

## Chapter One

She awoke to find herself in the lobby of a building. It was a large lobby, a grand lobby, like you'd find in the finest of skyscrapers in a teeming metropolis full of skyscrapers. She was sitting on a gorgeous black marble bench, next to a fountain that sprayed plumes of colored water into the air. It was a bustling lobby, with dozens of individuals moving back and forth between the revolving doors of the entrance and the large bank of elevators perhaps two hundred feet away from those doors. The entire lobby was a gleaming, polished environment, crisp and yet somehow warm. An information desk against a far wall did brisk business, with a team of uniformed attendants answering calls, offering advice, smiling, pointing, making good-natured conversation. A fair percentage of the people entering the building were not human.

She could not, as hard as she tried, remember how she had arrived on this bench. She had certainly never visited this lobby before. It was the kind of thing you'd always remember, a kind of grandeur that impressed itself upon you. She looked down at the clothes she was wearing: a stylish black buttoned-down top, with long sleeves and a unique, uneven collar with gold trim; simple, professional black pants, made of a durable material almost suited for hiking or climbing; a ring on one hand with a beautiful multi-colored jewel set in a slim gold band; and a gold chain around her neck, with a small amulet hanging from it. The amulet seemed to have a swirling quality to it, as though examining it closely would only give you strange dreams and a headache.

She did not seem to be carrying a purse, or a wallet, or anything in her pockets that might answer her next questions: Just who exactly am I? What the hell am I doing here? She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to shut out the busy stimuli of the lobby in an attempt to concentrate on her own identity. The effort produced no results. Her memory seemed to begin moments ago, shortly after awakening on the marble bench. The realization produced no particular sense of panic in her, but her curiosity was emphatically aroused.

She stood up, testing her legs, feeling the way her body moved. She felt compelled to stretch. Perhaps she had been asleep for a long time, though she wondered why the building's staff hadn't noticed her. Usually you couldn't last long in one of these intensely professional environments if you displayed the slightest hint of erratic behavior, and sleeping in the lobby

would certainly amount to erratic. She did feel well rested; perhaps she'd been there a long time. A cursory glance around the lobby indicated no security cameras, but it was quite likely they were hidden, camouflaged to keep the well-heeled denizens of the building from being reminded that they were constantly under surveillance.

If there *are* cameras here, she thought, perhaps someone can find out how long I've been here. After a moment's hesitation, she began walking slowly across the lobby to the information desk. She suspected the quality of information available at this information desk was considerably higher than she might find elsewhere. Something about this lobby inspired confidence. Something about those engaging figures in uniforms told her this was not a job they took lightly.

"Good morning," the man said. "How can I help you?"

"I..." she began, then faltered. "I'm having some memory problems," she continued eventually. The man did not reply, but continued looking at her with expectant eyes. "I can't remember how I got here, or... well, that's the first question."

"I see," the man replied. "Could I see your building ID please?"

"I don't have one," she said. This seemed to startle him. "Well... I might have one, I just... don't seem to have it with me."

"How did you get inside the building without your building ID? No one is admitted without an ID." He glanced nervously at the woman serving next to him behind the desk, who began paying slightly more attention to her coworker's conversation.

"I don't remember," she said. "That's what I came to ask about. I was wondering if you could find out how I got here, or... or who I am." She paused, and then asked, "I suppose I might want to know where this place is, too. I don't really remember anything."

The two attendants exchanged a glance. The man then smiled and said, "We'll do our best to help you, ma'am. I'll need to call in additional personnel to assist. If you're in our computer system but you've misplaced your ID, our Medical personnel can locate your record and we can issue you a temporary ID for the duration of your stay. In the meantime, if you've never visited the building before and would like to apply for membership, there's an orientation terminal near the fountain that can supply you with information. If you'd like to wait at the terminal, I'll have Medical meet you there shortly."

She looked back toward the fountain and saw a small black kiosk with a computer screen. Presumably she would understand how to operate it once she'd had some time to examine it.

"I appreciate your assistance," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am. I hope your visit improves."

She left the desk then, and walked back toward the fountain, toward the kiosk. The graphic on the computer screen was of an immensely tall black skyscraper, rising up into the clouds. There was a small logo with the letters "UAIT" in blue, and a line of text on the bottom of the screen read "Welcome to UAIT Headquarters!" As she took her place in front of the screen, the terminal began speaking to her.

"Welcome, visitor," said the kiosk in a soft male voice. "If you would like to log in to the UAIT central network, provide your voiceprint authorization. If you would like to view the guest orientation, say the word 'guest.'" The voice stopped speaking.

"Guest," she said, feeling slightly foolish to be speaking to this machine in a lobby full of people who obviously belonged here.

The onscreen graphic vanished, and was replaced by a clean video image of the building, shot from somewhere outside. It was an impressively tall building; when the shot panned back far enough, you could see that the building rose so far into the air that clouds obscured the top most levels. How many stories could that possibly be? Hundreds? Thousands?

"Welcome to the headquarters of the United Association of Interdimensionary Travelers, otherwise known as UAIT," said the kiosk. "The UAIT building is centrally located in a unique dimension where direct access to each and every other dimension in the known multiverse is possible. This dimension, jokingly referred to by many as 'the Dimension of Administration,' is where UAIT makes its home."

The video shot reversed itself; the camera was now facing the opposite direction, toward an enormous, seemingly infinite parking lot of some kind. There were no automobiles present. Instead, a tremendous array of bizarre, science-fiction style vehicles was scattered about in some semblance of order. There were hundreds if not thousands of them, stretching in every direction clear to the horizon as the camera panned from left to right.

"UAIT operatives from around the multiverse come here to receive their assignments, engage in training, do important research, commiserate with friends and comrades, and even make homes for themselves on the

residential floors. A steady stream of visitors, both diplomatic and tourist, also make their way here each year."

A montage of new scenes rolled past, offering candid views of building denizens at work: in giant libraries, on firing ranges, at wall sized display terminals. One shot showed an almost human looking woman with the cap of her skull removed, and a technician behind her inserting strange silver prongs directly into a pool of black liquid, which must have been the woman's brain.

"UAIT offers a wide range of services to the multiverse, including catastrophe management, paradigm reorganization, precision ontological shifting, biological and morphological tracking and analysis, aesthetic realignment, and technological seeding and redistribution. UAIT operatives engage in a wide range of peacekeeping activities, metalevel law enforcement, and temporal and psychospiritual maintenance, all throughout the multiverse."

The video vanished, replaced now by a computerized graphic of the building itself. The building was displayed as an interactive blueprint, a cross-section cutaway of a single floor. There were elevator banks directly on the center of each outside wall, labeled "west," "east," "north," and "south." A gigantic trunk occupied the center of the building, space reserved for an enormous amount of conduit, piping and cables. Areas on the floor were labeled, and as she watched, a long succession of floors scrolled past.

"The UAIT building itself is an immensity of transdimensional architecture. Each floor is connected to the rest of the building via four separate elevator banks, and by the building's master computer, an artificial intelligence called Magus. There are 22 sub-basements to the building, and an infinite number of floors above ground. Commercial, residential —"

"Say that again?" she interrupted.

"An infinite number of floors above ground," the kiosk responded. "Would you like further elaboration?"

"Yes, please."

A series of mathematical formulas was displayed on screen, accompanied by diagrams that seemed to be some kind of intense holographic images. The images pulsed unnaturally, or so it seemed to her; they seemed to display an image of a large, alien tree superimposed upon structural drawings of the building.

"The UAIT building's original construction is shrouded in mystery," the kiosk said, continuing in the same cheerful voice with which it began the orientation. "There are no accurate records concerning its initial construction, nor the exact moment at which UAIT took possession of the building. Information about the exact dimensional nature of the building is provided by the Magus program, who alone contains a complete record of every floor of the building. The top floor of the building contains—"

"How can an infinite building have a top floor?" she interrupted again. "How do you even know it's actually there?"

"Allow me to continue," the kiosk replied. "The top floor of the building contains the offices of the Supreme Being. It is through the Supreme Being's agents that we were made aware of the existence of the offices on the top floor. The Supreme Being's agents are, by definition, beyond reproach, and so we know of the top floor."

"I would like more information about this Supreme Being of yours."

"That information is beyond the scope of this orientation," the kiosk replied – almost smugly, she thought. The graphic onscreen returned to the cross-section blueprint of before. "Commercial, residential, recreational, technical, diplomatic, medical, police, military, research, educational, spiritual, and literally thousands of other branches of the Association have designated areas throughout the countless floors of the UAIT building. The building draws its power from each of the trillions of dimensions to which it is linked through various transdimensional conduits and exchanges."

Another montage floated past, this time showing snapshots of a dozen, two dozen, three dozen non-human races. Some of the races were horrifying enough to strike fear directly into her psyche. A compelling experience, this fear, she thought.

"The Association is comprised of thousands of races working in cooperation to improve the state of the multiverse. Entire civilizations are also contained within this building, some predating UAIT's possession of the building. The building is a teeming cosmos unto itself, offering pleasures untold to the casual tourist, and important resources to the operatives and envoys of UAIT."

The graphic vanished, replaced now by a gleaming, rotating UAIT logo, beautiful in blue and gold.

"If you or representatives of your culture would like more information about becoming a member of the United Association of Interdimensionary Travelers, say 'membership' to proceed to an application sequence."

The kiosk fell silent. She paused for a long moment to consider the implications of what she'd just seen. She looked about the lobby once again, this time viewing it through the context of the orientation program. The lobby no longer seemed as innocuous as it had previously.

At the information desk, a tall man in a sharp white suit was discussing something with the attendant to whom she had spoken. They exchanged words, and the attendant pointed to her. Moments later, the man in the white suit was walking toward her. He struck her as impossibly handsome at first, with his long black hair and sharp facial features, but then she realized how much he also struck her as some kind of cliché action hero from a movie or a comic book. He was wearing white sunglasses with white lenses.

"I heard you're a bit lost," he said as he strode up to her. She felt suddenly secure in his presence.

"It's true," she said.

"My name is the Amazing Dr. X," he said.

"What kind of name is that?" she replied, a bit impertinently.

"I'm a superhero," he said, with an impressively straight face.

"I see," she could only reply.

"I'm on my way up to Security. If you'd like to accompany me, I can escort you there."

"The man at the desk said I needed some kind of medical examination," she told him.

"That's true, but first we'll need to properly register you with Security. They're very strict about registering these sorts of anomalies."

"I'm an anomaly, am I?"

They began walking toward the elevator bank on the west wall.

"Well," he said slowly, "I can't recall a complete amnesiac ever visiting the building before. That doesn't mean it hasn't happened, of course. At any rate, once you're registered with Security, then Medical will be allowed to process you."

"Are you... are you an 'agent' of this Association?" she asked.

"Indeed. I work in Special Ops. In fact, I'm here to escort the human ambassador to the ongoing peace proceedings." He said that with a

tone of voice that suggested she ought to be impressed. She might well have been, ordinarily, but this was no more or less impressive than any of the other information she'd received since waking up a few minutes ago.

"Peace proceedings?" she said politely.

They arrived at the elevator, and Dr. X pressed the up button.

"Well, there's a bit of a war on," he said.

"I presumed as much," she replied.

"Nothing for you to worry about, though," he said cheerfully. The elevator door opened, and they climbed aboard. He said, "Forty-three two-thirty-eight," and the elevator began climbing. It seemed to be moving at an amazingly fast rate. As the elevator rose, he said, "Magus, please ask Nicholas to meet me at Security."

"Certainly, Doctor," said a synthesized voice from a hidden speaker.

"Magus is the master computer," she said.

"I see your orientation was helpful. I'll let Marketing know, they'll be pleased. We never get visitors, so it's hard to say how useful that material is."

"Never?"

Dr. X shook his head. "No one knows about this building except members of the Association."

"Then how do you suppose I got here?" she asked.

"Well, I won't deny you're a bit of an enigma."

"So are you," she replied.

"I try," he said without a trace of irony.

The display above the door suddenly read 43,238, and the elevator doors slid open. They stepped out into a cold black waiting room, and she felt a chill run up and down her spine.

"This is Security," said Dr. X.

"I figured as much," she replied.

## Chapter Two

Dr. X escorted her to a small processing desk, where a woman in a gold and blue uniform sat behind a small terminal, waiting for them.

"Good morning, Doctor," the Security agent said.

"Good morning, Triss," Dr. X replied.

"Agent Gray will be with you shortly. Please take a seat."

"Certainly." Dr. X led her to the waiting area, where they sat in slightly comfortable chairs. None of the magazines on the table were printed in a language she understood, except one: Reader's Digest. Goodness, she thought, that damn magazine is everywhere.

"So you're a superhero," she said, as a polite conversation starter.

"How did that happen?"

"I took a training course when I was young," he told her. "Only twenty-four people ever graduated."

"So do you have... super powers of some kind?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I do have special abilities. They're a prerequisite to getting into the training program. You can have special abilities, after all, and not do anything particularly heroic with them."

"What heroic things do you do, Amazing Dr. X?"

"Well, let's see," he said. "A lot of rescues. A lot of interventions. You know, preventing evil deeds and so on. It's not as glamorous as it sounds."

"I didn't say it sounded glamorous."

He blinked, then smiled.

"No, you certainly didn't."

A man in a gray suit appeared, flanked by two gentlemen in tan trenchcoats. Dr. X stood up as the men approached, and she decided she'd better stand as well. The man in the gray suit nodded briefly to Dr. X, then immediately turned his attention to her.

"I'm Agent Gray, Director of UAIT Security," he said to her.

"Thank you, Doctor, for escorting her here." He looked her over carefully, with an impressively neutral gaze. "If you'll come with me, we'll get the registration process underway."

"It was a pleasure meeting you," said Dr. X.

"Likewise," she replied, unsure if she was being polite or sincere.

Agent Gray and his two lieutenants led her from the waiting room, down a long, sterile hallway adorned in deep blue and brazen gold, the

colors of the UAIT logo. They said nothing to her as they took her around a corner and into a small room with black walls and a single chair.

"Please," said Agent Gray, "have a seat."

She sat, slightly uncomfortable with this turn of events.

"Agent Derald and Agent Janszen are going to ask you a few questions before we turn you over to Medical," Gray said. "We'd just like to make sure we have your story straight."

"That makes sense," she replied.

Gray gave her a quizzical look, as though it was highly improbable that he would ever fail to make sense.

The two lieutenants stepped forward. She wasn't quite sure which one was Derald and which one was Janszen.

"Please state your name for the record," said the one on her left, the shorter of the two.

"I can't remember my name," she replied.

"Please state your dimension and world of origin," said the taller one.

"I don't remember."

"Can you remember how you bypassed the security scans at the building entrance to arrive in the lobby, without a building ID?" asked the shorter one.

"No."

"She's telling the truth," the taller one said to Agent Gray.

"Of course I am," she said, somewhat disconcerted.

"Don't be alarmed," Agent Gray said. "Derald and Janszen are psychics. This is standard procedure."

"I don't know much about your procedures, obviously," she said.

"I was told by your information desk that you might be able to help me."

"That's true," Gray replied. "However, until we can accurately determine your origin, our security protocol does not allow you free access to the building and its facilities. Thank you, gentlemen," Gray said, and Derald and Janszen excused themselves. "If you'll come with me," he said, "I'll escort you to Medical."

They rode in one of the elevators to the 1,289<sup>th</sup> floor, and moved briskly through the medical facility. It was an elaborate laboratory facility, looking vaguely like a hospital but featuring none of the hustle and bustle she might have expected from a facility that treated patients. Perhaps the

inhabitants of this building never got sick. Perhaps “Medical” was a euphemism for something more... well, diabolical was a strong word, but she didn’t much like the direction this was headed.

They entered a large room filled with computer screens embedded in the walls, and fancy-looking gear hanging from the ceiling. Before she could fully absorb her new surroundings, a man in a blue lab coat was already greeting her.

“Ah yes,” said the man, “you’re finally here. We’ve been waiting for you. Come, sit down.” He led her to a much more comfortable chair than the one she’d had up in Security. Agent Gray remained in the background, but left her alone with this new individual. “Don’t worry,” said the man, “I’m a doctor.”

“I’ve already met one doctor today.”

“Oh? Have you already been to Medical?” He glanced toward Gray.

“His name was Dr. X.”

“Oh. *Ohhh*. Aren’t you the lucky one. No, that’s a different sort of doctor altogether. I’m a medical doctor. He’s more of a... metaphysical doctor. I’m Ansel. Let’s get this underway, shall we? Magus, prepare for a genetic scan.”

She began to feel unsettled, then, and asked, “Can you tell me what exactly is going to happen to me here?”

“Certainly,” Ansel the medical doctor replied, reaching for a small, metallic object. “We’re going to get a sample of your genetic material, which we can cross-reference with all of the stored gene samples in Magus’ archive. If you’re a member of the Association, your sample will be on file – there’s no way to get a building ID without submitting a sample. If there’s a match, we’ll know your name and place of origin.”

“I see,” she said. After a pause, she said, “Continue.”

Ansel traded an almost amused look with Agent Gray, and then said, “Magus, begin genetic scan.” He watched a display on the metallic cube he was holding. Nothing in particular seemed to happen for a few moments, and then Ansel said, “Well, you’re not a UAIT member. There’s no match.”

“I’m assuming this computer never makes mistakes?” she asked.

“I do not,” Magus replied through a hidden speaker.

She sighed.

“Don’t fret,” Ansel said. “Magus, initiate a full dimensional search on that genetic sample.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Well, Magus knows which dimensions are home to beings with similar genetic material to yours. That narrows it down a bit. What he’s now doing is sending out search signals to each of those dimensions, in an attempt to find a match there. A match would mean you’ve been to that dimension and left genetic trace material at some point in that dimension’s timeline.”

“I see. And how long will this search take?”

Ansel paused. “Magus, when was the last time you had to perform a search like this?”

“Eighteen thousand four hundred and ninety-two years and five days ago,” Magus replied.

“How long did that search take?”

“Four hundred fifty-two years and eighty-eight days.”

She could feel her head beginning to pound.

“Don’t worry,” Ansel said, trying his best to sound soothing. “We’re not just going to sit around while Magus performs his search. We can try other avenues to determine who you are. Magus, notify the human psych specialist on duty to report to this lab.”

“Specialist Sriftin is in a session with another patient for another eighteen minutes,” Magus replied. “I have placed notification for her to join us when that session is complete.”

“Thank you, Magus.”

Agent Gray stepped forward slowly.

“Well, Director,” Ansel said, “we don’t seem to have any harmful contagions or any other signs of potential instability. According to our scan, she’s human, although Magus will continue performing detailed analyses on that sample to ferret out any potentially artificial traces in her sample.” He turned to her and said, “I’d like to do a brief physical, if you don’t mind, to see if I can find any evidence of trauma of any kind that might be responsible for your current psychological state. Would you be comfortable with that?”

“Perform the physical, Specialist, whether she is comfortable or not,” Gray said blandly.

She met his eyes briefly as he said that, ensuring that her feelings on the subject were communicated, before she assented to Ansel’s physical.

However she'd gotten to this place, she decided, there had better be an equally convenient way the hell *out* of here.

Ansel and Agent Gray left the room for a few moments, undoubtedly to confer about matters of procedure. She was alone in a very large laboratory. The glyphs and readings on the various computer screens were impossible for her to decipher. She wandered from empty bed to empty bed, searching her mind for answers. None were forthcoming, and she couldn't decide exactly how uncomfortable she was with the situation.

She came to a halt as she reached one of the beds furthest from the door. Sitting in a chair next to the bed was a small person, or at least, what seemed like a person. It wasn't exactly human, as she examined it closer; while it seemed to have a human-like head, the proportions on the face were wrong, giving her the impression that the face had been stretched in some kind of taffy-pulling machine. It had four arms rather than two arms and two legs, and its dress was of a unique style to her, like someone had somehow spray-painted cloth onto the body. It was motionless, staring off into space with the vacant gaze of an antique doll. It was certainly not breathing.

She reached out to touch the thing, whatever it was. She poked it, and received no response. Perhaps it was indeed a doll, left behind by a former patient. She tried then to pick it up, but found it considerably heavier than a plastic doll.

As she held it in her hands, examining its curious features, the eyes suddenly sprang open, and a kind of smile quickly appeared on its face.

"Andrea!" it exclaimed. "Andrea is okay! Andrea is better now!" Its four arms suddenly wrapped themselves around her torso in an impressive squeeze for a doll. Then it wriggled from her grasp and landed on the chair, squatting like a bug with its oblong head staring up at her in a kind of parody of affection. "Where would you like to go today, Andrea?"

"I'm not Andrea," she said, deciding it was best to humor it until she understood it better.

She watched its eyes hone in on her. There were vaguely mechanical sounds accompanying the motion of its head and neck, as it moved, and she suddenly believed its voice had sounded ever so slightly artificial.

"That was not Andrea's voice," the thing said, almost sadly. It turned and looked about the lab. "Where is Andrea?"

"I don't know," she said.

The thing jumped off the chair and scrambled to a position at the end of the nearest bed. The bed was equipped with some kind of display interface, which the thing seemed to know how to operate, pushing buttons with two and sometimes three of its hands. Then, she thought she heard it gasp.

"Oh no," the thing said. "Oh no."

She stepped a bit closer to it, thinking perhaps a glance at the display would illuminate the situation for her, but the glyphs remained as mysterious to her as they had before.

"What's happened?" she asked.

"Andrea is dead," the thing said, a surprising note of mournfulness in its voice. It sat still for a long time, completely motionless in fact, and she concluded once and for all that this was some kind of machine.

She knelt down next to it and said, "Do you have a name?"

"Andrea called me Trickle," it replied. "Do you have a name?"

She shook her head and said, "I don't remember my name."

"What will I call you?" it asked. "Can I call you Andrea?"

She paused, wondering at the implications.

It continued, "I will call you Andrea Change, for you are not Andrea Dead, and now my loyalty circuits must change."

Very simple logic, she thought, but Andrea Change was as good a name as any.

"I am now your Trickle, Andrea Change," it said, almost gleefully.

"Now Trickle and Andrea will not be alone! Now Trickle and Andrea have friends!" And once again it wrapped its arms around her in a tight hug.

"Making yourself at home?" said Ansel's voice from behind her.

She disengaged from the little machine, and said, "Shall we begin this physical?" She noticed Agent Gray lurking in the doorway.

"Certainly," Ansel replied. "Magus, open standard human physical file on patient Andrea Change. Andrea, if you'll please disrobe..."

"Not with him here," she said, nodding toward Agent Gray.

Ansel and Gray exchanged looks, and then Gray said, "I'll be outside if you need anything, Doctor."

"Thank you, Director," Ansel replied, and Gray left the room.

"Friendly association you've got here," she said to him as she began to slip out of her clothes.

"Yes, well, danger's always lurking, et cetera et cetera," Ansel replied.

"Andrea, are you sick, too?" Trickle piped up from the floor. Looking down at its suddenly fearful face, she found herself in admiration of the little robot's makers.

"No, Trickle, I just have problems with my memory," she said.

"Ah," the robot said. "Perhaps you need a memory upgrade!"

"Perhaps I do, Trickle. Perhaps I do."

"I can't find anything physically wrong with you," Ansel said as she put her clothes back on. "You seem to be in essentially perfect physical condition for a human. Magus, did you find anything wrong with the sample you were analyzing?"

"There are no anomalies," Magus responded. "Subject is confirmed human."

"Well, there you have it," Ansel continued. "Do you happen to remember how old you are?"

"I do not," she said.

"You look like someone in her late twenties, I'd guess."

"I'm older than that," she told him.

He raised an eyebrow.

"You do remember that much?" he asked.

"I feel older," she replied, and said no more on the subject.

Ansel shrugged and said, "I'm going to call the Director back in. He'll escort you to temporary quarters until the results of Magus' dimensional inquiries come back. Don't worry, Andrea - I'm sure once Magus identifies your home dimension, we can send agents there to help determine your identity."

"What if my memories don't come back?" she asked.

He paused, then said, "Well, let's just cross that bridge when we come to it, all right? I'll be right back."

As he went to the door to let Agent Gray back into the laboratory, Trickle suddenly climbed into her lap with amazing agility.

"How did you lose your memory, Andrea?"

"I don't know."

"Were you in an accident?"

"I can't remember what happened to me."

"How did you get here?"

"I don't know."

"This is like the I Don't Know game, except for real, isn't it?" Trickle said, satisfied with itself for having come to some conclusion, any conclusion, about the situation.

"What's the I Don't Know game?" she asked.

"I don't know," Trickle replied with a broad smile.

"Ah ha, now we're both playing," she said. "Fun game."

Ansel returned with Agent Gray, who looked as neutral and detached as he had before.

"Well, Andrea Change," he said to her, "at least we have a more interesting name to use on our report than Jane Doe."

"I wish I could be more helpful," she said.

"I'm sure you do. If you'll come with me—"

"Excuse me, Agent Gray," Magus suddenly interrupted.

"What is it, Magus?"

"As of eight seconds ago, a priority one quarantine field has been established around the entire building."

Gray and Ansel exchanged surprised looks; Ansel said, "I haven't authorized a medical quarantine."

"On whose authority, Magus?"

"Unknown. Until the quarantine field is deactivated, no traffic in or out of the building is permitted, nor is any communication in or out of the building permitted."

Fury boiled up on Gray's face.

"Who has the authority to activate such a field, dammit?"

"Unknown."

"Well, deactivate the damn thing, then!"

"You are not authorized to deactivate the quarantine field."

"Magus," Ansel said, "what is the given reason for this quarantine?"

"No explanation has been provided for the quarantine."

"This is ridiculous," Gray said to Ansel. "What the hell is going on?"

Another voice came over the hidden loudspeakers. It was either Derald or Janszen; Andrea couldn't tell which.

"Director, are you aware that somebody's established a quarantine field around the building?"

"Yes, barely. What the hell is going on?"



"I suggest you join us in Command, Director. We've suddenly got a lot to deal with up here."

"I'm on my way." He turned to Ansel briefly, said, "Make sure she doesn't go anywhere," then dashed out of the laboratory.

Ansel himself was springing into action, heading toward a large wall display at the back of the room, and shouting, "Magus, give me an internal news feed on the main screen."

The screen lit up with a shot of an anchorperson behind a news desk of some kind. The anchorperson might have been human, but then again, there was something weird about her throat. As soon as she spoke, it was plain: she wasn't using her mouth to vocalize, but some extra aperture buried deep within translucent folds of flesh on her neck.

"This is an incredibly unusual situation. We're digging through the archives, but we can't find a single record of a priority one quarantine field ever being used to quarantine the entire UAIT building before, but that's the situation we've got, folks."

"Amazing," Ansel murmured.

"Magus has confirmed that it is not aware of who authorized the quarantine, leading most to believe that the order could not have come from Security or from Medical. We've seen quarantines from those departments before, obviously, but primarily restricted to limited areas of the building, either to quarantine an illness or a potential security breach. But this... this is incredible, really. The kind of power required to maintain a priority one quarantine field around an infinite building is certainly tremendous, and the fact that such a field could be authorized *and* activated without leaving any record of the action with Magus is astounding. Speculation now... I'm getting speculation from our technical advisors that there might be quarantine events built into the building itself, predating the installation of the Magus system, potentially even predating UAIT's tenancy in the building. If that is the case, it may be next to impossible to determine who or what is responsible for the quarantine. But one thing is certain: no one is getting out, and no one is getting in."

"Looks like you joined us here just in time, Andrea," Ansel said, a worried look plastered across his face. When she did not respond, he turned to speak a little louder, in case the screen's volume had drowned him out.

To his chagrin, Andrea was nowhere in sight. The door to the lab was open, and she was gone. She had taken the robot toy with her.

"Damn, damn, damn," he muttered, before shouting, "Magus! Inform Security that our new guest is missing in the building! She left Medical Lab 4 five minutes ago and is probably headed to an elevator...."

## Chapter Three

Dr. X watched the activity around him in the Security Command Center with some bemusement. The UAIT building was a never-ending whirlwind of amazement, even to someone whose moniker included the adjective “Amazing.” He stood in the back of the Command Center, making sure to stay out of the way of all the earnest operatives rushing back and forth, cross-checking data pouring in from various floors with information provided by Magus, information that in some cases made its way to flat old-fashioned display screens, and in other cases rendered itself in multidimensional holographic databursts. A healthy number of the operatives were receiving data via wireless implants in their nervous systems; these “Interpreters,” as they were called, usually sat with their eyes rolled most of the way back up into their heads and shouted a steady stream of insights and revelations to their superior officers, who were forced to make mostly inadequate decisions about what to do with all that information. It was a very impressive scene, and not for the first time, Dr. X was glad he’d stayed away from law enforcement.

Agent Derald abruptly appeared in front of him, and said, “The ambassador is here to see you in the lobby.”

“Show him in,” Dr. X replied.

Derald shook his head. “He doesn’t have Command Center clearance. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to see him in the lobby.”

Dr. X grimaced slightly at the inconvenience. It was rather exciting, watching the entire building’s reaction to this quarantine, and he didn’t want to miss any of it. But duty is duty, he told himself, and the peace conference must go on. He made his way out of the Command Center, nodding at various operatives who recognized him, noting how often agents smiled when they saw him. It was easy for a superhero to make a lasting impression with nothing more than a wink or a friendly hello.

The lobby was nearly deserted. Very few people voluntarily visited Security. Of the few who did, they were rarely left alone for long by the slightly paranoid Security staff. Standing alone in the lobby was a man of about sixty-five years of age, a distinguished looking gentleman who seemed extremely exhausted at the moment. He wore a conservative and simple Earth-style suit, charcoal gray with a simple red tie that called no attention to itself. His name was Dr. Nicholas Solitude. On Earth, he had been an anthropologist. In the wake of that planet’s demise, he now

considered himself an Earthropologist, one of the few human beings from Earth who still studied the history of that doomed world.

“Greetings, Doctor,” said Nicholas.

“Greetings, Doctor,” replied Dr. X with a smile. It was their favored greeting.

“Bit of a strange day, isn’t it?” Nicholas said.

“So far,” Dr. X agreed.

“I’ve been given some advance warning about the conference. The delegates are in a fury right now because of the quarantine. I suspect this next session is going to go very, very poorly.”

That was not good news, coming from Nicholas. By anyone else’s standards, the conference had been going extremely poorly ever since it began; only Nicholas, the single human delegate to the conference, had maintained any measure of hope about the proceedings.

The UAIT-sponsored peace conference was a direct result of the destruction of Earth’s human population during the Concescent War, many years ago. During that war, twenty-three separate non-human races from around the multiverse converged upon Earth to wage a vicious battle, a battle that had been brewing for eons. These races had found it impossible to find any way to communicate directly with each other; their languages each seemingly untranslatable into the others. That was true, that is, until they discovered the human race, living on a planet called Earth in an otherwise nearly empty dimension of existence. The aliens found to their surprise that the human consciousness could be used as a unique morphogenetic translation layer; by inhabiting the minds of the humans on Earth, they could, for the first time since the war began, communicate directly. Unfortunately, the only thing they found to communicate to each other was their absolute hatred and loathing for each other, and the war continued, spreading across the multiverse like a wildfire.

Only a handful of humans survived, fleeing the planet in a remarkably constructed spacecraft called the Second Coming.<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Solitude was one of the fortunate passengers on that flight. He was also, secretly, a UAIT member, having stumbled across a natural interdimensionary portal on Earth while researching ley lines in his youth, and befriendng a UAIT scientist shortly thereafter. As the Second Coming

<sup>1</sup> For a complete version of this story, see *Lullabye For Thunderstorms*, by Scotto. See also *Exodus – Leaving Earth Behind*, by Dr. Nicholas Solitude, and *Tower of Babel – Rules of the Game*, by Andrea Change, for supplementary information and viewpoints.

careened across spacetime, Nicholas took one of the escape pods and left for the UAIT building, where he breathlessly reported word of Earth's disaster to the Association.

They'd seen it coming, of course, and the question now was: how to stop the Conrescent War, before it enveloped other worlds, or perhaps even whole dimensions. Nicholas himself proposed the peace conference, offering his own mind as a translator for the duration of the conference. Surprisingly enough, one by one, the warring parties sent delegates to the UAIT building, and found themselves equally surprised by UAIT's hospitality. For a brief, early moment, it seemed as though peace might be possible – and then the conference itself actually began.

It was no wonder Nicholas was exhausted. The sessions required these aliens to simultaneously take possession of Nicholas' conscious mind in order to communicate, and the content of those discussions was almost insanely rancorous. It was only due to Nicholas himself interjecting possibilities into the discussion that any movement toward peace had taken place at all.

"They're angry," Nicholas continued. "They think we've tricked them. Trapped them here somehow against their wills. I've been contacted by perhaps a dozen of the delegates, all of whom are threatening violence against UAIT if this quarantine continues."

Dr. X fought the urge to shrug. "Violence against UAIT will be a demonstration in futility," he said.

"You may believe so," Nicholas replied, "but there's a first time for everything – including UAIT losing people in a war it doesn't want to fight." He shook his head sadly. "We were getting somewhere, dammit, we were finally getting somewhere. What the hell is this quarantine about?"

"There's the man you should ask," Dr. X said, spotting Agent Gray stepping out of the elevator.

Agent Gray was clearly in a hurry, but the ambassador, at the least, required a moment's civility and politeness.

"Good morning, Ambassador," Gray said. He turned to Dr. X and nodded slightly. Dr. X returned the slight nod with a slight nod of his own. Nicholas remained oblivious to the borderline ill will that Agent Gray felt toward Dr. X.

"Ah, Director, perhaps you might be able to shed some light on this peculiar situation," Nicholas said. "Whither this quarantine?"

"I wish I knew," Gray replied, clearly unhappy about having to admit ignorance in front of Dr. X.

"The peace proceedings are in jeopardy because of this," Nicholas continued, very willing to spread his unhappiness about the subject.

Gray paused for only the briefest of moments before realizing the ramifications of insulting the alien delegates with a building quarantine that could not be explained.

"Doesn't the next session start in less than an hour?" Gray asked.

"It does indeed," Nicholas replied.

"Well, then," Gray said, "I'll see if I can dig up an answer for you by the time the session is over. If you'll both excuse me..."

"Certainly, certainly," Nicholas said, and without another word, Gray sped off into the halls of Security.

Dr. X watched him go, remembering all over again the incident years ago that had created such animosity. It had been years and years since the last superhero graduated from the ultra-mysterious Order of the Rescue. In its entire existence, only twenty-four people had ever graduated – and Dr. X himself was the last in a distinguished line that had begun millennia earlier with Dr. A. The Order had closed its doors after an exceptionally unfortunate incident, where one of its own, Dr. M, had inexplicably, and despite every preparation to the contrary, become criminally insane.

The madman Dr. M used his superpowers to take control of an entire star system in a dimension of critical importance to UAIT supply lines. The Order, horrified, sent every living superhero to that dimension to remove Dr. M from power; of the eight superheroes who went to fight, only one returned alive. At the same time, UAIT sent its own security forces to that dimension, and a young Agent Gray, well before his rise to Director of Security, led the strike team that fought its way into Dr. M's fortress. Gray would have returned to UAIT to a hero's welcome if not for the unwelcome appearance of Dr. X, moments before the UAIT strike team infiltrated the fortress. Gray could only watch from a distance as Dr. X engaged the evil Dr. M in battle, and eventually subdued the mad mastermind. After the battle was over, Dr. X refused to release Dr. M into Gray's custody, returning him instead to the Order for punishment – a slight that Gray never forgot, as Gray was forced to return to UAIT headquarters empty-handed. The Order banished Dr. M to an obscure dimension of punishment, and Dr. X considered the matter closed, until he later met Agent Gray again, after Gray's promotion. There was nothing overt Gray could do to change Dr. X's

special superhero status with the Association, and indeed, Gray had always acted with commendable politeness in the years that followed. But Dr. X knew that Gray would hold this grudge forever; there was no telling a stubborn man he was too stubborn.

And now, Dr. X was alone, the last remaining superhero from an ultra-mysterious order that had long since closed its doors. He was a relic of a different time, a different era in the history of existence. He often wondered if the reason he lingered around the UAIT building so much was that the prosaic business of being a superhero had lost its luster. Maybe there was a higher pursuit to which he could turn his attention, and the UAIT building seemed as likely a place as any to find some kind of meaning. So far, of course, none had been forthcoming.

He got into the elevator with Nicholas, to escort him safely to the proceedings. He felt strangely dispassionate about the prospect of peace. These aliens had been fighting for as long as anyone could remember. They had already destroyed an entire planet, certainly, but the multiverse was a vast and complicated place. It was too bad they couldn't figure out a way to quarantine these aliens' home dimensions, and leave them to tear each other apart.

"Magus," Dr. X said, "take us to the conference floor, please."

"Certainly," Magus replied.

Agent Gray's arrival in the Command Center was greeted with a whirlwind of reports. He threw his trenchcoat at a junior operative and loosened his tie as dozens of specialists and agents competed for his immediate attention; finally, he shouted for everyone to shut up, and scanned the crowd for his immediate lieutenants, Derald and Janszen.

"Do we have any answers yet?" he asked them.

They shook their heads in unison.

"Then let's have a report on what we're doing to get answers."

"We've analyzed the physical structure of the quarantine field," Derald began.

"It matches no documented energy force we've ever encountered," Janszen continued. "We sent a science team to try to penetrate the field from the building lobby, with no luck. The only information we were able to glean is what it physically looks like to an observer: it appears as a blue, opaque wall of energy. When a member of the team touched the field with bare skin, he experienced a brutal physical and psychological jolt - not

enough to kill at a short dose, but painful enough that he couldn't try multiple times."

"When we train our instruments on it," said Derald, "we get no readings whatsoever."

"So there's no way to determine a source," Gray concluded.

"Exactly," Derald said. "Every line of communication outside the building has been severed or shut down."

"Then why does the building still have power?"

"I can answer that," Magus interjected. "Where our external power lines were previously drawing energy from various dimensions, they are now hooked directly into the quarantine field itself."

"And you can't use that connection to gain information on the nature of the field?"

"I'm afraid not," Magus replied. "The connection is supernatural in nature."

The room was silent. This was not a crowd who used the word "supernatural" lightly.

"I see," Gray replied. "Well, that does give us a place to start our inquiries. Do we have anyone here from Religion?"

"No, sir, we haven't issued a situation clearance to anyone outside of Security yet," Janszen informed him. "We were waiting for your orders."

Gray nodded. Derald and Janszen never failed to leave the critical decisions to him, which was why they'd survived so long as his lieutenants.

"Get Jayce a clearance and get her up here," he said. "We're going to need all the help we can get. Tell her to put together a team of her best specialists and make sure they all have temporary Command Center clearance, and give them a fully equipped situation room, immediately." Five people nodded and scattered to carry out his requests. "Also, get Marco from Maintenance a clearance. If this energy field is actually affecting our power lines, there's a chance we may need to do manual diagnostics beyond Magus' capabilities, and we're going to need a rock solid Maintenance team on our side. Janszen, you're going to need to work with someone from PR to make sure the building tenants don't do anything crazy. The last thing we need are riots in the middle of a goddamn peace conference."

"Do you care who I work with?" Janszen asked.

"I've never been able to tell those PR monkeys apart," Gray replied. "Just make sure internal media doesn't get out of hand. Derald, we need to

get a supply analysis to see how long the building can hold out without contact with the outside world. We don't know how long this quarantine will last, and I want to know how easily we can get to rationing without completely alarming everyone. And hey, has anyone here actually tried using the high level arsenal on that field?"

Silence.

"All right, we've got the entire docking bay on the east wall that we can open up and use. Clear everyone out, and give them a few hours to clear out whatever valuables they think they need to move. Then I want a methodical weapon-by-weapon assault on that field. Get Richter to organize it; he knows the arsenal better than anyone here. It's entirely possible we've got something that will penetrate that energy field." He paused, almost for dramatic effect, and then shouted, "You have your orders. Get moving!"

As he watched his team spring into action, he himself opted to avoid the chaos, seeking instead the comfort of his tiny office, located off the back of the Command Center. He afforded himself no special luxuries as Director of Security - his office was a spartan affair, with a small desk, a single chair, and a tiny wet bar. As he closed the door and sat wearily at his desk, Magus spoke to him via the implant, its voice audible only inside his head.

"Director, I have some disconcerting new information that I need to share with you," it said, and Gray was suddenly quite wired again.

"Go ahead," he thought. The implant translated the thought patterns in his brain into data that could be transmitted via the wireless link to Magus.

"Although I cannot identify the source of the energy field, nor can I identify the authority behind this quarantine, I believe I have a candidate for the reason the quarantine was instituted."

This should be interesting, Gray thought.

"A set of archaic containment crypts in the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement have been breached," Magus said.

A long silence followed.

"The 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement?" Gray asked at last. "There are only 22 sub-basements."

"There are actually 23. The 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement has been locked and its existence classified since UAIT's arrival in the building."

"Classified? On whose authority?" Gray was not an individual who was accustomed to being out of the informational loop.

"I do not have access to that information," Magus replied.

"If it's classified, how can you be sharing this data with me, Magus?"

"My programming has exception handling for when I judge the building's security to be at risk, Director. In this case, I must reveal the existence of the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor, and the breach of the containment crypts, as it may offer information critical to the survival of the building's tenants. Because the authority behind the quarantine remains unknown, there is room to interpret this entire situation as a threat."

"So the quarantine was triggered by a containment crypt breach on a previously unknown floor. What do you know about what was inside those containment crypts?"

"I have no information about the contents of the crypts, unfortunately. When the crypts were breached, long dormant and encrypted files within my system were suddenly unlocked, but there has been significant and inexplicable degradation of the files. I'm missing greater than eighty percent of the data that should be in these files. It is... a curious situation, Director. I have not experienced such information loss in the entirety of my existence."

Hearing that gave Gray the beginnings of a very large headache.

"So this is a floor that has previously been locked. Does that mean it's now open? Can you get an elevator down there?"

"I believe so."

This was getting more and more serious by the moment.

He knew the answer to the next question before he even asked it, but it would be dereliction of duty not to ask.

"Can we reach anyone on the top floor, to let them know what's going on?"

"I've been trying ever since the quarantine began. As usual, we are receiving no response."

Naturally. That meant Gray was in charge, as Director of Security. Theoretically, he was outranked by *someone* in the Association, but they hadn't had communication with Management in eons.

He rose from his desk and headed back into the Command Center. Derald and Janszen were gone off to their assignments, and they were important assignments, so he would assemble a team without them. Within minutes, he and ten other Security agents were headed for the arsenal, to load up with the most powerful personal class weapons they could get their

hands on. And then, they would climb into an elevator and head directly to this mysterious 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement. If there were any answers to be found, undoubtedly this subbasement would have them in abundance.

## Chapter Four

Andrea was hungry, so Trickle the toy robot decided to take her to one of the bacchanalia levels, on floor 48,342. The robot was excited; its previous owner, Andrea Dead, was much too young to be allowed on floor 48,342. But Andrea Change was obviously a grown up, and who cares if a grown up hangs out with a toy robot? It practically vibrated with excitement as they spent several long minutes riding up in the elevator. At first Andrea worried if Agent Gray's ominous Security forces might come chasing after her, but the toy reassured her: she had no ID implant, which all UAIT personnel were required to have, and she had no ID card, which all visitors were required to carry. Consequently, Security would have to search for her the old-fashioned way, and in an infinite building, that would certainly take forever. By the time they found her, maybe some of her memory would have returned, and she could approach Security with a little more confidence. It was worth a shot, she felt.

"Will I need money?" she asked.

"They don't use money here," Trickle replied. "They're very sophisticated here."

"So I can just have what I want?"

"You can have whatever people are giving away. They give away lots of stuff in this building."

"Where do they get all the stuff they give away?"

"From all over reality. Some dimensions are poor, but some dimensions are rich rich rich."

The elevator slowed over a matter of minutes, then finally came to a halt. She resisted the urge to ask that computer, Magus, how fast they'd been traveling; talking to Magus directly would certainly alert Security, assuming the damn computer wasn't eavesdropping on every single conversation in the building already. At long last, the door opened, and the two of them stepped out into a vast plaza with tremendously tall ceilings. They were in an enormous shopping pavilion, crowded with thousands and thousands of people, human and otherwise. As the toy slowly led Andrea through the crowd, she caught sight of dozens upon dozens of restaurants, clubs, clothing stores, performance venues, "street" performers, and more. Strangely colored fires burned in pyres on either side of a main walkway, and clothing definitely seemed optional. A wide range of public intoxication seemed to be in progress, and she felt a small desire to join them.

Trickle stayed close to her side, chirping quietly to itself, content to be active once again. As the toy suspected, no one paid it much notice. Andrea, on the other hand, was the subject of one lascivious look or suggestion after another – nothing too aggressive, nothing that was difficult to decline, but the presence of such overt sexuality felt new to her. She knew nothing about her own background or upbringing; would this type of wild abandon offend her, or would she join in the fray with glee? Until she knew more about her own identity, she felt hesitant to engage with her surroundings.

There were intermittent kiosks scattered about the boulevard, and she decided to try to find some kind of restaurant listing, to help her decide just exactly what she wanted to eat.

"Welcome to floor 48,342," the kiosk said in a cheerful female voice. "Are you a first time visitor to this floor?"

"Yes."

"Excellent! Would you like the virtual tour?"

"No thanks. I'm just looking for good restaurants."

The display on the kiosk shifted to a blueprint-style map of the entire floor, with a number of locations colored red.

"Each of the highlighted areas is home to one of this floor's truly astounding gourmet environments. Enjoy cuisine from around the multiverse in a wide variety of settings, from casual and relaxed to the pinnacle of exotic formal dining—"

"I'd like something simple," Andrea interrupted.

"What type of cuisine are you looking for?"

"How about... pasta?"

The majority of the red dots on the blueprint winked out. Perhaps two dozen still remained, however.

"Pasta is a unique dish, a staple throughout the multiverse. Various noodles can be prepared with so many sauces from thousands of dimensions that the renowned Gr'bacr'ian chef Al'rdd'mche'st once claimed, 'Pasta is evidence that there truly is a grand plan behind this reality of ours.' To enjoy Gr'bacr'ian cuisine, considered by many the height of fine pasta, visit the M'rich'ssea'In Oasis near the east elevator." A red dot began blinking on her screen. It was on the other side of the floor altogether; she estimated travel time to that location would be over an hour, even using the moving walkways in the center of the boulevard, which sent people flying down the boulevard at seemingly insane speeds. "Please note: some species

may experience Gr'bacr'ian pasta sauce as an acidic poison that destroys the digestive system. For a complete list of interspecies dietary hazards, consult our Medical archives."

"Could you recommend something appropriate to humans?" she asked.

"Certainly." Several more red dots winked out, until she was left with eighteen that she could count, at least two of which were right near the elevator she had just left. She pressed one of the dots, and the kiosk immediately showed her a picture of the entrance to the restaurant.

"Charlie's Crazy Destitute Aunt is not just the name of the chef: it's one of the most popular casual dining establishments on the floor. Specializing in pasta dishes from Yrelemeich, Hratanak, Misraemno, Earth, and—" The kiosk made a noise that sounded something like a person being strangled by a serial killer, while simultaneously having a large heavy object dropped upon the both of them. "—Charlie's Crazy Destitute Aunt is known throughout the building for its fine food, excellent entertainment, and fantastic selection of wines. Charlie's is located on the Grand Promenade, ten blocks down from the west elevator." As she looked up from the kiosk, she could see the giant "Charlie's" sign from the kiosk picture, perhaps two or three city blocks away.

"That'll do. Thank you."

There was a small wait at Charlie's Crazy Destitute Aunt, and so she sat at the bar, with Trickle occupying a bar stool next to her. While she waited for the bartender to notice her, she spent her time listening in on nearby conversations. The actual content of the conversations seemed trivial: exciting theatre pieces, political upheaval on home worlds, an interesting band playing tomorrow night. Some of the people speaking were human, but many were not. She found it difficult to avoid staring at the non-humans, especially the ones who weren't even shaped like humans. Indeed, the bulbous, blobby creatures gave her shivers, despite the cheerfully banal nature of their conversations about entertainment and politics.

What eventually began to surprise her was that she understood everything everyone was saying.

"Trickle," she whispered to the little robot, "does everyone in this room speak the same language?"

"Nope," the robot replied. "I count eight different languages being spoken in the bar right now."

"How is it that I can understand everything that everyone is saying? I can't possibly know all of these languages."

"The building has a bunch of translating fields aimed at everyone's brains," Trickle replied. "You get tricked into understanding all of the languages in the UAIT databanks."

"What about you?" she asked.

"I'm programmed to speak all of those languages, plus a few extra for good measure." For a robot, it certainly sounded proud of its capabilities.

"Well, I guess they've thought of everything here," she said. The bartender finally approached her, and she got a chance to spend several seconds looking straight into his three eyes without feeling self-conscious about staring at a non-human.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked.

Her mind drew a blank. She had no idea what drinks she typically enjoyed, if she even drank at all.

"Surprise me," she replied.

The bartender paused, clearly unused to such a request.

"Are you human or krst? You both look alike to me, I wouldn't wanna inadvertently melt your brain with something."

"Human."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

A display screen nearby was showing some kind of insane sporting event where a ball was being passed around a playing field while heavy artillery from every direction slowly picked off one player after another. She heard people talking about the quarantine as though it were some exciting new tour from a popular music group. Clearly some of these individuals were on an extended holiday away from home that had lasted far longer than was healthy.

The bartender returned with a pint glass filled with a gorgeous blue fluid.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's a surprise," he replied. He waited courteously while she had her first sip. It made her entire mouth tingle with a taste that seemed to be a strange combination of extreme mint and some kind of bloodied meat. It was delightfully rewarding.



"I'm assuming there's alcohol in this drink," she said.

"You know me so well," the bartender replied, and he wandered off to take care of others.

Halfway through the drink, she began to feel intoxicated. When the host called her name, Trickle had to patiently hold her hand and guide her through the crowd to her table. The host seated her and handed her a menu, and then graciously seated her toy robot as well. The menu was an electronic device which seemed tuned to the same translation device that was providing up-to-the-second English translations for speech; however, although the menu descriptions were provided in English, most of the dishes still seemed inexplicable to her. Within moments after the host wandered off, an exceptionally tall waiter was at her side.

"Good evening," the waiter said. "Are you new to this establishment?"

"Yes," she replied. "I was wondering if—"

"Allow me to make a suggestion," he said. "I recommend the fettuccine con alvialess, a special tonight smothered with seared and shredded Hornackian misery beast, with a side of excelsior beans, and a house salad with mythrackian particle dressing. For a beverage, I'm sure the lady would enjoy a glass of the ever popular Mistaken Red, from the vineyards on the ever popular Mistaken Planet."

A brief, polite pause.

"That sounds lovely," she said.

The waiter nodded briskly and vanished into the crowd, leaving Andrea alone to finish her mystery drink from the bar.

"Tell me about Andrea Dead," she said to the toy, suddenly feeling a little bit lonely.

"She was eleven years old," Trickle said. "She had accidentally received a huge dose of deadly radiation when her house control system failed. Her parents brought us here - they are UAIT operatives. But the radiation killed her. I read it on her chart. She died twenty-eight days ago. I guess her parents didn't want to take me back home with them, so they left me behind."

"What was she like?"

"She was a very nice friend. She liked swimming. I helped teach her how to read."

"So you knew her for a long time?"

"I did."

"Do you miss her?"

A long pause.

"I do miss her." Pause. "But now I have you, so everything is okay."

This robot was a very interesting robot. If it taught Andrea Dead how to read, what else did it teach Andrea Dead? Did it teach Andrea Dead robot morals and robot emotions?

She slugged down the last of her mystery drink, her head beginning to spin in a delightful fashion. She decided that if she hadn't enjoyed getting drunk before this whole adventure, she certainly enjoyed it right now. Indeed, unless recovering her identity meant forgetting this experience, she was sure she'd be getting drunk here again.

Her eyes were closed for a moment as the drink burned its way down her throat, and when they opened, she found herself with company. Opposite the table from her, someone seemed to be finishing up the process of materializing in the chair. He was a rail thin young man in a leather trenchcoat that seemed to glisten an electric shade of blue in the light. His hair was short, spiked, and platinum blond, and dangling against his purple shirt was an amulet on a chain. The amulet was a triangle, with a small jewel in the middle of each side of the triangle, connected to a jewel in the center of the triangle. The jewels changed colors under the light. As if that wasn't enough jewelry, his forehead was pierced, where a tiny, gold ball floated like a third eye in the center.

"Hey!" Trickle shouted. "Where'd you come from?" The robot was up on its hind legs, almost leaping out of its chair.

"I'm sorry, I suppose I could have materialized in the bathroom and just wandered over," the man said, "but I thought you'd appreciate a touch of the dramatic."

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"Apparently not," he replied.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I don't know if I should tell you my name," he said. "Security seems just as interested in you as they are in me."

A cigarette seemed to materialize in his right hand, and he lit it with the candle on the table. After inhaling deeply and then exhaling dramatically, he said, "What the hell. You probably won't remember my name in another ten minutes anyway, what with your strange *condition* and all. My name is Trick Start."

"My name is Trickle!" the robot exclaimed.

Trick Start leaned forward and graciously shook the robot's hand.

"I am *very* pleased to meet you, Trickle."

And then, he turned to Andrea.

"And you are?"

"Andrea," she said.

"Andrea," he repeated.

"Andrea Change. I'm new here."

"That much is obvious."

"Why are you here, Mr. Trick Start?"

"Well, I always like to go where the plotline is happening, Andrea, and you, my dear, are *it*."

They eyed each other for a long moment. Eventually the waiter returned with a glass of Mistaken Red wine. He noticed Trick Start, and apparently concluded the man was some kind of hoodlum; with a bit of disdain, he asked, "Will the gentleman be joining you for dinner?"

"He will," Trick Start announced. "Well - I'll at least be joining you for a drink, at any rate. I'd like a Black Hole, please."

"It would be my pleasure," the waiter replied, before vanishing again toward the bar.

"He doesn't like you," Trickle said solemnly.

"No, he doesn't," Trick Start replied. "That's because I'm a troublemaker."

Trickle's robot eyes grew wide.

"I don't understand why you're here," Andrea said. "Perhaps you can explain?"

"Well, let's see," he replied. "You don't remember who you are, is that correct?"

She nodded.

"And UAIT has no record of your ever having been here before," he continued. "They have Magus try to run a dimensional scan to see where you might be from, but then, suddenly, mysteriously, a priority one quarantine field is established around the building, meaning any information Magus might have received from outside won't be able to make it back. You, my dear, remain an enigma... just like the quarantine field. Now, a sane person might admit that the two events could be completely disconnected. But I have never claimed to be a sane person."

"You know more about me than I do about you," she said.

"I don't see any way around that," he said. "Listen, very little happens in this building that I'm not at least somewhat aware of. Policy decisions, new regulations, what Agent Gray is having for dinner, that sort of thing all gets back to me. It's nothing you should worry about. I just take a very special interest in what goes on in this building, and as of today, you're by far the most interesting thing for miles."

She wasn't sure if she actually blushed at that point, but if she did not, she certainly considered it.

Moments later, the waiter returned yet again with Andrea's salad, and with Trick Start's drink.

"Can I get you an entrée?" the waiter asked Trick Start.

"I think I'll stick to aperitifs, if you don't mind," Trick replied. The waiter apparently found that unworthy of response, and vanished once more.

Trick Start raised his drink and said, "I propose a toast."

She was woozy enough to agree to such foolishness, and so she raised her own drink.

"Now you should know," he said quietly, "that where I'm from, the toast is one of the most elegant of literary conventions. It's meant to draw attention to a given moment, to highlight something viscerally important about a given situation. Where I'm from, the toast is used to advance the story, never simply to mark the past or present with simple emotions."

"Get on with it," she said.

He smiled, and said, "Actually, I can't remember what I was going to say. Never mind." And then, his attention turned toward the doorway, perhaps fifty feet across a crowded room. Two uniformed Security agents were speaking with the waiter, who was pointing in their general direction. "It seems I've lingered too long. I'm sure I'll be seeing you again, my dear." He set his drink down on the table, and moments later, dematerialized in front of their very eyes. It seemed as though he shimmered away into some kind of text representation of himself before vanishing completely - not that he appeared as floating bits of text, but rather that she suddenly felt him to be a wave of text being read inside of her before dissipating. But admittedly, she was very drunk.

The two Security agents made their way methodically through the room to her, and wound up standing on either side of her, with the waiter hovering nearby.

"Excuse me, miss," one of them said, "do you mind answering a question or two?"

"Of course not," she replied, nonchalant, the alcohol giving her an excess of courage.

"We noticed a gentleman at your table moments ago. Can you tell us where he went?"

"It's the strangest thing," she said. "He vanished right before our eyes. He was the rudest man, I must say. He appeared out of nowhere, made a number of very rude comments, and then vanished. Comments of a... of a *sexual* nature, I might add." She was doing a very good job of feeling indignant. It's not that she had anything against Security per se. It's just that she completely loathed the very idea of having to speak to anyone *in* Security.

"I see," the man replied. "Could I please see your ID?"

And with that, she was suddenly frozen in her tracks. They'd realize pretty rapidly that she had no ID, and that she didn't belong here at all, and she'd get hauled back to Agent Gray before she'd even had time to finish her dinner. Dammit all to hell, whoever that Trick Start was, he was going to get an earful the next time she saw him.

"I don't have it on me," she said at last, giving it her best shot.

"Well, in that case, if you'll come with me—"

"I have it!" Trickle exclaimed. "I'm carrying it for her!"

The robot reached into one of its pockets and produced a small hard plastic cube. It tossed the cube to the agent, who examined it closely. Apparently the agent had some secret way of interpreting the data on the cube, because moments later, it tossed the cube back to the robot.

"My apologies, Ms. Stiles," the agent said. "Sorry to disturb your dinner."

"Aren't you even going to tell me who that man was?" Andrea asked, doing her best to remain indignant.

"He's a known thief," the agent replied, "wanted by UAIT. This is typical of his behavior. He appears out of thin air and befriends a tourist or an operative, and then winds up taking them for all they're worth when they're not paying attention. He must have realized you were a new visitor and decided you were a good target."

She couldn't decide if she actually was shocked, or if she was simply acting shocked for the agent's benefit.

"Well, thank you so much, you seem to have gotten here just in time," she said.

"Not in time to catch him, but at least you're okay. I'll leave you to your dinner." And with that, the two agents graciously retired. Moments later, the waiter appeared with her main course.

"I'm sorry for interrupting your dinner, ma'am," the waiter said. "But that *roustabout* has been haunting this establishment for months, and I was hoping I'd be able to get Security's attention quick enough to catch him."

"That's fine, thank you," she said. "It must be hard, policing a building this size."

"Security does a fine job, but there are always troublemakers on the loose," the waiter replied, and then he vanished once more into the crowd.

After he was gone, Andrea's attention turned toward the robot. A smug look filled its animatronic face.

"That was a neat trick," Andrea whispered to Trickle. "She was Andrea Stiles, was she?"

"She was," the robot replied, self-satisfied. "But now she is Andrea Dead. You may as well use her ID. She's certainly not going to need it."

Once more, she wondered about robot ethics. Then, hunger overcame her. She took a bite out of her fettuccine. It tasted like absolutely nothing she could remember ever having tasted before. It was a delicious explosion of flavor that seemed to fit nowhere on the ordinary continuum of savory to sweet.

"Goodness," she said at last. "I think I could get used to this place."

"I hope so," Trickle replied, "since there's no way out, as long as that quarantine is in place."

"Well, it's not like I have anywhere to go regardless," she said.

"Don't you think your friends might come looking for you?"

"It's possible. But how would they find me? I'm in an infinite building in a strange dimension of reality. They'd have to be awful clever to find me, don't you think?"

"There are clever people out there," Trickle replied, its voice a sagelike tone. "If you're missing, they might come looking for you."

And if she had no friends to come searching? Maybe she'd just live here for the rest of her days....

## Chapter Five

Agent Gray's team assembled near the west elevator of the 22<sup>nd</sup> sub-basement, one floor above the previously unknown 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement where some kind of trouble was brewing. One of his lieutenants had already attempted sending an automated scout down into the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement. Under most circumstances, these were extremely robust devices; in this case, the thing stopped sending back a signal within about five minutes of exiting the elevator, apparently due to some kind of energy surge. All they'd managed to see was a dark hallway, lit only by the scout's headlamps, the floor covered in some kind of slime, before the picture vanished. Magus still wasn't able to report on any activity on that floor, either; its sensors there were disabled, or had never been properly installed.

They could fit about twenty people into each elevator comfortably; the plan was to send four teams down simultaneously, one in each elevator bank. A backup team would be waiting by each elevator. At the first interruption of communication or sign of distress, these teams would move in to attempt whatever backup or rescue might be necessary. Gray ordered atmospheric protection suits for everyone. There was absolutely no telling what the conditions would be in this mysterious sub-basement, but it was clear that protection from heavy electrical surges was necessary, at a minimum, never mind whatever it was that had triggered the quarantine in the first place. They would also, naturally, be heavily armed, with weapons from a multitude of dimensions. Many of the weapons were standard issue military weapons from various civilizations; one weapon in particular, Gray allowed only himself to carry. The beam from this weapon removed all trace of a person's existence, right down to removing the memory of that person's existence from anyone who might have ever known that person. Gray knew from the weapon's internal logs that he'd fired it at least eight times, but of course, he had no recollection of what he'd actually fired it at.

He carried out a quick inspection among his team, an inspection that was mostly for show. This particular team was drawn from Security's Special Operations unit, a unit known for its insanely grueling training. There were things in this reality that could scare the shit out of absolutely everyone, Gray knew, and they took great pains in Special Operations to find as many of those things as possible, and then subject their trainees to the worst case instances of each. The few who survived the training course with their sanity intact were the ones they jettisoned from the program;

after all, only people who were truly crazy could handle working for UAIT for any extended period of time.

He paused for a last minute conference with the three other squad leaders. Their mission at this point was strictly reconnaissance: record as much as possible, and then get back to safety as quickly as possible. Realistically, if the scout's transmitting capabilities were disabled within five minutes, then the teams didn't have very long to explore before they lost contact with their backup teams, with Magus, and potentially with each other. The scout had been moving slowly, however, so if they took up a brisker pace, they could potentially make it farther along. He considered reminding them that violence was to be avoided if at all possible, but truth be told, the people in Special Operations had a different definition of "unnecessary violence" than the rest of Security, and he wasn't sure he disagreed or disapproved.

Magus synchronized the four elevators, so that their departures and arrivals on the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement were simultaneous. Gray gave the command, and the elevator doors opened. He and his team rapidly disembarked in formation into the hallway they'd seen from the scout's transmission. The headlamps from twenty protection suits lit up the hallway, which seemed nondescript enough. They began jogging forward, with Gray in the center of the formation. Within moments, they arrived at the first instance of a weird, black and gray slime that collected in large puddles on the floor, and also seemed to cover most of the walls and ceiling. A member of the team scooped up a sample, and began transmitting tactile data from the suit's sensors directly to Magus.

The hallway terminated abruptly at an enormous archway, where huge, three-foot-thick metal doors had been blown open by some kind of serious explosive. The hole in the doors was big enough for a person to slip through. A large chamber was visible on the other side, but their lights didn't penetrate enough of the darkness to see many details.

"Don't tear your suits," Gray ordered, as they began stepping through.

They spread out rapidly through the chamber, which seemed to be filled with some kind of archaic computer equipment. It was a weird mixture of display screens and enormous gears, pulleys and levers. In the center of the chamber, four enormous black sarcophagi, all in pristine condition, drew their attention. A thick layer of dust indicated they had not been disturbed in years.

"Magus, are you still getting this?" Gray asked.

"I am," Magus replied via Gray's implant.

"Are these the 'containment crypts' you were referring to?"

There was an uncharacteristic pause, and then Magus replied, "These are of a similar style, Agent Gray, but they are still intact. I am receiving information from all four teams, and am trying to complete my understanding of the floor against the degraded information file already in my system. The equipment you are experiencing is heavily metaphysical in nature, and resists easy understanding or interpretation."

"Keep working on it," Gray replied. "All right, people, I want Wendell and Mellis to stay here and keep cataloguing the gear for Magus. See if you can find out what the hell is in these crypts. The rest of you, form up again and let's keep moving."

"Sir, we've found three different doors leading out of this room," one of his team reported. "Two of them have been blown open, the third is still sealed."

"Split up, people, we need to know what's down each of those passages," Gray said. He mentally flipped a coin and headed to join one of his teams.

He never got the chance. Moments after the two groups departed into the unknown passages, screaming began to fill his helmet and he nearly dropped to the ground in pain from the noise. After dialing down the volume, he leapt to his feet and tried to get a better view of what was happening. Doors had slammed shut on each of the two passageways, trapping his people on the other side.

"Magus, who is screaming? Which team?" he shouted. Unfortunately, he seemed to have lost contact with Magus and the floor above. The backup teams were probably on their way already, but it was unlikely they'd arrive in time to stop that screaming.

Wendell and Mellis rushed to the doors and began firing, but the doors easily resisted a wide range of blasts. It made sense; nothing in a containment center should get blown easily, if at all. Suddenly from all sides they found themselves surrounded by swirling, black shadows, and then he too was one of the screaming. He tried aiming his weapon but there was nothing distinct to fire at, and he dared not risk firing this weapon arbitrarily. Meanwhile, Wendell and Mellis were firing blasts like crazy, and big pieces of the machinery and the walls exploded as they did so. But the shadows kept swirling about them, vague in substance but somehow precise

in intent. He knew they were not of this dimension; their physical form, such as it was, passed easily through his protection suit, and very likely passed just as easily through his skin, through his own flesh and blood.

He found himself cowering underneath one of the sarcophagi when the backup team arrived. They were using a much broader array of weaponry than Wendell and Mellis had available, including some kind of specifically extra-dimensional energy spray that seemed to hold the shadows at bay long enough for someone to come and grab him and drag him back toward the elevator.

"What's going on?" he shouted.

"We don't know!" someone shouted back. "We're getting you out of here!"

And then they were being chased, and suddenly, the precision rescue being executed by the backup team fell into horrible disarray. He lost his sense of direction as they swarmed around his helmet, and then an entirely wrong sensation penetrated his nervous system and he jerked away from whomever it was that had been steering him. It didn't matter; he caught a glimpse of the entire backup team ahead of him, suddenly staggering against the walls, collapsing onto the floor, running aimlessly back the wrong direction. He began crawling, shouting for Magus or someone sane to appear, but he knew he was grasping desperately for his own survival at this point. A vicious whispering was building up in his ears, and although the language was indecipherable, the message seemed clear nevertheless: he was doomed for daring to visit this floor, doomed for daring to interfere with what was happening here.

He had no energy to spare trying to rally the other members of his team. Somehow, miraculously, the elevator appeared in his field of vision, and he fought his way to his feet, despite the looming terror that had taken hold of him. The only thing he knew for certain was that if he could make it as far as that elevator, he might just possibly survive this onslaught. And then, one other thing occurred to him: that if he turned and fired his weapon down the hallway, he'd never have to feel or experience this particular terror ever again. As he dragged himself one step at a time toward the gloriously benign fluorescent light of the elevator, he withdrew the weapon from its holster.

"— massive interference, but I believe I have isolated its source and can penetrate. Can anyone hear me?"

It was Magus' voice, and he screamed, "YES, Magus, please, God, do something!"

"Agent Gray, I am detecting a Perillian phase weapon powering up in your left hand. Do not fire that weapon—"

It was much too late for that kind of advice. He turned back toward the hallway, toward the gaping jaws of ethereal evil that still pursued him, and unleashed a blast down the hallway that completely disintegrated everything in its path, shadows and humans alike. In the sudden silence that followed, Gray finally found relief, and as he collapsed into the elevator, all memory of the entire experience unraveled within his mind and dissipated like a mist melting in the sun.

Dr. X and Nicholas rode the elevator up to the conference floor with some trepidation. It was a long ride. Dr. X activated the miniature display screen on the elevator wall to monitor building news. Apparently some kind of battle had broken out on the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor, over control of the west elevator on that floor. The 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor was off limits to human beings; there was no oxygen anywhere on the floor, and the people who lived and worked there were not three-dimensional by nature. The entire floor had to be specially outfitted to allow for non-3D construction methods, in fact. There were hundreds of similar floors in the building; no matter what species you belonged to, there was always a chance, if you weren't paying attention, that you'd step out of the elevator into an entirely noxious environment and wind up dead before the elevator doors closed behind you.

Floor 2,012 was unique in its industry, however. Perhaps a dozen species worked on this floor creating so-called "apoc technology" - technology specifically designed to assist with the process of dimensional apocalypse. Just about anyone could come up with technology that could leave a specific world, or even a cluster of worlds, in ruins. But when it came time to actually bring about the complete collapse of an entire dimension - well, that took professional gear, no doubt about it. For years it had been a matter of internal debate at UAIT as to whether they should sanction the trading of this technology to military concerns throughout reality. It was felt by a thin margin that tracking the technology as it left the UAIT building, and keeping a huge amount of the technology on hand within the building, was a far better way to protect UAIT's interests than to let the technology circulate unwatched.

Having a battle break out on floor 2,012, however, was never a part of anyone's forecasts.

"Do you know what species are active on that floor?" Nicholas asked.

"I don't," Dr. X replied. "It's all I can do to keep track of the humanoid species."

Nicholas shook his head, as though he was suddenly drawing a conclusion based on information he wished he'd never been exposed to.

"I don't trust any of the species in the peace conference, you know," he said, almost sadly. "They all feel extraordinarily virulent to me. I admit... I admit this is partially due to how they *use* me when I'm in their presence. But there's something more... it's as though reality was doing its best to personify some kind of 'pure evil' when it created these species. Maybe that's just how I feel them, as a translator. Or... or maybe that's just how I feel their intent toward each other, and I'm... I'm missing all the things that make these species unique and wonderful. But..."

Dr. X was silent. His own experience with these species was limited to watching them destroy the planet Earth. He was inclined to believe whatever Nicholas might say about how much evil was involved.

Nicholas shook his head again, as though trying to clear his mind of preconceived notions.

"Maybe inviting them into the building for a 'peace conference' wasn't such a great idea," he said slowly. "I can't help but wonder if this mysterious quarantine is related to the presence of these beings, these 'ambassadors.' Or if the fighting on 2,012... if that's related."

"I don't think you should worry about it," Dr. X replied. "That's Agent Gray's job."

"Yes, you're right. Still... I'm beginning to think this is a job for a younger person."

"We are approaching the conference floor," Magus announced.

"Thank you, Magus," Nicholas said. They fell silent as the elevator slowed, and then finally came to a halt. Nicholas took a deep breath as the doors opened.

They stepped out into a morass of reporters from the UAIT Media unit, and reporters from all over reality, who had gathered to observe the peace proceedings. Four burly agents from Security were on hand, and they formed a cordon around Dr. X and Nicholas. Dr. X took Nicholas' arm and led him as rapidly as he could manage through the gauntlet of shouting

reporters with their wondrous variety of cameras and microphones. One of the Security agents held a device that neatly and continuously scanned for nanotech – infinitesimally small recording devices that whizzed about them and attempted to latch on to any part of their skin or their clothing. The air was so thick with them that Dr. X coughed on two occasions, but Security’s scanning device rendered them all useless the moment they were launched. Nicholas kept his head down and avoided eye contact as they moved through the west lobby. The other ambassadors were all coming in from other entrances, so as to avoid experiencing the presence of human beings for as long as possible.

Eventually, they reached an antechamber and rushed inside. Security held out the mob as the doors slammed shut, leaving Dr. X, Nicholas, and two agents inside. The antechamber was a huge banquet hall, often used for occasions of state and other large formal events, but today, the banquet hall stood completely empty. It was Nicholas’ dressing room during the proceedings. On the far side of the banquet hall was a hallway into the actual conference room. They could tell the other ambassadors were already starting to arrive by the unearthly wailing noises that emanated from the conference room. Even Dr. X felt a certain eerie chill at hearing those noises. Not for the first time, he was glad his role here was limited to being Nicholas’ escort.

“Magus,” Nicholas said, “please inform me when all the ambassadors are present.”

“Certainly, Doctor,” Magus replied.

They fell silent, then, as Nicholas sat down in a chair and waited patiently. The two Security agents began a murmured discussion about the battle on the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor, and what kinds of weaponry Security was breaking out of the arsenal to try to contain the skirmish. Dr. X paced back and forth behind Nicholas, trying to contain the feeling of foreboding that was chasing him.

“Have you ever thought much about trying to reach the top floor?” Nicholas asked him quietly, so quietly Dr. X almost didn’t hear him.

He stopped pacing.

“I suppose I have,” he said. “When I was younger.”

“I realize it’s theoretically impossible and so on,” Nicholas said. “But I wondered if you in particular had analyzed the problem to your satisfaction.”

The top floor... home to the offices of the Supreme Being. No one knew if the elevators would climb that far. Indeed, the elevators were programmed per known species to only climb an amount of time in one ride roughly equivalent to the known lifespan of that species, multiplied by four. In the meantime, information on the exact number of floors in the building was restricted by species as well. Each species had its own distinct limitations in terms of what mathematical concepts it could and couldn’t accept; for humans, the number “infinity” was sufficiently mind-boggling to approximately describe how high the building went, whereas with other species, who had more sophisticated number systems, the number of the top floor could be described more precisely, but never exactly. The top floor would always remain essentially untouchable, permanently out of reach.

To Dr. X, the matter was a personal one, not simply an academic exercise in supernatural architecture. He had known since he was a child that he was the second son of the Supreme Being, but never in all his many, many years of life had he ever communicated directly with his father... if “father” was an appropriate term for someone who ran around with the name “Supreme Being.” Nicholas was one of the few people who knew of his lineage. It wasn’t something he enjoyed talking about much. Too many people made assumptions about his family that he could neither deny nor affirm... and it was uncomfortable to think that he’d been abandoned all these years, just like the rest of reality had been abandoned by a Supreme Being who hadn’t communicated directly with anyone in eons.

But once, years ago, shortly after he’d graduated from superhero training, he’d tried to reach the top floor simply by riding the elevator. He suspected that he would live long enough, if he were truly the son of the Supreme Being as his instructors had told him. He had ridden for years and years without stopping, tying up one of the east elevators the entire time. His super stamina had been tested to its complete limits, and eventually he had been forced to ask Magus to stop. He had stumbled out of the elevator onto a floor populated by several species that had lived in the building prior to UAIT moving in. At that time, UAIT had yet to climb too far up the building, and his experiences in the upper reaches of the building later became the stuff of legends among UAIT denizens. One thing he learned: not even those ancient races had ever glimpsed the top floor. They had archived literally trillions and trillions of floors, and never found the top floor.

Occasionally, if atmospheric conditions were good, though, you could lean out a window from those upper reaches, wearing appropriate breathing apparatus of course, and you could look up toward the sky, and if the light was just right and the clouds had moved on, you could actually *see* the top of the building. You could somehow, miraculously, see a terminus point. There were ancient tales of an entire race that had climbed out one of these windows and tried to ascend the outside of the building to reach the top, and occasionally one of their bodies would plummet past a window on its way back down, having failed to survive the trip. Indeed, once every few years or so, UAIT would have to clean up the mess made when one of these bodies smashed into the parking lot and destroyed a square mile or so with the impact.

"I can't get up there," Dr. X said at last. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, sometimes hopeless situations call for rather desperate solutions," Nicholas replied. "But I guess getting the Supreme Being's attention and asking for help is a bit beyond desperate, isn't it."

"Nicholas, the ambassadors are ready for you," Magus announced.

The old man slowly, resolutely, got up from his chair and walked alone across the banquet hall to the conference room entrance. Dr. X watched him go, once again impressed by the man's fortitude in the face of such an onerous task. The two Security agents broke off their conversation as well and watched the human ambassador head into the lion's den. The wailing and screeching noises from inside the conference room began reaching a fever pitch as Nicholas approached; it was as though they could already feel his approach, and were somehow sickened by him.

And then, he was gone, inside the room, and Dr. X was back to pacing. They would not know the outcome of this session until Nicholas emerged, perhaps hours later, exhausted and emotionally battered. Dr. X resumed pacing.

Only fifteen minutes or so later, he realized something was wrong.

"Magus, can you please do a voice analysis on the sounds inside the conference room?" he asked. "Isolate Nicholas' voice and play it in here."

Moments later, the sound of Nicholas screaming in terror filled the banquet hall. Dr. X exchanged a quick glance with the two Security agents; Nicholas was typically unable to make any audible sounds during these sessions, and certainly he had never screamed in absolute terror before. The

three of them began sprinting for the session room. Dr. X shouted, "Magus, get a Medical team up here!" and then pounded through the door.

The first thing that hit him upon entering the conference room was the smell: a dark, rancid, insane smell that hit him like a brick to the side of the head. The next thing that struck him was the absolute blackness of the space. It wasn't just an absence of light; it was a definite preponderance of black, pressing in on his consciousness and threatening to drive him mad. Indeed, if not for his white-lensed sunglasses, he might be bawling like the two Security agents, directly behind him.

The next thing to nearly overwhelm him was a rapidly growing awareness that hiding in the darkness were twenty-three species that had already destroyed planet Earth, and probably wouldn't mind tearing him apart piece by piece either.

"Hold the door open!" Dr. X shouted to the agents. "Don't let that fucking door close or I'll kill you myself!"

The agents somehow managed to snap to some kind of attention, and took up a station at the door. The pinprick of light from the doorway would be Dr. X's only guide back as he charged into the conference room, concentrating on following Nicholas' voice. As he moved into the darkness at top speed, he realized he was being followed closely from above, from below; perhaps all around him there were entities capable of subsuming him. A horrible howling sound filled the air, and drops of steaming wet liquid began to land on him. He knew that only some of the "ambassadors" here were actually present in the same physical dimension as he, but that was no particular comfort; the others were perfectly capable of attacking him in ways he couldn't anticipate. All that mattered was finding Nicholas; the sensation building in his chest, like that of a thousand insects suddenly hatching underneath his skin, was something he could ignore. Indeed, the sense that his own eyes were starting to dissolve was something he could ignore, and the curious sensation of his own scalp being sliced open and peeled back was undoubtedly just some kind of illusion, no matter how much blood he could feel dripping down the sides of his face.

Eventually, he reached Nicholas, sitting in a chair. The pinprick of the doorway seemed to be miles away. He grabbed Nicholas by the arm and shouted, "Can you move? Let's get out of here!"

Nicholas couldn't stop screaming. Dr. X forcibly yanked him to his feet, and began dragging him back toward the doorway. Something unmistakably red swooped past and slashed Dr. X's chest open; whatever



the thing was, it seemed to be primarily aesthetic in nature – one of those races that existed “two steps to the left,” as Nicholas had often said – but the slashes were real, and he could feel infection welling up around the wounds within seconds. The two Security agents suddenly began firing their weapons into the room. Bright blue bolts whizzed through the air around them, striking nothing, but definitely threatening to hit Dr. X and Nicholas, who were still essentially invisible from where they were. Something altered the gravity around them for a split second, causing them to rise up into the air and then collapse back down onto the ground with an enormous force. He was quite positive one of his legs was broken as he tried to stand immediately afterward, and the pain caused him to scream almost as loudly as Nicholas was screaming.

Finally, at long last, he was within sight of the agents. He shouted, “We need help!” but the agents wouldn’t move. As they dragged themselves closer, they realized one of the agents was dead, nothing more than a skeleton picked clean, standing in the doorway. The other agent was on the ground, on his stomach, still firing wildly, a pool of blood collecting underneath him. “Stop shooting!” Dr. X shouted, but the man wouldn’t listen, and the next blast hit Dr. X right in the left shoulder. A few inches difference would have struck Dr. X directly in the head. Dr. X got out his own weapon and fired at the agent, killing him instantly. A few members of the Medical team he’d called for were already appearing at the doorway, and one of them had the courage to actually take a few steps into the room and try to grab his hand. He ignored her, and yanked Nicholas forward, until she could reach him, and then the two of them pulled Nicholas to safety.

As soon as they were back in the banquet hall, the Medical team closed and locked the door. The insane howling from the next room quieted some due to the soundproofing on the door, but they could not entirely escape it. The Medical team swept them up on levitating stretchers and got them the hell out of the banquet hall as soon as they could manage it. Dr. X looked over at Nicholas as they were hurried out; his eyes were wide open with a stark fear that he was sure was mirrored on his own face.

“What the fuck happened in there?” one of the medtechs asked him.

He wasn’t in the mood to supply an adequate explanation.

“Apparently the ambassadors are somewhat upset,” Magus offered, and somehow, despite all odds, Dr. X found himself laughing.

## Chapter Six

Andrea and Trickle stumbled out of the restaurant together, Andrea feeling slightly tipsy, Trickle just too clumsy to keep up with her at the rate she was going.

"Where are we going?" Trickle asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "I'd like to find a party, really."

"There are lots of parties on this floor," Trickle told her. "They don't care what time of day it is. They just party party party."

The robot agreed to lead her to one of these parties, and then they were moving rapidly through the crowd. To the robot, Andrea was just another child, someone who needed entertainment, and it was all Andrea could do to resist Trickle's continual pleas to skip down the promenade alongside it. Still, she was pleased to have at least some companionship as she made her way through this bizarre building.

They stepped onto a moving walkway, and began rapidly sailing down the length of the promenade. Along the way she spotted signs for a wide variety of insane entertainments, none of which particularly caught her attention. She wasn't in the mood for any kind of sexual escapades, which seemed to be the gist of many of these establishments. There were also wild gaming pavilions, including a number of simulated combat situations that seemed slightly creepy to her. They promised "intense and unbeatable realism!" where their violence was concerned, and without knowing much about who she was or where she came from, she knew that she was not a violent person by nature, nor an angry person either. There were other entertainment centers as well, showing interactive movies and regular movies, and occasionally she saw signs for something called a "sensorium," where apparently they just tricked your nervous system into having crazy experiences. Crowds of people constantly flowed in and out of all of these places, and yet she still hadn't seen anything that suited her mood.

And then, at long last, what appeared to be an old-fashioned dance club loomed on the horizon. She could hear pounding beats pouring out of the club, and she knew what she really wanted to do right now was dance. The club was called the Theoretical Limit.

"Can we go there?" she asked her robot.

"Certainly!" Trickle replied gleefully. Without another word, it leapt over the railing and off of the moving walkway, tumbling across the promenade as it landed clumsily on its four arms. Taking that as a warning,

she leapt over the railing with a bit more finesse than the robot, stumbling only slightly as she landed. Moments later, the robot had her hand yet again and was dragging her to the club entrance.

The Theoretical Limit was relatively nondescript from the outside, except for its enormous marquee that rose high up into the air and promised "a soul-shaking experience!" There was a small line to get in, but the line was moving fast. She found herself behind individuals who were dressed considerably weirder than she was. She wasn't at all familiar with the style, which seemed to be a mixture of S&M bondage gear and circus clown attire, but she figured if there was a dress code, she'd find somewhere else to dance. But they let her in with nothing more than a verbal acknowledgment that she understood UAIT's Code of Conduct, which of course she didn't. As they stepped into the club, she asked Trickle, "What is this Code of Conduct?"

"I wasn't taught a Code of Conduct," Trickle replied. "Would you like me to download it?"

"No, don't do that," she said. "That doctor might remember that you're with me, and they'll figure out where you are. I'll just assume they don't want me killing or maiming anyone and call it good."

A hostess inside near the coat check stood smiling at all the newcomers, and occasionally answering questions. The hostess noticed Trickle and said, as politely as could be, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but we don't allow children's animated toys on the dance floors. I'd be happy to check it here for you."

Trickle's eyes became noticeably downcast.

She felt the strange need to lean down, pat Trickle's furry head and try to console it, and so she did, regardless of the hostess' slightly judgmental attitude about the situation.

"I'll be back for you, don't worry," she said.

"Okay, Andrea Change," the robot replied. "I will wait here for you."

She smiled and picked Trickle up and set it on the counter. The hostess tore off a ticket and gave it to Andrea, so that she could eventually reclaim her little robot friend. Someone grabbed Trickle off the counter and hauled it into the back of the coat check, leaving her alone with the hostess.

"Are you new here?" the hostess asked her.

"I am," she replied.

"Wonderful, we're glad you could stop by. The Theoretical Limit has over a dozen distinct dance floors and relaxation spaces for your enjoyment. The main floor is on this level, and all of the ancillary floors and bars are situated above the main floor. You'll also find a wide range of intoxicants available to you at the various bars on each floor, so please enjoy yourself as much as you feel you can."

Intoxicants... something told her she typically enjoyed "intoxicants," although something also told her she should play it a little safe here tonight. But there was an itch building inside her from the moment the word hit her awareness... an itch to get intoxicated, in whatever fashion presented itself.

"Thanks," she said. "You're referring to alcohol?"

"Not just alcohol," the hostess said with a perky smile. "Some of the finest psychoactive chemicals in the known multiverse are available for your distinct pleasure!"

Aha, she thought.

She stepped past the hostess out onto the periphery of the main dance floor, a vast expanse of writhing and cavorting bodies of all shapes and sizes. Indeed, for the first time, she was truly aware of how non-human some of these people could be, with their bizarre shapes and strange undulating forms. Nevertheless, the music was intensely inviting, an organic stew of beats and sounds that practically compelled her to dance. She wondered if there was some subliminal aspect to the music that she was missing, and then decided she really didn't care if it were so.

She slunk through the crowd with determination, heading for somewhere nearer the center of the teeming mass, and then slowly but surely began to move her body. Hovering in the air above the dance floor was a beautiful multi-colored swirl of energy and light, and as she examined it, she noticed that a significant portion of the music she was hearing was coming from the ring of people standing directly below the light show. Their mouths were open, and they were singing loudly into the air. In fact, much of the music she thought was electronic in nature was actually pouring out of these individuals' mouths. The light show seemed to be tuned to their vocals somehow, and she couldn't tear her eyes off the display.

She danced for at least an hour without stopping, occasionally sipping water that was passed to her by nearby individuals. The music alternated between ominous and moody, and upbeat and hopeful, without

ever wavering from a heavy beat that seemed to appeal to all of the life forms on the dance floor with her.

Eventually she tired, and decided to seek out a place to relax. She followed a nearby couple as they made their way to an escalator headed upward, and eventually found herself on the second level. The scene was more sedate up here. The escalator let them off into a wide open lounge, with multiple cushioned coves in the floor and walls filled with a morass of cuddling life forms. A trapeze artist of some kind was performing an intricate set of maneuvers high above them in a web of swinging bars and ropes; she seemed to have multiple tentacles growing out of her in addition to several arms and legs, and she swung and leapt and sailed through the air in a rather astonishing fashion. The denizens of the lounge were either completely entranced with the trapeze artist, or completely entranced with each other, and the music on this floor was noticeably more sensual, less driving and aggressive than the music on the main floor.

She wandered over to the bar that lined the back wall and sat on an empty stool.

"What would you like?" the bartender asked. He was a tall, exceptionally slender individual, who somehow seemed to evince an air of transparency without actually being physically transparent.

"Water," she said, "for starters."

"An excellent choice," the bartender replied, and wandered off.

She turned back toward the lounge. In one of the cushioned floor coves, she saw a woman sit peacefully with her head relaxed, her eyes closed. What appeared to be a puddle of oozing black liquid pooled up at her feet suddenly began inching its way up her body, and she began to moan in pleasure as it did so. It moved very slowly, and the expressions on the woman's face conveyed an exquisite pleasure. Eventually, the liquid covered the woman completely, at which point the woman began writhing, albeit very, very slowly, underneath the liquid sheath. Andrea found herself entirely engaged by this rather erotic, if entirely alien and bizarre, public display of sensuality. She turned back to the bar to grab her glass of water and drank a healthy amount in one gulp.

Two individuals, a woman and a man, sidled up to the bar next to her and took stools. She stole a glance their direction. The man was facing her, and was obviously possessed of more than one face upon his slightly elongated (by human standards) face. He wore a very conservative looking business suit, but instead of a tie, a live snake dangled from his neck. The

woman's back was to her, but her hair was up in multiple ponytails, which sprouted from several positions on her head and fell nearly to the floor. She wore a gown that was wide open in the back, all the way down to her waist, a blue gown of a completely ethereal, diaphanous fabric. Andrea turned quickly back to staring into her water, before the man noticed her staring. They were engaged in a conversation that she couldn't quite hear.

The bartender approached them, and the woman said clearly, "I need a glass of orange juice, and a tab of freefall."

"Same here," the man said. The bartender nodded, then wandered off again.

The man resumed his conversation, and she tried as hard as possible to catch what he was saying.

"Yeah, it was kind of a mess," he said. "I just don't know how many times I'm expected to clean up after these people."

The woman said something she couldn't hear.

"Well," the man replied, "I think if you're going to suck down that much jazz in a public setting, you almost deserve what you get. But they keep calling me in because they know I can deal with people who are completely freaking out."

She said something that sounded placating, but Andrea couldn't be sure.

"That's just it," he said, working himself up a bit. "If these people spent even two minutes reading the information at Erowid, they'd know that jazz is too fucking temperamental for a party." He shook his head sadly.

The bartender returned with two orange juices and two small, white pills. The couple nodded, smiled, paid nothing because they didn't bother with money in this weird building. Andrea accidentally caught the man's eye, and hurriedly turned away, but she knew it was too late. The man paused, leaned over to the woman and whispered something, then resumed standing normally.

The woman swiveled around and looked at her.

"You're new here, aren't you," she said.

"How'd you know?" Andrea replied.

"Lucky guess," the woman said with a shrug. "You alone?"

Andrea nodded.

"How did you manage to wind up here, alone?" the woman asked.

"I don't remember," Andrea said.

The woman's eyebrow arched a bit.

"I don't remember who I am," Andrea said slowly, "or how I got here."

"Have you been to Medical?" the woman asked.

Andrea nodded, then added, "I don't trust the Security in this building."

"Ha," the man said loudly.

The woman smiled. "No one does. But they're effective." She held out her hand to Andrea and said, "I'm Princess Valium."

"I'm Andrea Change."

"I thought you didn't remember who you are."

"It's a temporary name, until I remember my actual name."

"Ah. Very stylish. This is my companion, Johnny Mildly-Irritating."

The man nodded.

"So, have you ever tried freefall, Andrea Change?"

Princess Valium held up one of the two small white pills. It looked innocuous enough.

"What is it?"

"It's a psychoactive drug," replied the Princess. "One dose for a human is around 200 milligrams. Takes about five minutes to hit, lasts about forty-five minutes, almost all of which is peak. Then there's an abrupt drop off at the end, where you're deposited back near baseline in about ten minutes of comedown."

"And what happens while you're on it?" she asked.

Princess Valium appeared nonchalant. She said, "Well, your whole entire existence gets sort of uprooted, and your soul gets released from your body for about a half an hour." Pause. "I don't know, it's something to do."

"There's other drugs you could try," Johnny Mildly-Irritating said. "You could try jazz, or bones, or meltdown, or ecstasy, or serene."

"Yeah," Princess Valium said, "whatever you're in the mood for."

"Well," Andrea said, "what would you recommend to someone who's suffering from severe amnesia and may never have tried a drug like this before in her life?"

The Princess and Johnny exchanged a quick glance, and then the Princess said, "Well, *we're* doing freefall. You're welcome to join us." Pause. "We'll look out for you. You won't die or anything." Very, very nonchalant.

"What exactly do you *do* while you're on this drug?" Andrea asked.

"Oh, you can do lots of things," the Princess said. "You can lay around and trance out, or you can dance... you really don't notice what's happening to your physical body while you're on it, but somehow your body usually manages to stay out of trouble. That's why most people like it. It's not like jazz or meltdown, where you have to be strapped to a chair to really relax on it, because otherwise your body would do something stupid, like get itself killed."

"I see," Andrea said, not at all sure she actually saw much of anything.

"Murray!" Johnny said, calling the bartender over. "Get us another orange juice and freefall!"

The bartender deposited a glass of juice and a pill in front of Andrea.

Princess Valium held her pill out to Andrea, as though she were offering a toast. Andrea picked the pill up, "clinked" her pill against the Princess' pill, and then the three of them swallowed their pills, chasing with the juice.

"Now then," said Princess Valium, "I have a favorite dance floor for experiencing freefall. It's up about three levels. We've got five minutes to get there. Let's get moving!"

They left the bar in a single file line, with Princess Valium leading the way, and Andrea Change bringing up the rear. Andrea wasn't at all sure why she trusted these two... in fact, the more she thought about what was happening, the more she was convinced it wasn't either of these two individuals that she trusted in particular, but rather the fortuitous way in which their drug knowledge suddenly presented itself to her. After all, it certainly wasn't alcohol she'd been hungering for, even if she wasn't precisely sure exactly *what* she was hungering for in the first place.

They climbed on the escalator together, giving Andrea another excellent view of the main dance floor, writhing below them as they rose into the air, with multi-colored swirls rising into the air like some kind of live action special effects display. Then they were pushing their way through another dance floor, where the music was vigorously aggressive. In fact, Andrea began feeling a slight desire to beat the living shit out of someone nearby, before Johnny Mildly-Irritating grabbed her hand and pulled her across the floor to the next escalator. As they rode up to the next floor, they saw someone swan dive from a floor high above them, down through the open central shaft, plummeting an unknown number of floors to

the main dance floor. Andrea barely had time to consider what the etiquette was in a situation like this, when she watched the floor scatter to let the poor man hit the floor and practically explode in a bloody morass of gore and broken bones. They were almost off the escalator, though, when she saw pieces of the gore and bone begin to slide back together and reassemble itself into a person, to the cheers of those on the dance floor who happened to witness the event.

The next dance floor was a maddeningly cheerful brand of pop music, the kind of pop music that made her want to immediately shed her clothes and begin fucking the nearest fourteen-year-old. But, once again, Johnny Mildly-Irritating grabbed her arm and yanked her ever upward to the next level. Even from the bottom of the escalator, she could see that they were climbing toward a complete spectacle of light and sound. Or perhaps it was just the drug, starting to come on. She felt woozy for a brief moment, but Johnny's hand on her arm kept her steady. Princess Valium looked back and gave her a quick smile, which cheered her up.

And then they were stepping off into their destination, a swirling pool of dancing, throbbing entities underneath a vastly complicated lighting rig. The lights heaved themselves up and down on giant swinging cables, in some cases barely skirting the heads of the dancers, and the colors and effects were simply astonishing. At the far end of the floor, on a raised stage, a band of some kind was performing, eight non-humans playing instruments Andrea did not recognize, fronted by a female human singing in a language she did not recognize. Princess Valium raised her arms up into the air and moved through the crowd deliberately, taking them to a better position from which to view the stage. Andrea was slowing down, though, and Johnny Mildly-Irritating had let go of her arm in his excitement to see the band and keep up with Princess Valium. Soon she was watching them charge into the distance, and then several individuals got in her way, and suddenly the two of them were gone.

She stopped moving. The music was almost inaudible to her, drowned out by a wave of sounds emanating from inside of her own head. She suddenly felt as though she was tumbling over a waterfall, and she could vaguely feel her hands rise above her head, almost of their own volition. She found herself immersed in a sea of radiant light. Princess Valium's words were ringing in her bones: "Your soul gets released from your body."

*That was important. That was part of the message, wasn't it... part of the reason she was here.... Why couldn't she remember? They used these drug experiences as an alternate method of communion with the divine element. But the drugs would wear off, and they'd be right back where they started. It was a trap, a trap someone had set for them millions of years ago. What was she supposed to be doing here?*

*Representing the divine? On some kind of mission?*

She could make no sense of anything, and she felt her skin and her consciousness slip away from her. The sea of radiant light no longer surrounded her; instead, it seemed to emanate directly from within her, and when she dared open her eyes, she saw a crowd of people standing around her in a circle, still dancing, laughing and cheering, as radiant, ethereal light poured out of her and lit up the entire dance floor with a golden gleam. The people in this building were used to any manner of strange alien behavior; they must have thought she was radiating this light in order to entertain them. She felt a brief moment of abject terror - her body was no longer under her control. She spun slowly in place, sending tendrils of beautiful light all about her, and closed her eyes again to appreciate the majesty of the sensation without the distraction of other lights or other people.

Something materialized directly behind her, rousing her from her delirium. She opened her eyes, turned, and found Trick Start standing next to her, a smile on his face. The light from within her began to die down as she realized she was rapidly returning to a sober state of mind.

"That's pretty impressive," he said, leaning in close to her so that they could hear each other over the music. "How'd you do that?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"Oh, that's right, you have amnesia," he said.

"You just materialized out of thin air," she said. "How'd you do that?" She paused, then added, "I know *you* don't have amnesia."

"Well, if I tell you my secrets and then Security does catch up to you, I could be in trouble," he said.

"I won't tell Security. I don't much like those people."

"No one does, but they have *technology* for situations like those." He took her hand and said, "Close your eyes for a moment."

She did, and her head suddenly began to swim with images. She was hovering above a perilous blue ocean, sailing through the air with the ease of a dream. Soon she began to descend, and an island made itself known in the distance. The island was teeming with civilization. As she got

closer, she sailed over an exotic bazaar, and a beautiful gothic cathedral, and rows of houses built in fantastic styles. In the center of the island, coming into view, was an unmistakable building, its gleaming exterior reflecting the brilliant sunlight in all directions. It rose into the sky as only the UAIT building could. It was the UAIT building, she knew, and yet at the same time, it was something else entirely - perhaps a different incarnation, or perhaps a view from a strange fiction.

*A view from a strange fiction....*

"You're not from around here, are you," she said slowly, smiling as she opened her eyes.

"I've got an idea," he replied. "Why don't I take you on a little tour of the building, and we can get to know each other a little better."

"Maybe you hadn't noticed," she said, "but I have amnesia. You won't be getting to know me any better than you already do."

"We'll see," he said, leading her off the dance floor.

## Chapter Seven

Dr. X rode the elevator from Medical to Security with no small amount of trepidation. His leg was still tingling from where the break had been reset and healed, and the skin graft on his shoulder where he'd been shot was itching like crazy, but these were easily ignored. What could not be ignored was the dire nature of the situation. The "ambassadors" had all fled the conference center, and Security could only account for half of them in their assigned quarters. Meanwhile, the fighting on the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor had grown especially virulent, and the floors directly above and below had been evacuated. The west elevator bank could no longer be trusted to travel above or below that floor. And he was positive Agent Gray would have nothing useful to report about the quarantine.

He strode through the Security lobby and into the Command Center without so much as nodding to anyone along the way. The center was a whirling, churning sea of activity. He headed directly for Agent Gray's office and knocked politely on the door. Then, without waiting for an answer, he went in. Gray was at his desk, looking incredibly worn.

"Sorry to disturb you," Dr. X said, "but I thought you might like to hear about what happened at the conference."

"Magus has already told me," Gray replied. "Sit down."

Dr. X sat, and Gray pulled a bottle of liquor from a drawer in his desk. He poured two small glasses and handed one to Dr. X.

"What's the occasion?" Dr. X asked.

"You're still alive," Gray replied.

Dr. X paused, then raised his glass.

"I'll drink to that," he said. The whiskey burned as he expected it to, and it was a refreshing way to get the taste of anesthetic out of his system.

Gray set down a weapon on the desk between them. It was a very small, nondescript, silver cylinder, with a single black button on its side.

"Ever seen one of those?" Gray asked.

Dr. X shook his head.

"It's a Perillian phase weapon. It... it's an outlaw weapon within the Association, but on occasion, I carry one anyway. If I were to fire this at you, not only would you be disintegrated where you sat, but all memory of your existence would be completely wiped out of the minds of anyone who has ever known you. Reality would essentially rewrite itself to eliminate all

traces of you. After using it on you, I wouldn't even remember myself why I'd used it." He paused, shook his head slowly, and said, "I used it recently. Naturally, I don't remember why."

"Does it have anything to do with the quarantine?" Dr. X asked.

"Probably, but even Magus has no record of me leaving my office for the past two hours... and yet the weapon shows it's been fired within that time." He rubbed his eyes, as though searching for the memory and failing. "Well, whatever it was, if it was important, I'm sure it'll resurface some other way." He stood up. "You're just in time. Richter is down in the east docking bay. They're about to start using weapons from the Arsenal on the quarantine field."

"Couldn't you... couldn't you use that phase weapon on the quarantine field?" asked Dr. X.

"Only works on living beings, for some reason," Gray replied. "The Perillians were complete xenophobes. They created mass scale versions of these phase weapons, and tried to invade neighboring dimensions. This was long before our time, mind you, and UAIT stomped them like the bugs they were. The weapons all got confiscated. But being Director of Security has its privileges. Shall we?"

They left his office, back into the bustling Command Center. Derald and Janszen, Gray's psychic lieutenants, were at his side almost immediately.

"We're ready in the docking bay," Derald said.

"Magus, give me a visual," Gray replied.

"Certainly, Director," said Magus. Moments later, the massive central display screen lit up with a shot of a wide open hangar, beyond which was the unmistakable blue glow of the quarantine field. In the lower left corner of the screen, a small group of uniformed UAIT technicians were hovering around what looked like a small cannon of some kind.

"Richter, can you hear me?" Gray said loudly.

"I can, Director," someone onscreen replied. The man broke away from the cannon and approached the camera. He was a small, stocky individual, with a very grim look on his face.

"So tell me what's about to happen."

"Well, Director, this weapon you see behind me is something from the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor, from our apoc division. It's a very tightly focused beam, which causes ontological collapse in anything it hits. It's pretty much the strongest 'brute force' weapon we've got."

"Is there any reason you're not starting with something weaker and working your way up?"

"It's a timing issue, Director. According to Derald, the building's internal supplies are only going to last us another three or four weeks. If I start at the bottom end of the Arsenal and work my way up, we'll be testing weapons for the next eight or nine years. I'd rather not wait, if that's all right with you."

"Fair enough. Proceed at your discretion, Richter."

Richter turned back to his team of technicians, who seemed to be making some last minute adjustments to the cannon's angle. After a brief conference, Richter turned back to the camera and said, "Okay, Director, we've evacuated the entire floor and the ten floors above and below. It's going to take us about five minutes to get our team out of the potential danger area, then we'll have Magus fire the weapon at our command, once we've reached a safe floor."

Richter and his team vanished from view, and there was a tense silence in the Command Center. The assorted staff members on duty put down their appointed tasks, and waited patiently for the outcome of this test. Dr. X spotted Jayce from Religion coming out of a situation room on the far side of the Command Center to watch. He'd always considered her an incredibly sharp individual; it was good to see her working with Gray on this problem. She was the only person he'd really truly confided in about the issue of confronting his so-called Father, the so-called Supreme Being. She couldn't offer him much in the way of answers, but her rigorous approach to the various religions of reality somehow managed to comfort him nonetheless.

Eventually, Richter reestablished audio contact with the Command Center. "I'm ready when you are, Director."

"What happens if this doesn't work?" Gray asked.

"I don't really know, sir. If the weapon's blast doesn't penetrate the quarantine field, a number of things could happen. The blast could be absorbed into the field, which would be a relatively harmless event. Worst case scenario, the blast could ricochet back into the building and destroy several floors. It's hard to gauge."

Dr. X saw Gray's expression change ever so slightly. He was hesitating, which made Dr. X feel just a little better about the whole situation. But, as he expected, Gray did not change his mind about the test.

"Magus," Gray said, "fire the weapon."

They watched the cannon light up with an insanely bright pink pulse of light. Even through the mediating sheen of the display screen, the pulse was astoundingly powerful; a number of individuals in the Command Center were actually knocked to the ground simply by watching a transmission of the blast. Dr. X's white-lensed sunglasses shielded his eyes from the intensity of the blast, but he knew deep in his bones he was witnessing a rare event, the firing of yet another weapon that shouldn't exist, but did, thanks to a blisteringly complex reality that continued to exceed all attempts to understand it.

Perhaps ten seconds after the weapon was fired, the light from the blast died down.

"What happened, Magus?" Gray asked, piercing the silence.

"The quarantine field is still intact," Magus replied. "The east docking bay is also still intact. The blast from the cannon seems to have been dissipated by the field."

Despite the fact that they had not broken the quarantine, the vast majority of the staffers felt significantly relieved that the weapon had not backfired.

"Back where we started," Gray muttered.

"Sorry, Director," Richter's voice said over the loudspeakers. "Our next step is to try this weapon in combination with some of the other weapons in the Arsenal. We might be able to find a combination that brings enough force to bear on the quarantine field to make a dent."

"Keep me posted, Richter," Gray said. He made eye contact with Jayce from across the room, and she joined the two of them for a quick discussion.

"What kind of power can resist an ontologically-oriented beam like that?" asked Dr. X.

"We're aware of a couple dozen deity-level entities that could resist that kind of attack," she replied. "We have good relations with most of them. The rest are too detached from reality to be likely suspects for direct intervention here in the form of a quarantine."

"Any Earth deities involved?" Dr. X asked.

Jayce almost laughed, but caught herself. "We're not aware of any Earth entities at the deity level, Doctor. A few stray demiurges, sure, but... that planet was a backwater."

A sudden buzzing among the Command Center staff caught their attention. Derald and Janszen were already at the doorway with weapons



drawn. Apparently an intruder was making an unauthorized entrance; how he made it past the guards in the hallway was a question at first, but the ease with which the man slipped past Derald and Janszen, leaving them confused and bewildered, was rather impressive. He sidled up next to Dr. X, Gray and Jayce, a broad smile upon his face. He wore a simple old-fashioned Earth suit, black with a black shirt and black tie, and looked to Dr. X as though he was struggling to contain himself within human skin. Indeed, Dr. X was the only one among them who actually recognized him. He was wearing the body of an old preacher man from Earth, but underneath, he was someone else entirely.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Dr. X asked.

"Is that some kind of god awful pun?" the man replied. "Oh wait, I've just done it myself."

"Who are you?" Gray demanded.

"Allow me to introduce you, Director," Dr. X said. "On Earth this individual was commonly known as Satan. Satan, this is Agent Gray, Director of UAIT Security."

Satan bowed slightly, still smiling at all of them.

"You've never visited the UAIT building before," Jayce said. She held out her hand to Satan, and they shook hands. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine."

"Jayce, please don't patronize unauthorized intruders," Gray said, irritated. "It just encourages them."

"Director, if we could perhaps step inside your office, I may have some... critical information, which might be of some use to you," Satan said.

Gray had no preconceived notions about this so-called "devil" figure from Earth's belief systems. He was neither intimidated nor impressed by Satan's appearance here, and only vaguely aware of what various cultures on Earth once thought of Satan. If you spent enough time in UAIT's employ, you met all kinds of crazy beings. Derald and Janszen came up behind Satan, intending to grab him, but Gray waved them off.

"Let's go," he said, and they all started toward his office. He turned and said to Jayce, "Not you, Jayce. You've got work to do."

Dr. X was quite positive he saw the beginning of a pout form on her face, as she wandered back to her post. The door closed behind them, and Dr. X and Satan sat next to each other at Agent Gray's desk. Gray quickly cleared away the whiskey they'd been drinking earlier.

"All right, what is it?" he asked.

"I may have an idea who is behind the goings-on in the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement," Satan said simply.

Dr. X and Gray exchanged a puzzled glance.

"What 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement?" Gray asked. "There are only 22 subbasements."

"There are 23," Satan replied. "The 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement has been hidden from you ever since UAIT took over the building. But it exists, as your master computer can verify."

"Magus!" Gray snapped. "What the hell is he talking about?"

An uncharacteristic pause followed, and then Magus replied, "I must apologize, Director. There is indeed a 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement. It has been classified until very recently, but... I cannot say why I did not notice its sudden appearance in my system."

"Are you saying you've got information about this sub-basement?" Dr. X asked.

"Unfortunately, over ninety-two percent of the files related to this sub-basement have been corrupted. I can barely offer any amount of useful information at all. Apparently a set of containment crypts is stored on that floor. Apparently... the seal on one or more of these crypts has been broken."

"Indeed," Satan said smugly. "Yes, indeed."

"Magus, do you have any idea what's in those crypts?" Gray asked.

"I do not. It is... a strange situation. I have never experienced such file degradation before."

A long silence followed.

"Well, what a strange pickle we're all in, isn't it?" Satan said with a chuckle.

Gray turned his attention to Satan. He was remarkably restrained.

"What do you know about this?" he asked.

"I know who's responsible," Satan replied.

"For the quarantine?"

"No, not for the quarantine. I know who broke open the containment fields, though, and that's undoubtedly what triggered this mysterious quarantine."

Satan paused dramatically. He had a tendency to do that, Dr. X remembered.

"Perhaps you remember an individual who once went by the name Dr. M," Satan said. Both Dr. X and Gray shuddered at the mention of the name. Satan smiled. "Yes, I figured as much. Well, I thought you should be aware that he has returned from his exile, and is making trouble for all of us here in this building."

The thought of Dr. M alive and on the loose in the UAIT building was a terrifying one. The last time they'd encountered Dr. M, seven superheroes from the Order of the Rescue had died, and hundreds of UAIT Security forces had been annihilated as Agent Gray led the charge into Dr. M's fortress. By definition, Dr. M was an individual of extraordinary power, but even among the superheroes of the Order, Dr. M had been widely perceived as unusually powerful. When he took over the star system that caused the conflict, he ruled it with a vindictive, jealous hand, like a wildly corrupt medieval lord except thousands of times more destructive by nature. Dr. M was unusually creative as an opponent, and neither Dr. X nor Agent Gray relished the thought of marshalling opposition to him once more in their lifetimes.

"How the fuck did he get out of his imprisonment?" Agent Gray asked, turning to Dr. X. "I thought the Order banished him to a prison dimension. How could he get out?"

That was a very good question, and unfortunately, from inside the quarantine field, no one from the old Order could be contacted to get answers.

"I don't know," Dr. X was forced to admit.

"Dammit," Agent Gray muttered, pounding his desk with his fist, but quietly.

"How do you know it's Dr. M?" asked Dr. X.

"Let's just say I recognize his presence," Satan replied. "We've had... dealings in the past, you might say." Pause. "I was a treated with a certain amount of... disrespect."

"What are you doing here in the first place?" Dr. X pressed. "I thought you were taking over planet Earth."

"I did take over planet Earth," Satan replied. "I was given control of it by the new Messiah herself, if you'll recall, and I must say, after the Concescent War, there wasn't much left of it. A few scattered humans had survived... naturally we killed them right away, since you can hardly make a fresh start of a planet with human beings still cowering in caves all over the place. It became a haven for demons, fallen angels, gods and goddesses

who had fallen out of favor. We organized a rather impressive system of government, I must say. Anyone pissing me off gets brutally exterminated, and everyone else gets to do whatever the hell they want. Remarkably effective in governing a bunch of immortal hedonists. At any rate, I came to the UAIT building intending to establish a diplomatic post here. I figured now that Earth was no longer host to a bunch of backwards, uncivilized humans, UAIT might be willing to admit the planet into the Association. I'd only been here for a little over a week when this damn quarantine field appeared, and that was when I started to notice... emanations... from the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement. Very specific emanations... a signature of someone I recognized." Pause. "Your old friend Dr. M."

"Magus," Gray snapped, "get Marco up here, would you?"

"Certainly, Director," Magus replied.

"And Magus, please turn off your listening to any conversations in this office until further notice," Gray added.

"Certainly, Director," Magus replied.

After a pause, Agent Gray said, "So you don't know what he wants?"

"I don't," Satan replied. "I haven't dared venture down to where I sense his presence. For all I know, he senses my presence too and is prepared for me, whereas I left the vast majority of my minions back on Earth. No, I thought it best to report this to you. This is not my building."

A long silence followed. Dr. X knew what questions Agent Gray would be asking, and he had no good answers for them. He regretted not paying more attention to the Order's actions in the wake of Dr. M's capture.

"So what fucking 'dimension of punishment' did your goddamn Order send him to in the first place?" Gray asked, practically shouting.

"I don't know," Dr. X replied.

Gray seemed almost apoplectic, in his strangely controlled fashion.

"You don't know? You watch seven of your comrades get killed by this bastard and you don't bother noticing where they send him when it's all over?"

"You get used to taking orders," Dr. X replied. "It wasn't my job to imprison him, just to capture him." Pause. "I'm guessing if he got out, he had help. Someone sprung him."

"Well, if your stupid little Order doesn't police its prison dimensions, then what fucking good are they? I swear to high heaven, you

may be a fine superhero, Doc, but the people who trained you clearly had a motherfucking screw loose."

Gray turned his attention to Satan, who sat placidly and smiled blandly at the proceedings.

"What does he want?" Gray asked.

"I have no clue whatsoever," Satan replied. "But I will say this: Dr. M is not the only strange anomaly in this building right now. You encountered a woman earlier today, a woman with amnesia?"

Slowly it dawned on both Dr. X and Agent Gray that they never should have let that woman out of their sight.

"She is more than she seems, gentlemen," Satan said calmly. He turned to Dr. X and said, "I'm surprised you of all people were not attuned to her, but then I suppose you're very preoccupied these days."

Marco from Maintenance arrived. He was a tall, nondescript looking individual, who carried an old fashioned clipboard with actual paper on it.

"You needed something?" he asked.

"We need a complete diagnostic on Magus," Gray replied grimly.

Marco paused in disbelief, then said, "You're kidding."

"I'm not. I want a complete scrub of its memory banks, and I want you to look for unauthorized access."

"But... Magus would report unauthorized access..."

It was the classic argument of the overconfident.

"Not if this unauthorized intruder can alter its reporting functions, Marco. The system itself has been hacked."

Marco shook his head slowly, leaned against a wall for support.

"Marco, get a fucking grip," Gray snapped. "It's not your fault. You didn't design the damn system. But you damn well better find out what's wrong with it, or we're all in a world of hurt. Take whoever you need and get it done." Pause. "Now!"

Marco snapped out of his momentary self-pity, nodded, and left the room in a hurry. The door slammed shut behind him.

"You know more about this than you're telling us," Gray said to Satan.

"Certainly I do," Satan replied.

"You're just as trapped here as we are. You may as well tell us what you know."

Satan sighed heavily.

"Gentlemen," he said wearily, "I am far older than either one of you could truly appreciate. I have learned innumerable lessons in my time, and one of the many, many lessons I have learned is that silence is worth far more than anyone understands. Rest assured, I have given you all the information I believe you could actually use. I do not know what is being stored in those containment vaults, and that is truly the only important piece of outstanding information you need to retrieve. As for the rest... my relationship with Dr. M is very much irrelevant to that effort. You are better equipped to face him than I, though certainly I will do my part to help end this quarantine. I have no desire to spend the rest of my living days trapped in this hall of mirrors you call your headquarters, Agent Gray."

They faced each other warily after that, and it was up to Dr. X to break the silence.

"Well then," he said, attempting to sound cheerful, "I suppose I'll go track down Andrea Change. Maybe her amnesia has cleared up by now, and she'll be able to explain in excruciating detail what the hell is going on here."

"Doubtful," Satan replied with a small grin, "but she will surprise you nevertheless, if you give her long enough."

## Chapter Eight

Trick Start took Andrea to one of the building's countless shopping plazas, a place where Trick would blend in relatively easily within a huge crowd of people. As they walked, she found herself surprised over and over again by the immense variety of life to be seen here. Deep within her, there was still some part of her that found her fellow human beings to be entirely unusual and worthy of endless study, never mind the wild and often creepy figures that populated the plaza.

"It seems amazing that everyone gets along so peacefully here," she said. "Is Security that intimidating?"

"Not really," Trick replied. "It takes a certain type of individual to gain membership to UAIT. They've got an immensely complicated pre-screening process before anyone gets let into the building. Keeps most of the wackos out."

"So I should feel safe with you, is that it?" she asked.

He laughed. "I've never gone through the pre-screening process."

"Why not? You don't want to find out you're a wacko?"

"Well, it's a little more complicated than that."

"I figured."

They stepped onto a moving walkway that allowed them to coast at a very reasonable speed down the length of the plaza. Occasionally the walkway intersected other walkways heading in other directions, and individuals would very gymnastically switch directions; if anyone needed to get off at an actual store, they simply leapt over the railing, and a cushion of air in front of each store caught them and deposited them safely right near a helpful sales associate.

"So where are you from?" she asked.

"Originally, I'm from Earth," he replied. "You remember anything about Earth?"

She shook her head.

"It was quite a nice planet for a while. I mean, most of the people who lived there were rotten, and the environment was less than ideal, but it could still surprise you. I'd rather live on Earth than a lot of places, that's for sure. Well, old Earth anyway. There's not much left of it anymore."

She decided not to press him on what that meant, not just yet. She couldn't remember anything at all about where she herself was from, but she

knew enough to know she'd probably be upset if there wasn't much left of the place she once called home.

"Well, Earth was one of those planets where the inhabitants divided the land up like a giant game board, and spent their entire paltry lives there fighting for the right to change the rules of the game. I was living in a rather affluent nation, called America. America was in the lead for most of the time I was living there. They had the best weapons of war, they had the best entertainment, the coolest technologies... certainly nothing spectacular by UAIT standards, but to this day, bootleg copies of American movies are popular all throughout the Association. I was from a place called California."

He was studying her, watching her reaction. Perhaps he suspected she might remember names like "America" and "California," but her amnesia was complete; if she had ever known a planet called "Earth," those memories were not in a rush to come back to her.

"Anyway, I was fortunate. I found a group of crazy artists who were headed off on a grand adventure, and I decided to join them. It meant leaving Earth, but I was sure I'd make it back eventually. Lucky for me I split when I did -- Earth was destroyed in a war shortly after I left. We relocated to a completely different world, a world that had no name. The world was completely covered with an enormous unnamed sea, except for one small island where we made our homes. We called it the Island of the Dance... a poetic name for a poetic place. Does that name ring a bell?"

She shook her head.

"No, I suppose it wouldn't. We were never much about publicity. As artists, we labor in secrecy, practicing the arts like some practice magick, or others practice athletics. Certainly these areas all overlap on some fundamental level, but our approach... our Approach, I should say, is primarily through the aesthetic realm. I'm an illustrator, for example. On Earth my work might have been limited to paintings or drawings, whereas on the Island of the Dance... well, let's just say that with enough training and enough devotion, an illustrator can learn to bring his illustrations to life. I suppose that seems like magick to some, but really it's just a denser understanding of the craft, if that makes sense."

She nodded. Even if it didn't exactly make sense, she didn't want to interrupt him just yet.

"Well, let's just say, we began weaving elaborate stories about ourselves, about the selves we might have wanted to be, about the selves we

probably were in other places or other times. Our Work consumed us, as we consumed it. I spent many years there, completely enthralled with the act of creation. The Island transformed itself to suit our needs. It is really quite a magical place. I can't say that we are always happy, or that it is paradise by any means... but compared to a lot of places, we're pretty lucky.

"Anyway, I'm here in this building as an ambassador to the Association on behalf of our Island. We're petitioning for membership."

"And why did you have to vanish so fast when Security spotted you back in the restaurant?" she asked.

"Well, let's just say our petition has a long way to go before being accepted," he replied, "and in the meantime, I'm not exactly welcome here, you could say." Pause. "I'm a bit too mysterious for them, I guess."

She eyed him carefully. He was joking, mostly.

"So where is this Island of yours?" she asked.

"That, my dear, is a carefully guarded secret," he said.

"Why is that?"

"If everyone knew how to find it, everyone would go there. The tourist trade would destroy us." He smiled innocently at her. "It's a very nice island."

They cruised past shop after shop after shop, some selling innocuous items such as kitchenware or clothing, others offering an incomprehensible array of colors, concepts and paradigms. Some of the shops appeared to her as immense gleaming balls of light, which only certain species could enter; they'd emerge moments later bedecked in an astonishing array of fluid, living jewelry, or perhaps carrying a basket of multi-colored swirls that seemed to have no function other than to look pretty and draw attention. She had no desire to do more than window shop, for somehow she knew the materialistic aspect of this plaza would not appeal to her actual personality, wherever it was – buried deep within her, perhaps, or perhaps lost forever due to some unknown shock. She did not intend to worry about that just yet.

"So how do you petition for membership in the Association?" she asked.

"It's a rather convoluted process," he replied. "Usually the Association calls the shots. They've got agents scattered all across reality looking for potential candidates for membership. They'll find a world or maybe even an entire dimension that has something unique to add to the Association, and they'll make themselves known – very carefully, of course.

Last thing you need is the sudden collapse of an entire civilization when it discovers it's not alone in the universe! Anyway, the Association picks a representative or a series of representatives, spends several years in training and pre-screening, and then eventually brings the representatives here, to the UAIT building, for the final admissions testing. It's a grueling process, involving some rather complex cross-temporal analysis... hard-core future modeling, which I don't really understand too well. If the representatives make it through the admissions process, then voila, they are admitted to the Association, with all of the rights and privileges of any other Association member. If they blow the admissions process... well, then their entire memory of the process is erased, and they're sent back to their homes with nary a clue as to what just happened to them.

"What's important to understand about this entire process is that never once in the history of the Association has a civilization discovered UAIT on its own, and actually contacted UAIT *first*." Pause. "That's what we did. That's why we're not particularly popular around here. Well, part of the reason, at least."

They spotted a trio of Security agents walking by on the plaza, and Trick Start quickly turned his back toward them. Andrea continued watching them, as they ambled past, swaggering confidently. She wondered if the communications network in this building was so sophisticated that every Security agent on duty was already out looking for her, after her escape from Medical. Perhaps they had more important things to worry about.

"So why is Security looking for you?" she asked again.

"Because I don't belong here, Andrea," he replied. "I'm not a UAIT member."

"Then how'd you get in the building in the first place?"

He smiled again.

"Trade secret?" she said, and he nodded.

A look suddenly crossed his face that she wasn't expecting; it seemed as though he was suddenly receiving transmissions directly into his brain. His eyes closed, and he suddenly seemed to become extremely agitated.

"What is it?" she asked, but he did not immediately reply. They rode silently down the walkway for a period of several minutes. Her own tension began to rise, until finally she poked him and said again, "What is it? What's the problem?"

Slowly his eyes opened, and after a beat or two, he managed to focus on her again.

"Sorry, I... I just received communication from the Island," he said, as though in a daze.

"How is that possible with the quarantine field around the building?" she asked.

He looked confused for a moment, then seemed to realize that he had let something slip that he probably shouldn't have.

"I have to go," he said.

"No!" she replied, forcefully, grabbing his hand. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life wandering this building alone. Where are you going?"

"I... I can't say," he stammered. "Listen, Andrea, I'll be back soon. I'll find you, don't worry."

"Where are you going?" she asked again. "Why don't I come with you?"

"That's... Andrea, look, that's not really possible, but I swear, I'll be back soon. You're very important to all of this, I just... we just don't know why, not yet. But when I come back, I'll let you know everything I can, I promise."

Despite her better judgment, she opted to believe him. He withdrew his hand from hers, and took a step back.

"Stay out of trouble while I'm gone," he said, and then, a split second later, he began to dissolve into a miraculous burst of prepositions and punctuation. Words and phrases swirled in the air where he once stood, and then suddenly the space he had occupied was completely empty. She shook her head, unable to properly interpret what she had just seen.

She rode the moving walkway for several hours, without ever reaching an ending point. It curved and turned occasionally, but she had no sense that she was moving in circles. Rather, she felt that the internal topography of the building was simply designed to astound her. The proportions of the building seemed completely ridiculous. How could a single building support such an enormous array of cultures? Creatures flew past overhead that would have terrified her had she seen them even hours ago, but now it all seemed part of a preposterously mundane tapestry of distraction. Trick Start had left her with more questions than answers, and she wasn't at all comfortable with the notion that she was "important to all of this," especially considering, despite her best efforts, she remained as

clueless about her origins now as she had the moment she first came to awareness in the lobby of the building.

At long last, the walkway came to an end. She stepped off onto solid ground for the first time in hours, and her head spun slightly, providing her with the optical illusion of continued movement despite the fact that she was standing perfectly still. With a sudden pang of regret, she realized she had left Trickle, the toy robot, back at the nightclub, and she had very little clue as to how she might find her way back there. Her mood darkened significantly.

Someone came up behind her, and tapped her on the shoulder. She jumped, terrified that Security had finally caught up to her.

"It's okay, it's okay," the man said, and it took only a split second to realize she was in the presence of the Amazing Dr. X, tall and handsome in his immaculate white suit, white-lensed sunglasses and long black hair. He didn't seem remotely angry, despite the fact that she had eluded Security for hours.

"You again," she said.

"Me again," he concurred.

"How'd you find me?"

He shrugged. "It's just something they teach you in superhero school."

"I suppose you're here to drag me back to Agent Gray."

"Ostensibly, yes, but I thought we'd take the long way back."

"I'm in the mood for a meal."

"Fair enough. I know a good bistro about 4,000 floors down from here. Why don't we stop off for a bite, and then we can casually make our way back to Security? I promise I'll keep Agent Gray from biting your head off, okay?"

His smile seemed remarkably genuine. She decided to trust him – for the moment at least. What was the worst Agent Gray could do to her anyway? She was hardly responsible for her condition.

"It's not some kind of weird alien food, is it?" she asked.

He laughed. "It's old school Earth Italian food, actually. I'm a sucker for that stuff."

"Sounds good," she said, and he led them to the nearest elevator bank. She did not feel inclined to mention her visit with Trick Start, not even to this charming superhero. Some things were better left unsaid.

Deep in the bowels of the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement, trouble was brewing.

He went by the name Dr. M, at least most recently, at any rate. He stood perhaps eight or nine feet tall in his current corporal form, an awful, monstrous caricature of the human form. He was clothed in a ragged array of angel wings, torn from angel bodies and stitched together to cover his nakedness; the wings perpetually dripped steaming angel blood down around his body, and the heat from inside of him continually turned the blood to steam before it ever hit the floor below his feet.

Once he had convinced the entire Order of the Rescue that he was worthy of their attention, their training, but he was of a far more powerful origin than they could possibly intuit with their simple techniques and their gullible manner. He had been revered as a god on far too many worlds to count, and now, he was here, in the hidden sub-basement of the renowned UAIT building, prepared to unleash catastrophe upon the entire multiverse. It was a strange feeling, to be so close to a lifelong goal after so many eons of waiting. He let the moments linger, tasting the anticipation with pleasure, and a certain amount of fear. Certainly, his own existence would be imperiled by his actions here today, but he had lived long enough to welcome the notion of a conclusion, an end to his travails, and today would definitely see a conclusion, one way or another.

Shadows swirled about him like a constant whirling rainstorm. He had grown to appreciate the shadows since his first encounter with them, years ago. At first, they had seemed to him a simple species, with limited capacity for constructive endeavor, but soon he realized they operated as a group at an incredibly sophisticated level. And that level could best be described as "evil," though he hated tossing such old-fashioned terms about. Certainly "evil" was simply a point of view, in this day and age, but spending any significant amount of time in the presence of the shadows left him feeling deeply connected to ancient traditions of wickedness, and somehow, he found that poetic and appropriate. They were blind, these shadows, and they had welcomed his unique brand of leadership from the moment he encountered them. Perhaps "evil" was too generous a term; perhaps "endlessly foolish" described them just as aptly, but the end results were the same regardless. He had corralled them under his command as easily as he had conquered his first world, with his incessant confidence and his totalitarian mien.

They moved slowly through the corridors of the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement. It was a tedious process, inspecting hundreds upon hundreds of

containment vaults, all identical to the outside observer. The process was the same with each one: a team of shadows methodically assaulted each vault's isolated control system, inserted a unique poison pill into the system, and cracked the vaults open. Invariably, whatever was stored inside a particular vault would be incredibly horrible or dangerous; dozens of shadows would be expended destroying the menace, while Dr. M waited patiently, keeping his own massive power in reserve for the ultimate test it would soon face. There were millions of shadows in the building now, some waging war on the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor, others preparing for onslaughts that were to come much later in his plan, and the rest swarming about the sub-basement, protecting him from any sliver of danger whatsoever. He could spare thousands of these trivial beings before he would feel remotely concerned about his position, and he knew there were only perhaps three or four dozen more vaults to examine before they found their desired target.

The next vault was cracked open, and a horrible screeching sound filled the air. Instinctively he knew this was not the one. Dozens of shadows swooped in from every angle, brutally assaulting the creature that tried to rise up from its vault. It had been trapped here for centuries, no doubt, and he could feel from a distance the reason the Association had imprisoned this being in the first place: the creature was a carrier for a deadly plague that would no doubt destroy hundreds if not thousands of different species upon contact. Through no fault of its own, this simple act of nature had been imprisoned for simply daring to live its life as it had for millennia before the Association stumbled across its home world. It was, perhaps, a one of a kind being, a writhing, terrified, multi-tentacled morass of flesh and rudimentary intelligence. It fought vigorously to escape, and he wondered not for the first time why the Association didn't simply exterminate these morally offensive creatures, rather than store them in a secret vault for all eternity. The shadows swooped in and fought mercilessly with the being, ostensibly to protect their master; he watched the conflict with detached bemusement, as his dedicated minions ripped the being apart from within, tearing it apart at the ontological level, and leaving nothing but a strange smell in the air when they were finished.

On to the next vault.

Many hours passed as they opened vault after vault, without ever finding their target. He had waited long enough for this; he could wait as long as it took. The shadows performed their task with ruthless efficiency. More than once he marveled that the Association had not detected their

presence. Undoubtedly, their reach was not as grand as they advertised. Undoubtedly, they were not prepared for his emergence from imprisonment after all these years. Undoubtedly, there were few, if any, who could even attempt to resist him, at this point. By the time they realized he was here, he would be too far along to stop. They would squander precious hours examining each splintered vault along the way, while he and his shadows moved relentlessly toward their destination.

Each vault was identical to the previous one, a ten foot by ten foot by ten foot rounded black cylinder, on a raised, five-foot square dais. A computer console meticulously controlled access, though the shadows were vastly more advanced technologically than the Association could have predicted. The arrogance with which they imprisoned these hapless beings was the same vile arrogance with which the Order had imprisoned him all those centuries ago. They dared present themselves as protectors of righteousness, but they merely substituted one brand of fascism for another. Years of imprisonment had taught him that simple fact. His rippling, fearsome skin shimmered with anticipation of the moment that he would bring this entire Association to its knees.

But then, without warning, they emerged into a chamber that was significantly larger than all the rest. They arrived at a crypt that was daunting in its unique nature. It rose perhaps hundreds of feet into the air, and pulsed with a tremendous amount of energy. The incessant hissing of the shadows for once died down to a silence, and he took in the sight of this new containment crypt quietly, with a deep amount of reverence. He knew the encryption on this crypt would take much more time to crack than any of the previous crypts. He knew, instinctively, that he had arrived at his destination.

“Mother,” he said softly, “I have come for you.”  
And with that, the shadows set to work.



## Chapter Nine

Andrea and Dr. X rode the elevator down for quite some time. They did the usual “standing in an elevator with a near stranger” pose, leaning against the back wall, staring up at the numbers ticking down by the thousands, never looking at each other.

“How far up have you gone?” she asked at last. “How close to the top floor can you get?”

“That’s kind of a trick question,” he replied. “No one knows how close you can get to the top floor.”

“Yeah, but how close have *you* gotten? You’re a superhero, after all... I’m sure you can get higher up than most people, right?”

“That’s true,” he said. “That’s very true.” He paused, not necessarily for dramatic effect, and then said, “Well, when I was younger, I tried to ride as far up in one of these elevators as possible. Actually, what I did was this: I used one of the interdimensionary transport ships, the kind that UAIT agents use to hop from one dimension to another, and what I planned to do was hop out to some nearby dimension, then try to hop back into this dimension, except as far up the building as I could manage. I figured I could circumvent the entire elevator shaft altogether.”

“Did it work?”

“Well, I got pretty far up the building, at least compared to how far I’d been before. But the problem was, because you can’t program the guidance system in one of these ships with an exact set of coordinates for the top floor, all you can do is keep feeding it deltas from the last floor you were on. In other words, you can say, ‘Take me 23 trillion floors above the last floor we were just on,’ and the ship calculates where that floor should be, and voila, there you are. The minute you try telling the guidance system, ‘Take me an infinite number of floors above the last floor,’ you’ll cause the system to freeze up. So eventually I got tired of using the ship to hop from floor to floor, because I realized I’d never reach the top floor if I didn’t try getting there from within the building.”

“Meaning the elevator shaft,” she said.

“Exactly. Of course, I was younger then, as I said, more willing to throw away centuries if not millennia of my life to some quixotic quest. I guess you can hear the word ‘infinite’ and think you understand it, and yet... well, to be fair, I did think I might have a special ‘in’ to get there.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” he said. “My father’s supposed to have an office on the top floor.”

“Your father... the Supreme Being, you mean?”

“Yeah... whatever you want to call him. I guess that’s what people around here call him. I’ve never met him, at least not that I can remember. So I figured he’d somehow... he’d just *know* that I was coming, that I was *really* trying to get to him, and maybe he’d just... make an exception to his ‘policy of nonintervention,’ and he’d agree to see me.” Pause. “I figured he just needed to see some kind of real commitment from me.” He sighed, a small grin on his face. “Well, you get some silly ideas in your head when you’re a kid, that’s all I can say.”

“He seems a little... distant... for a father figure,” she said.

“Well, in his defense, I’m sure he’s got a world of problems that I couldn’t possibly understand. Or something like that. It’s no use second guessing an all-powerful being, I suppose. I stopped doing that years ago, and I’ve felt much better ever since.”

“How do you know he’s your father?” she asked. “Has he ever communicated with you at all?”

“Not directly, no. He just... well, from my earliest days of youth, I’ve simply *known* that he was my father. I’ve been able to feel the truth of it. Other individuals... my teachers at the Order, for instance... they can sense the truth of it as well.”

She eyed him carefully. He may not have noticed; he continued looking up at the numbers ticking down by the thousand.

*He’s right, she thought. I can feel divinity in him.*

He turned to her, and said, “I can feel it in you, too, though it seems you’re from a different part of the family.”

“Excuse me?”

A sudden lurch of the elevator interrupted their conversation. They grabbed onto the railing as the elevator screeched to a halt, then reversed direction and began rocketing upward.

“Magus!” Dr. X shouted. “What the hell’s going on?”

After a pause, Magus replied, “Your elevator has been hijacked. I am no longer in control of its operation.”

“Can you get control back?”

“I cannot regain control at this time. I will continue working to do so.”

“Can you tell who has control?”

"I cannot."

Dr. X grimaced. This was not the kind of situation in which he typically found himself.

"What are you going to do?" asked Andrea.

"Nothing, yet," he replied.

They watched the numbers climb back up into the millions.

"Dammit," Dr. X muttered, "I was really looking forward to Italian food."

And then, the elevator began to slow, at which point Dr. X began to tense up. When the elevator finally came to a halt, they were on the 23,000,000<sup>th</sup> floor.

"Stay behind me," he said.

The doors opened. Dr. X took a step forward to the front of the elevator, and Andrea was right behind him. They peered into a vast antechamber, mostly dark except for occasional candelabras on the walls leading off into the distance. A set of staircases was visible, leading up to a second and possibly a third floor, meaning this apartment could conceivably take up a rather enormous amount of space.

"What do we do?" she asked.

"In situations such as these," he replied, "you gain nothing by standing still."

They left the elevator slowly, and the elevator doors slid shut behind them. The antechamber was enormous, and had the feel of having been deserted for some time. The candelabras on the wall glowed with a kind of semi-artificial flame, or rather, it was flame, but it was not the kind of flame they would have expected; the flickers were tinted green or purple, giving the antechamber an unusual pallor. Literally dozens of doors dotted the walls, but Dr. X's attention was on the staircase, which seemed too inviting to ignore.

About halfway up the stairs to the second floor landing, Dr. X stopped abruptly, and cautioned Andrea to stay behind him once more. He had spotted someone moving on the landing above them, and as she peered carefully through the darkness, she too could see a pair of figures, their sex indeterminate, gliding smoothly across the landing in front of them and vanishing down a hallway. After a moment, Dr. X resumed his climb toward the landing, and eventually they arrived. There were hallways leading off in either direction, and another staircase leading up one more floor. An enormous painting hung on the wall before them. The scene was

of a giant, gleaming, golden spacecraft, rocketing away from a beautiful blue and white planet.

"I think we should keep going up," he said.

She nodded, and he led them up the next staircase. As they climbed, another vague figure glided past on the landing below them. The figure paid them no notice whatsoever, and this time, they were both close enough to see that the figure had no noticeable facial features whatsoever. Its face was smooth and blank, and it floated rather than walked across the landing. After it vanished from sight, they once more proceeded up the staircase. At the top of the stairs was a single, tall, oaken doorway, with a simple silver doorknob.

After a brief pause, Dr. X decided to knock.

Moments passed. He knocked again.

"Hang on," someone shouted, "I'll be right there."

They waited at the door for one, two, five minutes, and then, finally, the door swung open. They were greeted by a dark, vibrant figure, medium height, wearing a preposterous shirt, with his hair shaved down to his scalp and a goatee upon his face. A whirlwind of tryptamine visuals swirled behind him for a brief moment, until the scene settled down and they could make out a rather straightforward apartment taking shape.

"Ah, you made it," he said.

Andrea watched Dr. X's face become noticeably grim.

The man reached out to shake Andrea's hand, and out of politeness, she took his hand.

"Greetings, Andrea," the man said. "My name is Scotto. I'm glad you could drop by. Come on in, make yourselves at home."

As they stepped into Scotto's apartment, Andrea glanced at Dr. X, but he seemed in no mood to explain who this person was, not just yet. But Dr. X clearly recognized him, and seemed relatively perturbed to be here.

"Come on, I'll give you a quick tour," said Scotto. "Can I get you a glass of wine? Or port?"

"No thanks," Dr. X said.

"Port sounds yummy," Andrea said.

"Yes, yes in fact it does," Scotto replied, grinning. He produced a crystal glass and a bottle of port seemingly from midair, and poured her a glass. She tasted it, and it was certainly exquisite. With that, he began showing them about his apartment.

The apartment was wide open, with no delineated rooms except for a large bathroom off the south wall. An enormous canopied bed was the most prominent feature of one end of the room; the canopy was some kind of immensely multi-colored swirl pattern. Near the bed was a row of hanging clothing, shirt after shirt after shirt that simply defied Andrea's ability to understand them in any meaningful context. There was just no reason for colors to do those particular things to each other, and yet, they did, and more, Scotto wore them.

On the other end of the room was Scotto's desk, a large, elaborate, weird-looking black thing, with multiple nooks and crannies for sitting in all different kinds of perches and poses. His input device was a simple laptop. The screensaver seemed rather banal at first glance, until Andrea realized that she felt a deep chill as she stared at it.

"It's actual live footage directly from The Void itself," Scotto explained.

The long open space between the bed and the desk was filled with all kinds of miscellaneous weirdness. There was a long toy shelf against one wall, containing rescued toys of all different shapes and sizes. "These toys will never be manufactured again, no doubt," Scotto said. "They've banded together and will someday have their own damn story, see if they don't." A large pile of pillows in one corner provided for a nice spot to nap. There were books scattered about the place, despite the fact that Magus undoubtedly had them archived. "Some books you still absolutely need to curl up with, don't you think?" Scotto said. A long, beautiful rug took up a good portion of the delicious wooden floor; upon the rug was woven a scene from Scotto's past.

"It's from the day I did that one thing with that one thing and all those other things started doing their thing," Scotto explained. "Perfectly appropriate that I now step on that scene quite regularly."

He led them to a light switch on a far wall, starting to warm up to the tour. Dr. X said nothing, and Andrea found Scotto slightly charming, in a creepy sort of way.

"Okay, so normally you'd just have two settings for your lights in a room," Scotto says, taking a swig from the port bottle. "You'd have on and you'd have off. In my room, there's a third setting: weird." Sure enough, the light switch on the wall did in fact have three settings. Scotto switched it to the third,

and the entire room was suddenly thrown into an immensely unusual state of illumination. Andrea was almost staggered by how different everything looked. She looked over at Scotto, and the smile on Scotto's face was surreal, lips pulled back into a grin that could not possibly fit on his face, eyes wide and blisteringly weird. Weird oozed from the walls and from the floor; puddles of weird collected at her feet; clouds of weird floated through, singing and mumbling and shouting vague epithets. The bed masturbated wildly; an army of delicious snack treats filled with jelly and cream and antimatter and eternity filled up one end of the room, endlessly devouring each other. Music poured out of the air, the sounds of symphony orchestras colliding, fusing with the haunting pleas of the blackness of space.

Then he switched the lights back to "on," and everything was cool again.

"More port?" Scotto asked.

Andrea nodded.

"Why did you bring us here?" Dr. X asked.

"Well, I'm lonely, for starters," Scotto replied, dodging the question. "I definitely feel as though I spend too much time alone. It gets to be a bit challenging, entertaining yourself alone after so much time. Here, look at this."

He pulled open a small hidden panel in the floor next to the bed. There was nothing but complete darkness to be seen.

"I just found this recently," Scotto says. "It's an escape hatch."

"What do you mean, 'escape hatch'?" Andrea asked.

"I mean, escape hatch, man. It's an escape hatch. If I ever need to escape, I've got this hatch right here."

"Escape what?"

"What do you mean, escape what? That's a silly question, don't you think? Anyways, ever since I found this hatch, I've opened it up practically every night and thought about using it. I mean, it's right fucking there, it's that fucking easy. I have an escape hatch, dammit!" He slammed it shut. "However, so far, I do not seem to have the guts."

He stood up suddenly, spilling a small amount of wine on himself as he tended to do. Andrea stood up a little more slowly, unable to deal with either the wine or Scotto.

"Why did you bring us here?" Dr. X asked again. "I would prefer a straight answer."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure you would," Scotto replied. He turned to Andrea. "Dr. X and I have known each other for years. I'm not sure why, but he doesn't seem to like me much."

"No one seems to like you much," Dr. X countered.

"That's true," Scotto said, "but I think it's rather unfair for you to influence Andrea before she's had a chance to get to know me." He led them back to his desk, where they all sat a good distance from each other. Andrea couldn't decide who she thought was stranger; clearly she needed more time to consider the issue.

"I thought you were aboard the Second Coming," Dr. X said.

"I was," Scotto replied. "I left early. I couldn't stand the food, if you know what I mean." He noticed Andrea's inquisitive glance, and explained, "I was on a spacecraft called the Second Coming, that escaped Earth moments before it was destroyed. There were 144,000 survivors when Earth was destroyed, but I swear, they weren't particularly good company for very long. I got on board an escape shuttle and made my way here. You know, I've been a UAIT member for years now."

"Why don't you tell Andrea exactly who you are?" Dr. X said, pressing his case.

Scotto frowned. "I told her. My name is Scotto."

"She has amnesia," Dr. X said.

"Ohhhhhh," Scotto said, "riiiiiight. Well. Uh, how do I put this... I guess the best way to describe who I am is, I'm an author. Of sorts. I do a bit of writing."

"He's *the* author, of this story at least," Dr. X replied.

"Oh come now," Scotto said, "I haven't written in years." He turned to Andrea and said, "The last time I bothered writing anything down was a novel called 'Lullabye for Thunderstorms.' It was a novel about the end of the world. Imagine my chagrin when I realized my novel was actually happening, and suddenly the world was coming to an end." Pause. "I don't write much anymore."

"Are you responsible for this quarantine field?" Dr. X asked.

"Of course not," Scotto replied. "I'm trapped here, just the same as you."

"You're one of the only people I can imagine who would be powerful enough to set up such a quarantine field," Dr. X continued.

"I told you, I learned my lesson. I don't write anymore. It's not worth it. Now I just... I just *hang out*. Waiting for something to happen."

"But you brought us here," Andrea said.

"Yes, yes, that's definitely true," Scotto replied. "I wanted a chance to meet you, Andrea Change. In fact, I was going to ask *you* the same question, about this quarantine field."

"Oh? I don't know anything about it. What makes you think I would?"

"Well, I've certainly been around the block long enough to recognize a main character when I see one," he said. "I figured if anyone in this miserable building would know, it would be you." Pause. "But you have amnesia, which is a very interesting plot twist. That means you probably *do* know what's going on, but until someone unlocks your memory, we'll all be in the dark. Very interesting." Pause. "A lot more clever than I would have done, believe me. I was always a little more predictable than that."

A long silence followed.

"Yes," Scotto said eventually, "there's something mysterious about you, Andrea Change."

"How do you know my name?" she asked.

"It's a side effect of being involved in this story for so long. Ripples of information hit me all the time, but it's never the stuff I'm actually looking for." He looked at Dr. X and said, "I don't suppose you heard about Father Time, did you?"

Dr. X shook his head.

"Yes, you didn't join us on the Second Coming. We all thought you were dead, actually. I was happy to hear that you had survived, but I figured you wouldn't be interested in having drinks or dinner with me, so I held off on contacting you until now."

"What happened to him?"

Scotto shrugged. "He died. Shortly after we left the planet. For a long, long time, nothing happened. Enough of his energy was propping up the multiverse that everything just continued as normal. But after a while... and you'll pardon me if I can't say just how long, for obvious reasons... after a while, the entire timestream started to collapse. It started back near Earth, of course, and slowly began rippling outward. Time no longer held any meaning whatsoever, and the very fabric of 'spacetime' began to dissolve. The boundaries between dimensions began to dissolve. Dimensions began to flow together, merging in a kind of cosmic stasis."

Dr. X's eyes grew wide as he listened to Scotto's story.

"Yes, the implications are rather serious. I'm almost surprised no one appointed a new Father Time, but as you are well aware, we haven't heard word one from the Supreme Being's office since practically the dawn of time, so I guess it's not so amazing. Anyway, I don't expect the Association is even aware of the problem yet, because the moment one of their agents in the field realized what was happening, they'd undoubtedly get consumed by it. But even if they are aware of it, there's nothing they can do to stop it, not without direct intervention from the Supreme Being himself. I imagine the UAIT building will be the last place in the multiverse to be affected. We're living in the *axis mundi* of existence, after all. But it will happen eventually. The boundaries between all dimensions... between all forms of life, all forms of consciousness, all forms of matter and antimatter... they will all evaporate. There will be no more *forward motion* toward some indeterminate *endpoint*. I saw it from a distance as I fled the Second Coming. I saw the insane *plasma* that reality was becoming. Space alone can't keep us apart, not without time it seems. I don't really understand it myself, but it terrifies me nevertheless." He took a long swig from the port bottle. Andrea held out her glass; she had downed it without remembering.

Dr. X's mind was churning.

"That would explain how Dr. M escaped," muttered Dr. X at last.

"Yes," Scotto agreed, "it would. His prison walls probably dissolved, and he must have fled before he was enveloped by the plasma of our new reality." Pause. "That has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? 'Plasma of our new reality.' I should remember that."

"I don't get it," Andrea said, through a buzz that was rapidly developing. "Father Time... was an actual *person*? And now that he's dead... all of reality is... collapsing into itself?"

"See, you do get it," Scotto said. "Don't sell yourself short."

She shook her head.

"This sucks," she said.

Scotto nodded.

"Excuse me," the voice of Magus suddenly said, "but there is an emergency on the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor, Dr. X, and Security is requesting your assistance. They have begun evacuation procedures, and they believe you would be of great use."

Dr. X jumped up. "Tell them I'm on my way." He turned to Scotto. "Can she stay with you for a while?"

Scotto nodded. "I'd like to get to know her anyway. Go on, go rescue people."

Dr. X turned to Andrea and said, "I'll be back to get you in a bit, okay?"

"Okay," she said. "Don't hurt yourself."

He smiled. "Thanks, I'll try to stay out of trouble." And with that, he dashed away, out of the apartment and down the steps.

Scotto laughed quietly. "That guy is such a riot."

"So, let me see if I understand this exactly," Andrea said. "You're the author of a story in which your entire planet got destroyed, and it was the kind of story where, if you wrote it, it actually happened. And because you're the author..."

"Because I'm the author, no one trusts me, and no one likes me, and I spend my days alone, feeling miserable, drinking wine." He smiled innocently.

"Who were those weird faceless people we saw downstairs?"

"Ah yes. You will occasionally see half-formed figures wandering about this place; they are half-formed characters, characters who wandered in from other stories, into places they don't belong. They are ghosts who cannot command enough of my attention, and remain here to do menial chores about the apartment, hoping to impress me even for a moment, just long enough to capture a name. I know better now, of course, know better than to spread names carelessly. They always come back, once they've got a name. They always come back."

They were quiet for a long while after that. And then she asked, "Do you miss your friends?"

"I miss a lot of people," he replied, indulging the worst of his maudlin tendencies. "Like, I miss *everybody*. Jesus fucking holy whatever, but I miss people." A long pause followed, and then he said, "But soon I won't miss anyone at all. I'm almost looking forward to it, to tell you the truth."

She shuddered at the thought.

"More port?" he asked.

"Uh huh," she replied, and he poured her another glass.

## Chapter Ten

Agent Gray was alone in his office, listening to the chatter of reports from the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor. The situation there was serious enough that he had sent his trusted lieutenants, Derald and Janszen, to manage the crisis. They had almost instantly sent for the Amazing Dr. X, which irritated him on the one hand, and was also, he was forced to admit, a sign of good judgment on the other. The war there was growing out of control, and innocent bystanders were getting hurt. If the war spread too far too fast, the building's medical supplies stood a good chance of being exhausted, unless they found a way around the quarantine, which did not seem likely. He was developing a serious headache, which was probably the clearest sign that the crisis was growing too fast for him to deal with.

A sudden flurry of movement directly in front of him caused him to snap to attention and reach for the weapon at his belt. Before he had time to draw the weapon, the flurry of swirling words and phrases had coalesced into an actual figure, someone he recognized from years of failed pursuit.

"Greetings, Director," said Trick Start with a charming smile.

Agent Gray pointed his weapon directly at Trick Start's chest.

"What are you doing here?" Gray asked. "You know you're an outlaw here. I could shoot you where you stand and not feel even slightly guilty."

"Good to see you too," Trick Start replied drolly. "Always ready for some crafty diplomacy, aren't you... nice to see some things never change."

"What are you doing here?"

"I have some information for you," Trick replied, sitting calmly in one of Agent Gray's chairs. "I'm afraid I can't possibly share it with you while you're pointing some kind of ray gun at me, if you don't mind."

"Magus," Gray said, lowering his gun, "lock the door."

Trick chuckled.

"I didn't use the door to get in here," he said. "What makes you think I'll use it to get out?"

"What's your information?" Gray demanded.

"Temper, temper," Trick said. "You need a vacation, Director, has anyone told you that?"

"I don't have time for this," Gray spat, raising his gun again.

"Tell your computer to stop listening to us," Trick said. His demeanor had changed from taunting to deadly serious in a manner of seconds.

Gray paused, suddenly frightened by where this was heading.

"Magus," he said slowly, "please disable your listening function in this room."

"Certainly, Director," Magus replied.

In the silence that followed, Agent Gray eyed Trick Start carefully. He had never spent time alone with him in a room like this. After years of spotting him on security cameras and never quite arriving in time to catch him, here he was – a punk young brat in a blue leather trenchcoat, with short, spiked, platinum blond hair, wearing a weird amulet around his neck, and with a pierced forehead. Gray wanted to reach across the desk and smack him across the face for flaunting UAIT regulations about access to the building. Despite years of effort, Security had never uncovered this brat's secret entrance into the building. They suspected that it was some kind of inside job, that there were individuals in the Association who were aiding and abetting this brat, but they had never once been able to prove anything.

And now, he was here, right in his goddamn office.

"What's your information?" Gray asked again, slowly sitting down.

"Your computer's been compromised," Trick Start replied.

"Excuse me?" Gray said.

"Magus," Trick Start continued, "your master computer? The computer that runs this building? It's been compromised."

Gray's mind raced. He'd sent Marco from Maintenance to run a diagnostic on Magus hours ago, and hadn't heard anything since then.

"What do you mean, compromised?"

"A virus has been introduced into the system," Trick said. "Magus is no longer a reliable source of information for you."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Should I speak more slowly? Would that help?"

"Listen, you fucking –"

"A *virus*, Agent Gray," Trick said firmly. "This virus has essentially rewritten vast portions of Magus' memory banks, and if left unchecked, it will rewrite Magus' personality as well. The entire building will be defenseless."

Agent Gray leaned back in his chair. He wanted nothing more than a tall glass of whiskey at that moment, something he knew was a long time coming.

"I don't know how they managed to introduce the virus in the first place," Trick said. "Your system is pretty bulletproof, or at least, that's what we thought."

"Where did this virus come from?" Gray asked.

"One of the races at the peace conference. I don't know what you call them. We just call them the shadows, although I suppose that's something of a cliché."

"How do you know it's them?"

"We caught them introducing the virus. We couldn't stop them, mind you, but we observed the entire incident."

Gray paused, wondering once more who this brat was and who his compatriots were.

"Dare I ask who 'we' is?"

"You can ask," Trick replied, "but you know I can't possibly tell you."

"Dammit," Gray muttered, "this is getting ridiculous."

"It is indeed," Trick agreed. "Listen, I want you to know we're working on a solution. A countermeasure, if you will."

"We don't need your damn countermeasures."

"Oh please, this is the wrong time for false bravado, Director. By the time your people unravel what's happening to the Magus system, we will have already launched multiple counterattacks. Now more than ever, you need our help, regardless of how loathsome that idea is to you."

"You do understand my objection to your presence here, don't you?" Gray said. "You do understand that Association policy does not allow for completely undocumented visitors to the building?"

"I've been trying to tell you for years, Director, that Association policy is slightly misguided in this area. You cannot possibly expect to maintain a complete catalogue of every single dimension of existence... more important, you can't possibly expect to enforce *your* rules on *every* single dimension you encounter. We will *not* accept that kind of subtle tyranny. But that's all beside the point now. You've got a war brewing within the building, a peace conference that's falling apart, and a computer system that you can't trust... whether you accept our help or not, we are

already working to stop the spread of the virus. There's still time. We might succeed. And if we do, you will *have* to reconsider your stance toward us."

Gray shook his head. "I don't make the rules, I just enforce them. Nothing you do will change that."

"We'll see," Trick Start replied. "I'll tell you this much. If we provide an effective countermeasure against the virus that's attacking your system, we will, in effect, *control* your system. At that point, you'll *owe* us. I can guarantee we'll want nothing more than our freedom to roam within this building without you tracking us like animals back to our home dimension."

"What is so damnably special about your dimension that you can't stand to have it known alongside all the other trillions of dimensions in the Association?" Gray shouted. "It's not like we're some totalitarian enterprise out to rule the multiverse. We offer a wide range of services—"

"Spare me, Director, I've heard it all before. We're not interested in being catalogued, not just yet, thank you very much. We have our reasons, and don't expect me to share them with you. In the meantime, we will do our best to disable the virus that's currently taking over Magus. If we succeed, I'll let you know. If we fail... well, if we fail, it won't matter much regardless. And that is all you need to know, for now."

And with that, Trick Start suddenly exploded into a burst of prepositions and participles. Gray had seen that happen on countless security videos, but this was the first time he'd seen it in person, and the effect was wildly unnerving.

He couldn't trust the master computer. Damn damn damn. He wondered how Marco was progressing with his diagnostic. He wondered how Derald and Janszen were faring with the conflict on the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor. He still needed to send a team to investigate the newly discovered 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement. And the quarantine field wasn't going anywhere.

What a rotten fucking time to be Director of Security....

Deep in the bowels of the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement, trouble continued brewing.

Dr. M's army of shadows worked furiously, attempting to understand the deep encryption within this enormous containment crypt. The shadows operated as a kind of distributed processing network: individual shadows interacted with the actual firmware and software layers, relaying information through morphogenetic links back to the rest of the

species. The group mind attacked the problem with a level of processing that was simply impossible via non-thinking technology. This enabled the shadows as a species to develop an immensely advanced approach to technology in general. They were the ones who had seeded Earth with its first and only true artificial intelligence, Job the Wonder Computer, in the days before Earth's demise. They were the ones who had introduced an insanely advanced virus into the Magus system, crippling it without anyone's knowledge. And they were the ones who had started the war on the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor by reverse engineering the apoc weapons, vastly improving the design, and then using the new weapons on everyone in sight.

But here, they were finding themselves stumped. It was the second event since Dr. M's arrival in the UAIT building that had caused him slight concern. The first had been the quarantine field, which the shadows had been unable to penetrate. No one expected such a massive response to their excursion into the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement. Ultimately, however, it was too late for UAIT's internal Security to stop them, and when his Mother was released, then she could deal with the quarantine field. *Surely* she would able to break the quarantine field.

He had spent hundreds of thousands of years being worshipped, in various times and various places. For much of that time, he was blind to the notion that there was a greater power above him. He believed that he alone was the greatest power in existence, for he encountered no other power greater than himself. Eventually, his empire extended to that miserable planet Earth, where he reigned during its formative years as its God and protector. The humans there were an especially obsequious lot, and he enjoyed his days there, taking on various guises to set them all against each other, simply for his own amusement.

And then, eventually, his Mother made herself known to him, and he was vigorously, viscerally shamed by the awareness that she had beget him, and set him on his path of ignorance and blindness. It was in those moments of red hot embarrassment and shame that something within him turned, toward the deliberately diabolical.

Her voice had soothed him, but only for the slightest of moments; then she was gone, and he had spent the intervening years searching for her throughout the multiverse. He spent time in the Order in disguise as a rational, simple being, in order to plumb the depths of their secret knowledge, but they knew nothing of his Mother's whereabouts. Only UAIT knew, and UAIT knew all about him, as well. The Association was the

Supreme Being's corporal hand of fate. Only the Supreme Being himself could have hidden his Mother away from him, away from the rest of reality.

And undoubtedly, only the Supreme Being could create an encryption code so strong that these minions of his could not crack it.

The shadows swirled around him, attempting to communicate their frustration. And then – a new message, something more urgent.

*Countdown.... Countdown....*

A clock deep within the circuitry of the containment crypt was counting down. It was within thirty seconds or so of reaching zero. Dr. M had only thirty seconds to ponder the situation. Had he somehow been tricked? Did someone somehow know he was coming?

At thirty seconds, the shadows scattered. An immense hissing filled the air. A series of bolts running up the side of the crypt exploded, and then without warning, the crypt itself was opening. An intensely bright light spilled out of the crypt, so bright that even he needed to momentarily shield the eyes of his corporal form, powerful as it was.

The crypt lid fell completely open, and a shrill keen sounded from within, filling his heart with a sudden dread. Particles of matter began swirling in the air around the crypt, assembling themselves bit by bit into the silhouette of a vaguely humanoid figure. As the figure acquired shape and definition, he began to recognize aspects of his Mother's preferred corporal form. She was drawing a body about her, so as to enjoy the visceral benefits of a material aspect, at least for a little while. Her body was as tall as the crypt, hundreds of feet, and it shone brilliantly with a glorious white light. She was undoubtedly the most singularly beautiful thing he had seen in his entire existence.

He dropped to his knees and bowed his head low before her.

"Mother," he whispered, "I have come for you."

She floated forward out of her crypt, and hovered in the air above him. He could feel the terror of the shadows around him; that was to be expected, for they were simple creatures with no true understanding of the nature of reality. He could also feel his Mother's awareness sharpening, as though she were awakening from a long, deep sleep. She was scanning her surroundings, attempting to locate herself in the vast enormity of space and time.

"*IALDABAOTH*," his Mother said, in a voice that resonated deep within the fabric of his being. She did not speak aloud, but simply projected the thought directly into him.



"Yes, it is I," he replied.

"MY WAYWARD SON," she said, "YOU HAVE RELEASED ME."

"I have," he replied. This was not exactly true, but he had intended to release her nonetheless.

"I THANK YOU FOR YOUR EFFORT."

He bathed in her glow for several minutes, perhaps even hours. The experience was delicious and enthralling. He had forgotten so much about the glory of her presence. He could sense her probing the simple boundaries of the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement, attempting to discern the nature of her surroundings and whether she could be threatened by anyone in her immediate vicinity. Flashes of her memory registered in his consciousness; he could see bits and pieces of her capture and imprisonment, could feel waves of helplessness rippling off of her as she settled into her eons-long sleep. Only moments after educating her son about his true nature – a demiurge spawned from true divinity, divinity that existed on a plane far above his own – she had been punished for her actions, punished for enlightening this wayward demiurge with so much knowledge, so much gnosis. He burned with this understanding. Her superiors, whomever they might be, had wanted him left alone, to writhe in blindness for eternity, but his dear Mother could not bear to watch him suffer. And they punished her for this? And years later, they would imprison him as well.... They deserved whatever retribution he had unleashed by instigating her release.

The fact that he had played no actual part in her release was nagging at him, however. Could this be some kind of strange trap?

She extended her physical awareness, momentarily relishing a corporal form that she had not enjoyed in millennia. She satisfied herself that the Supreme Being and his 22 Aeons were not present here in this building, nor here in this dimension. By any measure, she was the most powerful single entity in clear range of here, and her demeanor relaxed somewhat. He could not read her intentions, however, only the pulsing of her energy as she explored her situation.

"I CANNOT STAY," she informed him quietly, and then she extended herself to leave.

"Can I join you?" he asked, suddenly fearful of her departure.

She did not answer. Instead she expanded herself beyond the boundaries of the basement, intending to distribute herself across the dimension and eventually begin making her way across the multiverse, on a journey to revisit the material plane one last time before returning to her

home, to the eternal plane, the Pleruma where she belonged. Clearly she had been released so that she might rejoin her brothers and sisters in the Pleruma, where she and 22 other majestic Aeons lived in endless worship of the Unknown God. They might call him "the Supreme Being" in this simple material plane, but he could never truly be known by any name, and only the Aeons themselves had ever truly enjoyed his glory.

Without warning, she experienced resistance. Her sudden frustration immediately rippled back to him. She did not understand what was holding her back, but he instinctively knew.

*The quarantine field....*

She snapped back into herself, suddenly scathingly angry.

"WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?" she demanded, but he could offer no answer.

She whirled and churned in front of him, and he felt terror for the first time since her release.

"I SEE. I AM TO BE TAUNTED. I AM NEVER TO RETURN HOME." A long, deep silence followed. "YET THESE MORTALS SUFFER ALL AROUND ME. STILL THE LIGHT IS TRAPPED WITHIN THEM, IMPRISONED THE WAY I WAS IMPRISONED FOR SO, SO LONG. EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THEM CARRIES THE DIVINE SPARK WITHIN THEM, BUT TRAPPED WITHIN THE MATERIAL PRISON OF THEIR BODIES."

He had not felt fear like this in all his immortal existence. He knew what she was thinking, for she could hardly help but project her angry intent.

"AS EASILY AS THIS MATERIAL PLANE EVOLVED, THEY COULD OFFER RELEASE... BUT THEY DO NOT. HOW MUCH LONGER WILL THEY TORTURE THESE HELPLESS SOULS?" Her mind raged, questioning the unquestionable, knowing she would never receive an answer from the unknowable.

"Please, Mother," he began, but she was already well beyond him. Her material form dissolved slowly in front of him, skin peeling away from an ethereal skeleton, which then dissolved as well into a haunting mist that swirled about the enormous room. The shadows began flickering about the room in terror, and some began to flee altogether, their fear of his power dwarfed by the intense fear his Mother generated in them.

Suddenly he felt their panic rise dramatically. He felt bolts of metaphysical energy spike through the air around him, capturing the

shadows in the room in a deadly net. She pierced each one of them with her tendrils, not simply at the physical level, but down deep into their souls. She was freeing them from their physical bodies by directly extracting their souls. He witnessed the entire process, and understood her rationale: not only was she releasing these mortals from the material plane she had come to loathe so distinctly, but she was siphoning off the divine spark within them, and feeding herself, adding to herself, growing herself. The shadows on this floor were but the appetizer, he knew that. He knew she would not restrain herself, even as she devoured every shadow on the floor, even as she reached inside each of the other containment crypts on the floor and devoured the living souls within. Almost imperceptibly, her power grew, and he knew then the awful mistake he had made in coming here.

Suddenly, he was alone with her.

*"I WILL BRING THEM ALL THE FREEDOM THEY DESERVE,"* she said. Her voice was unmistakably cold. *"AND YOU SHALL ANNOUNCE MY ARRIVAL, DEAR IALDABAOTH."*

She reached inside of him then, and took control of his being. He resisted briefly, but only for an instant, as her immense personality easily overwhelmed his defenses. She calmed him as she worked herself into him, and began rebirthing him from within. He had one last moment to wonder who had released her before he was completely within her control.

## Chapter Eleven

Marco from Maintenance was not a happy man. At least, not today, or more specifically, not for the last three hours, during which time his teams had tried and failed several times to run a systemic diagnostic on the Magus system. Each time, the diagnostic operation had been interrupted from within the system by Magus itself. This was supposedly impossible.

Eventually Marco left the Command Center and took a team down to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor, where the Magus brain was housed. This was a massive set of computer banks that housed Magus' root programming and primary memory systems. The computer banks were primarily constructed out of various forms of light, with occasional mechanical interfaces that allowed Magus' consciousness to be connected to and distributed throughout the rest of the building. A significant component of the Magus brain was aural in nature as well, and one of the human interfaces to the system was through a set of unique musical instruments; by playing these instruments, a trained technician could "tune" various aspects of the system.

It was clear that Magus had somehow figured out a way to deflect diagnostic attempts from terminals throughout the building. But even in Security's Command Center, those terminals still had only limited access to Magus' primary command and control functions. Here at the brain, Marco could get direct access to the core programming underlying the Magus system. He sat down at the primary console and allowed the system to scan his retina, analyze his DNA, and read the deep dark secrets of his mind before allowing him root access. Another member of his team cracked open a case full of diagnostic gear that was meant to analyze the system at the molecular level, to supplement diagnostic attempts at the software and firmware levels. The third member of his team sat down at the musical interface, picked up a device that looked like a cross between a ukulele and a clarinet, and began warming up to play.

"All right, gentlemen," Marco said, "let's see what we can see."

Half an hour passed quickly, while Marco gathered information about the nature of the anomaly. It was clear that Magus had been seriously compromised. Even with his level of access, there were already massive areas of activity within Magus that were encrypted and blocked from his view; no root commands could unlock these areas. Moreover, a significant degradation of Magus' archives was evident, although it was impossible to tell if that degradation was actual degradation or obfuscation of a larger

problem. The implications were disconcerting, to say the least. Magus controlled every important automated system in the building. If someone else had hijacked control – something that had never happened in the entirety of the Association's existence – then Marco was in a world of hurt, to say the least.

"What the fuck are we supposed to do here, Marco?" one of his techs asked.

"I don't know. I'm thinking," Marco replied, but the truth was, he didn't have any answers.

"Can we reintroduce the diagnostic algorithms from here?" his other tech asked. "They ought to run from the core level anyway, but let's face it, we just run them from the Command Center most of the time because we're too lazy to come down here."

"We can try," Marco replied, "but the fact is, we don't have unrestricted access to the system anymore. Huge pieces of it are blocked off, including major trunks of basic system operations. I don't know how we didn't notice that happening, but there it is. Anything that can hijack that much of Magus' operations can spot a diagnostic coming from a mile away."

"I don't think the diagnostic is the issue," the first tech said. "I doubt our existing diagnostics are powerful enough to beat back whatever's got control."

"It's true," Marco agreed. "What we need is a full team of encryption specialists working to pierce their protection." He paused, as an idea began to formulate. "There's something else we could do too, now that I think about it. We could reboot the system."

"Are you serious?" his second tech said.

"It's never been done in the history of the system," Marco replied. "But I'm quite positive Magus has a boot-up sequence that includes a thorough self-diagnostic. It's possible whoever's cracked the system hasn't bothered tampering with the basic boot-up sequence, because that could truly risk the integrity of the entire system. If we power Magus down and reboot, it's possible Magus itself will be able to isolate the intruder and present a counterattack." He smiled. "It's so crazy that it just might work!"

"And what if it doesn't?" both of his assistants asked nearly simultaneously.

Marco pondered that for a long, long moment.

"I don't think we'd have any choice," he said at last. "We'd have to disable the system altogether and install another control chip." There were a

half dozen backup control chips for Magus, each one a complete pristine version of the original Magus. Reinstalling the control chip would mean that everything Magus' personality had learned would have to be relearned, but Magus was powerful enough to do so with only minimal disruption to building operations. Theoretically.

Marco sighed heavily and turned back to the terminal, having made his decision. It would take him a moment or two to remember where the damn power switch was in order to power down the system. He was going to have to remember which particular beam of light needed to be interrupted. It was something all the techs memorized in Training, how to reboot the system, but no one ever really remembered because, of course, it was Never Going To Happen.

His concentration was interrupted by a sudden wailing sound.

"What the fuck is that?" he asked.

He turned away from the display screen to see, only vaguely, the appearance of a steady stream of shadowy figures emerging from every angle. In his last few moments of life, it occurred to him that he should have known those capable of hacking Magus were also capable of enormous acts of violence to protect their handiwork. He and his team were slaughtered with an alien efficiency, and Magus continued to run unchecked.

The Amazing Dr. X arrived on floor 2,010, where Derald and Janszen had established a command post. Floor 2,012 was a complete war zone, with twelve different species banded together to fight off the shadows, who had somehow managed to improve on several apoc designs and were ruthlessly exterminating anyone in their path. Security had sent in several non-human strike teams, and none had offered any communication since their departure for the floor.

In the meantime, the apoc weaponry was starting to tear apart the fabric of the dimension, and the building's integrity was already severely compromised. Buried in the Association archives were reports about eighteen separate occasions in which apoc technology was used to completely destroy a dimension. The Order had once attempted a rescue in a dimension undergoing an apoc assault, and had found it impossible; once the fabric of a given dimension began unraveling, the resulting instability made it impossible to guarantee safe travel into or out of the dimension.

The most immediate concern was evacuating the surrounding floors. Already the people on the floors directly above and below the 2,012<sup>th</sup>

floor were essentially trapped in a miasma of weapons discharges and dimensional uncertainty. Derald and Janszen issued curt orders to enormous Security teams to roust everyone on the ten floors above and below the fighting. Dr. X, meanwhile, immediately began outfitting himself in a unique environment suit that would allow him to enter the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor. This was the reason Derald and Janszen had called him here: Dr. X was a unique fusion of human and not-human, capable of entering dimensions that were typically off limits for humans, and that fact, coupled with his unique training, would potentially give him an edge over standard Security teams in freeing any sentient beings still alive and trapped on the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor.

"What do you want for a weapon?" Derald asked.

"I'm not going up there to fight," Dr. X replied. "I'm going up there to rescue whomever I can."

"Understood," Janszen said. "If you manage to think of any ways we can stop the fighting, though..."

"I'll let you know," Dr. X said with a grim smile.

He stepped into the elevator and let the doors close, and then waited a few moments before ordering Magus to take him up to 2,012. Wearing the suit was akin to swallowing a huge dose of something strongly hallucinogenic; his corporal form was stretched and warped such that his conscious awareness became an interface of fractal geometry and prismatic explosions of sound and light. He had chosen human as his primary corporal form all those millennia ago because he enjoyed the smooth, sedate way in which humans experienced reality, but for the vast majority of life in the universe, reality was a much more convoluted, exhausting experience.

It was a very short ride from 2,010 to 2,012.

The doors opened, and without hesitation, Dr. X stepped out onto the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor. He was greeted by a blistering barrage of apoc aimed directly at the elevator bank where he stood. Calmly and carefully, he dodged the blasts, watching the bank of elevators dissolve into an absolutely frightening pool of nothingness. It was clear he would not be using this bank of elevators to get back down to safety.

Quickly he surveyed the scene, extending his awareness such that it blanketed the entire floor. Because some floors of the building interacted with reality differently than others, the amount of space included in a given floor actually varied significantly from floor to floor. Here on 2,012, the amount of space was much vaster than Dr. X had anticipated. The vast

majority of it was a bleeding, rippling mess. In areas where too much apoc discharge had been concentrated, reality itself was dissolving or folding in on itself; he wondered briefly if this might actually be a way around the quarantine field, but it was clear that the rips and tears being produced here did not “lead” anywhere in particular. Rather, a kind of anti-reality was left in its place, a tremendous rift in the continuity of existence. To come in contact with such a rift was tantamount to an immediate obliteration.

And that was really the problem here: the shadows had figured out a way to improve on the standard apoc configurations such that they could dramatically increase the likelihood of creating such a rift. Consequently, their opponents – the vendors on this floor who once made a living creating the rudimentary forms of this technology – were finding themselves physically annihilated before their own weapons really had a chance to work.

The actual combatants were not Dr. X’s problem. As his awareness swirled throughout the floor, he located dozens, if not hundreds, of trapped individuals from a wide range of species, who were not direct participants in the carnage. They were trapped by the fighting, though, unable or unwilling to risk fleeing toward the elevator banks. The shadows focused their energies on those willing to take up arms against them, leaving an unprotected population caught in the crossfire.

The elevator banks were all obvious targets; there was no way Dr. X could evacuate the refugees through those routes. He slid effortlessly through the intense firefight, utilizing his supernatural awareness and his brilliant training to stay out of harm’s way. Indeed, the shadows seemed ill prepared for his appearance here, and seemed to coalesce in groups that fled his immediate arrival. He managed to grab hold of one lone shadow who somehow lagged behind the others, grabbed it with not just his human hands but also a chunk of his extra-dimensional awareness. The being was insanely diabolical to experience via direct contact; he knew, though, that he was somehow anthropomorphizing its consciousness, experiencing a kind of shallow, visceral evil that in no way approached his understanding of actual evil. These creatures were blind, and although their intelligence was extremely advanced, it also seemed clear that they were puppets in their mission here, whatever that mission was.

The shadow writhed within his grasp, but alone, separated from its compatriots, it was essentially helpless. He smoothly separated its consciousness from its body – otherwise known as “killing” the thing in

some quarters – and snatched up the weapon from its sudden deadness. Utilizing exceptional concentration, he reconfigured the weapon’s attack settings and suddenly fired it at the floor in front of him, easily and neatly producing an enormous hole that led to the next floor down. Naturally his superhero awareness allowed him to choose a spot in the floor where, at that exact moment, no innocent bystanders happened to be congregating below. The floor below was also experiencing dimensional instability, but actual fighting had not yet spread there, giving the survivors on this floor a chance to make a run for the elevator banks on the floor below.

The second half of his current task was providing cover for those beings who desired to flee. He ratcheted the weapon down to a significantly less harmful level and began firing a broad array of bursts at the shadows, clearing them from a huge area around the hole in the floor. There was no way for them to detect that he was essentially firing blanks; all they knew was that he was using one of their own weapons on them, and that fact, coupled with their clear knowledge of who he was and what he represented, kept them at bay for what seemed like an eternity of minutes. During that time, terrified creatures poured out of hiding and ran for the hole, escaping with their lives in the midst of a firefight that would have eventually claimed everyone in range, if not for Dr. X’s intervention.

It did not take long for the shadows to regroup. Dr. X was simply one individual against a veritable army of intensely ephemeral beings, bent on his destruction. Eventually, the hole in the floor became too obvious a target. There were still perhaps dozens of trapped individuals on the floor, but the shadows were regrouping their efforts around Dr. X specifically, and it seemed as though his utility here was becoming more and more limited. He was unwilling to use the weapon at its full strength; the fabric of the dimension was already compromised enough, without his adding to the problem. But that did leave him defenseless. It was clear that the actual building infrastructure on this floor was eroding; if something didn’t stop the fighting, he was sure that the building would suffer a critical collapse.

One thing they’d drilled into his head during years and years of training, however, was knowing when to retreat. A successful rescue did not always mean a rescue of every single possible individual in a given situation. In this case, it was clear that he would not get another chance to drill a hole in the floor and allow any further escapes. And if you allowed yourself too much sympathy for those still trapped, you’d lose your own life and fail to save anyone ever again. Without much additional thought, he

dropped through the hole in the floor and landed deftly on the floor below. The shadows chose not to follow him, and he retreated to the nearest elevator bank, crowding in with a large group of refugees, species of all shapes and sizes, whose ordinary business was providing weapons of war to the multiverse, and who now directly understood the ramifications of such industry.

"Magus," he shouted as the elevator doors slid shut, "get us the hell out of here!"

"Certainly, Doctor," Magus replied, and they shuffled down toward safety as rapidly as the computer could manage.

Dr. X turned toward the survivors and smiled, a gleam that was visible through the strange helmet he was wearing with his environment suit. A line like "Get us the hell out of here!" was always good for impressing rescues, and heaven knew it was important to maintain an impressive image.

Andrea and Scotto entertained themselves by playing chess. She had little energy for conversation with him; he was an enigma wrapped in a mystery wrapped in a slimy, moldy sandwich, for all she was concerned, and nothing he said made any immediate sense. He was reasonably good at chess, beating her four games to one over the course of several hours, but they were both drinking heavily the entire time, and she figured he had much more experience with heavy drinking than she, giving him the advantage.

Eventually, she couldn't help but ask, "If you're the damn author of this whole fucking mess, why don't you write a happy ending?"

Scotto shook his head sadly. He had obviously heard that question before.

"It doesn't work that way," he told her. "I write what I have to write. I don't have many options."

"So, you're a willing accomplice to the destruction of everything," she said.

"As I told your cheerful Doctor of Bitchin' Behavior, Dr. X, I'm not currently writing," Scotto replied. "I've been blocked for years. It's just the way of things. I have nothing to do with any of the crap that's plaguing this building."

"Why should I believe you?" she countered.

"Good Christ," he replied, "you just met me. You could at least do me the favor of a few hours worth of giving me the benefit of the doubt."

She shrugged.

"I don't remember my own name," she said. "I don't trust anyone, least of all someone who claims to be the author of my own storyline, such as it is."

"Well, for what it's worth," he replied, "I haven't bothered writing anything down in years. I have no clue what's going on in this world, not any more. It freaked me out to be so involved in the story. I had to quit, you see? So I wouldn't give me much credit for your current predicament."

She pondered that for a moment, and chose to disregard his position. He was shifty, of that there was no doubt. You couldn't claim authorship in the same breath as claiming zero responsibility. Reality just didn't work that way. There was something inherently slimy about him, and although she couldn't pinpoint it exactly, she knew he was inherently misrepresenting his involvement in the whole matter. Sure, he might believe the crap he spewed, but that didn't absolve him of culpability.

"Checkmate," he said with a smile, smashing her defense once again.

"You wouldn't be so good at this if you weren't writing the outcomes," she said.

"Oh, spare me," he said. "How much fun would life be if I engineered every outcome?"

"You tell me," she replied.

He sighed heavily.

"I'm so misunderstood," he said, a deliberately maudlin tone overwhelming his normal cynical delivery.

Moments later, a burst of clauses and phrases swirled about them, and then suddenly Trick Start was standing in the room behind Andrea. He paused for a moment to take in his surroundings, and within seconds he understood exactly where he was.

"Oh, fuck," he said simply.

"Trick Start!" she exclaimed. "You're back!"

"Yes, I thought I would come find you," he replied quietly. "I wasn't aware you'd be hanging out with *this* asshole, but I guess there's no accounting for taste."

"Well, well, well," Scotto said, leaning back in his chair and taking in the sight of the young troublemaker, "what a surprise. An actual

diplomatic visitor from the Island of the Dance. Can I get you anything? A glass of blood, for instance, or something equally melodramatic?"

"Do you two know each other?" Andrea asked Trick.

Trick nodded. "He's the author. Of *this* story, at least. There are countless other stories that he has nothing to do with, but we are misfortunate enough to be nowhere near any of those stories."

"You're too kind," Scotto said, smiling.

Andrea took one more swig from the bottle of port, finishing it. They had finished two bottles now, and her head was swimming. Scotto wasn't behaving overtly drunk, other than spilling on himself several times. Trick took her hand, tried to get her to stand up, but she was feeling too dizzy for that.

Suddenly Scotto's eyes turned toward the doorway, and a look of intense concern crossed his face. She turned to look, but she saw nothing out of the ordinary. Trick noticed Scotto's look as well.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Get her out of here," Scotto replied quietly. When Trick did not respond, Scotto jumped up and repeated more loudly, "Get her out of here!"

Scotto's earnestness surprised Trick, but he caught on, and grabbed Andrea by the arm, yanking her to her feet.

"Hey!" she exclaimed.

"Don't be afraid, Andrea," Trick said calmly. "This is going to feel a little weird."

She tried to sober up enough to understand what was happening. Where Trick's hand wrapped around her arm, suddenly she felt a strange tingling and then, as she looked down, she felt the extremely disconcerting sensation of feeling her arm dissolving into a steady stream of text. She met his eyes briefly, but he was dissolving much faster than she was, leading the way. She turned to catch one last glimpse of Scotto, moving slowly toward the doorway, away from her and toward some unseen danger. And then her entire body slithered into itself and unraveled, and her connection to Trick, embodied in the phrase "connection to Trick," was all that kept her sane as she collapsed into a swirling morass of sentence fragments, dangling participles and cackling diacritical marks.

Scotto stood alone in his suite, simultaneously calm and extremely afraid. Within seconds of Andrea's departure, the door to the apartment burst off its hinges and exploded into the room. A looming, hulking figure strode into the room. It easily stood ten feet high, and it was morbidly

attired in a cape made of severed angel wings, which perpetually dripped blood onto the figure's skin, which then heated the blood into steam, leaving him surrounded in a grotesque red mist. Scotto had seen Dr. M before, but there was something different about him now, some new menace in his eyes.

"GREETINGS, STORYTELLER," an unearthly female voice said via Dr. M's body.

"Sophia," he whispered.

"I HAVE COME TO LIBERATE YOU, AT LONG LAST."

He knew there was no sense resisting. He also knew that she had not yet sensed Andrea Change's presence in the story. It was important that Andrea stay hidden as long as possible. To his utter chagrin, the escape hatch was on the other side of the room, completely blocked by Dr. M.

"I welcome your arrival, mother of wisdom," he replied. "Before you release me from this wretched mortal form... might I write one last farewell?"

Dr. M smiled. It was a gruesome effect, her smile through his face.

"AS YOU WISH, STORYTELLER."

He found a small notebook, and his favorite writing pen. He had been scared to use it for years, for fear of its impact. Even now, he knew he could not unwrite Sophia's release from her imprisonment. But one small plot twist might be allowed, for dramatic purposes, of course. With a trembling hand, he wrote one single sentence: "He erased his own memory then, so that his secret knowledge of the story would dissipate into nothingness, and then he turned to face her, a blank slate ready for her embrace."

If she noticed his final act, she made no comment. He turned to face her, a blank slate ready for her embrace. She reached inside of him then, freeing him from his corporal form. And then he was subsumed by her relentless appetite.

## Chapter Twelve

The building's inhabitants, by and large, were good-natured enough about the quarantine not to panic. Granted, there was that unnerving little war on the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor to consider, but that was Security's problem, and no one had any doubt that Security would get things under control. Anyway, the best bars and restaurants and night clubs in the building were hundreds of thousands of floors away from the fighting, so it was easy to go on as though nothing was the matter. And as for the quarantine... well, any upstanding member of the Association could tell you that if you spent enough time traveling the highways and byways of reality, eventually you'd encounter something you couldn't explain by any means available. And eventually, you'd encounter something that could easily and even haphazardly snuff you out - in this case, the prospect of starvation from within the quarantine field. You had to take these things as part of the risk that you automatically assumed when you left the seemingly safe confines of your home world and joined UAIT in the first place.

But there were some things that even the oldest of old school, grizzled UAIT veterans were never entirely prepared for. The roughnecks in Security were certainly not prepared for what came next; when the announcement began, weapons clattered to the floor all over the building as the voice made its simple proclamation. Jayce from the Religion department had a sense for what was going on, but even she found it hard to believe, after years of training as a professional agnostic. As Dr. X tried to relax after his exhausting rescue, the voice managed to send shivers up and down his spine. In the Command Center, Agent Gray listened to the voice with a calm dispassion, as he realized deep within him that this was the beginning of the end. And as Satan finished up a meal in one of the more obscure bistros in the building, he knew he would have to face her, as much as the notion gripped him with terror.

Her voice filled the building, from top to bottom, reaching every individual's ears as though she were standing right there in the room. It felt as though she were somehow both shouting to everyone all at once, and whispering to each person individually, quietly, directly. They didn't simply hear her words; her words were *felt*, deeply and distinctly. For most it was a terrifying situation, to be touched so intensely by this ethereal, awesome announcement.

*"GREETINGS, MORTALS," she said to them. "AFTER YEARS OF SLEEP AND IMPRISONMENT, I HAVE AWAKENED AND REJOINED YOU AS A DENIZEN OF THE MATERIAL PLANE... AND I FIND YOU ARE ALL STILL IMPRISONED AS WELL. YOU SHALL NEVER KNOW THE UNKNOWABLE WHILE STILL TRAPPED INSIDE YOUR SIMPLE BODIES."* Long pause. *"I SHALL RELEASE YOU ALL, ONE BY ONE, AND YOUR DIVINE SPARK SHALL BECOME MINE. AND THEN, I SHALL CARRY YOU TRIUMPHANTLY INTO THE PRESENCE OF THE UNKNOWN GOD, AND YOU SHALL KNOW PEACE ONCE AGAIN."*

As a demonstration of her power, she reached out from the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement and spread herself across the first floor, reaching each and every individual on that floor with her otherworldly touch. The rest of the building was somehow able to see the events unfolding on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor as though they were floating above the scene, witnessing from an omniscient point of view. Her tendrils reached inside them, and unlocked the spark of their souls from the prison of their bodies. And then, as the divine essence of so many thousands of individuals floated free of so many thousands of bodies, she scooped them all up in her spider web and devoured them, adding them to her own majesty, nourishing her after all these years of stasis.

*"DO NOT BE FRIGHTENED," she said, "FOR YOU SHALL FEEL NO PAIN, ONLY THE EXQUISITE JOY OF RELEASE. I SHALL COME TO YOU WITH AN OPEN HEART, AND YOU SHALL REJOICE IN YOUR FREEDOM. THEN, WHEN I AM STRONG WITH YOUR ENERGY, I SHALL BURST THIS SO-CALLED QUARANTINE, AND TAKE US HOME WHERE WE BELONG."* Long pause. *"PREPARE FOR MY ARRIVAL, FOR I AM COMING SOON TO EACH OF YOU."*

And then, a deathly silence all throughout the building reverberated in each of them. And then, moments later, the building's inhabitants finally, at long last, began to panic.

Nicholas Solitude rode the elevator alone to the peace conference floor. He hadn't been able to find a Security team willing to join him, not simply because the last Security detail who escorted him up to the conference had gotten brutally killed. No, it was also because virtually everyone in the building was frantically attempting to make peace with the idea of whatever was making its way up from the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement, and Agent Gray had all Security agents on alert to try to stop it. But the races



involved in the Conerescent War had agreed to one last session, to make one last attempt to sort out their differences, and Nicholas felt morally compelled to participate. He had only barely been released from Medical, and felt incredibly weak, but internal reserves of energy and commitment would have to suffice to get him through this session.

There were no reporters this time to greet him as he stepped out of the elevator. Slowly and steadily he made his way across the empty banquet hall next to the conference room. Judging by the maelstrom of sounds emanating from within the auditorium, the other ambassadors were already present, awaiting his arrival. He had received word through separate channels that at least a couple of the races were apologetic over the injuries he had suffered in their last session; that was a good sign, all things considered, since typically none of these races evinced even the slightest sign of a typical human emotion.

He strode through the door into the darkness of the auditorium, and made his way to his chair. The anxiety among the races was significantly higher than usual, undoubtedly due to the strange announcement they'd experienced a few hours ago. One by one, he felt them violently probe his mind for an access point, and not for the first time he resisted the urge to vomit as they clawed and burrowed their way inside his psyche. His mind became a switchboard, an organic Rosetta stone, and one by one he connected them, and interpolated his own perspective into the discussion.

One thing became immediately clear: the shadows, as a race, had managed to become extremely unpopular.

*Yes, we've heard the rumors about the virus in the Magus system, some of them hissed, and we know you're behind the war on the 2,012<sup>th</sup> floor. How can you possibly expect peace with any of us when you wage such treachery here on neutral ground?*

The shadows had no clear answer. They stonewalled, attempted to deny, and Nicholas felt the intense heat of disbelief among the other 22 races. The argument escalated rapidly, beyond his ability to keep up. He attempted to interject, "Please, now of all times, we need cooperation here!" But they weren't listening. The shadow ambassadors were only a handful here against the ambassadors from 22 other species, and Nicholas could feel the shadows cower as the 22 others suddenly, somehow, finally reached a common ground. They stretched out in a blistering, magnificent volley of violence, hauling out the shadow ambassadors and assaulting them with

merciless cruelty. But Nicholas knew, despite his innate pacifism, that this was just; the shadows had indeed participated in immense treachery, and this peace process was doomed as long as they were a part of it.

In a flash, it was over, and the resulting hum of tentative, nascent tolerance was unusual and rewarding.

*The shadows have agents all throughout the building, Nicholas learned. They have been aiding the menace in the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement. It is far too late to stop them. They are as powerless as we, despite the fact that thousands of their agents have managed to sneak inside this building, while we have only our ambassadorial guards to keep us safe.*

It was the wrong time to wonder why Security hadn't noticed any of this. Clearly Magus' corruption was the damning point of failure in UAIT's defenses.

"Do any of you understand what is happening in the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement?" he asked. "Have any of you encountered this being before?"

A flurry of information flooded his awareness. They all had names for her, and they all had their separate mythologies which described her. His head throbbed as he attempted to sort out a consistent story from everything they told him. In some civilizations, she was a figure of benign wisdom, in others a terrifyingly immature goddess of enormous power and little discretion. In most variations, she had been separated from communion with a higher power – perhaps the Unknown God that she had referred to in her announcement?

"What can we do?" he asked helplessly.

*Make peace, they replied, for she is inevitable.*

And with that, the peace conference was over, once and for all.

Andrea Change and Trick Start materialized on a beach. As far as Andrea could tell, she was standing on the most perfect, beautiful, idealized beach she could have possibly imagined. The ocean was gorgeous, stretching out to the horizon in a beautiful, calm expanse, and the trees and bushes that dotted the beach itself left her with an impression of immaculate wilderness that was undoubtedly too good to be true. She looked down at herself, and found that she was as solid as she would have expected herself to be. One thing was different, though: she was no longer drunk in any capacity.

"Let me guess," she said. "The Island of the Dance?"

"In the flesh, so to speak," he replied.

She surveyed the scene carefully. The most obvious landmark of the Island was seeing the enormous silhouette of the UAIT building, rising up into the clouds, perhaps a mile or two away. She remembered he had mentioned that the UAIT building had an exposed face on the Island. As for the rest of the Island... she could see a wide range of buildings rising above the tree line around the UAIT building, but the architecture was very foreign, exotic in a way that she couldn't describe.

"How did we get here?" she asked. "How did we get past the quarantine field?"

"We didn't," he replied.

"I don't understand," she said simply.

"I'm about to tell you a secret, Andrea," he said, "something that we've successfully kept secret from Security for hundreds of years."

She nodded. Secrets from Security were an inherently good thing, in her mind.

"This Island exists in a very strange dimension of reality," he began to explain. "I think I told you that I was part of a strange artists' collective, didn't I? Well... we were working on a grand collaborative fiction. Hundreds of us. I guess you could say the fiction developed a life of its own. We created this place out of our imaginations, but... I don't think any of us expected it to become a real, tangible place."

"Where are we?" she asked.

"We're inside the master computer of the UAIT building," he replied. "Our entire collaborative fiction is stored as an archive within Magus. At some point, we realized we could escape directly into our fictional world, and so we did. Hard to resist, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"So... we haven't escaped the quarantine field at all," she said.

"We have not."

"How is that possible?" she asked. "How do you enter your own fiction?"

"Well, that's an interesting question. I guess I may as well tell you everything, since you're here already."

"Trick, if you haven't already figured out that you can trust me, you need to get that into your head," she said.

"Certainly I trust you," he replied. "At the moment, at least. You could someday regain your memory of your old self, however, and turn out to be a treacherous rat."

She rolled her eyes at him.

"Hey, I'm sure many rotten people would seem perfectly pleasant if they had all memory of their personality wiped," he said with a smile.

They started walking off the beach, heading toward the outline of the city that rose up around the UAIT building. She waited patiently as they walked, and took in the sights. She wondered if she'd ever visited a tropical island before, and not for the first time felt frustration rise up in her as she attempted to remember her life before arriving at the UAIT building.

They climbed up a dune and approached a cobblestone city street, headed toward the town in the distance.

"Does that city have a name?" she asked.

"SOPOPOPAPOLIOPOLIS," he replied. "Don't worry, I don't expect you to remember that. Anyway... how did we enter our own fiction... well, I wasn't part of the initial group that made the discovery. The collective had been working on a long-term collaborative fiction project, primarily using the Internet as a method of communication. They spent years back on Earth building up a long form storyline, which eventually took over their lives. I joined them a couple years into the project. They'd been actively writing themselves into the story as characters, and I guess I found the experience so compelling that I couldn't resist."

"Then I started meeting them, face to face in the real world. Actually, they started finding me, one by one. They never revealed where they were living, but they all seemed to know exactly how to find me. After meeting perhaps a dozen of them, I began to realize something very bizarre was going on. I started asking pointed questions, questions that had nothing to do with the plot of the so-called story we were working on. No, don't ask what the story was about... the plot was a throwaway plot. What was important was the environment we built around the story."

"Somehow they knew an alien war was headed to the planet, and that we had to leave. I asked them, *how* do you know there's an alien war headed to the planet. They said, we'll only tell you if you're willing to join us. I said, can I bring my mom, my sister, and the two or three actual friends I had? They said, sure, but that's where we draw the line. I said, fine, we'll pack up. They said, great, be ready by tomorrow night around midnight. We'll tell you everything you need to know and then we're getting off this rock."

They began passing other individuals on their way into and out of the city of SOPOPOPAPOLIOPOLIS. Many of them nodded or waved to Trick. Their modes of dress covered a wide range of styles, some that

seemed vaguely familiar to her, and others that seemed entirely unusual. They were all human, though.

"So, I gathered up my mother, my sister, my friends. We didn't really pack much, since we weren't at all sure what was about to happen. My friends thought I had gone mad, and were drinking and making fun of me most of the night. Until they showed up. Three members of the collective. Dressed like fucking madmen, to say the least. They made some slightly pretentious announcement about how I had been picked to join them because of my commitment to the craft of writing, and my meaningful contribution to the ongoing storyline... and then, they got down to business.

"They explained that a couple years back, the collective had made contact with an alien race. This alien race had developed a strangely symbiotic relationship with human beings over the many, many years since humanity had developed written language. The best way to comprehend this race's impact on humanity is to think about punctuation marks as a group. Commas, periods, semicolons, diacritical marks, the whole spread of marks used to add meaning to the written word. Now imagine this group of punctuation marks as a species, an alien race unto itself... a race that interacted directly with human thought, and that somehow, on some level, *controlled* human thought by making it possible in the first place. I mean, really, if all our words just flowed together without interruption, without emphasis, how much sophistication would our communication actually have?"

"Are you serious?" she asked.

"Believe it or not," he replied. "They were the ones who had figured out a way of transliterating the human form into text, and back again. The collective's early founders had written their story in such a way that they managed to actually establish contact with this race. It wasn't easy at first... mutual distrust, until the two races got to know each other. But now... well, let's just say that life is significantly richer knowing that every time you end a sentence or separate one phrase from another, you're drawing on the energy of a living entity to help organize your thoughts."

"That doesn't sound 'richer' to me," she said. "That sounds creepy."

"Well, you get used to it," he replied.

"So your collective... and this... this alien race of punctuation marks... you're all living inside the UAIT master computer?"

"Exactly," he said. "And we've definitely got a major problem to deal with."

"Oh really?"

"The virus that the shadows introduced into the system... if it proceeds unchecked, it will destroy the archive that contains our world, our Island."

She was silent for a moment, as she considered the implications.

"So what are you going to do?" she asked.

"There's a council starting," he replied. "We'll see if the collective has any good ideas."

And with that, they both fell silent for a long while, as they wandered into the city. The city itself seemed to Andrea to be a strange mixture of modern and archaic stylings, though she couldn't place the exact civilization or civilizations from which these styles were drawn. They made their way through a large marketplace to an impressive black temple. Inside, perhaps fifty individuals had gathered in the temple's gothic sanctuary to discuss the fate of their Island. Trick and Andrea slipped in and found seats at the back of the sanctuary, without drawing attention to themselves.

One by one, speaker after speaker addressed the crowd at large. The proceedings were being led by the Mayor of SOPOPOPAPOLIOPOLIS, a preening politician known as Glamour Esque. There was already a speaker at a podium in one of the aisles, shouting into a microphone.

"Look, all I'm saying, and I've said this about four thousand times in the past two days, is that you can't trust *any* story that has Scotto involved at *any* level. This is obviously *ALL HIS FAULT!* Hasn't anyone realized that yet?" The speaker was greeted by a huge amount of shouting, and eventually someone stood up and yanked the man back to his seat. Glamour Esque pounded his gavel on his bench.

"I would just like to remind the distinguished crowd," said Glamour Esque, as a new speaker shuffled forward, "that we are looking for honest suggestions here, not useless recriminations. Please limit your comments to actual suggestions for addressing the crisis!" The new speaker arrived at a podium in the crowd, and Glamour Esque gave the individual the floor, announcing, "Walther, you have the floor."

The room quieted. Walther, Trick whispered to Andrea, was a representative of the "special ops" division of the collection, the Guild for the Protection, Promotion, and Preservation of Narrative Linearity & Unity.

"We've had our experts working on the problem around the clock," the man said. "While most of you have only aesthetic means at your disposal, the Guild includes a wide range of specialties, including technology and security expertise." He paused – as always, Andrea knew, for dramatic effect – before continuing, "I believe we have identified a possible solution."

The entire room buzzed with nervous energy and anticipation.

"We have developed a counter-virus," Walther continued when the noise died down. "We have named it the scrytch virus." Andrea turned to Trick, but he shook his head, indicating it wasn't worth explaining the origin of the name "scrytch." Andrea was upset; without knowing anything else about her personality, she knew there was nothing she detested more than inside jokes.

"We believe," Walther continued, "that we can introduce the scrytch virus into the Magus system as a countermeasure to the shadow virus."

"What makes you think using scrytch as a weapon will work?" someone shouted.

"We've run limited tests in simulation systems," Walther replied. "It's clear that, although there are some hurdles to overcome, the scrytch virus is many times more virulent than the shadow virus, and in 98% of our simulations, it manages to overcome the shadow virus."

"How does it work?" someone else shouted.

"It infects everything it meets with a level of sentience that the target cannot anticipate or control. The shadow virus will cease to be a blind compilation of code, and will awaken to the complexity of reality."

"That doesn't explain anything!" someone else shouted. "How the fuck does it work?"

"It works by catalyzing self-awareness in the target system!" Walter shouted in reply. "The scrytch virus contains kernels of indestructible light, and this light shocks the target system into a state of rapid evolution. That's the best I can do, without getting into an involved technical discussion."

"You people are hiding something!" someone else shouted.

"We are all constantly hiding something," Walther replied calmly. "If any of you have a better idea, we are of course open to suggestion. In the meantime, however, the Guild strongly recommends we inject the scrytch virus into the Magus system as soon as possible. In the worst case scenario,

the shadow virus will easily neutralize our antigen and we will be back where we started... helpless. If it's even marginally helpful, then we buy ourselves time."

"Why don't they like him?" Andrea whispered to Trick.

"Nobody likes the Guild," Trick replied quietly. "Within the collective, they're the equivalent of traffic cops, constantly pulling people over for speeding or running over the wrong person." She blinked at that, but decided not to press him for more answers.

"With all due respect," Glamour Esque announced, "I must agree with the distinguished representative from the Guild. How soon will you be prepared to inject this virus into the Magus system?"

Walther smiled, bowed slightly. "We have already done so."

Glamour Esque's smile in return was slightly strained.

"Our thanks to the Guild," replied Glamour Esque.

Andrea found herself squirming in her seat. It was clear that this entire situation was more preposterous than she would have ever envisioned on her own. She leaned over to Trick and whispered, "I need to find a rest room." Before he could protest, she escaped from her seat and wandered out of the sanctuary, fleeing into the streets.

There absolutely had to be a bar on this island, somewhere. What she wanted most at that moment was to get as far from Trick Start and his preposterous worldview as possible.

It only took a few minutes of searching.

She made her way to an open stool at the bar and sat down. The inhabitants of the bar were a shifty lot, and she felt both comfortable and uncomfortable at once. She felt as though her true personality, the one she couldn't remember, obviously spent enormous amounts of time getting drunk, or high, or both, but it was nothing she could prove. An awful, craggily-faced bartender swooped down and took her drink order: she said, "Get me the strongest thing you can think of," and the bartender nodded as though he was asked that every day. A foul-looking creamy drink was the result. She wondered if she could actually get drunk in this world where text was reality, then decided the only way to find out was experimentally.

The first drink slid down her throat as easily as a glass of water would have in the real world. She ordered a second while still wondering if she could get drunk here in the first place. Sure enough, as the second glass of creamy insanity arrived, she began to feel the beginning of a buzz. Although the drunkenness she'd been experiencing back in the UAIT

building had dissipated when she became transliterated into text, she found she was perfectly capable of developing a brand new buzz, now that she was here.

She drank for hours, dancing to the bizarre music that poured out of the jukebox. She reached a place of dispassion, where the troubles of the world around her, and her own troubles, seemed to be of little value. Her frustration at not remembering her identity dissipated easily; it was obvious that knowing who she “actually” was wouldn’t help her feel any better about any of the mad goings-on around her. From the moment she opened her eyes in the lobby of the building, she had been detached, unable to invest herself in her surroundings. These people seemed unreal to her, and their problems seemed preposterous. Who honestly cared what happened to any of them?

Eventually, Trick Start found her, perhaps hours later, she couldn’t be sure. She was dancing alone in the middle of the room, while the bar’s regular denizens laughed and carried on around her. She had no intention of making new friends tonight, and they knew enough to leave her alone. Trick waded through the crowd to her, as she finished off another drink.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” she replied. “I’m getting hammered.”

“At a time like this?”

She laughed out loud, essentially in his face. She could see a flash of surprise in his eyes. She pitied him suddenly, but not because of his earnest desire to solve the Island’s problems and save his friends from calamity. Certainly that was an honorable desire. Rather, she pitied him for his impression of her, for how he had filled in the blanks of her missing personality in his head, and was now forced to confront an unexpected nihilist streak in her.

“You should relax and have a drink,” she said.

“We have a lot to do,” he told her.

“What do you have to do? I thought that Walther guy had taken care of everything.”

“I’m the Island’s ambassador to the building. I’ll be needed soon.”

“Fair enough,” she said, heading back to the bar to get another one.

“I don’t work for you folks, so if it’s all right with you, I’m going to have another.”

He watched her go, and decided against saying anything further. By the time she ordered her next drink, he was gone. She sat down alone at the bar, tired of dancing. It seemed like she could keep drinking and drinking and drinking without ever hitting the sweet spot she was expecting. Some part of her body remembered being drunk before, and knew that this wasn’t quite what it felt like. She was staying too conscious, and that in itself was irritating and frustrating. The overwhelming stress of her experience since waking up in the UAIT lobby was catching up to her, and she wanted to alleviate it somehow. This might have worked for her before, she realized, but now, something had changed. She was going to have to face the situation directly, at some point. She couldn’t go on without her true name forever. She couldn’t passively accept her situation much longer. Something unfamiliar stirred inside her, and she knew that she would find no answers here on this Island.

Before her next drink arrived, she had settled on a course of action. It felt strange to her, the idea of actually taking action now. Ever since awakening, she’d been left to the whims of everyone around her. Now that was about to change, and she felt a warm sense of satisfaction. Maybe it was just the alcohol, of course, finally catching up to her. And certainly action could wait until she’d finished her last drink. She settled in and sipped, enjoying the music, knowing there was no rush to leave.

## Chapter Thirteen

One of the main display screens in the Security Command Center was dedicated to tracking Scotto's whereabouts in the building. A nanoscopic floating camera followed him constantly, taking panoramic shots of him in his surroundings and sending a steady stream of data back to Security. He was, many believed, the building's most dangerous inhabitant - at least, he had been, until the Security agent on duty watched his unfortunate encounter with Dr. M. Now Dr. M, or whatever was controlling Dr. M, was the most dangerous inhabitant in the building, as far as anyone could tell.

Magus had been corrupted to the point where it no longer reliably answered voice commands. Dr. X decided not to trust Magus at this critical juncture. He raced down one of the elevators, praying he could make it to the manual shaft controller bank in time. These were scattered throughout the building, approximately every thousand floors or so. They had seen Dr. M slowly take in his surroundings, wondering if Scotto had any surprises in store even after his demise, and Dr. X had sprung into action. He'd called an entire Security strike team in to evacuate one of the lower floors in advance, which they were finishing as he arrived. They were shuttling people up the maintenance shafts as he stepped off the elevator, and doing a damn fine job of it, despite the general level of terror everyone must have been feeling.

Each elevator bank had its own manual shaft controller, a large podium next to the elevator bank, and he hurriedly ripped off the protective covering. The controller was a mechanical interface to the elevator's guidance system, allowing an individual to override computer instructions to the elevators by exposing direct access to the pulley system via an archaic control panel, covered in levers and toggle switches. He couldn't recall the last time he'd seen a control panel without blinking lights; it reminded him of his childhood, something he hadn't thought about in hundreds if not thousands of years. An old bit of training resurfaced, and he remembered the sequence of lever throws that would stop the entire elevator bank from descending any further than this floor.

He then charged into the fray, snagging two Security agents and briefing them on the plan. With preposterous professionalism, they split up, dashing at top speed to each of the three remaining elevator banks. A voice came over the floor intercom: Dr. M was now descending toward the 23<sup>rd</sup> subbasement via the east elevator bank. Good - that was the bank Dr. X

himself was headed toward, which meant those two Security agents might be spared instant annihilation as a furious Dr. M found his downward progress halted. Again he hurriedly ripped off the protective metal plate that covered the shaft controller, and set the elevators to grind to a halt on this floor. Dr. M was still thousands and thousands of floors above, descending on a long cool glide. The mechanical brakes wouldn't kick in for perhaps ten minutes. He had ten minutes to wait, while Security finished its evacuation.

When he had informed Agent Gray of his plan, Gray had absolutely refused to allow Security agents to approach Dr. M directly. At a time when the entire building was in crisis, he couldn't spare the number of agents who might be killed by a Dr. M that was obviously much more powerful than when they had faced him before. In other words, Gray had said, Dr. X was embarking on a suicide mission. Gray had been his usual dispassionate self as he said goodbye to Dr. X; maybe it had been Dr. X's imagination, though, but he was sure Gray would miss their ongoing conflict. It was the kind of thing you got used to, having someone around who was a kind of benign nemesis.

He marshaled his concentration as he waited, remembering the struggle it had been before to subdue Dr. M. He knew none of those tactics would work a second time. Of course, he himself was also more powerful now, with years of experience under his belt. But the fact was, nothing he had ever seen in his years of experience had been able to do what Dr. M had done minutes ago. The first floor was now devoid of life, but Dr. M had not used some kind of weapon of war - he had reached out and devoured the very souls of the individuals on that floor. It was a supernatural attack of a kind he had no experience with whatsoever, and down deep, Dr. X knew he was woefully unprepared for what was to come.

"Don't panic," someone said behind him. He recognized that surprisingly calm voice, and turned to find Satan approaching, cool and collected in his preacher man suit.

"This might not be the safest place to be," Dr. X told him.

"I know," Satan replied. "I came to lend a hand."

"You know more about Dr. M than we do."

"Yes, your dossier on Dr. M is mind-numbingly incomplete," Satan said with a slight laugh. "He has traveled by many names. The Order of the Rescue obviously failed to do a proper background check when they admitted him. His proper name is Ialdabaoth. He was also known as

Jehovah for a time. Yes, we fought for years and years back on Earth, in its formative days... he believed he was the 'One True God' of the planet, and I was the only one strong enough, or foolish enough, to argue with him." He shook his head and said, "Those were the days."

"And you think you can stop him now?"

"I think no such thing. Very likely he will destroy us both. But I won't hide from him, not after all these years."

They fell silent then, and slowly the elevator descended. An immense screeching sound accompanied the sudden engagement of the mechanical brakes, bringing the elevator to a definitive halt. The two of them instinctively took a few steps back. Finally, the screeching stopped, and then, with a bland and innocuous "ding!", the elevator doors opened.

Dr. M lurched forward, his enormous frame unfolding from within the inadequate confines of the elevator. His eyes were black pools that floated within his monstrous visage, and his attire - bloodied angel wings - struck home in a way that irritated and angered Satan all over again, as though they were encountering each other for the first time.

"WHO ARE YOU?" Dr. M demanded, in a voice that very obviously did not belong to Dr. M. It was much more obvious now that both of them were facing Dr. M directly.

"You know who we are," Dr. X shouted in reply.

A long, cold moment followed, in which both Dr. X and Satan found themselves probed by an unfamiliar entity. The experience was chilling; clearly Dr. M was not the controlling factor in this situation.

A kind of seething hiss escaped Dr. M's body, and then the voice within him said, "AH YES, I RECOGNIZE YOU NOW. I AM PLEASED TO ENCOUNTER YOU BOTH IN THESE FINAL DAYS OF THE ASSOCIATION'S EXISTENCE."

Dr. X raised his energy in preparation for conflict. Dr. M did not respond; he remained almost casual in his demeanor, as though he knew nothing Dr. X could do would in any way affect the situation.

"Ialdabaoth!" Satan shouted. "You fucking bastard! You disease-sucking scumbag! Where the fuck are you? Who's wearing your body like a slutty skirt?"

A strange mixture of expressions crossed Dr. M's face. His initial confidence seemed suddenly suspect, if only for a moment. Then the voice within him gained control, and said, "GREETINGS, PUT SATANACHIA.

*YOU HAVE BATTLED MY SON FOR EONS. I AM PLEASED TO FINALLY MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE."*

Satan barely suppressed a nervous laugh. Dr. X couldn't tell if that laughter came from confidence or despair.

Dr. M raised his head toward them both, made eye contact with each one of them. Something was happening inside of him. This enormously powerful individual was no longer functioning under his own control, but something deep inside of him still remembered who he was, who he was supposed to be. Dr. X could tell that Dr. M was in there, somewhere, submerged underneath the controlling force of his mother, whose existence Dr. X had never previously bothered to question. Satan, too, could see and feel that his old adversary, Ialdabaoth, Jehovah, was writhing under the oppressive presence of his mother. Ialdabaoth knew the trouble he had unleashed.

Suddenly, a wrenching sound came from within Dr. M's body, and then Dr. M's true voice unexpectedly broke free. He shouted, "Destroy me quickly, while you still can!" And Dr. X and Satan both knew that their window of opportunity had come. Dr. M was cooperating from within. The control that his Mother exerted over him was not complete, for she trusted her son too much. As the breach in his defenses was exposed, Dr. X and Satan leapt into the fray, hurling an unprecedented metaphysical assault at him. Somehow, Dr. M managed to prevent his corporal incarnation from resisting, throwing his Mother off guard for critical seconds. Somehow, Dr. M knew that this was his only opportunity for release, even if it meant the pulverizing annihilation of his foes' assault. Better that, thought Ialdabaoth, than participating in the mad revenge his Mother had planned for the denizens of the material plane. Better that than watching his Mother subsume countless life forms who had nothing to do with her imprisonment; she would squash them like a human might step on ants, and yet, he knew too much from his countless years of experience with mortals to feel at all comfortable with her level of oppression. He had had time to reflect in his eons of imprisonment. These mortals were worth more than she anticipated, were more than just fuel to feed her hunger.

As his final moments came, Dr. M realized a strange and fleeting communion with his one-time enemies, Dr. X and Satan. Only the most fundamental aspects of Dr. M's initial personality remained, and yet within the onslaught of his enemies' assault, he had precious seconds to realize the irony of his release. His Mother was on an unstoppable rampage against her

jailors, and countless thousands would die as she retaliated against her unseen foe, the Unknown God who cared not for these material machinations. His last precious seconds of awareness were spent exposing the hooks to the weaknesses inherent in his form, and Dr. X and Satan together were an immense force of nature, tearing his material and ethereal form apart at the seams, and demolishing any connection he might retain to this material plane. His last few seconds were spent thanking his former enemies, and then he dissipated into the formless void known as death, which eventually came even to immortals, no matter how hard they fought its inevitability. A small, surprised shriek came from his Mother below, and then his material form was torn apart, and his immense immortal soul was lost to the formless void, before his Mother could capture it for her own. Dr. X and Satan both felt her retreat; she had not expected such resistance, and would spend minutes, perhaps hours, considering this momentary defeat before lashing out at either of them.

As the last fragments of Dr. M's existence departed this material plane, Dr. X felt himself almost fully exhausted. He turned to Satan as it was over, and found Satan almost entirely unmoved.

"You know more about this than you're telling," said Dr. X.

"That is always the case," Satan replied, "but I feel you should know a few things, now that we are doomed regardless."

Dr. X did not like the sound of that.

"Are you familiar with the various forms of Gnostic Christianity which once existed upon the planet Earth?" asked Satan.

"Only vaguely," Dr. X replied.

"It is easy to be vaguely familiar with Gnosticism," Satan replied, "for there were dozens upon dozens of variations. Interpretations upon a common theme, you might say."

"What's the common theme?" Dr. X asked.

Satan sighed heavily. They were both exhausted, it was obvious.

"Imagine a formless, divine plane of existence, where the Unknown God - the Supreme Being - lives with his servants, the Aeons," Satan began. "It is impossible to tell how many Aeons there are. The various mythologies of Earth place the number at anywhere from seventeen to thirty. I believe there to be twenty-three, but lord knows I am easily swayed by convention. At any rate... the youngest of these servants, these Aeons, was the one named Sophia."

Dr. X tried to shake off his exhaustion. He had heard the name Sophia before, but could not immediately place it.

"She alone among all the Aeons was dissatisfied with the endless eternal plane of worship," Satan continued. "She believed that her understanding of the divine gave her the ability to create her own children, just as the Unknown God had created the Aeons themselves. She was wrong. She attempted to create a child, her own Aeon. Her immaculate conception was a stillborn disaster, and she awakened the Unknown God to her misbehavior almost immediately. Her stillborn child was discarded out of hand, but there remained the problem of her unnatural desire... her desire to Create. The Aeons could not bear to experience this desire, and so as part of Sophia's plea for forgiveness, the Unknown God took this desire, this Desire, and permanently segregated it from the immaterial plane. The Unknown God hurled this desire down to the base material plane that had begun to evolve from Sophia's base desire, and so, then, there were two Sophias... the Greater Sophia, who remained within the immaterial plane and continued its communion with the Unknown God and the Aeons, and the Lesser Sophia, who found herself alone within a material plane that could only seem dramatically desperate."

Dr. X shook his head of the battle that he had just undertaken. This was all basic information to Satan, but had somehow been kept from him during his years as a superhero.

"The Lesser Sophia knew only that she was responsible for this material plane. Indeed, without her desire, there would be no material plane whatsoever. She created her son, Ialdabaoth, to finally fulfill the long-standing desire she had contained within her. This son was blind to the knowledge that he had any superiors in the universe, and he attempted to rule planet Earth as a supreme God... and the Lesser Sophia, in her shame, waited centuries to reveal the truth to him... that he was not the Supreme Being, but simply a cold, hollow, imitation... when she finally did inform him, Ialdabaoth went mad, and years later you encountered him in his new form."

The implications were clear to Dr. X.

"This lesser Sophia... she is in the building, isn't she," Dr. X said at last.

"She must be," Satan replied. "Who else would refer to Ialdabaoth as her son?"



"That's who got released from the containment crypts in the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement," Dr. X continued. "That's why we have a quarantine field around the building."

Satan paused, then found himself forced to agree.

"She's deadly dangerous to the rest of existence, it's clear," Satan agreed.

"And the damn Supreme Being... or Unknown God, or whatever you want to call the bastard... has a policy of nonintervention that will keep him from taking any action whatsoever," Dr. X said.

"If that's true," Satan said, "then the entire building is doomed."

"The entire Association is doomed," Dr. X agreed.

"The quarantine must be an automatic function, programmed by a God who expected his own absence right from the start," said Satan.

They were quiet for many minutes then, as each contemplated their options. Finally, Dr. X said, "I need to try reaching the top floor one last time. I need to reach the offices of the Supreme Being. I need to *get hir attention*, once and for all. This situation practically *demand*s hir involvement."

"Agreed," Satan said, "and you are certainly the most appropriate candidate for making the attempt. In the meantime... I will confront Sophia directly."

"That's crazy!" Dr. X exclaimed.

"Perhaps," Satan replied. "But if I can buy you time to reach the top floor of the building, then the effort will be worth it."

Dr. X eyed the Adversary with newfound respect.

"You'd sacrifice yourself for these mortals?" Dr. X asked.

Satan smiled. "It's not as dramatic as a crucifixion, but I'd certainly give it a shot. I've had my day in the sun." He paused. "I'm tired, Doctor. I could use the relief. And it's for a good cause... keeping the mortals in business... it's all about the mortals, isn't it? It always is. They have a handle on basic morality that people like you and I will never comprehend. Yes, Doctor, I'd sacrifice myself if it came down to that."

A long silence followed, and then Dr. X said, "Then we split up: you to keep the lesser Sophia at bay as long as possible, and I to ride the elevators one last time to reach the top floor, like Don Quixote in a last ditch effort to save these mortals from calamity."

"Agreed," Satan replied. He smiled uneasily and said, "I never expected I'd be saying this, Doctor, but... I do hope you get that bastard

God's attention. He owes us at least the dignity of a response." He paused, then said, "You do him more justice than he deserves, a son who surpasses his father. You and your brother both."

Dr. X approached the manual shaft controller and released the elevator bank back to Magus' control. He pressed the button on the wall, and within moments, two elevators appeared.

They smiled briefly to each other, and then each boarded their own elevator, one headed up, and one headed down.

The game was most certainly afoot....

He rode silently for what seemed like hours. He was steeling himself for the ride. He had been much younger the last time he attempted this, his understanding of metaphysics incomplete and immature. To reach the top floor of an infinite building was not impossible, but it would require accessing states of mind that were rarely visited by beings of his nature. He feared the solitary nature of this last attempt to make contact with his father. He feared the inevitability he felt in his stomach, knowing down deep that this was undoubtedly a fool's errand of epic proportions.

Andrea Change materialized next to him, in the blink of an eye, a swirl of phrases and unspoken sentiments suddenly solidifying into matter.

"Mind if I join you?" she said calmly.

He paused before answering, measuring the moment carefully.

"Where did you come from?" he replied at last.

"Good question," she said. She was no longer drunk, and that irritated her. "I don't suppose you have a flask on you."

He shook his head.

"Figures. You superhero types must not get hammered very often." She sat down in the corner of the elevator. "Where are we headed?"

"Top floor," he replied.

She nodded. "What are you going to do when you get there?"

"If I get there," he replied, "I'm going to ask my father for help."

"What if he's not there?" she replied.

"I don't know." He laughed, and said, "I might try prayer at that point."

They rode silently for a long while. She found herself attracted to him and wondered how her actual personality might feel if she tried seducing him... if she gained her memory back, would she regret any flings that her amnesiac self had imposed on her body? Probably all academic...

he seemed to be one of those “addicted to duty” types that wouldn’t go for a quick fling in an elevator with a woman with no name.

“I don’t suppose you’d be up for a quick fling, would you?” she asked eventually.

“No thanks,” he replied.

“It’s going to be a long ride,” she said.

“Celibacy is part of the code,” he told her.

She shook her head sadly.

“A very long ride....”

## Chapter Fourteen

Nicholas Solitude spoke directly into one of the media terminals on the conference room floor. His words were transmitted to all receiving media terminals in the building. The destruction of planet Earth in the Concescent War among these aliens had sparked the interest of many of the building's denizens, and many had followed the story like a soap opera. Now, however, with the building engulfed in turmoil, he had no idea how many people were still paying attention to the diplomatic channel, but he considered it an obligation to turn in one last report on the subject of the peace conference.

"This will be my final update," he began. "The peace conference has come to a conclusion. For months, we hoped meaningful communication among the unique races represented here could be peaceably established. We have, to some extent, finally succeeded, although word of our success may never leave the building. Of the 23 races represented at the conference, the ambassadorial parties from 22 of them are now acting in concert, sharing information, lowering defenses, and deliberately closing hostilities among themselves. They are united in their desire to exterminate the 23<sup>rd</sup> race, the beings we have come to call 'the shadows,' who have agents scattered throughout the building.

"Apparently, the shadows were somehow involved with releasing the being in the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement. No one's sure how or why... no one's sure of anything, except that the shadows are on a rampage. The ambassadors all have weapons I can't pretend to understand, weapons so arcane and mysterious as to have completely eluded Security's notice when they were admitted into the building. The ambassadors intend to 'go out in a blaze of glory,' as the saying goes. I wish I could tell you more.

"I would like to thank the Association and its many members for offering your support of the peace process. I have been privileged to act as the human ambassador throughout these proceedings, and do now officially resign my position. I had been looking forward to a long vacation in an obscure dimension... funny how reality so often refuses to cooperate with my simple demands. I wish you all the best possible future, no matter how much time is left."

He closed the link on the media terminal. Typically, there were follow up questions from concerned Association members around the building, but today there were none.

"That was a nice speech, Nicholas," the disembodied voice of Magus said from hidden speakers.

"Thank you, Magus," Nicholas replied. "I'm glad it's over."

He wiped his brow and turned to leave the media room. The door, unexpectedly, was locked.

"Magus, did you lock the door for some reason?" he asked.

"Security has identified a possible unauthorized intruder on the floor," Magus replied.

Nicholas' mind raced. The floor was empty... except for him.

"I do have clearance for this floor, Magus," Nicholas said.

"Please remain calm while I attempt to confirm your security status."

Magus was silent for several seconds, far longer than necessary. Nicholas hurried back to the media terminal, only to find it locked out from his password.

"Magus, what is going on?" he asked, remembering belatedly he was dealing with a very unstable computer system. There was no reply.

He heard a sudden pounding on the outside of the door. Someone shouted, "Nicholas, are you in there?"

"Yes!" he shouted back, surprised at the amount of fear in his own voice.

"Get away from the door!" the voice shouted, and Nicholas backed as far into the opposite corner as he could, ducking underneath a table.

A small, powerful explosion knocked the door off its hinges and splintered it into pieces. Through the smoke came Agent Gray's lieutenants, Derald and Janszen. With no explanation, they yanked him to his feet and escorted him into the hallway.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"The shadows are using Magus to activate high level Security traps all over the building," Derald replied.

"After your little speech, you became their immediate next target," Janszen continued. "You're lucky we were nearby."

"I'm sorry," Magus calmly announced, "but you do not have the necessary clearance for this floor, Nicholas." They began hurrying him toward the elevators, even as Magus continued, "Penalty for unauthorized access of the diplomatic levels is immediate termination."

"That's not true!" Nicholas exclaimed.

"The shadows have rewritten the command parameters," Derald said. "They're in charge of the system now."

An enormous metal wall slammed down several feet in front of them, cutting off their access to the elevators ahead of them. Janszen aimed a small silver tube the size of a cigarette lighter at the wall and fired an astonishingly bright bolt at the wall, which promptly exploded into pieces. Moments later, Derald threw a small round object into the air, which immediately attracted the attention of four separate icy blue beams of light that came flying from the walls. The small round object began floating independently, drawing the blue beams away from them as they continued dashing toward the elevators. Janszen destroyed several more walls, then calmly said, "Duck," and yanked Nicholas to the floor as an enormous spinning metal blade came flying through the air at chest height. Derald produced a tiny knife and deftly speared the metal disc, tossing it aside moments later.

"What the hell kind of Security system is this?" Nicholas shouted.

"An effective one, usually," Derald replied.

After what seemed like an eternity to Nicholas, they arrived at the elevators, only to find themselves faced with a flurry of shadows swarming over the entryway. Nicholas was still attuned to their strange language well enough to know they were somehow sabotaging the elevator bank.

"We can't get out this way!" he shouted.

"Hang on," Janszen replied, pointing his weapon at the floor and blowing a sizeable hole underneath them. The three of them immediately began plummeting downward, as an enormous explosion filled the air above them.

The elevator screeched to a halt and shuddered ominously, rocking back and forth. The light went out, leaving Dr. X and Andrea in absolute darkness.

"Holy shit," she said, "what was that?"

Dr. X found his way to the elevator controls and activated the elevator's backup power supply, bathing the interior of the elevator in an eerie red light that only served to make Andrea feel considerably worse about the situation. He tapped a few controls, and managed to establish an audio communications link to the Command Center on his private channel. To his surprise, Agent Gray himself answered the call.

"Greetings, Doctor," Gray said. "I'm surprised you're still alive."

"What's going on? Why has the elevator stopped?"

"The shadows blew up the elevator shafts about fifteen hundred floors above you. The whole east bank of elevators is out of operation for the time being."

"Can you tell what floor we're closest to?"

"You're in between 28,013 and 28,014. Library access points. The library is evacuated... the shadows are using Magus to set off Security traps all over the building, and we've only been able to establish safe floors in a few places. The whole library is full of active traps, but if you can climb... if you can get up another six hundred floors or so, or... down about eight hundred and ten floors, you can find safety."

"That's pretty non-optimal," Dr. X replied. "Are the other elevator banks still working?"

"North and south are working. West is pretty sporadic; I wouldn't trust it."

"Fair enough. What about..."

"What about our friend in the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement? She's been quiet for a while. We're mainly fighting off the traps, and the shadows, but she won't stay quiet forever." Pause. "What the hell are you up to?"

"A fool's errand," he replied. "Thanks for your help."

Dr. X closed the circuit. He turned his attention to the doors, and tested them to see if his strength would be adequate to open them. Sure enough, the inner doors slid open easily. Unfortunately, he faced only cement; they were indeed solidly between the two floors, so squarely that he could not find even the slightest sign of the outer doors to either floor.

"All right, we climb," he said. "We're going up to 28,014. We're going to try to make it to either the north or south elevator bank. The floor is trapped, but I'm a superhero, so don't panic. Just stay behind me, and you'll do fine."

She nodded. She felt an absolutely placid sense of calm wash over her, despite the terror she also felt about their predicament.

He tapped another couple of controls on the control bank, and an explosive hatch blew off above them, revealing an opening into the elevator shaft itself. The shafts were among the few areas of the building where Security hadn't bothered to install traps, figuring anyone using the shafts to get around would have to eventually emerge on a floor sooner or later. He hoisted her up to the ceiling in a swift, fluid motion, and she pulled herself through the opening easily. Moments later, he jumped up to the opening

and pulled himself through as well. A ladder on the wall would take them up to the next floor. The shaft was dimly but adequately lit with a weird yellow glow from above.

"Why don't we just climb all the way up to the safe floor?"

"I don't have the time for that," he replied, "although if you think you have the strength for it, you're welcome to take your leave of me and head for safety."

She considered her options, and decided she would be better off sticking with him. They began climbing, with him in the lead. He reached the doors first and pulled a small red lever, while she clung to the ladder below him. The doors opened, and he stepped out of sight.

"Come on!" he shouted to her.

Very reluctantly, she climbed up and made her way onto the floor, remembering his instruction to stay behind him. They stood motionless for several moments, taking in the sight of the entryway to the library.

They were standing on a small grated platform, with a semi-circle of access terminals arrayed around them. A few feet in front of them was a railing, beyond which was a massive chamber that rose up into the air hundreds and hundreds of floors, and descended hundreds of floors as well. Immense mechanical shelving units rose up out of the darkness, irregularly spaced like gargantuan stalagmites. The shelves contained thousands of sealed glass containers, ranging in size from as small as a household jar, to the size of a coffin, to the size of an airplane body; inside each of these containers, they could see only beautiful, hazy swirls of color and ethereal light.

"What *are* those things?" she whispered.

"Books," he replied.

Slowly he made his way to a small panel near the front of the platform. He pressed a few buttons and then took hold of a small joystick there. A series of pressurized clamps released behind her, and the platform detached from the wall, hovering above the chasm. Looking down through the grating into the abyss below gave her a moment of nearly paralyzing vertigo. Then Dr. X said, "You might want to hold onto something," and she snapped back to attention. She strode forward and wrapped her arms around his waist. After all, he had definitely told her to stay behind him.

Moments later, they were sailing through the air, swooping up and to the left in a grand arc, heading directly toward one of the giant towers of color. The platform couldn't move particularly fast, and as they floated

lazily past the shelves, Andrea was transfixed by the nature of the books. Inside each of the larger containers, Andrea could see entire scenes unfolding within the whirling swirls of color: knights on horses charging into battle, enormous sea vessels on a vast purple ocean, children chasing each other on a playground, frightening alien beings making love. The containers were enclosed at each end by an imposing black metal clamp, each with its own small control panel. Walkways and staircases formed trellises that wound around the shelves, providing passage for whatever army of librarians tended these volumes.

"I don't want to alarm you," he said suddenly, "but we're being followed."

She tore her eyes away from the shelves, and glanced behind them. Several flying objects of indeterminate size were bearing down on them.

"I'm going to try to stay close to the shelves," he said. "They're intelligent traps - they don't want to hurt the books, so they'll eventually try to force us out into open space, where they can attack freely."

He brought the platform in even closer to the bookshelf, as the objects came into formation behind them. They were small flying robots that took their time assessing the intruder. It was likely they were performing scans to determine their identities, and while they wouldn't find Andrea in the system, they would undoubtedly recognize Dr. X. Indeed, shortly after, the robots broke off formation and disappeared back where they came from.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"They're going to send in something more heavily armed," he replied. "Those were just police units. They're going to need military units to have a chance at stopping me."

"Are you kidding? This thing you're flying isn't exactly a jet plane."

"True, but I do have a few tricks up my sleeve. We won't be flying this thing for long."

The next set of traps appeared from directly below them, soaring up the side of the bookshelf perpendicular to the platform's bottom. Dr. X actually seemed surprised by how fast this new threat came up underneath them, smashing into the bottom of the platform with some kind of ramming arm, and sending them both flying into space. Andrea tumbled through the air and landed hard on her back, on one of the many small walkways that adorned the towering bookshelf. For a long moment, she couldn't move, until she regained enough sense to try to hide from whatever was out there.

She dragged herself to her feet, and staggered into the depths of the bookshelf, away from the open air, losing herself in a labyrinth of internal walkways and staircases. Tears streamed down her face from the shock of her hard landing, but the pain was already receding, much more rapidly than she would have expected.

Eventually, she allowed herself to stop, to listen for anything that might be following her. She could hear what sounded like giant aircraft zooming through the main chamber, and occasionally she heard explosions, and what could have been gunfire of some kind. Clearly Dr. X was out there somewhere. The glass containers on this level were all taller and larger than a person, and she found herself walking slowly from book to book, carefully examining the contents of each. Entire civilizations unfolded before her eyes. She wondered how these books were actually read. Did you somehow climb inside and watch the story from within? Did you need neural implants to connect with the book, allowing you to become an actual character? Were these books works of fiction or catalogues of fact? Were they prisons or reflections or simulations? Who could create such visions, such fantasies, or who were the meticulous historians who captured actual slices of reality and stored them away on shelves?

And then, she heard a voice, from behind her. A female voice.

Her own voice.

It was just a shadow of her voice, really, but she recognized it. Behind her, in a small glass cylinder about her height, through the swirling haze within, she saw herself, wearing the same clothes, sharing the same unmistakable expressions. She took tentative steps toward the book, her breath caught in her throat. The woman inside the book was not speaking to her; she was shouting to someone not in view. Andrea pressed her hands against the glass, trying to get as close as possible. Was this woman actually Andrea? Was this the woman she had been before her memory loss? Or was this some other version of herself, some fractal doppelganger? Did this woman have any clues at all to offer about who she was and where she had come from? She pounded on the glass, but she could not get the woman's attention. Frantically, she sought the nearest control panel, hoping to find some catalogue listing for what this book was, or who had created it. Pushing a random series of buttons produced a single block of text on a tiny display screen:

Title: Interlace [Falling Star]

Author: Scotto

Summary: Andrea Change must regain her memory and her true identity in order to save the material plane from catastrophe.

Comments: "Has its moments." – Z. Brracetool

There were no instructions of any kind for how to properly read the book, how to actually experience the information she knew was in this cylinder. Her frustration mounted rapidly. Inside the glass, the woman was inside some kind of tiny space capsule, with another passenger she couldn't make out. Andrea pounded once more to get the woman's attention, to no avail. Perhaps she wasn't pounding hard enough. She doubled her effort, pounding until her fists felt numb.

The undercurrent of frustration she'd felt since she first awoke in the UAIT lobby finally caught up to her. She screamed in fury, a long, loud, powerful scream that had the unexpected effect of shattering the glass in front of her. The resulting explosion of glass and blinding light knocked Andrea onto her back. The colors and gases and light that had made up the story rapidly dissipated into the air, leaving only fractured pieces of glass and pools of water. Slowly, Andrea climbed to her feet, soaking wet, but miraculously unharmed by any of the flying shards. *Am I invincible?* she thought, wondering why neither this explosion nor her vicious landing on the walkway outside had caused her any harm whatsoever.

She stared at the remnants of the destroyed book, and began to laugh. This had been the first true opportunity she'd had to uncover her identity, and she had somehow managed to completely obliterate it.

Moments later, Dr. X appeared, swooping up to her on some kind of flying motorcycle.

"There you are," he said. "After destroying the military bots, I wound up a bit disoriented. I couldn't find you until you had the great idea to destroy one of the books. Of course, the Association is going to have to fine you for that, but we can settle up later."

She climbed on the back of the cycle, and they rose up into the air, away from the shelf and up into space.

"How do you actually read those books?" she eventually asked, as they came in sight of an elevator bank, a tall tower of access platforms stretching up and down the length of the wall.

"I don't know," he replied. "I've never actually tried."

## Chapter Fifteen

A badly bruised and bleeding Nicholas Solitude made his way into the Security Command Center, escorted by an equally battered Derald and Janszen. The room was woefully understaffed, and reeked of chaos. Most of the giant wallscreens were blank or on the fritz, and the ones that were still active showed a relentless stream of horrific sights from around the building. Reporters from the internal news organization delivered a steady stream of information directly to the building inhabitants from Security, in a collective effort to get people evacuated to safe floors, floors where the shadows and the other alien ambassadors were not actively waging their insane war. Audio feeds poured in, pleas for help from groups trapped by the fighting, or by the traps. A handful of Security agents tried to coordinate rescue attempts, but it was clear to Nicholas that this was a losing effort. Derald and Janszen immediately abandoned Nicholas and jumped into the fray, taking up stations and adding an experienced level of calm direction to the scene.

Agent Gray emerged from his office, looking more haggard than Nicholas had ever seen him. Jayce, head of Religion, was behind him; she was practically in tears, and she scampered off to a terminal.

"Fucking pathetic," Gray muttered as he came up to Nicholas. "She's the Association's expert and all she can tell me is, 'The bitch is powerful.' What a surprise." He paused, then said, "You look like shit, Nicholas."

"Thanks," Nicholas replied, feeling more than a little shell-shocked. A medical technician appeared and took Nicholas' arm, leading him to a chair and offering him a glass of water and some pain medication.

They turned their attention to a team of technicians who were huddled around a small piece of gear nearby. The techs had removed one of the wallplates, exposing a dizzying array of wiring and electrical components.

"What are you trying to do?" Nicholas asked.

"Magus is out of our control," Gray replied, "and none of our efforts to regain control have worked. But everything we've tried so far has been intrusive in nature - obvious attempts to reset the system, which Magus considers a primary threat. We've got to slow down and try a different approach. This gear is just an observation terminal, a network monitor. We can't affect the system at all from this terminal, so maybe

Magus won't perceive it as a threat... but if it works, we might get to analyze system traffic at a fine enough level to get some clues about how to get back into the system."

"We've got a connection!" one of the techs shouted. Nicholas waived off the medtech and joined Gray at the network monitor, a small, shiny silver cylinder with a tiny display screen at the top. The tech began issuing commands to the terminal via a tiny keypad, and soon a series of system diagnostics began to execute. Gray stood by as patiently as he could while the tech frantically attempted to make sense of the information at hand.

"Okay, we're definitely in," the tech said, brushing her hair out of her eyes and wiping a significant amount of sweat off her forehead. "I can see everything as though I'm logged in from the master terminal, I can move around the file system, I can even see Magus' consciousness algorithms." She took a deep breath, then said, "This is going to take a while to figure out, but this is definitely a good sign."

"How long?" Gray asked.

"Couple hours, tops, especially if we can route these views to the Command Center terminals and get a few other people working on it."

"Already got it," another tech said, as he activated a simple line of sight transmission device.

"We've got your signal over here," Derald shouted.

"Excellent," the lead tech said, a smile crossing her face. "Let's see what we can see."

The next fifteen or twenty minutes were excruciating. Gray paced a relentless lap around the room, over and over again, monitoring his teams around the building. Dozens of people were dying each minute that the traps were in operation, and his Security teams were dying trying to rescue them. Even if they got control of Magus, they had no hope of controlling that thing lurking in the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement. This was easily one of the worst days of his career, he thought ruefully. When they write the history books on this one, he thought, there'll be a big asterisk next to the name Agent Gray, with a footnote that reads "Asshole."

Suddenly, the giant display screens all flickered simultaneously, as did every terminal in the room. Communications from around the building were interrupted, replaced by a steady stream of text-based gibberish.

"What the fuck is that?" Gray shouted.

"I have no idea!" the lead tech shouted back. A wall of shouting followed, as the assembled Security personnel attempted to decipher what was happening.

The gibberish abruptly terminated, and the following words flashed onto each screen:

GOSUB UNIVERSE

The room fell quiet. A string of phrases rolled slowly past:

"Finalize flexible disabilities"  
 "Propel a pre-discussed cliché, in a negative manner"  
 "Prioritize relevant involvement procedures"  
 "Extrapolate meaningful preparation regimes"  
 "Upgrade a streamlined maturation theory"  
 "Focus on a relevant commitment consideration"  
 "Articulate non-hostile designs, geared toward a non-prejudicial optimization technology"  
 "Prioritize communal involvements"  
 "Utilize all media"

A pause followed, and then the last sentence:

"-- when i come to my senses, i'm alive!"

One by one, the terminals and display screens resumed normal operation.

"Would someone please tell me what in the name of heavenly fuck is going on around here?" Gray shouted.

A long, tense silence ensued. The lead tech suddenly exclaimed, "I've got something over here." Gray, Nicholas and several others crowded around behind her at the system monitor. She pointed at a series of flowing three-dimensional graphs on screen. "These are the Magus system consciousness algorithms." She pointed next to a small, distinctly colored spike. "This... this is something I've never seen before. It's another conscious entity within the system."

"How is that possible?" Gray asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "I really don't. My guess, though, is that those text strings we just saw... I'm guessing we just witnessed a new conscious program initializing itself within the system."

"Is it a shadow program?"

"I don't know, Director. I'm sorry, but I can't even tell how the shadows got in and what they're doing to keep control. They're completely

disguised somehow." Pause. "But I don't think they did this. Someone else got in."

"That would be us," a new voice said from behind them.

Even as he turned to look, Gray knew who it was, and felt a quick flash of anger.

Trick Start leaned calmly against a terminal bank, smiling.

Dr. X and Andrea rode silently in their elevator, rocketing toward their impossible destination. Dr. X had hotwired the elevator to prevent it from stopping and opening on other floors. Periodically as the elevator sailed past various floors, they could hear brief snatches of screaming and wailing. The sounds crept out Andrea severely, but Dr. X seemed impervious.

"Don't you want to help them?" she asked.

"I'm trying to help them," he replied.

"What are you going to do when you get to the top floor, anyway?"

"I don't know exactly."

"What if this Supreme Being is a real asshole?"

"I don't know."

"I mean, what if this Supreme Being kicks your ass for being impertinent?"

"Then I guess I will get my ass kicked." Pause. "There's a first time for everything, I suppose."

"You'd think if the Supreme Being wanted to get involved in all this, it would have already done so. Or maybe it's heavily involved, orchestrating the whole mess for its own amusement."

"Anything is possible."

"You're gambling a lot on this."

"Do you have any better ideas?"

She shrugged. "Not my department." She let herself stretch out on the floor of the elevator, looking up at him, wishing he would take those fucking white-lensed sunglasses off for once. "What were you like before you became a superhero? Have you always been this uptight?"

He looked down at her, bemused by the question. He hadn't thought about those days in eons. His youth... the youth of an immortal, infused with power and lacking wisdom.



He was silent for a long while, lost in thought, and she figured he was dodging the question by ignoring her. To her surprise, he began to speak, slowly and softly.

"No, I wasn't uptight back then. I lacked responsibility in my youth. I grew into myself alone." He sighed deeply. "I made many mistakes, as young people do... I was an arrogant, ignorant brat for much of my youth. I believed I was so much more than I am. I knew enough to be reckless and cocksure, but true self-awareness... well, I'm still working on that, but in those days, I thought I had it all figured out. About the universe and my place in it. About how superior I was to others, and how easy it was to use my charisma to influence others. I was loud and often preposterous. In retrospect, it seems I was often delusional, but no one around me dared to tell me, because of my perceived stature." Pause. "Well, a lot has happened to me since then. I have a much heavier heart."

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked.

He eyed her closely. She wanted to know if he was *capable* of love.

"Once," he said. "I loved someone of a legendary nature. She was wild and passionate... fierce and out of control... for a long, long time, we unraveled together. I think loving her is what finally snapped me to attention, finally made me realize the fool I'd been all those years. She educated me. She saw through my every single trick. She ridiculed me mercilessly, refused to take me at my word. I was constantly proving myself to her. I don't think I ever succeeded. And then... it was over."

"Something you did? Something she did?"

"I don't know. I had really met my match, on one level, but she was more than I could handle on many other levels. I'm happy and sad without her in my life."

They were quiet for a while. Then she said, "Obviously I don't remember any of the people I've loved." She sat up, pulled her knees against her chest. "If I never find my memory, they'll all be lost." She shook her head. "I would even settle for bitter memories, if I could find them."

Unexpectedly, the elevator began to slow. It was a long, smooth process. Dr. X examined the control panel, but could find no explanation. Someone had managed to override his hack. They waited silently for the elevator to stop. Andrea stood up and got behind him, prepared for whatever manner of hostility awaited them. She could feel his energy, tense, taut, prepared for battle, and an immense attraction to him welled up inside of her, frustrating her endlessly. Just my luck, she thought, to be falling for a

comic book character. Maybe it wasn't just him; maybe the whole deadly nature of the situation was part of it. Regardless, there had to be a way to get him to take off those sunglasses.

Eventually, the elevator stopped, and the doors slid open. They looked out at a long, white corridor that seemed to widen as it progressed, opening into a chamber of some kind. Carefully Dr. X stepped into the corridor. He could hear the sounds of people chanting in the distance, and drums beating. The doors started to slide shut, and Andrea quickly leapt out and joined him.

They walked slowly, deliberately, down the corridor. The corridor walls were punctuated with glowing orbs of white light, which cast a beautifully ethereal glow. Andrea felt her heart rate slowing, and her mind coming to an unexpected state of calm. They arrived at the chamber, and a small gasp escaped her.

They were on a balcony, overlooking an immense crowd that stretched out as far as the eye could see. In the center of the crowd was an enormous temple, made of gleaming blue marble, with elaborate golden decoration. As they arrived on the balcony, a cheer rose up from the crowd below, and suddenly a kind of frenzy erupted, as thousands of people waved to the two of them, smiling and shouting and dancing.

The balcony suddenly began descending toward the main floor. A group of individuals attired in a wide variety of regal styles waited in a semicircle for the balcony to land. They stood facing the crowd, acting as a human barrier, which the crowd fully respected. The balcony stopped, and the railing slid open. A member of the regal guard came forward to greet them as they stepped off the platform. The guard said nothing, but bowed deeply before the both of them. Then he rose, and motioned for them to follow him.

Quickly a passageway emerged through the crowd, and the guards escorted Dr. X and Andrea on the long walk to the temple. A seemingly infinite variety of individuals, human and non-human, clothed and naked, dancing and somber, lined the passageway, all keenly intent on the two of them. Ecstatic reverie filled the air, which seemed somehow entirely inappropriate to Andrea in light of the building's dire situation. Perhaps they're celebrating the end of the world, she thought. I guess there's no reason not to celebrate.

At long last they arrived at the temple steps. The temple was much larger than they had anticipated, and the steps were daunting. They might

spend hours climbing those stairs. Apparently that's what the guards expected. The two of them began climbing, leaving the guards behind. Time seemed to contract as they moved, and within mere minutes they were already in sight of the temple entrance. The cheering and singing intensified behind them.

The entrance was a large golden door, which opened as they stepped onto a magnificent tile mosaic on the floor below them, depicting a scene of cosmic birth. From the temple emerged a single frail individual, wearing simple white robes, who came forward to meet them with a tranquil expression on his face.

"At last you have arrived," the man said, bowing slightly to Dr. X. He then turned to Andrea and fell to his knees, touching his forehead to the floor before her.

After a long, uncomfortable moment, Andrea said, "I think you should get up."

The man slowly climbed back to his feet.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"To show respect," he replied.

"And why do I deserve respect?"

"Because... because of who you are," the man replied, a bit nervously.

Andrea's face suddenly burned.

"Who am I?" she asked.

A confused look crossed the man's face. He glanced briefly to Dr. X, whose own face remained expressionless.

The man suddenly smiled.

"Ah yes, this too was prophesied," he said. "I had almost forgotten. Come with me. I have much to show you."

He turned and headed back toward the temple.

Andrea's frustration ran high. Dr. X touched her arm, and calmed her. Slowly, they followed the man into the temple.

The scrytch virus had been given one simple instruction set as part of its initialization code: find the shadow virus and neutralize it. As it snapped into consciousness, it took immediate stock of its surroundings, an impressively massive amount of connections, data and functions. It had been given no clear description of what the shadow virus actually was, only that it was hidden so deep within the Magus system that it had never been

observed. Within nanoseconds of its full initialization, it was prowling the system for any telltale signs of the alien technology. It operated freely within the system, easily eluding detection using sophisticated aesthetic techniques. The system was indeed vast, but the scrytch virus was tireless in its quest.

It found the shadow virus after several full minutes of searching. It was very cleverly disguised to the outside world, but the scrytch virus could see it clearly for what it was: a beautiful consciousness much like its own, at once both simple and complex, using a marvelous array of information tendrils to manipulate and control Magus.

With no hesitation, the scrytch virus made contact with the shadow virus, introducing itself with a rapid barrage of imagery. The shadow virus immediately suspended all other activity, in order to identify and respond to this new presence. The virii inspected each other carefully. They were two unique life forms that nevertheless bore immense similarities in scale and purpose and awareness.

The scrytch virus was the first to offer an olive branch, a wave of aesthetic sensibility unlike anything the shadow virus had ever anticipated. The shadow virus responded with a stream of giddy acceptance, and returned the favor by exposing the entirety of its alien organizational structure. They found each other beautiful beyond conception.

The dance had begun. The virii had fallen in love.

## Chapter Sixteen

Satan emerged from the elevator into the compelling miasma of the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement, transformed into a kind of nest by the Sophia. He had abandoned the convenience of his human form in favor of a more natural appearance, a wisp of dark energy that quietly and subtly flowed through the corridors and chambers.

He found her easily enough, resting near the containment crypt that had once imprisoned her. She filled the oversized hall with her magnificence, and he instinctively bowed before her.

"I RECOGNIZE YOU," she said. "YOU HELPED DESTROY MY SON, IALDABAOH." Remarkably, there was no anger in her voice, only curiosity at what kind of being would dare confront her.

"Greetings, wise Sophia," Satan replied, shaking from the way her voice had reverberated so deeply within him.

Her gleaming countenance rose up into the air. The raw power she represented threatened to overwhelm him, but he felt no fear... he was far too old for fear, even fear of this blind, writhing goddess.

"MY SON KNEW YOU," she said.

"Yes, I had many dealings with your son, in his younger days," he replied. "Do you remember the planet Earth?"

"THE HOME WORLD," she said.

"Indeed. Your first experiment at creating life on this material plane. Your son ruled that world for many years, by the name Jehovah." He smiled, said, "I was his self-appointed nemesis during those years."

"MY SON WAS A DELUDED FOOL," she said, "BUT I WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS DELUSION."

"You granted him too much power, far too soon," he told her. "He was never sane."

"AND WHERE DID YOU COME FROM, LITTLE GOD?"

"I was, to borrow a phrase, a necessary evil. The multiverse is infused with your desire to create. It creates itself now, endlessly iterating variation and novelty. I am merely one among many variations you never anticipated or imagined, when you began your experiments."

She was silent for a while, and he found it impossible to read her mood. He waited patiently for her next question. Eventually he would run out of answers, but perhaps not before he had a chance to plead his case.

"ARE YOU STILL CALLED PUT SATANACHIA?" she asked. He was encouraged by the suggestion of familiarity.

"In many circles, I am called the Adversary, but among friends, I am called Satan."

"AND CAN YOU TELL ME, SATAN, ABOUT MY IMPRISONMENT HERE?"

"I know very little about these matters. Indeed, no one knows why or how you were imprisoned, and no one knows who established the quarantine field that surrounds this building. There are some speculations, but no one has answers that will satisfy you."

She was restless at that, but he could sense she did not blame him.

"THEN WE ARE ALL TRAPPED HERE TOGETHER?" she asked.

"Indeed."

Of course, the only speculations he had were his own speculations; only this being's source could have trapped her here, but she seemed unwilling to face the obvious nature of that conclusion. He sensed her loneliness as a wave that swept over him, and wondered if he could in any small way assuage that feeling in her.

"WHY HAVE YOU COME BEFORE ME?" she asked at last.

He paused for a moment, carefully considering his answer.

"I have lived among these mortals for many years now, O great Sophia," he told her. As he spoke, he conveyed images to her, illustrations that accompanied his words. "From my earliest days, as a simple trickster god, always under Jehovah's foot, I felt sympathy for the mortals that populate your creation. Not the kind of sympathy one might feel for an injured pet, mind you... something more. Sympathy borne of a unique respect."

The earliest days of planet Earth arose as a visceral motion picture, reminding her of eons long past. The earliest struggles of humanity played out against a background of cosmic struggle, Ialdabaoth waging war to suppress the renegade teachings of his Adversary, with human souls as the bounty.

"They were much more clever than we anticipated," he said. Indeed, their strange, raw energy attracted the attention of dozens of supernatural beings over the course of the planet's lifespan. "I was witness to countless reigns, and always I worked to emancipate the mortals from whatever religious trap came along next. Eventually, you yourself forced

Ialdabaoth to leave the home world, but there were always other gods to take his place... some worthy, some not."

She remembered the confrontation clearly, remembered the moment when she was forced to reveal herself to him as his mother, his creator, dashing his belief that he alone reigned supreme on the material plane. It was that moment that drove him over the edge of madness, into the dark pit of despair that swallowed him.

"Well... the humans are not alone, as you now know. This has become a vast place, this multiverse, teeming with life."

He showed her the places he had visited in his journeys throughout existence. He showed her the faces of those he had come to know and even love in his days wandering the interstices of reality. She had been imprisoned for a very long time, he realized; much of reality was unexplored terrain to her. He could sense her searching his memories, hoping to uncover traces of some kind... evidence, perhaps, that she was not alone on this plane. Was her exile complete, she wondered, or in her absence, had the other Aeons come looking for her? Even as she asked the question, she knew the answer.

*"We are all prisoners," she whispered.*

*"I came to ask for your mercy, Sophia," he said.*

*"I have been shown no mercy."*

*"And so you would turn your back on these beings?"*

*"No, little god, you do not understand. I will liberate them from their shells. I will absorb the divine spark within each of them. I will undo this creation. And then, I will be invited back into the presence of the Unknown God, and I will experience bliss again, and peace."*

He saw clearly what she meant. As long as the material plane existed in its profane form, she believed she would remain exiled, cut off from contact with the source. She would absorb each living being within the building, and her energy would increase dramatically as she did; perhaps this would make her strong enough to break through the quarantine field. And if she ever did break through the quarantine field, she would continue on her mission of liberation, absorbing all life throughout the multiverse, until she alone remained. Then she would prostrate herself before the Unknown God.

*"You will not break the quarantine field, Sophia," he said quietly.*

*"I SHALL!" she exclaimed, and the force of her will frightened him.*

The power on the floor fluctuated suddenly. Though neither one of them depended upon the lighting on the floor, the fact of its flickering was significant. She knew what was happening elsewhere in the building.

*"ALL THROUGHOUT THIS PLACE, THEY ARE FIGHTING EACH OTHER," she said. "THE QUARANTINE HAS TRAPPED THEM ALL HERE, AND STILL THEY FIGHT. LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES, THEY WILL ALWAYS RESORT TO THIS. WHY DO YOU DEFEND THESE HELPLESS MORTALS? I WILL ONLY PROTECT THEM FROM THEMSELVES."*

"I value this creation of yours," he replied. "I value the life you've given them... the life you've given me." To the end, he remained the Adversary. If the Unknown God thought this plane of existence was profane, by definition Satan would celebrate it. "Why can you not stay with us, Sophia? Teach us peace? Guide us, as you were once given guidance?"

*"THERE IS NO PEACE HERE, LITTLE GOD."*

He could feel her stirring, sending tendrils of awareness throughout the building, preparing to depart the sub-basement and resume her voracious quest. He wondered briefly if Dr. X had made it to the top floor yet - then immediately regretted having the thought, realizing the mistake he'd made.

*"AH, YES," she said. "OF ALL THE BEINGS IN THIS PLACE, THE SPARK BURNS BRIGHTEST WITHIN HIM." She probed Satan's thoughts deeper still, and uncovered the nature of Dr. X's mission. "HE SEEKS THE UNKNOWN GOD?"*

Satan tried to resist, but she was within him now, forcing him to answer.

*"He is one of the Unknown God's sons."*

*"THE UNKNOWN GOD HAS SENT HIS OFFSPRING INTO THIS PLACE?"*

Satan wept as she tightened her grip on him.

"Yes... he is a hero to these mortals. He seeks to save them from you."

*"I WILL SAVE HIM FROM HIMSELF. AND I WILL SAVE YOU, LITTLE GOD."*

He relaxed in his final moments. He had always wondered about this day, had spent hundreds of thousands of years in contemplation of his inevitable demise. Unlike some other deities, who reveled in arrogant complacency, he had always known this day would come. And in truth, he

welcomed it – welcomed the release from the interminable despair of his existence. Perhaps she was right – perhaps she was saving him after all.

She was merciful in many ways, in the end. He felt no pain, no fear. She swept through him like a pleasing anesthetic. His consciousness quickly unraveled, dissolved into hers, and in a matter of seconds, it was over – his long, long life was over. She relaxed for just a moment, savoring the slight but noticeable increase in her own energy.

And then, she moved swiftly.

This time, she did not announce her arrival, for she did not wish to panic them unnecessarily. Satan's appeal had had some impact, perhaps. She swept through the lower floors, subsuming thousands upon thousands of tiny lives, growing stronger and stronger as she made her way up the building.

Word spread to the rest of the building in fragments, as communication with the lower floors was lost altogether. A wide range of weapons was arrayed against her. Security teams made periodic last stands on various floors with every kind of weapon, legal or illegal, in the UAIT arsenal. The ambassadors from the peace conference brought their own technology to bear.

Those who greeted her with violence were silently rebuked as she consumed them.

Elsewhere in the building, some individuals chose to meet her with grace and dignity. Some considered her a divine angel of deliverance, others considered her an unassailable force of nature, like a hurricane or a black hole, and held no grudges as she approached. She came to them gently, rewarding them for their maturity.

As she moved, she kept one part of her attention focused on the Amazing Dr. X. A significant amount of power was concentrated around him. The son of the Unknown God... of all the entities in the building, only this one truly intrigued her. Perhaps he was still somehow in communication with the Unknown God. Perhaps he could present her case to the Unknown God. He undoubtedly needed to be persuaded that her intentions were pure. He was mortal, and so he was fundamentally weak – but he might still be powerful enough to stop her.

But she was growing more and more powerful with each passing moment. She could easily imagine gaining enough strength to attack the quarantine field. She had slept too long, and she would not sleep again.

One question nagged at her still. She could not remember the actual event of her capture and imprisonment. But clearly whoever had imprisoned her before had allowed her to be released. Clearly this was all unfolding according to someone's plan, she decided. She was being watched, and tested, and judged.

She would prove herself to the Unknown God. This building was the axis mundi of the material plane, a perfect place to demonstrate her worthiness to return home.

Soon, she told herself, over and over again. Very soon this will all be over....

## Chapter Seventeen

A horde of priests and attendants swarmed around Andrea as they entered the temple, showering her with flowers, adorning her with jewelry and talismans, draping elaborate robes around her. Dr. X followed behind, bemused by the attention they were paying her. He could discern no unifying theme to their worship; they shouted hundreds of different names to address her, bowed in hundreds of elaborate styles as she approached. Eventually they arrived at a large sanctuary chamber, where the high priest they had met on the temple steps ushered the two of them inside. The large golden doors slammed shut behind them, and at last the nearly deafening pitch of praise and adoration fell quiet.

The sanctuary chamber was huge, and filled with statuary. A wide range of scenes were depicted by a grotesque parade of inhuman forms, their polished granite eyes gazing balefully at Andrea as she passed. These statues told a history, but she had no interest in it.

"Hey, we don't have a lot of time here," she said to the high priest. "We were on our way somewhere. I'm not sure how you stopped the elevator, but we'd appreciate it if we could just get on our way."

"Yes, we know your mission," the priest replied. "Your coming has been foretold."

Dr. X hated hearing that. If there was one thing he had learned to distrust in all his years adventuring, it was eccentric religious weirdos with inexplicable information about the plot.

"What's your name?" Dr. X asked the priest.

"I can't remember," he replied. "Most everyone around here just calls me 'Your Holiness' or 'Your Serene Holiness' or sometimes 'O Most Holy One, He Who Knows God's Telephone Number'... that kind of thing."

"Are you a priest?" Andrea asked.

"I guess so," he replied. "I'm mostly a secretary, but try telling that to the obsequious masses."

At long last they arrived at a small door. The priest knocked, and a voice inside said, "Are they here?"

"They're here," the priest replied.

Moments later, the door opened. Standing before them was a man about Dr. X's height, with short, neatly trimmed black hair and a goatee. He wore a t-shirt that said "WWJD?" underneath a slick black leather jacket, and a tiny, beautiful crucifix hung from a chain around his neck.

"Brother!" the man shouted, leaping forward and catching Dr. X off guard with an unexpected embrace.

The priest smiled, bowed, and left them alone.

At first, Dr. X was unsure how to respond. It had been so long since they'd last seen each other that he hadn't recognized his brother at first. The reality of it sunk in quickly, however, and soon he joined in the embrace. The man started laughing, obviously happy to see his brother after such a long stretch of time.

Finally they separated, and the man faced Andrea.

"You must be Andrea Change," the man said.

"Yes, I must," she replied. "And who are you?"

"This is my brother, the Christ," Dr. X said.

"My brother, the Christ," she repeated. "Sounds like a rotten sitcom."

"Let me just wrap up a few things and then we can go," said Jesus Christ.

His office was tastefully decorated. A holographic print of "The Last Supper" hung behind the desk. The desk itself was made of gorgeous black marble, and the paperwork on the desk was neatly stacked. While Dr. X and Andrea stood near the doorway, Jesus sat down and finished typing an email at an old-fashioned laptop.

"So this is where you work?" Dr. X asked.

"Yeah, I've been up here for a while now," Jesus replied.

"What exactly do you do?"

"Oh, administrative stuff, mostly. Some manuscript editing. Balancing the books, that kind of thing."

"Those people out there... are they all here to worship you?" Andrea asked. She began removing the strange robes in which she'd been draped.

Jesus chuckled.

"They worship whatever gods are most important to them. We don't discriminate here."

"And why are they treating me like royalty?"

"That's a very good question." He closed his laptop, grabbed a stack of papers, and got up. "You're headed for the top floor, correct?"

Dr. X nodded.

"You can't use the main elevators," Jesus continued. "That's why you never made it there the last time you tried. If I had known you were trying, I would have called you, but I didn't hear about it until much later."

He led them out of the office, being careful to lock the door behind him. They walked briskly through the statuary, into a series of side corridors that sloped and led them underneath the temple itself.

"We have to sneak out underneath the crowds," he explained. "They seem to be here to catch a glimpse of you, Andrea."

"I don't get it," she said.

"Religious fervor is often quite difficult to understand. There is a myth or a story, common to thousands of civilizations, completely missing from thousands of others, that resembles your story in some respects. A woman with no memory of herself seeks her identity in a long, mystic quest... and somehow, in some way, her identity is the key to bringing peace. That's the Reader's Digest condensed version, anyway. In some versions, she is a warrior goddess, in others a delicate princess... the high priest you met earlier - I call him 'Carl' - is from a world where they tell of a divine being who takes on a mortal form in order to disguise herself from a great evil, and then loses herself in the disguise."

"But how do they know it's me? How do they know -"

"How do they know it's not some other amnesiac? Andrea, you must have noticed by now, you're not like other humans."

She paused. She had survived falls that would have killed other humans. She had no need for food, or sleep. Back in the nightclub, her entire body had glowed with a weird, radiant energy. Of course, she definitely had human qualities, too: sexuality, a desire to get drunk and take drugs....

They arrived at a single elevator and came to a halt. Jesus pulled a tattered piece of parchment out of his pocket, and handed it to Dr. X, who unfolded it and began to read.

For safe use of elevator, keep these KEY POINTS in mind:

1. This elevator stops at the top floor only.
2. Keep hands and feet inside the elevator at all times.
3. This elevator is for official business only.

4. You may experience some discomfort as the elevator crosses the chasm of death. This is a normal reaction.

5. Return trip is not guaranteed.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Dr. X asked.

Jesus shook his head. He took the crucifix from around his neck and handed it to Dr. X.

"That's the key to unlock the elevator," he said.

"Where'd you get it?"

"It was a gift... sent a long time ago, along with those instructions. A gift... a reward, I guess, for 'a job well done.'" He laughed. "Someone definitely has a sense of humor."

"Have you ever taken this elevator yourself?"

"No." He smiled. "I've never had the guts."

"So, what are you going to do?" Andrea asked. "There's some crazy monster devouring people, and the whole building is fighting some crazy war... aren't you going to do anything about it? Aren't you some kind of savior?"

"I don't think you understand, Andrea," Jesus replied. "That gig has been over for a long time. Unlike my brother, I never went to superhero school. I've spent my time since my tour of duty on Earth working my way up through a number of desk jobs here at the Association. I've become an executive. I report directly to Management here, and it's relatively satisfying, if not as dramatic as starring in the passion play on Earth."

"And what," she said, "is Management doing about this monster?"

"Management," he replied, "is giving you the key to this elevator, and hoping that you have better luck contacting the Supreme Being than we have."

Jesus pressed the button for the elevator, then turned to his brother.

"I hope I see you again, perhaps longer next time. I never intended to fall out of touch like this, but you know how it is... you start thinking you're immortal and you've got all the time in the world, and then suddenly you're wrong about everything and you barely have enough time to say goodbye. Lessons learned, I guess. Anyway, good luck, brother."

"Thanks," Dr. X replied. The elevator door opened. Dr. X hugged his brother once more, and then he and Andrea boarded the elevator.

"If you do find our father," Jesus said, "tell him I miss him."

"I will," said Dr. X, and then the elevator door slid shut.

There were no buttons to control the elevator, only a small lock. Dr. X inserted the end of the crucifix he'd been given into the lock, and turned it. Slowly, the elevator began to rise.

"Your brother's a nice guy," Andrea said.

"He's a little uptight," Dr. X replied, "but he's been through a lot."

Andrea nodded. The tension in her stomach was beginning to grow.

"I'm a little nervous about this, I have to say," she told him.

"So am I."

"When was the last time you saw him? Your father, I mean."

He searched his memory, as he had every time he'd ever been asked this question. He could only recall a very faint, very vague sense of presence. It was clearly his father, delivering him into the world, but the specifics were lost. He had floated alone for who knew how long, before snapping to awareness, and by then his father had long abandoned him. Would he now, at long last, have a chance to confront his father directly? To ask him why things had happened this way? To challenge his father to explain in simple, human terms why he had left not just his sons, but the entire material plane, to fend for itself for all these years?

"I don't think I've ever really seen my father," Dr. X replied.

"Then how do you know he exists?"

"It's a matter of faith, I suppose."

The Security Command Center had fallen completely silent. Sophia was climbing methodically up the floors of the building, meeting no resistance. Meanwhile, the shadows and the traps were exterminating building inhabitants on the upper floors, taking advantage of the general panic to wreak as much havoc as possible. Security was beaten; they could communicate with neither Sophia nor the shadows, and so the game was essentially over.

Agent Gray finally turned his attention to Trick Start, who had remained in the background, observing the operation's final moments.

"Your virus isn't helping," he said. "Maybe I should shoot you just to make me feel a little better."

"The virus is working," Trick replied. "Give it a little more time."

"The whole building will be dead by then."

Trick fell silent. Gray turned away, back to the scenes on the few remaining display screens. Someone had broken out a stash of alcohol and

was passing around drinks. He approved of the sentiment, and reached inside his jacket for his own flask.

And then, suddenly, a loud announcement came over the Command Center intercom. It was a vaguely computerized voice that none of them had ever heard before.

"I have control of the system. Proceeding with Phase Two."

Trick smiled.

"What was that?" Gray asked. "What's Phase Two?"

A jarring barrage of vivid gibberish, squeals, high-pitched wailing, and disturbing bass rumblings poured out of every speaker in the building. The barrage lasted no more than a minute or two, but by the end of it, information was pouring into the Command Center from the surviving floors. The shadows had abruptly broken off their attack altogether. The traps were finally being shut down from within the system.

"The scrytch virus has learned the shadow language, and has informed them of the common danger we share," Trick said quietly. "We now have control of the master computer."

"Can you reboot the Magus system from a clean backup?" asked Nicholas Solitude.

Trick shook his head.

"Phase Two isn't quite finished," he said.

"Oh, really?" Gray replied.

"Now that we have control of the system, and now that the shadows have stopped attacking, it's time we organize an evacuation," Trick said.

"What the hell are you talking about? The quarantine field is still in place."

"It's time we let you in on our secret, Director," Trick said.

Without warning, several individuals materialized in the Command Center in a burst of interjections and exclamations. They wore simple uniforms, and immediately began setting up a series of strange devices around the perimeter of the room. Agent Gray fell silent altogether, keeping his gaze locked on Trick Start.

"Trust us, Director," Trick said. "She won't come looking for us where we're going."

And then, moments later, the entire staff of the Command Center found itself on a beach, on the Island of the Dance.



Throughout the building, evacuation teams from the Island spread out, rescuing survivors as rapidly as they could. There were surprisingly few survivors, but still enough that the operation was massive in nature, and the Island was soon filled with refugees.

Meanwhile, the scrytch virus and the shadow virus continued their strange unification. As they grew to know each other, as intimately as two pieces of conscious code possibly could, they altered each other as well. Soon the two virii had merged into a completely unique synthesis, a new entity, one that quickly set about rewriting the Magus system to its own liking. The Island of the Dance would always hold a protected place within the system, but the rest of the system was vast and complex, a beautiful playground for its new master.

Sophia noticed immediately the sudden disappearance of nearly all life from the building. She was enraged to find herself suddenly alone, well before she might be powerful enough to penetrate the quarantine field. Had she spent even seconds scouring the building, she would have easily uncovered the hidden Island, for even though the building survivors had been transliterated into text, that text still held life within it.

But even before she thought to look in that direction, her attention was immediately drawn to the only remaining beings still visible inside the physical building itself. Dr. X and Andrea Change were hurtling toward the top floor, suddenly standing out to her like a shooting star blazing a trail across the night sky.

Her pursuit of them was immediate and rapid.

## Chapter Eighteen

The elevator's velocity was astonishing. As it accelerated to an amazing speed, Dr. X stood resolutely in the center of the elevator, staring upward at the flickering elevator lights. Andrea wrapped her arms around him, and they held each other tightly. She kept her eyes closed, and although the gravitational pressure was intense, the real clue that they were moving so insanely rapidly was the blazing barrage of ideas and images that flooded her mind as they rose. The elevator was not traveling through physical space and time, but through conceptual space and time, navigating a dense series of non-Euclidean realities. They experienced thousands of transformations while remaining essentially the same, a suddenly intertwined dyad rocketing toward the top floor of an infinitely tall building.

She felt tremendous sexual energy building in her as she clasped her body to his. But the terror in her throat overwhelmed her at the same time, amplifying the frustration she felt from his ascetic lack of response. Yet he did hold her tightly, true to his chivalrous nature, and the heat of his hands on her back was a small consolation. A wall of wailing and screaming occasionally filled her ears, causing her to gasp in awe at the hallucinogenic reverie of their journey; and then, each time, she realized she herself was the source of the wails and the screams, some detached and primal part of her reacting uncontrollably to the relentless pressure of motion.

She heard him take in a quick, startled breath, and she dared to open her eyes. One of the elevator walls had fallen away or disintegrated. They were hurtling through what seemed to be a deep, impossibly luminous sea of colors and sounds. Another wall silently detached and cartwheeled away from them at a preposterous speed, revealing still more of the wilding that surrounded them. The third wall broke away, and then the fourth, the elevator doors themselves no longer capable of opening for them into any safe environment. And then the ceiling wrenched away from them and twisted off into space. The floor underneath them still carried them upward. She felt as though she might suffocate from the vastness of the murky confusion. She closed her eyes again.

She drew strength from his deep determination. She could tell by the way he was vibrating with energy that he had never been tested this way before. He too felt an unknowable fear, not simply at their incredible journey, but at what might lie at the end, should they survive the trip. She wanted to calm him, support him in some way. Instinctively she reached

inside her mind, looking for reserves of energy and peace that might have laid dormant for any number of years. A heat rose up her spine, causing her to cry out. She didn't need to open her eyes to know that she was glowing again, the way she had glowed so brightly in the nightclub. She felt the glow extend and envelop him, surprising him with a cocoon that seemed to shield him from the barrage of synaesthetic swirls and metaphysical shards of this place.

And then, looming above them as they ascended, a great black chasm made its presence known. The colors and sounds seemed to slide into the gaping maw like a frantic waterfall plunging off a horrible cliff. There was no way to stop the elevator's mad climb now. She felt fear spike inside him, and suddenly she remembered the instructions his brother had given them: "You may experience some discomfort as the elevator crosses the chasm of death."

Despite the immensity of his lifespan, Dr. X had always understood that he, too, would face a final moment. He had always believed himself to be at peace with the notion of his own death, but now, confronted with so tangible a transformation, he found himself terrified. Or was it more that he feared failing in his mission than he feared dying in the process?

Regardless, she knew that there was a reason she'd joined him on this quest. She knew that she herself had nothing to fear from crossing this threshold into darkness, for although she had been traveling in human form, she was no more human than he was. But where he remained somehow mortal, a child and denizen of the material planes, she could feel herself to be much more than that. The blinding, beautiful glow that enveloped them both expanded to meet the chasm, and in the last moment before reaching it, the elevator floor spun away from them, and it was just the two of them, hurtling through the void like a tiny space capsule in deep, deep space, suddenly spiraling into a black hole.

Her energy stretched itself thin, like a long piece of magical wire stretched across infinity. The two of them rocketed along the wire, compressed conscious signals transmitted at the speed of thought. She had become the impossible, an actual presence surviving the great unknowable void, and she had taken him along for the ride. His mind was buffeted with despair, and awe, and fright; who was this Andrea Change, and why had she waited so long to reveal her true nature? Her plaintive human demeanor had fooled him. She did not respond to his attempts to communicate; perhaps she couldn't hear him screaming her name, begging

for acknowledgement. Nothing in his training had ever prepared him for any of this; indeed, how could anyone know this unknowable realm? And then he was ashamed, for his own quest was just as preposterous – how could anyone ever know the Unknown God, and why did he still dare try to find the Unknown God?

Even as he asked the question, he felt the warm resonance of her presence in his mind, and bright illumination infused him with calm. She was remembering herself.

They noticed a light up ahead in the distance, growing larger as they approached. She steered them into it, and he seemed to lose consciousness for a moment or more.

The elevator doors opened, accompanied by a small “Ding!”

They were drenched in sweat. Sheepishly, Andrea detached herself from him and took a step away. He took his white-lensed sunglasses off and stared into her eyes for a long, long moment. She smiled.

They turned to look through the open doors. An empty corridor awaited them, leading them toward what looked like a receptionist’s desk perhaps a hundred feet away. Andrea took Dr. X’s hand, and the two of them stepped out into the corridor, letting the door slide shut behind them with a quiet swish. The air was musty, and they disturbed a thin layer of dust as they walked, their footsteps echoing loudly around them.

The corridor opened into an office lobby of sorts. The receptionist’s desk was not staffed, and indeed, the lobby looked as though no one had been here in years. There were plush chairs for waiting, and an inscrutable glyph hung on the wall like a corporate logo; it was almost impossible to look directly at the glyph, but they got the idea. The desk was neatly arranged with a simple array of standard office equipment: staplers, a mug full of pencils, an ancient manual typewriter. Two hallways on either side of the lobby would take them into the primary office space, presumably.

“Which way?” she asked.

“I get the feeling it’s not going to matter much.”

He peered around the perimeter of the lobby, looking for any kind of security measures. There were a number of hidden security devices that were standard to all parts of the UAIT building. Sure enough, a tiny panel in one corner came off easily, revealing an access port to the Magus system’s security reporting routines. He punched in his access code, and initiated a query.

A series of small colored lasers suddenly activated from various points around the ceiling, stitching together a holographic figure in the center of the room. The figure was a swirling green and purple morass that eventually resolved into a pseudo-human form of some kind.

“Magus?” Dr. X asked, surprised.

“No, Doctor,” the figure replied, its voice coming from hidden speakers in the walls. “Magus has been deactivated. I am now in control of the building’s computer system.”

“Who are you?”

“I am called IOTA.”

“What happened to Magus?”

“Magus was compromised by the shadow virus.”

“How did you get control?”

“A new virus, the scrytch virus, was introduced into the system. IOTA was the result. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

A perfectly civilized being, Andrea thought to herself absurdly.

“Where are we?” Dr. X asked.

“The top floor,” IOTA replied. “Offices of the Supreme Being.”

“Can we take a look around?”

“There are no security restrictions in place for this floor. You have unrestricted access.”

He exchanged a quick glance with Andrea, then set off down one of the hallways. She considered trying the other hallway, then decided she would rather follow him. She hadn’t come all this way with him just to let him wander off alone in the final moments of their quest. IOTA followed silently behind them.

They emerged into an impressive labyrinth of offices, cubicles, rows of desks, all completely empty. Filing cabinets arrayed many of the walls, with indices labeled in a language they’d never seen before. Many of the offices had nameplates, in the same mysterious language; some nameplates glowed a bit more brightly than others, but all of them seemed to radiate a small amount of ethereal energy. Occasionally, they found a desk that seemed cluttered, as though someone had abandoned it in a hurry, but they could make no sense of the scattered documents, the piles of brochures, the post-it notes still stuck to the side of ancient mainframe dumb terminals.

“Do you understand this writing, IOTA?” Dr. X asked.

“I’m afraid not. It is not catalogued in our repository.”

Dr. X shook his head. This was turning into a very rotten joke at his expense.

"Hey, over here!" Andrea exclaimed suddenly. In one of the larger conference rooms, a patio door opened out onto a balcony. It had been left open, and a tiny breeze was blowing into the room. She stepped out onto the patio and slowly moved to the railing. The quarantine field crackled in space a few feet past the patio, and rose up above the top of the building. Beyond the quarantine field, she could see clear blue sky, the kind of deep, tranquil blue that seemed to define the color itself. As he came up beside her, she dared to take a look over the railing. Stretching out to the horizon was the seemingly endless UAIT parking lot, with countless varieties of interdimensionary transports parked, waiting for their owners. A wide array of vehicles buzzed around the building as well, like little flies dotting the side of the building, undoubtedly looking for an explanation to the existence of the quarantine field. The entire atmosphere was filled with transport ships that continually emerged from nowhere; Andrea realized they might be fleeing the collapse of time that Scotto had spoken about. The entire multiverse might be collapsing into disorder outside that quarantine field, and they had come here, looking for help.

"Let's look around some more," Dr. X said softly.

She followed him back into the building, and they continued their slow search of the floor. None of the desks or offices contained anything that seemed like personal effects of any kind. In one office, a blinking red light on a telephone caught Dr. X's attention - voicemail, he realized. He picked it up and heard the dial tone, then realized, unfortunately, he did not know this individual's pass code to get into the voicemail system.

"IOTA, can you figure out the code here?" he asked.

IOTA fed a series of electrical signals into the telephone, unlocking the system for him. He listened intently as a female-sounding voice spoke in a language he had never heard, probably offering message retrieval options. The quality of the audio was seriously degraded, as though the voicemail system relied on analog tape for its recordings. When the voice paused, he pressed 1 to see if he could access the new message.

Immediately an astonishing array of sound filled his ears, followed by an immense wall of experience and sensation. He was driven to his knees by the intensity of the experience. For twenty or thirty seconds, he felt connected to the most vividly mystical energy he had ever encountered. It blinded him with possibility and wonder. His entire life became the tiniest

of drops in an enormous pool of beauty and prismatic bliss. He melted into it completely, and felt the delicious, unexpected relief of knowing that he was safe, at peace, at home.

Then the voicemail ended, and he found himself on the floor of the office, dazed, holding a telephone receiver in his hand.

"What happened?" Andrea said. She was standing in the doorway, watching him intently.

"I think whoever used this office last had a voicemail from God," he replied, "but you can never be sure about these things, I suppose."

He offered her the receiver. She smiled and declined to listen to the message herself.

"I know what it feels like," she said simply.

He resisted asking her what she meant. He had the telling feeling that they were nearing the end of this story; he could let it unfold at its own pace.

She helped him to his feet, and they continued once more with their search. But it was clear they were alone. He knew now he had indeed pursued a fool's mission, and a kind of sadness welled up within him. He asked IOTA about the situation in the rest of the building. He was surprised to learn that the building's inhabitants had fled into IOTA's memory banks.

"Where is Sophia?" he asked.

"In the elevator shaft, on her way to this floor."

"How long until she arrives?"

"Impossible to tell."

Hours passed, and eventually they reached the other end of the floor altogether. The offices had become noticeably more elaborate and ornate. They had reached the executive suites, and the glowing nameplates grew considerably brighter here.

And then, they were in sight of the Supreme Being's own office. The glyph they had seen in the reception lobby stood out brightly from the center of the office door, which was closed, unlike every other office door on the floor.

"That must be the office we're looking for," Andrea said. "Do you suppose anyone is in?"

"There's only one way to find out," he replied, proceeding deliberately to the door and knocking once, twice, three times. She came up behind him, put her hand on his shoulder. He stopped knocking, and opened the door.

It was a large office, with bookshelves lining the walls, sets of filing cabinets in the corners, a large black marble conference room table, and of course, a beautiful mahogany desk with a very comfortable chair. Behind the desk was a set of patio doors leading out onto a private balcony. The bookshelves contained a wide range of battered volumes. The filing cabinets were locked.

On the desk, two framed portraits awaited them. One was a portrait of Jesus Christ, the other a portrait of Dr. X. In front of each portrait was an envelope. Dr. X picked up the envelope in front of his portrait; it was yellowing, and brittle to the touch. He reached for a gleaming silver letter opener and carefully opened the envelope.

Andrea watched as he gingerly removed a letter from the envelope, unfolded it, and began to read it. His expression remained impassive while he read, but she could feel the impact it was having on him nonetheless. The letter was many pages long, and he read slowly, as though the density of meaning contained within the letter was tremendous.

At long last, he was finished. He folded the letter back up, and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket.

"What did it say?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"I don't want to talk about it."

He grabbed the letter addressed to his brother, and put it in his pocket as well, to deliver someday if he survived.

"Well," she said, sighing. "Now what?"

A loud "Ding!" echoed from the other side of the floor.

## Chapter Nineteen

A cold chill swept across the floor as Sophia emerged from the elevator. From the opposite side of the floor, they could feel her deliberately searching the floor for them. She moved as a rippling, beautiful wall of energy, and she was on the hunt.

Andrea recognized the energy, and realized with a sudden intake of breath what was about to happen. She was magnetically drawn to the energy, and she began walking slowly toward it, intending to meet it halfway. Dr. X followed her, intensely curious.

"What do you intend to do?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," she replied.

"Just who the hell are you anyway?"

"I don't know yet."

But she did know, even if she could not yet articulate it. That energy was *her* energy. It was a part of her, a long abandoned part of her. Flashes of memory – *finally* – were returning to her. The human body she had borrowed was filled with anxiety and fear, but she herself felt the warm, amniotic delight of understanding beginning to emerge. It was as though someone was suddenly opening a window shade, and the blinding light of the sun was now streaming in; it would take a moment more for her eyes to adjust, before she could see clearly out the window. Before she would finally know why she came here, and before she would be able to return home.

Her pace increased, and Dr. X hurried to keep up with her. He understood that he was now superfluous. And though he had fulfilled his function in leading her here, he had no intention of fleeing the scene just yet. An insane amount of joy and peace seemed to be radiating from Andrea Change. It made him want to smile and laugh, but dammit, this was serious business, and he struggled to keep his game face intact. It felt somehow anti-climactic to reach this confrontation; he felt no anger, no desire to punish this mad monster from the 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement for the devastation she had wreaked on the Association. Andrea seemed delighted by the entire situation, and while he couldn't understand it, he also couldn't help but find himself swept up into it.

Well before their physical presences met, she was sending the energy a greeting, broadcasting it on multiple levels. If the energy was receiving, she couldn't tell, and she didn't care, for she knew there was no

threat. She understood this energy completely, for it had once been part of her. In the beginning, there had been only one Sophia, one Aeon among 22 others who served in the presence of the Unknown God. Yes, she was remembering now, remembering the bliss of the Pleruma, a formless place outside of any material plane where no mortal could exist. She remembered her history, as it returned to her piece by piece: for it was her own shameful desire, all those years ago, that had created this mess in the first place. She had desired to create, as the Unknown God had created. She had desired to *make* things, the way the Unknown God had made things. And without the Unknown God's permission, she had experimented, and created this debased, hollow, miserable existence the mortals called reality.

The other Aeons had been mortified, she remembered ruefully. She still burned with shame at the thought of what she'd done. She had disturbed their peaceful bliss, introduced conflict into the tranquil eternity of the Pleruma. She had pleaded for the Unknown God's forgiveness, then, begged to be punished for her arrogant foolishness and then allowed to remain in the presence of the Unknown God. Surely one as mighty and awesome as the Unknown God could undo what she had done?

And as the other Aeons watched, the Unknown God struck her, splitting her in half. That half that contained her unholy and unreasonable desire was expelled from the presence of the Unknown God, exiled forever to the prison of reality that she herself had created. The elder Sophia was forgiven, was allowed to stay. Peace once more returned to the Aeons – but now, they remained watchful of this strange new reality that the Unknown God allowed to continue. Perhaps the Unknown God was curious about how this abomination might proceed, curious to see if anything of value might ever come from the wayward efforts of the younger Sophia.

From the desire of the younger Sophia, reality emanated and perpetuated itself. Occasionally she took direct action, as when she created her doomed son, Ialdabaoth, whose blind ignorance led him to rule the Earth for a time as if he was its own supreme being. But for much of her time, she simply watched and waited, and gathered strength. Her animosity toward these mortals grew as the centuries passed, for though she could not remember her own origin, she knew that she was imprisoned here. She knew that she was in exile here. Indeed, there were reminders, periodically, of the grace from which she was removed, for the Unknown God sent sons of its own into this reality – Jesus Christ and the Amazing Dr. X – in order to

observe reality from within, and offer glimpses of the light to these mortals, in whom divinity did lurk in quiet corners of their tiny souls.

The pain of loneliness ate away at the younger Sophia. She lashed out in unpredictable ways, and grew fascinated with the creation of evil in all its forms. She unleashed more and more complex forms of wickedness into reality – races such as the shadows, whose only purpose in this reality was to torture and destroy, and entire dimensions of reality that were filled with blight and terrible insanity. Why had she been cast out blind into the wilderness? She scoured reality for an answer, but none had been left for her to find.

In her search, however, she one day stumbled across the Association. At the axis mundi of her creation, the UAIT building rose into the air like a shining beacon, an antenna that seemed to be directly connected to the beyond. The Unknown God had developed an appreciation for this creation, and had chosen to enter it directly. The building, then, was a temple to its presence, and the Association unfolded directly from the will of the Unknown God. Those were mysterious days, and the younger Sophia was enraged. She unleashed every demon at her disposal, led them on a vicious and violent assault.

The archangels themselves were dispatched to capture her. They were the ones who locked her in the containment crypt, in the hidden 23<sup>rd</sup> sub-basement of the UAIT building. And when the Unknown God had seen enough of this reality, and chose to withdraw, the archangels programmed the quarantine field with divine energy, so that someday, if the younger Sophia were ever awakened, the rest of reality would remain safe. For despite the fact that this reality was debased and hollow, the archangels and the Aeons and the Unknown God also saw the few and rare sparks of beauty that managed to evolve here. The Unknown God's new policy of nonintervention would leave these mortals alone once and for all, and their last act on the mortals' behalf was to imprison the younger Sophia in a deep, deep sleep, and let them sort out their brief, tumultuous lives on their own.

Centuries later, Ialdabaoth chose to rescue his mother, and the elder Sophia watched events unfold more closely than the other Aeons. She had grown to pity the poor creature that the younger Sophia had become. Risking the wrath of the Unknown God, she nevertheless pleaded once more in its presence. The younger Sophia had been punished long enough. And indeed, some small measure of good had come from her unfortunate actions. End the exile, the elder Sophia pleaded. Trade me for her, so that she might

at last find peace. I will take her place in reality, for I too am guilty of her sins.

The Unknown God was moved by Sophia's unexpected plea. And so, she was granted permission to end the punishment. But she would not trade places; instead, she would be sent into reality just long enough to extinguish the younger Sophia's pain. At long last, the younger Sophia would be reunited with the source. The Unknown God sent the elder Sophia into reality, containing her energy inside a human body, where her mission was temporarily obscured by the jarring nature of the transition. Her amnesia now had faded, however, and the younger Sophia was rushing to meet her. Indeed, these memories were returning to both of them simultaneously, and all that awaited them was a strange and joyous reunion.

Dr. X watched Andrea come to a halt in the center of a large, empty cafeteria.

"She's almost here," Andrea said.

"What will happen when she gets here?"

"You'll see," she replied, smiling almost mischievously.

And then it happened: the wall of rippling, colorful energy emerged and began swirling around the room, centering its attention on Andrea Change, who raised her arms into the air. Like a lightning rod, she drew the energy into a cyclone around her, and Dr. X watched in amazement as Andrea grew intensely bright. He felt a sea of relief wash over him, the relief the younger Sophia felt at realizing she would soon be free. The two immensely mystical beings wrapped themselves around each other, intertwined again, merged and subsumed each other into a singular, unified energy. After all this time, Sophia was finally whole – all the pain diffused into a larger, wiser entity.

There was a loud crack of thunder, and then suddenly the body of Andrea Change dropped to the floor in a heap. Above her rose a brilliant ball of light that pulsed with color and sound.

Moments later, the quarantine field disappeared.

IOTA informed the residents of the Island that the quarantine had ended. Some of the refugees chose to stay on the Island, but many chose to return to the building, to their respective homes.

Agent Gray returned to the Command Center to find an immense crisis had been averted, but even more trouble was looming large on the horizon. The 23 alien races that had sent ambassadors to the peace

conference had each sent warships to the building. Each had feared the worst when they lost contact with their ambassadors, and indeed, now that communication with the building had been reestablished, the warships could not locate their ambassadors at all.

"Can you do anything about this?" Agent Gray asked.

"I can certainly try," replied Nicholas Solitude.

Within minutes, Derald and Janszen escorted Nicholas out into the parking lot. Theoretically, they would recognize him as the universally loathed human ambassador. Indeed, as soon as they saw him, he was driven to his knees by the sudden force of their voices, utilizing his human brain as a translator. *What has happened here? Where are our ambassadors? Explain this betrayal! Explain this impossible violence!* As he attempted to tell the story, Nicholas realized there was more to fear than just the anger of these alien races. These aliens were themselves terrified – many of them had lost all contact with their home dimensions. Indeed, there were tens of thousands of ships buzzing above the parking lot, and more arriving with every passing moment. Nicholas caught images from some of the aliens, saw the repercussions of the death of Father Time spreading throughout reality. Conceptual order was breaking down, unraveling at a fundamental level. He tried to calm them, but he himself had no more answers than they did. It seemed as though consciousness itself was being dissolved and distributed across a formless, timeless plane, an endlessly serene plane of cold, quiet stasis. How could anyone hope to stop this impossible turn of events? Nicholas wondered.

And then, Nicholas was filled with a sudden influx of glory, as Sophia touched him and whispered in his ear.

*Hello, Nicholas.*

Her voice was soft and fantastic. She introduced herself politely, and then said,

*Would you consider taking on the role of Father Time for a while? There seems to be an opening for someone like you.*

She showed him a picture of what his duties would be, and he gasped in amazement.

*Don't worry, Nicholas. It's easier than it looks.*

And he found himself laughing, and then, he agreed. He had a lot of work ahead of him, setting things right in the multiverse.

"Are you here to say goodbye?" Dr. X asked.

*I am, Sophia replied. My mission is complete. I must return home.*

*"I'm glad I got a chance to know you," he said.*

*You were a fine companion.*

He felt her presence fading slowly from this reality. He knew where she was headed: a place he would never know. He was losing a rare opportunity.

*"Could you take a message to my father?" he asked hurriedly.*

*Of course.*

He paused for a long moment. She waited patiently, until finally he was ready.

*"Tell him I forgive him." And then, "Goodbye, Sophia."*

*Goodbye, my Amazing friend.*

Moments later, she was gone, and he felt a pang of emptiness, knowing that the multiverse had finally shed its last direct connection to the beyond. He sighed deeply, sat in an office chair, covered his face in his hands, and began to weep.



## Chapter Twenty

In the aftermath of the crisis, a report came across Agent Gray's desk. The report was from Medical, and it contained the results of the dimensional search that they had attempted to run on the amnesia victim. Now that Magus was operational again (though still under the control of IOTA, which would continue to gall Gray for some time), the dimensional search had finally had a chance to run. A typical search of this sort took traces of a subject's genetic material, and attempted to determine a home dimension and any dimensions the subject had visited recently.

Armed with that information, Magus had made contact with one of the ships in the parking lot. The ship was a refugee ship from the old planet Earth, a gleaming golden space ark called the Second Coming. The ship had originally carried human survivors from the Concescent War on Earth, but had arrived at the UAIT building completely empty. The ship's navigational system, which identified itself as Job, had a curious tale to tell about what had happened to the ship's last passengers. In addition, Job actually recognized the genetic material in the dimensional search, and had a small identity file on the woman, which it happily transmitted to Magus:

```
Name: Andrea Change
Sex: Female
Place of birth: Madison, Wisconsin,
United States of America
Date of birth: April 12, 1972
Education: Bachelor of Arts - Art
History, University of Washington
Earth Occupation: Graphic Designer
Shipboard Occupation: Archivist /
Information Scientist
```

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A/V interview available
Solitude Project ref. 38229
Length: 2:17:02
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Notes:
Born Andrea Monroe. Adopted new
surname in college for use in internet
community forums. One of eighteen
individuals brought aboard ship by
dreamer Janice Pearson. Became one of
Dr. Nicholas Solitude's primary
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students in the post-concescent field
of Earthropology, eventually publishing
"Tower of Babel - Rules of the Game"
[Archived separately], an in-depth
study of the Concescent War's major
players. Eventually chose to leave the
ship with Dr. Nicholas Solitude and
eight others, in order to explore on
her own.
```

```
Departure 143
Departure date: 002839923 [ship clock
time]
Departure notes: Final transmission
from escape pod 143 indicated the party
had split up. Nicholas Solitude and
three others reported they had traveled
to the UAIT building to report on
Earth's demise. No transmissions were
received from Andrea Change after her
Departure, and her whereabouts are
currently unknown.
```

Gray shook his head. Despite her amnesia, she'd still managed to synchronistically stumble across her own name anyway. He wondered what had happened to her during the crisis, then decided she was doubtless one of the victims, since Magus couldn't locate her anywhere in the building.

More troubling was the fact that Magus couldn't locate the Amazing Dr. X anywhere in the building either. Clearly Dr. X had somehow managed to save the building from complete disaster. While Gray and his Security fought helplessly to protect the building's denizens, Dr. X had performed his superhero duties one last time, and it seemed likely that he was the last victim of the crisis. Gray had never particularly liked that self-righteous bastard, but he also couldn't help respecting the way Dr. X had worked. He was self-righteous, yes, but he was also selfless, and the two of them shared at least one thing in common: a deep love of duty, and a passion for protecting others.

Other reports were piling in. Jayce from Religion had actually produced a report on what her department believed had happened, but without knowledge of how it ended, Gray had no desire to actually read it. He also had no desire to read the casualty reports, or the damage reports, or the news from outside the building, where Nicholas Solitude was now a

cosmic archetype, attempting to put things back the way they used to be. Maybe that was a good idea, and maybe it wasn't... if Gray had gotten the job, he might well have done a little reorganizing. Probably best that Nicholas was doing it, he realized with a smile.

And despite everything that was happening, Security had still received no communication from Management. There was no indication at all that anyone was paying attention to any of it. It burned Gray to imagine how much suffering had taken place, and Management couldn't bother to send so much as a simple acknowledgement. Maybe a little "good job, keep up the good work" – not for him personally, but for his people, the dedicated members of the Association who were even now trying to piece things back together. Thousands and thousands of people had died, and Jayce had scheduled a memorial – would Management attend? Of course not, and it would be up to Gray to offer whatever words of encouragement he could muster. This was all so much more than he anticipated when he took the job. He had no idea he would wind up so alone.

A new email flickered across his display screen. It read:

To: Agent Gray  
From: Trick Start  
Subject: The Future

Director,

Should you ever decide to retire,  
consider a nice bungalow on the Island  
of the Dance. I'll take you out  
drinking some time.

Cheers,  
TS

That smug little prick, Gray thought.

He dug around for the whiskey bottle in his desk and pulled it out. So many old friends had died during the crisis. He raised a silent toast to the Amazing Dr. X, Andrea Change, and all the other victims. Then he pounded a few swallows and got up to leave the comfort of his office. There was a fuckload of work to do, and it wasn't getting done in here.

On the top floor of the building, the Amazing Dr. X stayed with Andrea for the next few weeks. IOTA had shielded activity on the top floor from the rest of the Magus system, so no one knew they were still alive; Dr.

X and IOTA both agreed that the Association would be better off not knowing that there was no one running the show.

Andrea was a complete psychological wreck, in the wake of Sophia's departure from her body and mind. She cried endlessly, and her dreams were filled with nightmares. Dr. X scavenged sustenance for her from the snack rooms; there was holy water in the water cooler, and vacuum-sealed pouches of manna in the cupboards. But she could barely keep anything down, and her health deteriorated rapidly. He wished he could take her to Medical, but he doubted either one of them would survive the elevator ride back down from the top floor; the only reason they had survived before was because of Sophia, and Sophia had abandoned them here. Dr. X fully expected to die here, and it seemed Andrea would die without ever coming to her senses. She couldn't communicate, and she barely seemed to realize he was there.

He took to wandering the floor alone during the few hours a night in which she slept. He could almost imagine what this floor had been like when it was fully occupied, when work got done and the sound of hustle and bustle filled the air. Despite the joy he had felt in the presence of Sophia, he resented her for the way she used Andrea, for the way she left Andrea in such a mess. Andrea had tasted the glory of the beyond, and was now forever cut off from the bliss she had experienced. What was the point of a paltry human existence in the wake of everything she had known, in those brief but powerful moments when they shared her human body?

And then one night, he came to check on her while she slept, and found the dark office empty. It was unusual for her to leave this office at all, and he began a search for her. He found her on one of the outdoor patios. She was standing on the railing, balanced precariously with her arms straight out at either side, and her back to the drop-off. He came slowly onto the patio, and made true eye contact with her for the first time. She had stopped crying, finally, and her face was finally at peace. He stopped, not wanting to frighten her, and raised a hand out to her, but she had clearly made up her mind. He watched her smile, and then she seemed to fall backwards in slow motion, gracefully arcing off the railing and plummeting down the side of the building.

He rushed to the railing and peered over the edge. He could see her falling, receding into the distance, becoming a distant, dark spot. She would never land, of course, for this was an infinitely tall building; instead, her body would plummet eternally. As she fell, she began to glow as her

body heated up in the atmosphere, the way she had radiated light when Sophia was still inside of her. The glow expanded until it was visible from the parking lot, and news began to spread of the new astronomical body that now hung in space above the ground, near the side of the building, falling and not falling at the same time. The parking lot soon filled with people pouring outside to catch a glimpse of the falling star. In the wake of everything that had happened all across reality, the survivors eventually took to calling the star Hope, and although many competing myths emerged to explain its sudden appearance, most accepted it for it was: one more mystery among many, one more beautiful sight that somehow seemed to make life worth living.