

Astronought

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“Initiating Zero Sequence,” the lab-coated scientist announced to the tense room, military presence lurking behind him, “Space-time is stabilizing on our induced micro-ergosphere...”

The room was filled with all manner of blinking lights and buzzing machines, white lab-coated scientists staring at screens and measuring things while a small group of military-types lurked in the back surveying the scene.

The chief scientist—the one who had spoken—leaned forward and adjusted something on his screen. In front of military-types, in front of the scientists and in front of all the machines, a pin-prick of pure white light appeared and began to flutter in one spot and then straighten into a plane-like surface.

“Space-time has flattened, beginning to invert,” as the Chief Scientist spoke a man in a clumsy-looking spacesuit walk into the room and began moving directly to the growing, white portal, “The wormhole has scaled and is stable. You may step through the Portal and best of luck!”

The man in the spacesuit paused, looked at the military-types where one of them nodded, and then stepped through the fluttering Portal...

“The best I can work out from the readings before we lost him,” the Chief Scientist was lecturing a small room of military-types, mostly the same ones as before with one or two older, grey, colder faces, “Is that the dimension into which our man stepped has different constants and vectors to ours such that core physical assumptions—like solids and liquids, mass and atoms—cannot necessarily be made over there.”

The oldest, greyest and coldest military-type growled a question out: “What do you mean? Explain this in language the rest of us can relate to.”

The Chief Scientist sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose while squeezing his eyes shut, and then started again.

“In our universe, we have atoms that make up matter. Matter has various states that include the solid-state. Our body is, in fact, a solid: frozen atoms clinging together in a bonded crystal lattice and directed by our consciousness. When our man stepped into another dimension, we discovered that the other dimension does not have atoms, which means it does not have the solid-state of matter either. Which means, General, that our man no longer had a *body*. His consciousness managed to survive for a while by attaching to something on that side but then we lost communication with him and the portal closed.”

The General narrowed his eyes and the people looked at him. He thought for a bit and nodded.

“Right,” he barked, standing up slowly and turning to leave, “Send more men in there. Figure this dimension out. Our sonic probes indicated life was there and we need to figure out if it is a threat or not.”

The Chief Scientist closed the door when the last of his staff had left for the night and then collapsed on his chair. He was exhausted and his emotions were in turmoil.

It was a disaster.

They had sent man after man through the Portal. Some disappeared quickly, others attached to *something* on the other side, and some had even appeared to attach to multiple things on that side creating replicators of their consciousness...

Or their instruments were wrong? Or everything was wrong?

It was all so confusing and nothing made sense.

He stood up and walked to his desk. The bottom drawer there had a bottle of whiskey in it. Perhaps there were answers at the bottom of it? Perhaps not, but it would make him feel a bit better.

The General marched through the facility, his people being towed behind him and the staff fleeing before him.

He had been woken up early and told that they had an answer. While he was happy about that—he had his *own* superiors he needed to answer to—it had interrupted his Saturday golf plans and he was still keen to make the back nine holes.

“Right, what have you found,” he barked at the Chief Scientist that was now standing before him, “Where are our men going? What is happening on the other side of this blasted portal?”

The Chief Scientist—looking slightly pale, a tad green and sweaty—nodded and began slowly to unpack things. Over the months of dealing with the General, he had learned how to speak to him.

“Late last night, I had an idea. I sent through another probe—“

“But we’ve sent plenty of probes through,” the General interrupted, angrily, “Why would you send another one?”

“Well,” the Chief Scientist backtracked, his hangover intensifying under this scrutiny, “Well, since we started sending men through the Portal, we have not sent any *more* probes. Why would we? Well, I wanted to see if I could use a probe to try and locate our men. And, General, I did.”

“Well? Spit it out man!” the General asserted, leaning forward, his men shadowing his movement.

“The other side does not have atoms and matter like ours, thus our men’s consciousnesses could not exist in their normal states. Rather, our men’s consciousnesses were attaching to the first things that they found and that could house them. Our men are still there, but they are no longer our *men*. Their consciousnesses have attached to the lifeforms on the other side. Do you know the seven characteristics of life, General?”

The Chief Scientist was on a role now, standing up and orating his incredible discovery. He did not even pause and wait for the General to acknowledge his ignorance on this subject.

“Life has seven characteristics, else it is not life. Life is responsiveness to the environment; it grows and changes; life has the ability to reproduce; it has a metabolism and breathes; life can maintain homeostasis or, in other words, it maintains its structure; life is made of cells; and, life passes traits onto its offspring. Now, the men have lost their bodies in the other dimension, meaning that they no longer are made up of cells nor have maintained homeostasis, but all the other characteristics of life remain with our men. In fact, some of our men’s base reproductive instincts have been retained and the probe picked up that they have been growing their consciousness on the other side. Specifically, *multiplying* their consciousnesses. Our men are *still* there, General, and, in fact, there are *more* of them!”

The Chief Scientist paused and let the room absorb all this detail. He smiled and leaned forward.

“There is another thing that exists that does not completely satisfy the definition of life, General. There is another things that *almost* alive in our universe,” the Chief Scientist was now inches away from the General’s face, “The *virus!*”

The General gasped and some of his men instinctually reached for their weapons before realizing how silly that was and slumping back into their seats.

“General,” the Chief Scientist concluded, sitting back down in his chair, “When our men go through the Portal, they lose their bodies but their consciousness automatically attached to a suitable host. A suitable *living* host. And some of our men then start to replicate through the host and into other hosts. General, when we step through the Portal into the dimension that lacks our own dimension’s structure, *we* become *that* dimension’s *virus*. Who knows, perhaps our own viruses in this universe are actually lifeforms from other dimensions?”

“When did he start coughing?” asked the Doctor.

“Uh, must be about two days ago,” said the child’s mother, “Just suddenly. Around the same time we were hit with another of those strange power surges. Yes, must be about two days ago.”

“Yeah,” the Doctor sighed, “It’s the flu. Strange this time of year, but some new flu has been going around like crazy. Who knows where it came from? Don’t worry, I’ll write some prescriptions here and the kid should be fine in a week or two.”