.”

“Oh it will be changed,” Jonas hissed, “Starting with a little test here in about an hour!”

“Am I free to go?” Faith asked quietly.

“Yes, and here’s a tip – take the blue tunnel, it’ll be quicker!”

Jonas disappeared with burst of laughter and blue light. The bars on the door had been left open.

She mustered up enough energy to rise to her feet. Using the slick stone walls for any support that they could offer, she moved slowly out of the room and into the long

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inclined hallway. She could see a lone light ahead against a wall. It was only a few hundred meters away. She trudged up the sandy hallway – trying desperately to keep her feet planted. She was so tired.

At the end of the hallway she came to a doorway that had been walled-off. Opposite the doorway were two dark, cylindrical tunnels. The tunnels were sloppily painted inside from the opening to about two meters down – one green, the other blue.

*Which do I take? They're both too long to see the end,* Faith thought. She remembered Jonas's tip – to take the blue tunnel. She held a breath and made her choice.

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"Just got word that the *BlackHole* showed up at that landmark house," said Chon on the console display, "Got a couple of agents bringing it up now. How close are you?"

"Inside the cavern," Skree announced calmly, "Air outlets are just up ahead."

He, Nick, and Pontius surveyed the underground landscape for their landing site. They had entered the

cavern through a small cave mouth where the river exited and had flown several miles inside. The cavern was gigantic in height, though narrow in width – the river had carved it out after ages of erosion. The tall rock walls were sharp-edged and crude. The men hoped for a sturdy landing site for their craft.

“Right there!” Pontius yelled, delighted to be first to spot it.

“I see it, thanks!” said Nick as he maneuvered the craft above the outcropping.

Years of funneled air had smoothed the face of the precipice just enough to make it a safe landing spot. The right-most outlet jetted out another three meters from the wall and hung nearly one hundred meters over the jagged rocks below. Almost as soon as the ship came to rest, the trio jumped out and began their climb up into the left-most tunnel. Less than ten meters in, Nick noticed rubble panging down from before him. He heard a familiar frustrated groan.

“Faith!” he yelled, spotting a figure in the dark.

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“Nick...” came a whisper from the shadows.

Nick rushed ahead, grabbing any handhold and footing he could get. He met Faith with open arms and grabbed onto her tight. He wanted never to let go.

“We have a ship right down there! How did you know to take this tunnel?”

“Jonas... Told me to take the other one...” Faith whispered with a sly, tired grin.

“Well, you’re safe now. Come on!”

“No,” Faith stopped him, “We can’t... We have to go back.”

“What’d she say?” Pontius asked with a flabbergasted expression.

“He’s got a time machine of some kind. He wants to go back in time and... I don’t know, become an emperor or something...”

“Time travel research has been barred by UIPA Relations Treaty, Code Seven,” rattled Skree, “It’s dangerous.”

“Well that’s how they do their little disappearing acts – and he’s got a big machine ready.”

“If he can go back in time,” Skree sighed, “Then we have to go and stop him. If he can make that thing work, we may not ever be *around* to stop him.”

“Let’s go kick some ass,” Pontius said with a smirk, “I’ve got some things I’ve been wanting to try out, anyhow.”

The team moved up the tunnel and into the passageway. Skree quickly broke through the walled-off door with a sonic-pulse gun that crumbled the cheap concrete into gravel within seconds. With five quick blinks, a map displayed on a contact lens in Nick’s left eye.

“Main temple floor, or dignitary burial chamber?” Nick asked.

“Gotta be the burial chamber,” replied Skree.

The group followed Nick through a series of hallways, past grotesque statues of bone, and through a vertical passageway just large enough for them to scurry up. One-by-one each person crested the floor and was pulled up. They stopped on a walkway overlooking Jonas’s creation.

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The machine was large, and profoundly egg-shaped. The vessel's door doubled as a ramp leading up into its interior. Its diameter was about three meters, by Skree's estimation, and it was roughly five meters in height. It was plated in platinum and glimmered in the light of the wall-mounted torches. It was eerily beautiful. A group of guards lined the wall behind the vessel, while a few men worked underneath it to make final adjustments. Jonas, like a proud father, stood in admiration of his work.

"Pontius," whispered Nick, "You take out the guards, Skree and I will handle Jonas."

"No," interrupted Faith, "Jonas is mine, you and Skree cover my back."

"But Faith, you're—"

"Nick, I can handle this. It's my responsibility."

"Let's just do this thing. Please?" Pontius whispered in frustration.

Faith found focus and gathered her energy as best she could. After a slight hover above the ground, she took off with blazing speed. Jonas turned around just in time to

hear Faith careening towards him. The two tumbled into the dirt, and Faith grabbed him by the throat.

The rest jumped down from the terrace. Nick and Skree stood back-to-back – Skree armed with the polarizing cuff and Nick with a freeze-pellet gun. Pontius centered his thoughts on everything warm he could imagine – fresh pizza, volcanic magma, sun-baked asphalt – anything to bring him the sensation of warmth. As guards began to rush him, he threw out his open palms. A visible wave of heat knocked them onto their backs.

Skree fired a lightning bolt at a guard. With a flick of his wrist, the guard flew toward him. Skree uppercut the man's jaw and knocked him to the floor. Nick fired a spray of freeze-pellets at the legs of a group of guards. The pellets exploded, releasing the compressed frozen gas inside their muscles. Each of the three guards fell to the floor in agonizing pain – their calf muscles frozen solid.

Faith decked Jonas in the face several times before lifting him up and tossing him onto the ramp of the machine. She spied the cube resting inside on the console.

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Confident that Jonas had been sufficiently disabled, she ran forward into the vessel to retrieve the artifact. A hand grabbed her by the ankle.

“After the cube, you bitch?” Jonas hissed.

He pulled her to the floor and she dropped the cube. It fell to rest against the interior wall of the machine.

“I bet you want your necklace too!” he taunted, “Well you’ll have to kill me for it!”

Faith kicked him in the head twice before he released her other leg. Jonas felt around under the dashboard until he found his spare cane. With a slide of a switch, a blade popped out of the end. Faith caught a jab to the calf before she noticed the weapon.

In moments, Pontius had every guard on the floor reeling from second-degree burns on their extremities. The unarmed assailants did not even have a chance to fight.

“You’re a quick learner, huh?” asked Nick, in shock.

“Always have been,” Pontius replied with a nod.



Jonas hit Faith with a cheap shot in the gut, caught her head as she collapsed, and pounded it into the console. A burst of energy shot out of the girl and knocked Jonas onto the dashboard. He slid down across the series of buttons onto his feet and took an uppercut to the jaw as he landed. Faith grabbed the Claman by his neck and shoved his face into the console, smashing it repeatedly into the array of controls.

"You'll have to try harder than that!" Jonas yelled through a maniacal cackle.

Suddenly the vessel sprung to life, the door slammed shut, and it vanished in a glimmer of blue. Nick, Pontius, and Skree stood frozen in astonishment.

Faith continued to pummel Jonas until she felt the vessel slam to a halt. She looked out the lone porthole at the top of the machine to see a vast shoreline and sparkling blue-green ocean. Palm trees waved from the beach.

As she turned around, she caught the handle of Jonas's cane right to her jaw. The door of the vessel swung open, and with a boot to her chest, Faith was knocked out of the

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hovering craft. She looked down to see an ocean growing closer beneath her and Jonas fiddling with the machine's control console slipping farther away. Everything seemed to move in slow motion.

Faith rocketed with all of her remaining energy up and into the craft, pounding Jonas against the interior wall. Jonas heard his valuable stolen relic – Corwell's Cube – screeching toward the door. In a greedy grab for the artifact, his jacket slipped from Faith's grasp. He and the cube fell perilously to the ocean below.

Faith moved toward the door and prepared to take flight to quickly apprehend the man, but was stopped. The door slammed closed and the machine hummed to life again.

As quickly as it disappeared, the time machine flashed back into sight before Nick and his cohorts. It sat motionless in wisps of blue haze. It could be heard rumbling and humming from within. A puff of steam released near the hatch and it crashed open to the floor. Only Faith walked out.

## Epilogue

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“And the source says that the device has indeed corrected the planet’s orbit and delayed the interplanetary standoff for at least another thirty-six hundred years,” said a news anchor on the kitchen television set, “It is rumored that the mysterious girl known to the press only as ‘Stargazer’, was heavily involved in the project, though no confirmation has been put forward...”

“Well, I’m glad to hear everything went okay!” Margaret announced as she pulled a boiling extra-terrestrial plant out of Faith’s new oven.

Nick had convinced Faith to go in with him and accept the monetary reward from both the United States Government and the UIPA. Some of it went to pay off Faith’s student loans, and more was spent on purchasing a beautiful new duplex in downtown Ravenwood. Margaret and Dale had been given the other half of the house, and immediately a party was scheduled to celebrate the occasion.

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“When are Chon, Milo, and Nila supposed to arrive?” Faith asked Nick, who sat at the second replacement table picking little scraps of skin from a bowl of fried chicken.

“Any time – I told them to be here by four o’clock.”

“The little alien woman is bringing desert?” Margaret asked nervously.

“Yup,” replied Faith, “Blackberry cobbler!”

“Oh my god – my favorite,” Nick grinned.

“Good thing, too!” Dale said as he entered the kitchen, “Homemade vanilla ice cream is coming along perfectly!”

“Dale,” Margaret said with a headshake, “Don’t spoil your dinner!”

“Have you ever seen Dale eat?” Nick laughed, “I doubt anything could spoil his dinner!”

The doorbell rang, prompting Nick to jump up from his seat.

“I bet that’s them now!” he said happily.

He ran to the door and opened it quickly, to find Skree standing alone and holding two cases of cola.

"Skree, you old bastard! Get in here!" Nick exclaimed, as he patted the alien on the shoulder.

"Hey, thanks for inviting me. The rest of the gang here yet?"

"Not yet, should be any time!"

"Excellent," Skree replied with a grin, "I hope you like this sugar-filled slop you call 'soda'."

"Love it," Nick said with a laugh, as he pushed Skree towards the kitchen, "Mags, Dale, meet Skree. The smartest alien I ever met!"

"Nice to make your acquaintance," Skree said humbly, "Nick speaks highly of you both as well."

"A friend of Nick's is a friend of ours," Dale said, taking the soda from Skree.

"We've heard such lovely things about you, Mr. Skree," Margaret said with a soft smile.

"So I guess you completed the disassembly of the time-shifting machine?" Faith asked as she counted out paper plates.

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“Yes indeed,” Skree said with a delighted inflection, “You know, it’s amazing that damned thing actually worked. It was a complete wreck of mish-mashed computers and technologies.”

“Learn anything new?” asked an inquisitive Nick.

“Actually yes – I dumped the logs of the computer before we began torching the thing apart. The data included the date and location at which the machine had stopped before Jonas set the navigation computers to return to present day.”

“When was that?” Faith asked.

“Right before what is known as the ‘Classic Period’ of Mayan culture, just off the Yucatan Peninsula. About 246 CE.”

“Wait, if the timing is that close to the beginning of the hay-day of Mayan culture...” Nick began.

“Surely there’s no way that he survived that fall,” Faith replied, “If I had to guess, I’d say we were more than a mile offshore.”

"In any event," Skree said confidently, "He would be stuck back there, and any effect he would have had obviously didn't alter anything in this time."

"Because the past already happened..." Faith offered.

"Yes," Skree replied, "It sounds confusing, but he could not have altered the future because he would have always been part of the past."

"Well that all just makes my head spin," Margaret interrupted, "How about we start moving this stuff to the backyard?"

As the group worked to complete the place settings and set the backyard picnic table with food, a silver transport vessel set down near the rear fence. Milo and Nila quickly jumped out, as Chon worked leisurely to power down the ship's systems. Nila set her cobbler down proudly at the end of the table and jumped up into Faith's open arms. Nick and Milo performed their secret handshake.

"Milo and Nila, meet Maggie and Dale, they're like family," Faith introduced the couples.

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“My oh my, aren’t you two just the cutest little things?”

Margaret said with an amused giggle.

“That’s what I’m told!” Milo yelled enthusiastically.

“Hey everybody!” Chon barked as he walked toward the gathering.

“Don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure of an appropriate introduction, Mr. Chon,” laughed Dale with a hearty handshake.

“Yes, I really must apologize about that. I’m working up a ‘call before you transport’ initiative now!”

Nick fumbled with a small metal box in his pocket. He spun the dial on its underside discreetly and felt the edge of its hinge with his finger. Nick had always been brave and brazen in the past, but for the first time in his life, he felt a nervous sweat forming on the inside of his palm. As the party guests sat down to dine, he pulled the box from his pocket and held it behind his back. He cleared his throat loudly.

“Faith,” he said, as he dropped to a knee beside the table, “Will you set a date with me?”



He opened the box, to reveal its empty interior. Faith cocked her head to the side, confused.

“Snuggle-bunny!” Nick yelled to the box.

Suddenly, a bright light flashed inside and a small puff of blue smoke shot out. Inside the box was a white gold band with a two-carat princess-cut diamond in the center and half-carat emeralds set on either side. The band was adorned with a striking classical floral pattern. Faith, Nila, and Margaret all burst into joyous blubbing.

“Now that’s a hell of a way to make it official,” Chon said as he lit an enormous cigar.

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Dark, then light, then dark again. Though Jonas was almost entirely blind, he could still sense a faintness of light against the back of his exposed optical nerves. He was spinning, and immersed in salty, murky water. It burned the flesh around the gouged holes in his fingertips and around the eyelets in his ankles, wrists, and neck. He convulsed as the electronic components in his chest shorted. The muscles in his arms contracted violently,

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locking his joints over and over in an agonizing momentary paralysis. Light moved over his head. He had leveled out and was facing the sun. His feet kicked hard.

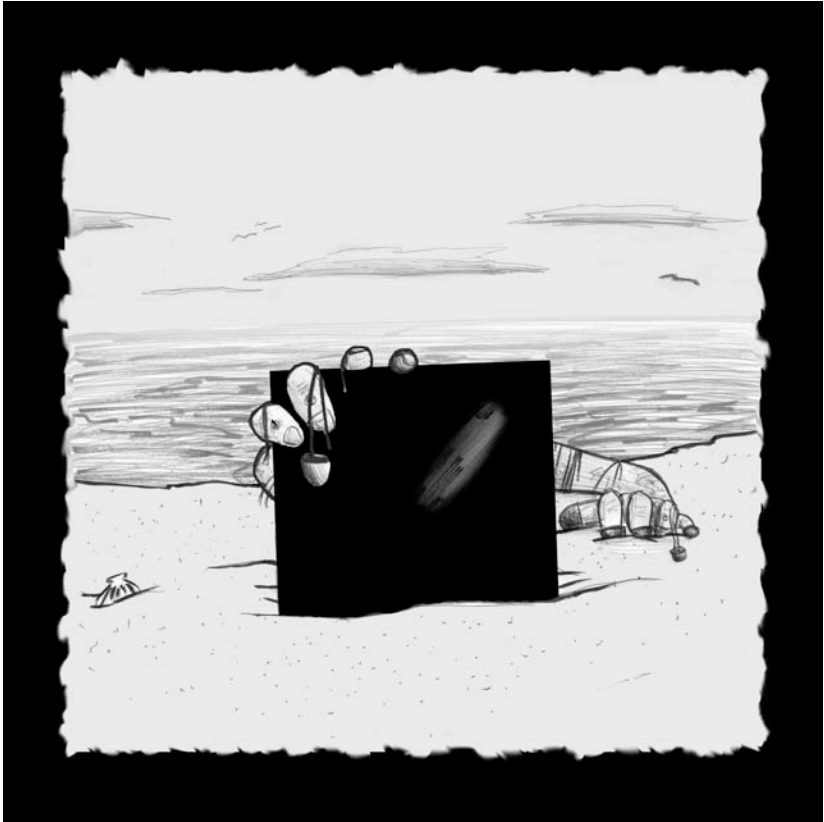
The blue nothingness before him was clouded with darkness at the edges from the asphyxiation that had choked his brain. He swallowed water as he kicked to distract himself from his inability to breathe. He grabbed the respirator mask from his mouth and tore it away. As he pressed on toward the ocean's surface he began to remove the waterlogged clothing that weighted him down. A dark circle closed in, ever so slowly, toward the center of the blue haze. He knew that he had little time to breach the surface.

As his mouth cleared the water, he took an enormous breath. The oxygen-rich air filled his lungs. He had not breathed open air in over a year. A rush of relief poured over him. He gripped his one hope firmly under his arm as he rode the rushing waves and treaded water between breaks.

After what felt like a blind eternity, his foot cracked firmly against a rock. Sand swirled up and into his boots. He kicked hard in the current, trying desperately to find a foothold. He was on sand. Jonas trudged toward the beach and collapsed in exhaustion on the warm surface. He had made it to land. He was tired, but he had made it. With one hand on the cube and another in the sifting stones, he pulled himself out of the water. Footsteps were faintly heard in the distance before Jonas passed out on the edge of the sandy peninsula.

Even in his slumber – he knew that his last day would not be spent in unfulfilled anguish.

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