**The Gates**

“Well that’s interesting” Xu remarked, and peered closer at the illuminated monitor. He recorded some numbers and brought up other calculations on one of the several monitors hanging above him. His fingers traced well-rehearsed routines and soon the cross reference was complete. Xu scratched the beginnings of a beard and looked behind him.

The gate station was silent except for the dull hum of the air circulation system. Most of the other work stations were off and for an irrational reason, Xu suddenly wished more people were on the station. His hands slipped back into their usual positions and numerous klaxons informed him that the prototype gate had been closed without mishap. He quickly consulted the monitor one last time to make sure energy levels were normal before grabbing a print out.

Before running out of the room, he took a quick look over his shoulder. The gate controls were as he left them. The software was set back to its base state and hopefully with the help of a small script he had snuck into the control computer, there would be no trace of his involvement.

He traversed the white, mostly nondescript storage hallway, eying a mounted camera with distaste. He would wipe its recording later. Of course phones didn’t work this far away from the planet but they had given him a pad which allowed for communication inside the station. He rarely used it but now took it out of his suit.

He fumbled with it for a bit sending a message to June, one of the other researchers on the station. And ironically, one of the only ones Xu trusted. The feeling was not necessarily reciprocated, but Xu mostly chalked that up to different backgrounds. That and off world universities were still not thought of as prestigious as Earth side ones for some reasons.

“Are you still up?” He swiped, hesitating slightly before sending. There weren’t many people on the station and most kept to themselves, especially between the technicians, responsible for the upkeep of the station itself and the planet below, and the University members, who really only cared about the gates. Even among the university members however, no love was lost usually. Everyone had their own research to do. Most didn’t want to be here too much and June was no different.

Although her quarters and small work station were just a handful of feet away in the non-rotational section, he knew he couldn’t just enter her work station, peculiar social rules seemed to have developed on the gate station, and he didn’t want to hurt his already damaged reputation with her.

Regardless, it was on his way, at least he could claim coincidence if she got angry at him. He undid the latch on the transitional corridor. Truth be told, he was not really comfortable with zero-g and thus spent most of his time in the rotational section, although he was lucky enough to have one of the few dorm rooms in the rotational section.

The door hissed behind him and lights glared around him, bouncing off the stark white walls. He instinctively grabbed for a handhold and awkwardly held himself stationary even as his torque started to swing his feet up into his face.

He pushed himself along, coming to a stop near June’s door, just as the pad vibrated in his pocket.

“Yes.” The laconic response said.

Scowling slightly, he quickly typed a response and grabbed a new handhold with one hand, arm looped through the hold.

“I have something to show you. It’s about the Gate prototype”.

A moment later, the door opened revealing June. June was a particularly attractive woman, or so Xu thought. She had attended some major institution in Europe and made sure that people knew, perhaps to remind them she wasn’t just looks, which, to be fair was exactly what he had done.

“Thanks for taking a look at this, ah, here is the results I was referring to.” He clumsily attempted to hand her the paper, only to realize that that was the hand on the handle. The act of jerking his arm out introduced a momentary torque that was now, awkwardly starting to turn him. He hoped June wouldn’t notice. It looked like she didn’t as she took the paper from his hand.

“You actually printed it out? Why did you do that?” June asked, confused. The paper was actually a fire proof plastic and didn’t recycle well, physical printouts were rare.

“I, uh, didn’t want anyone t-to see it before I made s-sure what I saw was real.” He replied, cursing himself internally for his stutter, hastily grabbing another handhold, arresting his rotation.”

“Hrm, everything looks normal. Energy levels are within expected limits, no bad spikes or destabilizations; it looks fine.” She looked up, somewhat annoyed, but a grin appeared when she saw Xu trying to orient himself.

“Still haven’t gotten a handle on that?” She asked.

He shook his head, and even more vigorously when she tried to give the printout back to him.

“Ah, no, t-take a look at the time d-deltas, there’s something wrong!”

She rechecked the sheet, one eyebrow raising quizzically. “Wait, is this from the last test? The time stamp is wrong!”

“Oh I was hoping you wouldn’t notice t-that, ah, but really, it’s the deltas that are off.”

She looked down again. “You know; this isn’t really my specialty. I do stabilization research; you’re the latency guru.”

“Thank you” Xu said somewhat blushing before remembering what he was going to add. “So, ah, the transmission times are off between the tests. A Gate’s time and the prototype are off by several microseconds. The prototype is faster than A Gate somehow.”

“Ok” she admitted, “that is off, but it’s probably just error accumulating somewhere. You know better than I that if the two are calibrated right and everything is working, they should have the same deltas. You probably still need to adjust some subsystem.” She said dismissively.

“Plus, I know you’re proud of your synchronization system, but I highly doubt you’ve improved on the professor’s design. It is his life’s work practically after all.”

“I suppose it is possible that something’s off, but I didn’t change any of the calibrations from the last test. I triple checked everything. It was all the same from the last test!”

A frown started to appear on June’s face and she crossed her arms. “Are you telling me you ran the test tonight? By yourself? Without any technicians?!” The frown changed into horror.

“Ah… yes, I s-suppose that’s exactly what I did” Xu admitted.

“Are you insane? What if something had gone wrong? You’ll be arrested for sure! You could have killed us all!” June threw her hands into the air in exclamation, quickly remembering she was in zero-g.

“Don’t worry, ah, like you said yourself, everything was stable.” Xu pointed out.

“So why did you do something so stupid? You found these deltas; did one of your models predict that?” June demanded, suddenly suspicious, “Are you trying to discredit the professor’s work?”

“No! O-Of course not! In fact, quite the opposite! I, ah…” Xu stammered, suddenly feeling another bout of fear laced adrenaline run through him. He surreptitiously glanced down the hallways. There were no cameras in this dorm area, but he guessed it wouldn’t hurt to be careful.

“Is it possible we could talk in a less open area?” he asked, surprised he didn’t stutter once.

June took a somewhat exacerbated breath and also looked down the hallways.

“Look, you better not try anything” She warned.

“Err, I, ah, told you I’m sorry for t-that, I…” He trailed off before reassuring her, “I’m serious; I don’t q-quite understand the implications of this, but it’s one hundred percent professional.” He stuttered, sternly.

June shook her head but motioned for him to enter.

The door closed softly behind him. June’s work station and room were impeccable, unlike Xu’s own quarters, which were a mess. Although he supposed it helped if you were in zero-g and would have to strap everything down anyway.

“You better give me a good reason why I shouldn’t talk to someone about this. You could wind up getting all of the university researchers here in trouble!”

“Look, I’ll start from the beginning. Last test someone slipped a message under my door asking me to run this experiment while the window for the Gate was still open.” Xu explained.

“I just assumed that it was the professor. Who else would ask me something like that? But as I conducted the test, I realized that the circumstances were a bit… odd. I wrote a script to erase the record of the test. This should be the only record.” He said, pointing at the paper still in June’s hands.

“So what are you going to do now?” June asked.

“I, err, was a-actually h-hoping it was you who sent the message if not the professor, but t-that doesn’t seem, um, to be the case.” Xu admitted.

June’s eyebrows raised. “Look, since I know communication isn’t your strong suit,” she pointed out harshly, “if I need or ask you to do anything, I’ll do it to your face.”

“F-fair enough. I guess then, I was wondering what you w-would do in my sit-sit-situation?” He said, struggling with the last word. It only took her a second to understand why he was playing at.

“No way, you’re not getting me involve. Not even a bit! I have only two months left here before I can present my research and I’m not going to stick my neck out for you, or anyone!”

Xu grimaced, but understood. He turned to leave.

“One word of advice, I guess. If the professor wrote that note, and I really hope for your sake he did, it’s probably because he couldn’t run the test himself. You could try to figure out what he wanted to know from it, probably about those deltas.”

“Exactly!” Xu exclaimed, and started to ask June about some specifics, but June would have none of it.

“No, no, no.” She said, shaking her head and reaching out to give the paper back to him. “This stinks of the exact type of academic politics that I want to avoid. Probably some childish bout between the professor and some other university head.”

He nodded, took the paper and left.

Xu stared at the professor, but he hadn’t let anything slip about the “extra” test. Subtly was not Xu’s strong suit, but he was doing his best to catch any hints the professor was dropping.

However, if it was the professor, he wasn’t making it easy for Xu. The two were in the Gate control area, which also doubled as the main lab. They had just finished running some experiments on a simulation of the prototype, powered by data form the real thing. The results were promising but they were going to send them to some of the other gate control systems for validation during the next window, which was two months from now. June was supposed to leave then to present her research on earth.

“The robots have finished most of the facilities below, the managers reported” the professor said suddenly.

“Oh?” Responded Xu, looking up from the last of the data compression.

“There’s just the radiation shielding left which should be done this week! The first of the crews should arrive next window.”

“Well, radiation shielding is, ah, somewhat important” Xu joked. The professor chuckled.

“Before I leave, are you free sometime soon? I know you’re working hard on that synchronization model.” The professor’s voice dropped softer. “Its hard stuff, I know. I realize you’re just working on the prototype but you should take a look at the existing architecture. You might see something interesting…” And now back to regular volume. “…good work today! I’ll send you specifics on the meeting later.”

Xu watched him leave with some confusion. Was he putting too much emphasis on things? Nothing the professor said was out of ordinary. It was no secret that the professor was proud of what had come of his work. Obviously he had looked at what the professor had done with synchronization; what did he think Xu had been doing all this time?!

But perhaps the body language? The compression was almost finished. Xu absent mindedly ran some system diagnostics.

What had he said? Look at the existing architecture? Fine, Xu decided. He would do just that. Things were simpler before he had run that test. The diagnostics were all green. He sent the data along to the professor and left the lab.

He stared from his desk to the Gate map he had hanging over his small bed. The graph splayed from Earth, almost web like. The artist who had put the visualization together obviously hadn’t intended for it to be to scale. Earth was put smack in the center of it. He stared at his Gate control station far away, one of only a handful with triple connections.

To be fun he had drawn in the prototype as well, a straight connection right to the moon. He looked at the linkages next to the prototype’ line. An idea struck suddenly. What if it was about interference?

The gates had to be tuned to incredible precision to connect properly. In fact, the professor hadn’t really developed the Gate system as a whole, that honor belonged to a research conglomeration in Japan. But the head researcher there has such an unpronounceable name that most lay person’s books just credited the professor with the whole thing. Actually though, the professor had just shown that one could place the links back to back without any ill effects, provided that you observed the windows.

He loaded up the professor’s old papers, by now well recognized documents to him. He went through them one by one. The facts were simple: you could put the entrances and exits of the gates right on top of one another practically, vastly reducing the energy needed for a full jump, but by breaking the jump up into segments, you had to be careful about the windows.

The two Gate segments were linked harmonically and gravitational distortions like a planet passing or even worse a star had large effects on when and how long a connection would be the cleanest. Open the gate at the wrong time and the power draw would be unimaginably strong and erratic. It was clear why the point to point approach of the prototype was a clear improvement, but the materials required for it were brand new. Hence them testing it all the way out here.

He realized he had started to drift off in his thoughts and stared back at the paper and flipped the page. The schematics were there, not in full detail though, the implementation of the professor’s research had been a joint private and government undertaking and some of the pieces were still incredibly secret, even to the researchers who had designed the thing in the first place.

The two Gate points faced one another on the page with only a small sliver of room between the two. The stable wormholes within each Gate were held together against their will by a genius dynamic magnetic field.

Had anyone anticipated the effects of having two gates together in parallel? Most likely, but perhaps he should take a look at the math himself, if the professor was interested. His fingers went to their keys.

Several hours later he pushed back his chair and wiped some of the tiredness from his eyes.

Nothing. If the Gates were at the separation they were at at this station and close (within about five degrees) to flush, there should be no problem. A complete bust.

He sighed and stole a look at the time. There were only five “hours” left before “day” would start. Earth centric concepts of time still were hard to dislodge, even in today’s age.

Xu flopped onto his bed and stared at the featureless metal ceiling. Ok, so he knew the architecture was of note, possibly. And the deltas were off, and the prototype was a straight shot, and there was not an interference problem.

What if the delay were real? What would that mean? That would imply that the prototype straight shot was actually faster than the staged version. That made sense, each gap introduced a known delay that had to be factored into the synchronization equations, but that delay should be in nanoseconds. The one he had observed was several microseconds, almost four orders of magnitude off.

And it mattered. A delay like that was the difference between a clean jump and hull failure, essentially being chopped in half, yet fused back together. He had seen the pictures of the original test probes that the professor’s team had sent when they were just perfecting the technology. He had to figure out what was happening.

A sudden worrying though hit him. Not only did he have to figure out what was happening; he had to do it before June left to go through the next window.

He brought up the results of similar Gate linkages but they all agreed with A Gate, the regular linkaged one. B Gate, the prototype, was different. It had no relay stations. However, this meant there was something wrong with B Gate or something strange with the whole system. According to the equations, there was no reason for it. It’s true that there could be something mundane wrong with the gate, a broken piece, a deformed electromagnet, but almost definitely, these kinds of problems would be picked up by one of the thousands of sensors on the Gate itself.

He heard something behind him and jerked to the direction of the door. A piece of paper lay under it. He sprinted to it and flung it open, just in time to see a figure slip around the corner.

“Hey, wait!” he yelled. Xu grabbed the paper and sprinted towards the corner. The person was gone. He scratched his head and looked at the paper.

It was a series of Gate synchronization equations. Three of them, then a space, then another series of them. He frowned. Was someone messing with him? If the professor wanted to have him look at something, he could just have messaged him!

He slumped back into his chair and stared at the equations. They were not necessarily challenging but all the initial conditions like rotation, position and the time based gravitational interference equations were plain wrong. These equations weren’t for any real gate.

When he was done he looked at this solutions: 2007, 2530, 3507, 12,30. He didn’t think the numbers were very significant mathematically. Not part of any series he knew off the top of his head. Garbage equations with garbage solutions.

He sighed and flung the paper on the table, slamming his computer shut. There was something on the back. Brackets and a colon.

He grabbed the sheet and peered at it. The new symbols lined up with the equations, enclosing the first questions and a colon between the last two. (2007,2530,3507),12:30. Coordinates and a time! He didn’t sleep well that night.

He awoke feeling horrible. Gripping the sheet, he looked at his pad trying to figure out where the coordinates would match up with. He had figured they were station coordinates and their value would put the position somewhere in the center.

As he looked at the wall in front of him though, he identified a problem. The coordinates were inaccessible. They were inside a wall. He looked around. The hallway was an ill used utility hallway that lead to the reactor, halfway between the university and technician quarters.

Suddenly he heard a knock from the wall. Disbelieving, he stared at the area for a moment. A second knock followed the first though, and more rapid. He inched closer to the wall and saw that one of the panels looked openable.

Looking around to make sure there were no people or cameras, he curiously took the panel out of the wall. Behind it was a ventilation duct of some sort, and inside that was the professor.

“Professor!” he cried. “Shush!” The professor silence, glaring at him. “Quick, get in.” The professor motioned.

Not sure what was going on, Xu crouched and scooted into the space.

“What are…?” The professor silenced him and motioned him to move further in. Several feet in, the shaft turned into a small maintenance room. The height allowed them to stand.

“Will you tell me what this is all about? Why did you slip those papers under my door? What’s going on?”

“You ran the tests, right?” The professor asked, helping Xu to his feet.

“Of course. I have the results right here.” Xu said, brandishing the print-out.

“I assume you were discreet about it?” The professor said, looking over the printout.

“I wiped all traces of the test and have been trying to avoid the cameras”

“Good, good” The professor said, still going over the sheet. Suddenly he looked up. “You didn’t talk to anyone else about this did you?”

Xu was silent for a moment as he realized the implications of his former actions. Should he lie to help June from getting involved? He looked at the professor and realized that it was far too late for that: his initial expression had already answered the question.

“Err, to tell the, ah, truth p-professor”, the stammer was back, “I talked to June about it, although not in detail, and she didn’t want to have any part in it.”

The professor shook his head. “Thanks unfortunate, but there’s nothing we can do about it at this point. But lets get down to business. We can’t be missing for too long, especially now me.” He turned to Xu. “Did you figure it out?” The professor asked.

“I know part of it, whatever it is. There’s some sort of delay in the A Gate or the B Gate is faster somehow.”

“Yes, precisely. Let me lay out the problem. Even with the prototype, Gate technology is limited today. Messages and material can only be during the windows and our understanding of how to improve on the systems we have is still in its infancy.” The professor said, sitting down. Xu followed suit. The two faced each other, LEDs dully shining behind them, a dim overhead light keeping them from true darkness.

“But for all its limitations, it’s Gate technology that allowed us to expand outside our solar system. It would have taken hundreds of years to get here, which is of course how long it took the first pioneer robots to set all this up for us. The ones who constructed all of this would have left in the early 2000s, just as many are still in transit or are being launched to even further reaches.”

“Dozens of planets now are semi-habitable with the stations we have, and obviously you know this being born on one. But the politics with Earth are tenuous at best. Have you heard of the commotion that happened almost three years ago now?” the professor asked. Xu shook his head. He had been too focused on his studies at the university.

“One of the planets tried to break contact and were going to break or take control of the Gate station above their planet. Somehow, Earth was warned before they moved and the rebels were dealt with…harshly. Those that survived were sent back to Earth for trial.”

“The bottom line is, they are intercepting and copying all communications throughout the Gate system!” The professor paused to let that fact sink in.

“Their copying of the data introduces a delay, which you found out. The prototype proved this by allowing us to measure the point to point time against the segmented time, for the first time possible.”

Xu swept sweat from his forehead. “So who’s doing this?” He asked.

“One of my colleagues suspected a loose coalition between several powerful Earth governments as well as industry. Essentially, the same people who funded and built the Gates in the first place.”

“But how do you know?” Xu asked, somewhat suspicious. A conspiracy of this size would be massive, almost unthinkable.

“This colleague tipped me off quietly before inquiring more to his university. Apparently, someone heard of it, because by the next windows, he’d had charges filed against him and he had to go to Earth to defend against them. I haven’t heard from him since.”

Xu paled. “So it *is* a conspiracy.” He thought a bit, mind racing. “What do we do?”

“We sit tight for now. We don’t know what they’re planning. I will consult with my colleagues.”

Xu looked at him strangely. “How? The next window isn’t for another two months!”

“The micro Gate. With it, I can communicate directly to others, without sending transmissions back to earth.”

“The what? Another gate?” Xu asked, confused. “Yes”, the professor said dismissively” I kept it from the initial experiments, it’s a small version of what’s out there.”

“How come I’ve never heard of it? Where does it lead to?” Xu asked, interested, but the professor was concerned about other things.

“I’ve kept it hidden from everyone, for reasons that you now understand clearly. As for where it leads, I will keep that a secret for now. I don’t want to accidently betray any of my colleagues. But forget about that for now. You need to be on guard. The technicians are usually an ok bunch, but who knows what they are capable of, if you understand me.” They left surreptitiously and agreed to meet via secret message if either turned up something.

However, the following moth passed without import. He saw June a handful of times, but she didn’t seem interested in talking to him.

A week in, his room was reassigned to one that wasn’t in the rotational section. He never quite knew who was in charge of the station, probably a committee of technicians and university personnel.

He looked with narrow eyes at his new room. The door looked the same. He looked around. The hallway looked the same, metal floors, plastic container walls with small labels, metal ceiling, mostly, white or unpainted. The lighting was the same, the same dim fluorescent light found all over the station.

He topped the crate of belongings in front of him, for once happy to be in zero-g. Some of his tools were quite heavy, but here, he could lift them all at once effortlessly.

However, he still couldn’t navigate in zero-g as well as he wanted to, certainly not as good as June, who had surprised him by asking if he wanted any help moving things. He had thanked her, but something about the offer made it sound as if she thought the reallocation was some sort of demotion.

He surveyed his new room. It was almost exactly the same as well. He sifted in his stuff and strapped it to the ground. He would have to get used to the zero-g. He would put things away later.

As he was locking his door, a reflection caught his eye. A camera; at the end of the hallway. He scowled. He would have to figure out how to access its records from his computer. Was the move some sort of demotion? Or was it a subtle signal for him? Did they know? Had they seen his meeting with the professor?

These thoughts followed him as he drifted to the lab. Passing through the transition section, he was surprised to see the window alarms active when he entered the lab.

Several technicians were there as well as the professor. June was there as well in one of the corners, working on something. She was wearing a pale green uniform which was significant. Everyone usually wore dark colors. The station was not a very vibrant place. It looked good on her.

“What’s going on?” He asked the professor. Several of the technicians turned and greeted him. He recognized a few face.

“It’s a very small window, just a few seconds, not long enough to send anything except for information. We’re expecting a response to our tests of the prototype.” The professor clarified. Xu nodded but inside he felt a sinking feeling. If his test had been detected, this was their first chance to respond.

The professor scowled at something and ushered over one of the head technicians. He was much less subtle in his response. “That’s a bunch of bullshit!” The man yelled, and backed away from the computer. The professor and the head technician conversed while the rest of the people watched awkwardly. He and June locked eyes for a second but he thought he felt himself blushing so he quickly looked away.

The professor signaled everyone to listen and pointed at the screen next to him. The head technician nodded sullenly next to him, arms crossed.

“I’m afraid to say that although the results are mostly positive, they believe they experienced some sort of partial jump from their end. Although our sensors have no indication of such activity, this made them even more uncomfortable. As such, they are forbidding any tests of the prototype until they can pinpoint the problem on their side.”

There were several groans and some curses from both parties. Xu felt strangely detached from reality. They knew! They knew and they knew the details of the test!

June shot him a murderous look. The sinking feeling somehow became worse. Of course, her research required another test of the prototype Gate! He had doomed her research. The world closed around him.

He barely remembered drifting back to his room. The bleak room didn’t help his mood. He shifted to his bed and soon fell into an uneasy sleep.

He was standing on a series of shifting platforms. Deep below him was the planet, spiraling madly. Ahead of him was a person; somehow he knew it was June. She was trying to warn him about something behind him.

Twisting, he realized he was in zero-g, but couldn’t hold on to anything, the platforms were too far down by just an arm’s length. He panicked, unable to gain any traction. He saw the platforms were metal, the same airbrushed plating found in the station.

Sweat began to run down his face. He turned in horror to the dark behind. An irrational terror gripped him as he saw a being illuminated from behind, its features wreathed in shadows. A tentacle like arm reached toward him as he squirmed in a futile struggle. As his eyes adjusted he could see that it was actually a crowd of people, but instead of faces, they had the reality distortion of Gates, all reaching toward him.

Tentacles wrapped around his neck, choking him. He tried to call out to June but she was too far and he couldn’t seem to be able to make any sound. He screamed breathlessly.

And awoke to find himself drenched in sweat. He couldn’t breathe! With horror, the rational part of him realized that the air vac system was off somehow!

Gasping for breath amid the cloying stale air, he squirmed and panicked when he realized that he was suspended just barely out of reach of any surface. He had forgotten to strap himself in when he slept. He wriggled, legs now above him, head facing down. Stars appeared in front of his eye.

Suddenly, his toe touched something, his desk lamp! It was just enough to give him hope. Careful not to knock it away, he applied just enough force to turn him such that his feet could barely touch the desk. He wasted no time and shot across the room and slammed on the door controls.

The fresh air hit him like a wave, submerging him in glorious oxygen. He hung for several minutes collecting himself.

“I think someone just tried to kill me.” Xu gasped to the professor, huddled in the ventilation room. He explained what had just happened.

“I understand what you’re going through, but I hope you understand what we’re dealing with. Proving involvement is usually impossible though. Did you check the cameras?” The professor asked.

“Yes, there was nothing. I’m almost possible someone turned off the air vac for my room, so they had to be there! But the camera shows nothing!”

The professor signed and shook his head. “They’re more careful than that. If you and I can access the cameras with some effort, they can override the air vac systems.”

“So what can we do?” Xu asked. “That was terrifying!”

“The best that’s worked with my colleagues is to stay in clumps with other people. From now on, I believe we should spend more time in the lab, you and I. Even more, we should invite some technicians to work with us closely as well. They’re unafraid of killing to further their goals, but they won’t attack innocents.”

“This is crazy” Xu said, shaking his head. He realized that wasn’t all that was shaking. “Should we get June to the lab as well?”

The professor also shook his head. “I’d rather not get her involved, more than she already is. We have no indication that they know that she knows anything” He pointed out. Xu nodded.

The next months passed uneventfully, much to Xu’s relief. However, only a week and a handful of days before the next window (and when June was going to leave) the professor burst into the lab.

“I ust got the results of a test on the surface, come and see Xu!” He looked excited but perhaps worried. Xu recognized the secret phrase they had designated to meet. The professor was already gone.

Exactly an hour later, Xu edged into the ventilation shaft, but when he got to the end, he was surprised to see an additional person in the room.

“J-June! What are you d-doing here?” he asked shocked.

“The professor just finished telling me about you’re conspiracy. I’m not sure that you’re all not just crazy.” She stated, arms crossed. Xu didn’t say anything in response.

“It doesn’t matter that you believe us, only that you listened. Here is a stick with the evidence me and my colleagues have managed to come up with.”

“Thank you professor,” Xu said, reaching for the stick, but the professor withdrew his hand.

“No, this is for you June. Best forget about all this. You’ll know if you should come forward with this information.”

June took the stick but scowled. “Tell me why I’m not just going to turn this over at the first sign of trouble? I’m telling you, I don’t want to be involved!”

“Its your decision what to do with the data. I will let you make your own choices. They have not connected you with us.”

“Ha.” June snorted. “As well they shouldn’t. I’m leaving. Have fun with your game.” She said, crawling out of the shaft.

The professor made sure she had left before he continued. “It’s a shame she doesn’t trust us, but I think her lack of belief will help her if they ask her any questions. Our choices are much more restricted, I’m afraid” The professor said, suddenly dead serious. You in particular are in grave danger. It’s clear you are known to them; and although I am public enough that heads would turn if I suddenly disappeared, that is not the case for you. Even worse…”

The professor stopped for a moment and either concentrated or thought about something for a moment.

“Even worse, I just received an urgent communication over the micro-Gate that they’re sending a squad of men to apprehend you!”

“No! On w-what grounds? They c-can’t just do that!” Xu protested, stricken with fear.

“Unfortunately, they can do that and will. You have to flee. If you get a shuttle to the surface, you can go to ground there. There are enough workers in the urban areas and enough space in the other areas that you could go anywhere and be somewhat confident in your safety.”

“I’m having trouble understanding, ah, even getting my mind around this…”

“I understand, but we need to act immediately. I’m not convinced whoever tried to hurt you won’t do it again. You should leave immediately: today!” the professor said.

Xu ran his hands through his hair and clenched his teeth, looking down the ventilation shafts one after another. After a long while he said “fine. I’ll leave at once.”

“Oh, I almost forgot.” The professor said, “you should give me a copy of all your work. When its safe I and my colleagues will figure out how to contact you.”

“Of course,” Xu replied, “I’ll go pack my things now!” He got up and started through the vent.

“Meet the shuttle through airlock two. It leaves in three hours. No questions will be asked. I’ve prepared everything.”

Xu nodded and left. The next hours were a blur, copying data, packing his things. He only took a backpack. He climbed slowly on to the shuttle and watched the station shrink into the distance as he shot through the atmosphere.

**Optional Ending A- The Colleagues**

The professor watched the shuttle leave with relief. The more fragmented and hidden they were, the less likely they would be able to find them. He hunched over his computer and pressed a button. A small fist sized circular device hummed on his desk, bolted to its surface. The micro-Gate distributed Xu’s research to the rest of his colleagues. He waited for the transmission to go through before disassembling the device.

He then ran to the lab and input an interesting combination of parameters into the console. Lights flashed as he overrode failsafe after failsafe.

He looked wildly at the energy levels, making sure they were within a certain range. He locked the settings into place and started a script that would keep everyone else out of the system.

After he made sure everything was in place, he sprinted to the first shuttle lock and stole it. With the micro-Gate safely in his possession, he flew straight into the active Gate.

Almost a hundred lightyears away, the professor’s craft emerged above a particularly large asteroid. The robots, although damaged by the radiation of traveling to their present location, had successfully constructed a usable Hab on its surface.

The professor smiled. There was no way for them to follow him, to robots responsible for the Gate at this location hadn’t made the journey and only a few people even knew they were sent.

As his one of a kind, one-way wormhole destabilized behind him, he smiled. Soon with his help, his colleagues would join him. In a few years, they would be ready.

June shook her head at the last question. She couldn’t understand why or what had compelled the professor and Xu to jump through a clearly unstable portal. It wasn’t even open during a window! Everyone knew that amounted to suicide.

The man thanked her and let her pass, entering the shuttle. She took her seat. She just couldn’t believe what had just happened, it was all crazy and so sudden. She was glad to be Earth bound, especially circumstances considering. As the shuttle launched though, she looked down into her hand at the data stick and wondered.

**Optional Ending B – A Conspiracy of a Different Sort**

The professor and June watched the shuttle leave from the lab and shared a smile. It had been too easy to convince Xu of the crazy stuff they had made up. He must have been on the edge to begin with.

It just came down to the publications and the research. Xu had been toying with interesting things. Unfortunately, it was dangerously close to June and the professor’s Project. She had sacrificed too much to have to share the glory with that creep.

Just a bit of intimidation and the professor’s made up stories along with the mean trick with the air vac system had been needed for him to abandon all his research and go into hiding. What a score!

The professor had made millions selling and licensing his research on the gates, and there wasn’t any reason why she couldn’t either.

Now that his legacy and financial future was secure, he was glad to pass the baton on to her. Yes, things were certainly looking up for her, for once.

**Optional Ending C – It Was All a Dream**

“But you don’t understand!” The professor yelled, as several technicians held him. “You’ve been tricked by them!” he shouted as June depowered the Gate.

“I’m sorry professor,” June said, “but none of your crazy worries are real! ‘They’? Not even a name? You’ve gone off the deep end! Hopefully the hospital staff can help you.” June said, only locking eyes with the madman once.

She accompanied the group down to the shuttle lock where they loaded the professor onboard. Soon he would be back to Earth to receive the physiological help he deserved.

Xu stood dumbly by, staring at the professor as he was dragged into the spacecraft. “It’s a good thing we found you before you had gotten too lost!” She said, now addressing Xu.

“I’m so sorry you got caught up in all of this Xu,” June said. “Some of the technicians and I noticed that he was acting strange a year or so ago but it became much worse recently. He started to sabotage his own tests. You saw the consequences of that with those deltas. But then he got you into the madness as well. Here is the ‘evidence’ he said he had collected. It might put some perspective on things. Its mostly garbage, Gate equations with no solutions and some drawings.” June said, pressing the stick into his hand.

“I… ah, to be honest, I was quite c-confused. Perhaps I had gotten somewhat off myself. First one way and then another, its quite a lot to take in.” Xu said shaking his head.

“And after he disabled the vac systems!” June said, moving toward him. She looked into his eyes sincerely. “We never thought he was so unstable as to hurt someone… I wanted to tell you or warn you but, like I said, we had no idea, and we needed some proof that he was off.” June said. She suddenly embraced him. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

Xu stood limply and awkwardly. “It’s ok, I guess he was crazy.” Xu said, through the hug. But his eyes never left from the data stick in his hand.