

KET

Prologue

“Hey, Steve, can you come look at this code?” Ian shouted.

“I’m busy,” Steve replied. “Can’t it wait?”

“Not really,” Ian replied.

“Why, what is it?” Steve asked.

“I think I just fucked our last three days of allocation,” Ian said.

“Wait, what?” Steve replied. He got up from his terminal and hurried over to where Ian was working.

“Let me take a look,” Steve said, shoving Ian aside. Steve tabbed through Ian’s code for no more than thirty seconds. “Nah. Yeah. You fucked up, mate,” he said. “Look at this offset variable. It’s several orders of magnitude off. That will have caused a deviation of, I dunno, a few hundred million light years. At least.”

“Does that mean what I think it does?” Ian asked.

“Yeah. It does. Looks like you’re gonna have to tell Lam why we lost three days of precious time on the array,” Steve replied as he turned to Ian and grinned. Ian didn’t look happy.

“Fuck!” Ian replied. He turned and walked across the lab to a small room where Professor Lam sat. He paused outside Lam’s door for a moment, gulped, and then knocked.

“Come!”

Ian opened the door and walked in. A muffled conversation that lasted less than a minute could be heard coming from the room. And then, both Ian and the professor left the room and returned to Ian’s console. Other researchers in the lab had stopped what they were doing to stare at the unfolding drama. To their surprise, when Lam had emerged from his sanctuary, he didn’t seem angry. On the contrary, he appeared intrigued by what Ian had told him. A moment later, two of the other students left their stations and joined Steve, Ian, and Professor Lam at Ian’s console.

Ian took a seat at his console and nervously brought up the results of the scan. He displayed a collection image on the screen. It was completely blank.

“Okay, let’s go through all of these, one at a time. If the error wasn’t catastrophic, we might just be off by a little. We might still find evidence of stellar phenomena in one of these,” Professor Lam stated.

Ian started to click through the images. The full capture included more than ninety of them. More of Ian’s lab mates made their way over. Ian slowly clicked through at least thirty images. All were completely blank. He started to click faster and faster. Forty, fifty, sixty. Still nothing. And then one of his colleagues, Mary, shouted “WAIT! STOP!”

Ian stopped clicking. “Go back,” Mary said. Ian went back one image. It was completely blank. “Okay back one more,”. He went back another. “Okay one more.” He went back another.

“There it is,” she said as she stepped forward and pointed to a spot on the screen. It wasn’t obvious to the others who were watching, but what had caught Mary’s eye was one or two dark gray pixels near the top-right of the image. Almost imperceptible to the human eye.

“Can you isolate that spot?” Mary asked, still pointing at it. Professor Lam stepped forward. Ian stood up and let him take over. The professor typed some commands into the console and isolated the area. He zoomed in a little.

“Probably just a large asteroid or piece of debris that made its way out of a nearby galaxy billions of years ago,” Lam posited.

He zoomed in further. And further. And as he enhanced the scan, what had been a few gray pixels became something nobody would have ever imagined.

“Is that what I think it is?” Steve asked.

Professor Lam continued to zoom in on the image.

“I think it might be,” said Ian.

Lam continued to zoom in.

“I can’t believe we’re seeing this,” Mary said as Lam zoomed in further.

Professor Lam entered the final calculations into Ian’s console, producing a clear and thoroughly detailed image of what could only be described as a starship.

“My God! From rough calculations, this thing is huge. It must be at least one hundred kilometers in length. The cross-sectional diameter is at least twenty kilometers. It is hundreds of millions of light years from anything. And according to these readings, it is at a complete standstill. No velocity, no angular momentum. Nothing.”

“Can you pan around to the underside?” Mary asked.

“Sure!” Professor Lam replied as he typed into the console once more.

“Do those look like weapons?” Mary asked, pointing to the screen.

“Bloody great weapons, given the size of this vessel,” Steve said.

“This is the find of the century,” Ian said.

“More like the find of the millennium,” Steve replied.

“Oh my god, do you know what this means?” Mary said.

“I know what this means,” Lam replied as he left Ian’s console and headed back to his office.

“It means I’m going to need to make some calls.”

Chapter 1 QUERY

I remember that morning clearly. It was late summer. The weather was still unseasonably warm. Luckily our lab was well air conditioned. Nice and frosty. To keep all the equipment from overheating. My colleagues and I had slipped into casual conversation over tea, coffee, and biscuits about halfway through the morning. And, as we’d done on many occasions before, we’d fallen into reminiscing about the past.

“Remember that time we were here over a decade ago? When Robert strongly disagreed with Kenkichi’s paper and its findings?” I remarked.

“Yes! I remember that!” said Dr. Kallas with a beaming grin.

Dr. Rihard ‘Riku’ Kallas was an applied physicist originating from Estonia. He was pragmatic and oftentimes rather verbose. Dr. Kallas was a short man who always dressed in a casual manner. His ill-fitting jumpers all contained holes and we’d often wondered whether he’d purchased any new clothes during the previous decade. His hair was scruffy and uncombed, and tended to stick up in a multitude of directions without the assistance of a single hair product. He wore small circular shaped glasses.

Dr. Williams, looking less than amused, crossed his arms. “Could you guys cut it out with that story already? It’s factually incorrect on several counts. I didn’t disagree with the paper. I was merely skeptical.”

Dr. Robert Williams was a highly opinionated and perhaps slightly over confident physicist originating from Canada. He was always keen to share his views and was known for being vocal, and often undiplomatic with his criticisms of others' work. Aside from his obvious personality flaws, Williams was a highly competent experimentalist, who’d made significant contributions to our field. In addition to his work in physics, Williams was also a highly skilled engineer. He’d designed and built a many of the innovative experimental devices that we used in our research. He was of average height, had brown hair, slightly thinning on top, and wasn’t someone you’d describe as athletic. In any way.

“Mildly skeptical?!?” exclaimed Dr. Kallas. “Do you not remember your exact words?”

“Not exactly, no. And besides, you two wouldn’t have even heard about the paper if it hadn’t been for me,” Dr. Williams protested.

“We only found out about it because you felt the need to blast it as pseudoscience,” Dr. Kallas retorted. “And if you’ll recall, I was in full agreement with the paper’s original theories.”

The conversation I had alluded to had indeed taken place in the very lab we were in. Possibly at the very bench we were sitting at. Long story short, more than a decade prior, a team of physicists, led by Professor Ichida Kenkichi at Hokkaido University, built a device capable of

visualizing non-local quantum spacetime. It took the team three years to build and refine the apparatus, run experiments, and publish their first results. Although many physicists, including Dr. Williams, considered their publication and the nature of their findings less than credible, two other research teams eventually secured the funding required to reproduce their results, after which Kenkichi's initial findings were not only validated, but improved upon.

The paper published by Kenkichi et. al., entitled "Digital Representations of Non-Local Spatiotemporal Phenomena", would change the world as we knew it. The paper's abstract stated: "The ability to digitally represent and observe non-local spatiotemporal phenomena opens up new avenues of research and applications in a multitude fields. Here we report the first experimental demonstration of quantum emergence relational telemetry, which can be used to deterministically construct digital representations of any desired location in spacetime." The paper went on to outline, in detail, a mechanism that was able to render realistic three-dimensional images of any location in the universe via a form of quantum entanglement that allowed one to establish a relationship between any two individual points in spacetime.

Truth be told, whilst Dr. Kallas had agreed with Kenkichi's findings and I had aired cautious reservations about them, Dr. Williams' position had been nothing but negative. If I recall, his words at that time had been something along the lines of "I can't believe they allowed such pseudoscientific nonsense to be published. And this paper was peer reviewed? My ass!"

"If Kenkichi's findings hadn't turned out to be valid, we wouldn't be doing what we're doing today," Dr. Kallas stated.

We all nodded in agreement.

“I still don’t think the public fully grasped how groundbreaking this technology was at that time,” Dr. Nara said.

Dr. Kano Nara was a recently graduated PhD student from Kyoto. Her thesis had detailed work on the simulation of the chemical and biological processes that drive life on our planet. The lab where she’d worked in Kyoto had created virtual environments where organisms grew, evolved, and interacted with each other in a manner reminiscent of the conditions of early life on Earth. Kano Nara was the youngest and most energetic member of our team.

“I don’t think people understand how much QUERY has changed the way we approach astronomy,” Dr. Kallas stated. “All of us around this bench appreciate how this stuff used to work. We’d point a telescope at a particularly dark spot in the sky and let it capture for weeks on end. The result would be a rather blurry photograph of several thousand distant galaxies. It would have taken us a million odd years of doing that to map our entire night sky. QUERY allowed us to bypass all of that in an instant.”

QUERY "QUAntum Emergence Relational telemetrY" - was name given to the technology by its creators.

“Weren’t we mostly undergrads when Kenkichi published?” I asked.

“Final year masters students, perhaps?” replied Dr. Kallas. “First year PhD at most, I would guess.”

“Riku, do you remember that course you used to teach on QUERY?” I asked.

“Oh yeah! First year undergrad introductory course,” he replied.

“I loved that analogy you used to explain how the technology works. Something about a wall and a torch,” I said. “How did it go again?”

“Imagine you're in a very large, very dark room. In front of you, some distance away, is a wall with a very detailed map of the universe inscribed on it,” Dr. Kallas began. “You have a torch. Turning on the torch and pointing it at the wall allows you to see part of that map. At a distance, you won't be able to make out much, and what you will be able to see will be dimly lit. That description represents the first iterations of QUERY.”

“As improvements are made to the technology, they enable the observer to take a step or two towards to the wall, revealing a smaller portion of the map, but more brightly. As more improvements are made, the observer steps closer and closer to the wall, illuminating more detail in an even smaller area,” he added.

“It is hypothesized that the technology might eventually be improved to the point at which the observer can essentially use a laser and microscope to observe the nature of the matter the wall is composed of,” he added.

“Sounds like you memorized that off by heart!” Dr. Madson said. How long did you teach that course?

“At least five years,” Dr. Kallas replied with a sigh.

Dr. Rachel Madson was a Canadian biologist, in her early thirties, who had joined us after her previous position at the University of Toronto. Her mannerisms were pleasant and professional, and her enthusiasm for her work often shone through as she discussed her research. Dr. Madson had a petite frame with a slim build and shoulder-length, light brown hair. She usually dressed in casual attire that included overly large jumpers, comfy trousers, and sneakers. We’d later discovered that she was, in fact, Dr. Williams’s slightly younger sister. They’d kept that fact from us for reasons we’d never delved into. Bottom line - they had different surnames on account of Dr. Madson having changed hers to her mother’s maiden name after going through what we assumed was a rather unpleasant divorce. She didn’t really like to talk about that. And so, none of us brought it up.

“Remember our first QUERY device?” I said.

“Yeah, that old, massive, liquid-helium-cooled EPOCH1 beast! It was barely able to capture an area of a hundred thousand light years. Not much better than a space telescope of that era,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“It took us four years to get an upgrade. To an EPOCH2 device. Capable of observing individual solar systems.” Dr. Williams said.

“That one felt a whole lot faster, too. At the time, I mean” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Around that time, the SCOPE stellar cartography and SETI 2.0 projects were initiated, if I recall,” Dr. Nara said.

“Weren’t you involved in the SETI 2.0 project, Kano?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yeah, I wrote my master’s thesis on the topic,” Dr. Nara replied.

“And it was about six months after the initiation of the SCOPE project that we found the first signs of extra-terrestrial life,” Dr. Nara said. “I remember because I joined this team not long after that announcement went public.”

“MURATA-1A, named after Akiko Murata who was working in our lab when she found it,” I replied. “Yes, we were the ones who made that discovery.”

“Wasn’t that around the time a group of extremists tried to blow up this lab?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yeah, it was just before the announcement, wasn’t it?” I replied.

“Thank god they were way off with that bomb,” Dr. Kallas said.

“Yeah, I think it managed to slightly crack a window. That’s about it,” I replied.

“The crack is still there,” Dr. Williams said, pointing to a small window on the east side of the lab. “We never got around to fixing it.”

“Luckily nobody was hurt,” Dr. Kallas said.

“Remember the backlash we got on social media when we finally made that announcement?”

I said.

“Oh yeah, I remember,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Thankfully rational folks celebrated the news,” Dr. Madson noted.

“There seem to be fewer and fewer of those every day,” Dr. Williams said. “Remember how many internet idiots made allegations that our research was politically motivated?”

“Because they determined that science is somehow political in nature,” Dr. Kallas said.

“If your entire political philosophy is based on lies, ‘doing your own research’, and becoming a PhD from the university of Facebook, then, yes, hard scientific facts might be considered political in nature,” Dr. Nara said.

We all nodded.

“It took a few years to get an EPOCH3 device,” I said. “It gave us the ability to view planets as if from orbit.”

“That was around the time that I joined the team,” Dr. Madson said. “As a xenanthropologist.”

“You were one of the first real xenanthropologists on this planet!” Dr. Nara said.

“That was interesting work for its time, but things got a lot better after we finally broke through to EPOCH4,” Dr. Madson said. “Magnification enough to view things as though you’re present and standing there. At that point, we were finally able to observe alien life properly. Well, everything but microscopic life.”

“It also allowed us to look in places we couldn’t before,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Under water, under the canopies of forests, and inside caves.”

“EPOCH4 was the game changer,” Dr. Williams said. “The ability to observe something as though you’re standing right next to it feels like what this technology was always created for. Everything prior to EPOCH4 looks grainy and out-of-focus.”

“Game changing for us scientists,” Dr. Nara said. “And game changing for the public.”

“Oh yeah. We did NOT see that coming,” Dr. Kallas replied. “A lot of people got very paranoid that the technology would be used to spy on them. Not like that would even be feasible.”

“And then there were those shootings at the University of Houston,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Yet more extremists.”

“Yeah, that was a sad day. Professor Martin who we’d worked with in the early years of QUERY was one of those killed by the radicals,” Dr. Williams said.

We all paused for a moment, recalling the tragedy. One of what would end up being many. And all because science had been deemed political by an increasing number of internet fanatics. And to be honest, that shit had really ramped up during COVID and the years that followed.

“You know what excited me the most about EPOCH4?” Dr. Kallas said. “The ability to finally search for signs of technologically capable alien species.”

“And, if I recall, it wasn’t too long before we did find the first technologically capable extra-terrestrials,” I said.

“Yep. During the first year of EPOCH4, over one thousand technologically capable alien species at various levels of advancement were discovered,” Dr. Madson said. “I’ve read up on almost every one of them. Contrary to most popular science fiction TV shows and movies, we’re not seeing humans or even humanoids everywhere. In fact, we haven’t found a single alien species that even remotely resembles our own.”

“And, in terms of intelligent mammalian species that we’ve recorded, including other intelligent primate-like species, fur is a predominant trait. The baldness of humans is, in fact, rare, and strange in comparison to everything out there,” Dr. Madson stated.

“So, you’re saying that most aliens would find our appearance strange?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“More like repulsive,” Dr. Madson answered.

“You know what’s odd?” Dr. Kallas added. “After a year’s worth of study and over a thousand technologically capable species documented, we still haven’t found a single one more advanced than our own.”

“Yes. That is rather odd,” I replied.

“I’d use the word concerning. Worrying, even,” Dr. Williams said. “Logically, it points to the idea that there’s a way to block QUERY scans that we don’t know about. The more advanced races are hiding from us.”

“That hypothesis is indeed concerning,” Dr. Kallas replied. “And highly plausible. If they can block a scan, they could hide entire planets, solar systems, or even galaxies.”

“Surely gravitational effects would allow us to detect the presence of something hidden, even if we can’t see it in a QUERY scan?” I asked.

“Technically. But those interactions are highly complex. We still don’t fully understand the physics behind galactic procession. And when things seem out of place, we tend to attribute it to dark matter,” Dr. Williams replied.

“So, what we’ve attributed to dark matter might be galaxies that are hidden by some super advanced tech?” Dr. Madson asked.

“It’s a hypothesis worth considering,” Dr. Williams said.

“If we’re watching and documenting intelligent extraterrestrials on other worlds, and in other galaxies, it only seems logical that others have done the same to us,” Dr. Kallas said.

“Or they’re doing it right now,” I said.

“Oh, you mean like an alien big brother?” Dr Williams asked.

“Yeah. Good analogy,” I replied.

“Yeah, but that TV show is a controlled environment where people sign up knowing they’re going to be filmed. If aliens are ‘big brothering’ us, we don’t know about it at all. And with billions of people on the planet, who are they choosing to watch?” Dr. Kallas said.

“Well, if they’re sufficiently advanced, we can only assume that every alien household has QUERY devices, and they can basically tune into wherever they want,” Dr. Williams said.

“Anyway, what would make us interesting? I’m sure there are millions of inhabited worlds out there with more debauched goings on than our own boring planet.”

“Ahh, but that’s the point. Maybe aliens consider even our most mundane activities as interesting,” Dr. Kallas said. “For instance, a simple thing like brushing our teeth might be considered erotic, humorous, or disgusting to an alien species.”

“Well, I’m not going to lose any sleep about the thought of being spied on while brushing my teeth,” Dr. Williams replied.

“How would you feel if an alien tuned in every time you went to the loo?” I asked.

“Okay, point taken,” replied Dr. Williams. “But anyway, isn’t that one of the alien TV channels Riku watches?”

“It was one episode! Of a home décor show! Where they were discussing toilet design and functionality!” Dr. Kallas objected.

It was at that point that Dr. Kallas received a call on his mobile.

“One moment, gotta take this,” he said, rushing out of the lab.

“I find the cooking shows depicting ingredients and cuisines we can’t possibly imagine really fascinating,” Dr. Nara stated. “Even though I don’t understand a word they’re saying.”

“I enjoy nature documentaries detailing the diverse biodiversity on alien worlds,” Dr. Madson added. “Stuff we’d never dream of seeing here.”

“A library full of books could be written on alien TV culture,” I said. “Simply fascinating from many angles. Especially cultural angles.”

“I’m a fan of alien news broadcasts,” Dr. Nara stated. “Even though, again, I can’t understand a word.”

Dr. Kallas rushed back into our lab. He looked both excited and shocked. He was out of breath and almost too excited to speak.

Chapter 2 Hidden in the dark

“Guys!” he said, pausing for breath.

“What is it Riku?” I asked.

“He’s probably going to tell us about some new sci-fi show that just started airing,” Dr. Williams remarked.

“No, this is bigger!” Dr. Kallas stated. “It looks like QUERY research just hit the jackpot!”

“More TV shows about toilets?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Hey, give Riku a break,” Dr. Nara said. “Let him speak.”

“I just received a communication from a colleague at the University of Bath,” Dr. Kallas said, excitedly. He took a breath. “They found something significant while performing scans outside our observable universe.”

“What did they find?” Dr. Nara asked.

Dr. Kallas took another breath before answering. “They found a starship.”

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Nara replied. “Did I hear that correctly? A starship?”

“You did,” Dr. Kallas replied. “A massive, technologically advanced warship. Literally in the middle of nowhere.”

“You’re joking, right?” Dr. Williams replied.

“No, Robert,” Dr. Kallas replied. “I’m serious. The scan data and reports from Professor Lam’s team are being verified by other teams right now. They’re saying it looks legit.”

“Okay, we need to see this,” Dr. Williams replied.

Dr. Kallas logged into his console and accessed the data. We all looked at it. Dr. Kallas panned around the vessel at various levels of zoom. He then adjusted the camera to peer inside it. To describe the ship as technological marvel was an understatement. The feats of engineering required to build such a vessel, and the technologies within were all so completely beyond our scope of scientific understanding that we were left in complete awe.

“And this isn’t some fabricated data meant to fool us?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Here, read this statement from Professor Lam. He sent it out to a select few teams under NDA. If this is a joke, he’s putting his career on the line.”

We read the statement:

The ship measures approximately one hundred kilometers in length, and has an octagonal cross-sectional diameter of approximately twenty-five kilometers. Its hull and inner bulkheads are composed of metallic alloys. At this QUERY resolution, we cannot ascertain their composition.

At what we think might be the rear of the ship are four long needle-like structures mounted at each of the octagon's angled edges, and in parallel with the ship's main body. Towards the front of the vessel, sections protrude from the underside of the hull, starting about a fifth of the way from the front and ending about a halfway back. We have not yet determined the nature of these protruded sections but suggest that their function could range from weapons arrays, to energy or matter collection devices, to hangar bays. Various dome-shaped transparent protrusions, some more than a kilometer in diameter, pepper the outer hull. We assume these are observation decks.

As you might imagine, there's a great deal of space to explore inside the vessel. We've so far only seen a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a percent of what's there. From the areas we

have explored, space inside the ship is divided into different sections that we've identified might be living areas, recreational areas, engineering, laboratories, medical bays, sanitation, food production, and more. We've yet to find any areas that we can classify as a bridge or command section. We have also found storage areas containing what might be munitions or scientific equipment. Again, this is all pure conjecture.

Central to the ship is what we surmise are power systems, shield generators, propulsion, or something of that ilk. There are data consoles everywhere, but it may take years to find a central computer core, if there is one. We estimate, after very brief evaluation, that the ship is capable of housing hundreds of thousands, or perhaps even millions of inhabitants. However, while the vessel is still powered and operational, we have yet to locate crew or any signs of inhabitants.

If this ship was abandoned, we have no idea why. We also do not know for how long the ship has been drifting in space. I can only surmise that this exceptional discovery will require years, or possibly decades of research to fully understand.

“He’s not joking, is he?” Dr. Nara stated.

“I don’t think so,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Me neither,” I added.

“Holy shit!” Dr. Nara said.

“This report is highly confidential,” Dr. Kallas stated. “Our team was one of the few who received information about the discovery. We need to keep this strictly to ourselves for the time being.”

“If this is real, it changes everything,” Dr. Williams said.

“I agree,” I replied. “This is massive.”

“I suppose we’ll be signing more NDAs?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yeah, I suppose we will...” I replied.

“So, what are they calling this ship?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Interesting question,” Dr. Kallas replied. “It was given the name HERMES-NEX. The name is based upon a large inscription found on the ship's hull. Of course, the writing on the ship isn't in English, but the shapes of glyphs can be transposed into similar looking characters from the roman alphabet.”

“HERMES-NEX?” Dr. Nara replied. “What a mouthful. Sounds like an acronym an academic paper might conjure up.”

“I think it’s nice,” Dr. Kallas replied. “It sounds suitably alien-warship-like.”

“I’ll give you that,” Dr. Madson replied.

“I’ll send the data to your consoles,” Dr. Kallas said. “Have a good look at it.”

We all returned to our consoles and scrutinized the data for a while. It was overwhelming. If someone had fabricated this QUERY scan, they’d have had to go to great lengths. Almost inhuman lengths, to be honest.

“So, first impressions?” I asked.

“I’m sorry. I’m still at a bit of a loss for words!” Dr Kallas said.

“Robert, does this disprove your theory about QUERY jamming?” Dr. Nara asked.

“I’m not sure it disproves the theory,” Dr. Williams said. “There are several possible reasons as to why the ship appears uncloaked. The report states that the ship is still powered.

However, the onboard QUERY jammer might be malfunctioning. It could also be the case that QUERY jamming apparatus, if it exists, is large or has massive power requirements, making it unsuitable for use on a ship, no matter what size. For instance, such apparatus may require a star or black hole to power it. Since this ship was found in intergalactic void, it could be that it is simply outside of the range of feasibly deployed QUERY jamming fields. The race that built the ship may live in a galaxy adjacent to the void where it was found. However, the rest of their civilization and technology may be cloaked. Honestly, the possibilities for speculation on this matter are endless.”

“I know we can’t tell for sure, but it does look like this ship is heavily armed. I mean, those have got to be weapons, right?” Dr. Nara stated.

“If they are weapons, they’re probably capable of destruction on a level we can’t even comprehend,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“I suppose it’s comforting to know that this ship is very far away. Outside of our observable universe,” Dr. Madson added.

“Yeah, but whoever built it is thousands of years more advanced than us,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“The fact that we can see this ship means that they’ve had the capability to see us for a very long time.”

“The universe is vast. Perhaps they haven’t looked at every star. Perhaps they haven’t seen us yet,” Dr. Nara posited.

“If they’re thousands of years more advanced than us, they’ll have automated QUERY to the point where they’ll have scanned everything, surely?” Dr. Madson added.

“That’s a valid hypothesis,” Dr. Williams replied. “We can assume they know about us. And we can also assume that they could have wiped us out. And yet they haven’t. In my opinion, this builds credence to the zoo hypothesis.”

“They consider us insignificant, and they’re simply leaving us alone?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yeah, that would be my guess,” Dr. Williams replied.

“But if they’re watching us, they’ll know we’ve discovered their ship,” Dr. Madson added.

“Might that put us in danger?”

“That’s a distinct possibility,” Dr. Williams replied. “This discovery happened, what, a few days ago?”

“Yep. On Tuesday,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Does that give them enough time to fly here and destroy us?” Dr. Madson asked.

“That would depend on their propulsion technologies. And that’s where we’re going to enter the realm of science fiction,” Dr. Williams replied.

“If this ship or the civilization that built it do go around destroying anyone who develops the technology to find it, this accounts for why we haven’t found any civilizations more advanced than our own,” Dr. Kallas added.

“Good point,” Dr. Williams replied. “These aliens may exert preemptive supremacy over any civilization that might go on to develop to the point of eventually challenging them. If that is the case, I suppose we can expect an invasion. And they’d have plenty of time to get here. It’s not like we’re in a position to reverse engineer anything onboard. We’d need EPOCH7 or better resolutions to start doing that.”

“Of course, there’s another theory we haven’t considered,” Dr. Nara added. “Lam’s team didn’t find any lifeforms inside the ship. It could be a long-lost remnant of a now dead civilization. One that was destroyed by a superior adversary. That ship represents the last artifact of their civilization, and it could have been floating there for eons.”

“That theory is very concerning,” Dr. Madson replied. “Imagine the capabilities of a species that defeated whoever built that ship!”

“While Dr. Nara’s hypothesis accounts for the lack of crew,” Dr. Williams replied, “it doesn’t account for the fact that the ship is still powered, there’s no visible damage to the hull, and we don’t see any debris or signs of a battle nearby.”

“I’m sure there are ways of wiping out a ship’s crew without doing damage to the ship itself,” Dr. Nara replied. “They could have poisoned their food or released a biological agent into the atmosphere.”

“Or beamed them out,” Dr. Kallas added.

“Beamed them out?” Dr. Williams replied sarcastically. “Beaming people up is pure science fiction. The very idea of that technology is ridiculous. It will never exist, no matter how advanced we get.”

“What if the ship builders were the bad guys and a benevolent race wiped them out?” Dr. Nara conjectured.

“Okay, let’s consider that hypothesis,” Dr. Williams replied. “A benevolent, highly advanced race wiped those guys out. They can obviously see us, and they now know we’ve found that ship. They know that we’ll inevitably develop EPOCH7 and above. We’ll use QUERY to study and reverse engineer the technologies on that ship. As science fiction scenarios go, they’ll want to step in and prevent us from doing so. They’ll worry that we’ll gain access to technologies beyond our understanding and wipe ourselves out.”

“Or go on to wipe others out,” Dr. Kallas interjected.

“Yes. That has generally been our tendency as a species,” Dr. Williams added.

“So, the benevolent race will either wipe us out preemptively. Or they’ll make contact and invite us into a glorious Federation of Planets,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Science fiction references aside, those do both seem to be logical conclusions,” I replied.

“So, what you’re saying is we’re not totally screwed?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Not... quite?” I replied.

Shortly after our team had received news about the HERMES-NEX discovery, debates over whether and how the findings might be presented to the world began. Of all the amazing discoveries that QUERY had led us to, nothing had really presented this kind of dilemma. Of course, there had been fears about how people would react when we revealed the first extra-terrestrial life, the first technological extra-terrestrial civilization, and QUERY EPOCH4 with

its potential to create a global panopticon. But nothing we had previously encountered had the potential to cause panic and upheaval like this had. And judging by the extreme and irrational reactions we'd had to previous discoveries, a much more severe backlash was to be expected.

In the end, we deferred to the government and let them make the decision. Which took a long time. And during that time, we continued to explore HERMES-NEX in secret.

When the government finally got back to us, it was with the decision that the discovery be kept firmly out of the public domain. At least for the time being. Pending 'further investigation and deliberation'. For once, we agreed with their decision.

Chapter 3 On xenolinguistics

"Did you know that the internal volume of HERMES-NEX is almost fifty trillion cubic meters?" Dr. Williams stated.

"What does that even mean?" Dr. Nara asked.

"I don't really have an analogy for it," Dr. Williams replied. He started typing at his console.

"Don't you guys always measure size in stuff like Olympic size swimming pools or football fields?"

"Not us!" Dr. Williams replied. He raised one of his hands, clicked his fingers a few times and pointed in an arbitrary direction. His eyes were fixated on his console screen the whole

time. “Ask the folks to the south of us about unscientific measurement systems. Anyways, I doubt their real scientists would use such measurements.”

“Rest assured, when they make a documentary about this thing, they’ll quote the internal volume of this ship in cups, gallons, and I dunno, thimbles,” Dr. Nara joked. “Don’t you just love it when sci-fi shows use those measurements?”

“Don’t get me started on that,” Dr. Williams said. He continued to be preoccupied with what he was doing. He typed furiously for a few more seconds, hit enter, and then looked up again.

“What I was trying to get at is that a thorough search of the inside of the ship is going to take decades. Even with multiple collaborative teams of researchers.”

“And we’ve been assigned to explore it?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yep. We have.” Dr. Kallas replied in a slightly weary tone. He sighed.

“Are we not looking for nearby galaxies? You know, that might be host to whoever built this thing?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Not us,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Several other teams are already on that.”

“Right,” Dr. Nara replied. “Good to know. We are to focus on the HERMES-NEX.”

“HERMES-NEX is such a mouthful,” Dr. Madson remarked. “How about we abbreviate it?”

“What about HEX?” Dr. Nara suggested.

“I like that!” Dr. Kallas replied. We all nodded.

“There’s alien writing everywhere in the ship, so I’ve brought in a couple of xenolinguists to help us out,” I said. “Work with them as needed.”

“I’ve set coordinates for each of you to search. Let’s share findings in a week,” Dr. Williams said. “Good luck and have fun!”

And so, we all started to explore the interior of the ship via QUERY scans. To be honest, the task wasn’t as tedious or laborious as we’d imagined. The ship itself was wondrous – full of gadgets and alien technology. It was everything we’d hoped to eventually find using the technology. And we savored every moment. After a week and a great deal of overtime we reconvened to discuss findings.

“The interior walls and walkways are composed largely of a dark grey metallic alloy,” Dr. Kallas stated. “We obviously can’t say anything more about its composition at this time. We’ll need much higher QUERY resolutions to do that.”

“Rooms vary wildly in size,” Dr. Williams added. “Even the smaller ones are large compared to rooms in Earth structures. Ceilings in even the most confined of spaces, such as crawl ways and access tunnels are easily over three meters in height. Ceilings in regular rooms are, in the smallest of cases, at least six meters in height. Doorways measure a good four or five

meters high and almost two meters wide. The larger open areas of the ship are, in some cases, kilometers in both length and width and hundreds of meters in height.”

“The race that built HEX must be physically larger than us,” Dr. Madson ascertained.

“I concur,” Dr. Williams replied. “They must be three or four meters tall. Perhaps even more.”

“Despite the ship’s size, we’ve found very few elevators,” Dr. Kallas stated. “Everything is connected via corridors, stairs, ramps, ladders, and the like.”

“It would take weeks for a human to walk a fraction of the ship’s length, or to move up or down a fraction of the ship’s height by foot,” Dr. Williams added.

“That already gave me a better idea about the ship’s interior dimensions than the Olympic swimming pool thing!” Dr. Nara joked.

“How is the work with xenolinguistics going?” I asked.

“Not all that well,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Decoding an alien language is a daunting task, made even more difficult in the absence of the species that created it.”

“Yeah, that’s what they told me, too,” Dr. Madson added. “Apparently, it’s much easier to grasp cultural references when one can observe a species interacting with their environment. And this ship is, well, completely uninhabited.”

“How about the consoles?” I asked. “They contain icons and pictographs alongside glyphs.”

“And they’re in continual update,” Dr. Williams added. “We captured video of a few of them and gave it to the xenolinguists. They’ve not made head nor tail of any of it.”

“Sounds frustrating,” I replied. “Is there anything they have managed to translate?”

“The word for toilet,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“And other simple words depicted around the ship such as corridor, level, floor, cabin, section, and console,” Dr. Madson added.

“Oh, and their numbering system,” Dr. Nara added. “Apparently it’s base eighteen.”

“We found this really cool room,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Full of gadgets,” Dr. Williams added, “All lined up on tables and neatly labelled.”

“But since we have no idea what the gadgets do, the labels are of no use to the xenolinguists,” Dr. Kallas said.

“I found some very large glass tanks containing what looked like algae,” Dr. Madson stated.

“We first thought the stuff might be food. Or perhaps a substrate used by food printers. But so far, it’s been a dead end.”

“The xenolinguist I talked to also suggested we find food,” Dr. Nara added. “Apparently, by observing their food’s shape, color, composition, and size, we might try to equate it with Earth-equivalents and thus make appropriate translations.”

“Did you find any?” I asked.

“No,” Dr. Nara replied. “Well, apart from Rachel’s grow lab thingy. We found no food printers, no food storage, no dining areas. We didn’t even find plates or utensils.”

“The xenolinguists have admitted to being almost completely stumped,” Dr. Williams noted. “They told us that deciphering the language on that ship would likely be a multi-year project.”

“Honestly, it might be quicker to create the technologies needed to get to that ship than to understand the stuff onboard using QUERY,” Dr. Kallas joked.

“Did we figure out what the turret-looking things on the outside of the ship are?” I asked.

“No,” Dr. Kallas replied. “We’re going to have to continue to assume they’re weapons. At least for now.”

“Excessively large weapons, too,” Dr. Williams said. “Some of those turrets are hundreds of meters in length.”

“After a couple of weeks’ worth of snooping around, we have to assume the shipbuilders know we’re looking at HEX” Dr. Madson said.

“It is a possibility,” Dr. Kallas said.

“We could be days away from an invasion,” Dr. Williams added.

“Given we may be facing imminent destruction, perhaps we should consider how it might play out,” I said.

“We’ve all seen films depicting alien invasions of Earth in which a species advanced enough to traverse the distances between stars in massive motherships arrive on our planet only to be defeated by humankind and our primitive tactics and weapons,” Dr. Kallas said. “I posit that a film depicting an alien invasion as it would really happen would likely only last a few minutes, and that is why realistic alien invasion movies have never been made.”

“For once, I wholeheartedly agree with Riku,” Dr. Williams replied. “I doubt that any of our culture’s previously imagined alien invasion scenarios are like anything we’re going to face.”

“The way I see it,” Dr. Nara added, “there are two categories to consider. The first is that the aliens travel here and wipe us out. The second is that they destroy us remotely. In my opinion, the second option is way more likely.”

“I agree,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Let’s, for the sake of argument, consider the first,” Dr. Nara replied. “Let’s suppose for a moment that destructive, planet-colonizing aliens might want to do a bit of travelling, see the sights, take some selfies, and even stream their invasion on Tiktok. Assuming their mothership or armada were sent to our planet, the likelihood that they'd actually land or even send craft into our atmosphere seems somewhat far-fetched.”

“Exactly. Why bother?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Yep. They could employ any number of more efficient methods to wipe out humanity without stepping foot on our soil. They could deploy a specifically engineered toxin or bioweapon into our atmosphere. They could beam every human into space. Or they could disassemble our planet from orbit,” Dr. Nara replied. “We have to assume the weapons on HEX are easily capable of destroying an entire planet.”

“That last one seems like a win-win given the resources they could harvest,” Dr. Madson replied.

“When considering remote scenarios, an unmanned probe could easily be sent to achieve any of that stuff. Even a simple long-range-planet-killer missile with faster-than-light or hyperjump capabilities would do the job in a fire-and-forget fashion,” Dr. Nara added.

“Push a small red button and then get on with more important business. Such as lunch,” Dr Williams joked with a grin on his face.

“Haha yeah!” Dr Nara replied. “Other remote destruction options could involve the use of nanoprobes, shot in our direction from afar. Once on the planet's surface, the nanoprobes would replicate the necessary technologies and tools to wipe us out.”

“We wouldn’t even see those coming. In fact, that scenario could already be playing out. We’ll find out a few days from now,” Dr. Kallas added.

“So, we won’t see an invasion coming until it’s too late?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yep, that’s about the gist of it,” Dr. Nara replied.

Chapter 4 Astronomical unit

As days and then weeks passed, Earth continued to orbit the Sun. No invasion happened. And we pressed on with our fascinating exploration of HEX.

And then, out of the blue, we were directed towards yet another interesting discovery.

“The SETI 2.0 project found something of interest that they’d like us to take a look at,” I said. “According to the data they’ve sent us, they made this discovery while performing planetary surface surveys on habitable planets, previously identified by SCOPE, that exhibited out-of-the-ordinary atmospheric readings possibly indicative of past technological civilizations.”

“Ahh, yes. I heard about that project,” Dr Nara stated.

“Have you kept up with that SETI 2.0 stuff since you worked on the project?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Somewhat. Not in any detail. And not as much recently since it’s been so busy. From what I remember, they started that project over a year ago,” she replied.

“The finding itself was made on a planet designated Miller-1C, located in the Needle galaxy,” I continued. “During surface-level exploration of the planet they uncovered a set of large, intricately carved stone pillars hidden under the canopy of a forest on the planet's northernmost landmass. A total of sixty-four pillars were found, each identical in size – approximately ten meters in height and about one point five meters in both width and depth. Glyphs and inscriptions are carved on all faces of all pillars. The precision of those inscriptions seems to indicate that they were created and placed there by an advanced technological species.”

“Interesting,” said Dr. Kallas.

“The pillars themselves can’t be dated by QUERY technology. They could have been there for a long time. However, no other remnants of past civilizations were found on the planet. Here’s an picture of the location,” I said, bringing up an image on a nearby monitor.

The image depicted several oddly shaped and very tall evergreen trees. Their needles had a bluish tint. The pillars were stuck into the snow-covered ground under the canopy of the forest.

“According to readings, this planet is cooler than Earth, with polar ice present during its entire yearly procession. The ground surrounding the pillars has been identified as frozen swampland,” I stated.

“If this planet goes through ice ages, one might expect those pillars to eventually be buried under kilometers of glacier. I doubt they’d survive that,” Dr. Madson said.

“True. We don’t know if this planet exhibits such climate fluctuations. Which means that either they were put there after the last ice age, or they have been there for millennia,” I said.

I clicked thorough a series of images as I read out the next section. “The arrangement of the pillars is as follows. Eight innermost pillars are arranged around the circumference of a circle with a diameter of approximately fifty meters. Each innermost pillar is equidistant from each other. One at every forty-five-degree increment about the circumference. Think of them as the eight points of a compass. The rest of the pillars form straight lines fanning outwards from each central pillar such that a line drawn through each set of eight pillars intersects the middle of the circle.”

The last image depicted a top-down view of the layout of the pillars. It resembled a simple pictograph of rays fanning out from a sun.

“The relative location of each pillar, along with all inscriptions have been carefully recorded for analysis,” I said.

“Can you show us those pictures of the sides of one of the pillars again?” Dr. Nara asked. I clicked back until we found the one Dr. Nara had meant.

“Two of the sides are clearly different from the other two,” Dr. Madson noted.

“Yeah,” Dr. Nara replied. “I’m not professing to be able to read these glyphs, but the patterns on these two sides look like mathematical notation written with a different set of symbols to ours.”

“Now that you mention it, I can see that too!” Dr. Kallas said.

“The other two sides must be written text. Some sort of a guide, perhaps?” Dr. Madson posited.

“Each pillar seems to follow the same pattern. Two sides look like this mathematical notation stuff, and the other two contain more condensed notation,” I said.

“Perhaps the information on the pillars must be combined in some way to create one long piece of text?” Dr. Kallas posited.

“Yeah, like clockwise, starting from the northern innermost pillar and then in a circular fashion all the way out,” Dr. Madson added.

“Or along each line fanning out, starting with the twelve o’clock position and moving clockwise,” Dr. Nara suggested.

“All the data is in our shared repository, so take a look at it together and let’s see if we can’t work this out,” I told them. “And if we need to bring in some xenolinguists, let me know.”

“The xenolinguists haven’t been all that helpful,” Dr. Williams remarked. “I say we try this on our own first.”

We concluded our meeting, and the team excitedly headed straight to our shared workspace to play around with their ideas. It only took them two days to decipher the first clue to the puzzle, which they enthusiastically shared the moment they found it.

“Okay, we’ve figured part of this out,” Dr. Nara told me excitedly. “We were kinda right about combining the information on the pillars. Determining that pattern took longer than it should have because we were trying to get both the condensed and mathematical notations to line up into something that looked logical. That was a red herring. The only concatenation we needed to do was on the condensed sides.”

“Still, you lot solved that rather quickly!” I replied.

“Yeah, and it was my pattern that worked,” Dr. Nara added. “Take the west and north faces of each pillar fanning out from the northern most one and then moving in a clockwise fashion.”

“We concatenated all of the symbols, from top to bottom, on each face sequentially,” Dr. Kallas added. “This provided us with a long string of glyphs.”

“Yeah, and then we cherry picked examples from the other two faces on a few of the pillars that we recognized. That allowed us to map a few of their symbols to our own mathematical and programming notations,” Dr. Nara said.

“The long concatenation of symbols from the condensed faces appears to be a guide. It contains examples of their numbering system and mathematical operators,” Dr. Williams stated. “Look here.” He pointed to a few symbols that had been highlighted. “This denotes one plus one equals two.”

“And here,” he pointed to another highlighted section on the list of glyphs. “This denotes square root of nine equals three.”

“They’re using base ten?” I asked.

“It seems so. I was surprised about that too,” Dr. Nara replied. “That’s partially how we solved it so quickly!”

“So yeah, once we’d figured out the numerals, the rest of the operators were easy enough to decipher. We now know what all the symbols mean,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“I must admit the way it has been presented is most elegant,” Dr. Williams said.

“I agree,” I said. “So, what about the other two faces? Have you figured them out yet?”

“Not yet, but we don’t expect it’ll take all that long now,” Dr. Nara replied, hurrying back to the shared workstation.

“Don’t stay here too late,” I shouted as I left for home. I was pretty sure they wouldn’t pay any attention to that piece of advice.

And they didn’t. When I arrived the next morning, the team was eager to brief me.

“You’ve deciphered the other faces?” I asked.

“Yep!” Dr. Williams replied.

“Okay. Let me get some tea and I’ll be back to hear your explanation,” I replied. I returned with a nice hot cup of tea shortly thereafter.

“So, as we predicted,” Dr. Williams said.

“As I predicted,” Dr. Nara interjected.

“As Dr. Nara predicted,” Dr. Williams continued, “the symbols on the other faces of each pillar do indeed depict mathematical formulae.”

“Well, to be precise, they are a combination of formulae and pseudo code,” Dr. Kallas interjected.

“Yes, yes. Semantics,” Dr. Williams said. “Anyway, each pillar contains an algorithm that generates a sequence of numbers. Some of them were familiar to us already. For instance, the Fibonacci sequence, powers of two, Bell numbers, prime numbers, and so forth.”

“Interesting!” I stated.

“Okay, but here’s where it gets good,” Dr. Nara added. “The only way this logically works is if the sequence of numbers on the innermost pillar of each line correspond with the position of the number in the sequence generated by each pillar behind it.”

“Wait,” I replied. “It’s a bit early in the morning for me. Explain it like I’m five.”

It was clear that both Drs. Nara and Williams had overdone it in the caffeine department. They were jittery, excited, and speaking way too fast.

“If I might interject,” Dr. Kallas added. “Let’s say the innermost pillar generates a sequence such as one, two, five, eight, twenty, and so on. This means you must select the first item of the sequence generated by the pillar directly behind it, the second item of the sequence generated by the pillar behind that, the fifth item from the sequence described by the pillar behind that, and so on.”

“Okay, I get it now,” I replied. “Go on.”

“The final number is thus derived by concatenating all selected numbers together.” Dr. Kallas added.

“You missed a bit,” Dr. Nara said. “Each of the innermost pillars contain additional symbols not present anywhere else. A series of vertical and horizontal lines. We noticed that there can be multiple horizontal lines, but only one vertical line that might or might not be present. We inferred that the horizontal lines denote a decimal place, and the vertical line denotes that the final value be multiplied by minus one.”

Dr. Kallas added “So, for instance, if the numbers selected from sequences in the set of pillars are (38, 421, 99, 101, 328, 122, 853) and there are ten horizontal lines and no vertical line present on the inner most pillar belonging to the sequence, the resulting output would be 3841299101.328122853”

“Okay, I get that,” I replied. “So did I understand that the puzzle presents us with eight floating point numbers?”

“Correct!” replied Dr. Williams.

“A set of coordinates, perhaps?” I asked.

“Possibly. That’s something we’ve yet to determine,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Good work!” I stated. “By the way, did you all stay overnight?”

They nodded.

“It’s Friday. You should leave early and get some rest over the weekend. I’ll book us some time on the departmental QUERY array for next week. I’m getting a feeling we’ll need it.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right about that,” Dr. Nara replied.

While the team were off on some well-deserved rest, I stared at the numbers that the puzzle had generated. I remember thinking that it takes three values to represent a three-dimensional set of coordinates. Eight numbers aren’t neatly divisible by three. If six of those eight numbers represented coordinates, two would be left over. And the number of possible coordinate sequences that could be derived from eight numbers was still quite large. Also, if the numbers did represent coordinates, a measurement of some kind was needed. Any standard measurement used on our planet would be irrelevant to whoever created the puzzle. The solution was almost in our grasp. But not quite so.

We all returned from a needed break the following Monday. I thought I’d arrived early that day, but the whole team were already in the lab when I entered. Apparently, Dr. Madson had already come up with a plausible hypothesis for the measurement system.

“Astronomical unit,” she told me.

“But the distance between the Earth and the Sun would have no bearing to whoever designed the puzzle,” I replied.

“No, not our astronomical unit,” Dr. Madson replied. “Theirs.”

“Oh wait. Yeah. I see what you’re saying!” I replied. “You know, I was pondering this problem all weekend and that thought never occurred to me!”

“Even if we have a measurement system for these coordinates, it still isn’t obvious how to select the three numbers, in the correct sequence,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Well, we have plenty of time booked on the QUERY array. How about we try to brute force it?” I asked.

“Seems like the only obvious solution currently,” Dr. Williams replied. “I’ll write a program that combines the digits, takes the distance measurement and offset from our own planet into account, and have it run scans.”

About half an hour later, Dr. Williams started his program. And we waited. In the early afternoon we got our first hit. The scan had landed almost perfectly on a star. The next hit was waiting for us when we returned to the lab the following day. We checked to see if the two sets of coordinates had used any overlapping numbers. They hadn’t. So, we stopped the program, figuring we might later determine what the last two numbers meant.

“Interesting. The unused numbers are in the north and south positions. One set of coordinates uses clockwise sequential values from the right-hand side of the circle, so north east, east, and south east and the other comes from the left-hand side, so south west, west, and north west,” Dr. Kallas stated. “I wonder if there’s any significance to that pattern?”

“We have now identified two star systems from the coordinates in the puzzle. Any suggestions on how we might proceed from here?” I asked.

“Draw a triangle between each of the three locations and QUERY scan the center?” Dr. Nara suggested.

“And if not, perhaps QUERY scans of their solar systems? Maybe we’ll find planets with more clues on them?” Dr. Kallas suggested.

“Okay, let’s try Dr. Nara’s suggestion first. If we find nothing, let’s ask the SETI people to start looking at those two solar systems,” I instructed. “Scouring those planets will take SETI’s expertise and resources.”

We quickly determined that the center point of the triangle connecting all three stars was devoid of anything useful. And so, I contacted the SETI folks who’d originally alerted us to the pillar formation and explained what was going on. They were delighted that we’d solved part of the puzzle and promised to immediately scan planets orbiting the two stars we’d located. I provided them with coordinates. And then we waited.

After two days, my SETI contact got back to me with news that habitable planets had indeed been found orbiting both stars, and that they’d initiated full sweeps of the surface of each. I was also told that analysis might take some time. Possibly a few weeks. And so, we returned to our HEX research while we waited. And after just over two weeks, the SETI folks contacted me with two new datasets. They’d found identically arranged sets of stone pillars on both surveyed worlds.

The puzzles on those pillars worked in the same way as the originally discovered set. They even used the same glyphs. So, solving them was trivial. In each case, upon solving the presented problems, another two stars were identified. As we followed the trail, some of the puzzles pointed back to stars we'd already visited. Others pointed to new stars. After a few months of searching for pillars and solving the problems presented on them, we ended up with a total of nine different worlds.

The puzzles themselves had been constructed in a logically redundant manner - find one and you'll eventually find them all. And once we'd determined that the clues had stopped with those nine locations, we attempted to draw lines between vertices of the three-dimensional shape it had created. Unfortunately, lines didn't intersect, and none passed through any other known solar systems or places of interest. We'd hit another dead end. The only clues left were the two superfluous numbers obtained from each of the nine puzzles – eighteen numbers in total. They had to be the next clue. But we had no idea what they represented.

“This is frustrating! Those numbers could literally mean anything!” Dr. Williams complained.

“How about we try another brute force search?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“That’s close to five thousand possible three number combinations. You know they won’t go for that. We simply don’t have the budget.” Dr. Williams replied.

“Does anyone else in the team have any ideas at all?” asked Dr. Kallas.

“Not to my knowledge,” Dr. Williams said. “We’ve spent months collecting this data, solving these puzzles, and doing all these scans. We hit this dead-end weeks ago, and we’re no closer to solving it now as we were then!”

“Do you think the SETI people can run those five thousand combinations for us?” Dr. Kallas asked, desperately fishing for a solution.

“No, I doubt they’d have the capacity either.” Dr. Williams replied.

“Look, it’s getting late. How about we go to the pub for a couple of pints?” I asked.

“You know what? That sounds like a plan. I need to take my mind off this task,” Dr. Williams said.

And so, we left the lab and headed out. On our way over we bumped into Dr. Nara who asked where we were headed, and then volunteered to join us. “I’m always up for a pint!” she cheerily exclaimed. That wasn’t the first time she’d informed us of that fact. We were happy to have her join us. The more the merrier.

As was common when Dr. Nara was around, the topic of conversation quickly turned to the subject of artificial intelligence. She loved talking about it, and we were always eager to learn more about it.

“So, what do you guys think of when you hear the term artificial intelligence?” she asked once we’d got sat down with our drinks.

Dr. Kallas immediately answered her question with one word. “Skynet.”

“Skynet?” Dr. Nara replied. “What in the hell is that?”

“Terminator. A film from the eighties,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Ahh. Terminator! Yes, I think I’ve heard of that,” she replied. “So, basically, true machine intelligence is what you’re getting at?”

“Yeah,” Dr. Kallas replied. He then clumsily attempted to mimic Arnold Schwarzenegger’s voice. “Come with me if you want to live.” Dr. Nara looked confused. The rest of us felt extreme embarrassment.

“Our current artificial intelligence systems aren’t capable of thinking for themselves,” Dr. Nara said. “When we finally crack that problem, we’ll have what’s called artificial general intelligence. Some people think it’ll take a few years. Others think it’ll take decades. Some people also think artificial general intelligence will cause our extinction.”

“Our extinction? How would that happen?” I asked.

“Some hypothesize that artificial general intelligence will immediately and exponentially self-improve after we create it,” Dr. Nara replied. “And it’ll become so intelligent, it will

either disregard us in its quest to become more powerful or kill us all to prevent us shutting it down. I think there are some obvious holes in the idea that an artificial general intelligence will inevitably, and very quickly become an artificial superintelligence. For one, in order for artificial general intelligence to become super intelligent it needs to be more than just a thinking machine. It needs to be able to interact with the physical world. And the online world.”

“Yes, my thoughts exactly,” Dr. Williams replied.

“If we assume that it could rewrite its code, it would eventually need more compute capacity, more disk space, and more memory. We’re at the limits of all of those things when it comes to the AI models we train today,” Dr. Nara added. “Theory suggests that it would first occupy all available computer systems on the planet, and then when those no longer suffice, invent and build new and better systems for itself.”

“Inventing new technologies requires practical experimentation. That’s something you can’t do purely in simulated environments,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Precisely,” Dr. Nara replied. “Regardless of how intelligent a runaway artificial intelligence is, they wouldn't be able to skip that experimentation phase, which is time-consuming. Best case scenarios would require the superintelligence to construct millions of robots to perform experiments in parallel.”

“Yes, and one would assume that the creators of such an intelligence would have shut it down way before that moment,” Dr. Williams added.

“What if we did create an artificial superintelligence? And it made millions of robots and improved itself exponentially?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“If an artificial superintelligence were able to self-improve unchecked, some hypothesize that it would start to consume all resources on its home planet. Probably at the expense of other inhabitants. It would then continue to consume all resources in its own solar system, and then spread itself out into neighboring solar systems. It would then exponentially spread to all stars in the galaxy, and when all resources in its home galaxy have been consumed, ultimately go on to consume the entire universe, again, at an increasingly exponential rate. All of this would happen in a relatively short amount of time, in relation to geological timescales,” Dr. Nara replied.

“The very idea of artificial superintelligence is highly speculative,” Dr. Williams replied. “If it were possible to create an artificial superintelligence, it would have been created hundreds of thousands of years ago. Maybe even hundreds of millions of years ago. By the first technological species to make it past the extinction barrier. And if that were the case, we’d not be sitting here having this conversation. Our planet, star, solar system, and perhaps even entire galaxy would have already been assimilated.”

“But if artificial superintelligence is the logical and guaranteed outcome from the development of artificial general intelligence, why ARE we all still here?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Perhaps there’s some all-powerful alien race out there watching everything and destroying any race that looks like its about to create artificial intelligence,” I joked.

“And on that cheery note, how about another round?” Dr. Kallas said.

That discussion was the first of many that evening. And we ended up staying until last call. The conversations went on and on about recent public QUERY discoveries, adjacent research, Dr. Nara’s previous artificial life research, and theories about how to solve the remaining piece of the pillar puzzle. We were all aware of that fact that we’d probably overdone it, and that the next morning would be painful. But that’s how things sometimes go.

Chapter 5 Cellular automata

The next morning, those of us who’d spent the evening out arrived a little later than usual. We were all nursing hangovers of various degrees. And Dr. Madson, who was already at the lab, and who had already apparently consumed an entire pot of coffee, immediately noticed our diminished conditions.

“Been in the wars?” she asked.

We all sort of wearily nodded and shuffled to our desks.

Upon arriving at his desk, Dr. Williams produced a kebab from his backpack and started eating it.

“Really?!? A kebab for breakfast?” I asked.

“Yeah! I always get two on the way home. Standard practice. One for now and one for later,” he replied. “And besides,” he said with a mouthful of food, “they’re not open this early in the morning.”

The smell of kebab made me hungry.

“I think I might have a theory about those extra numbers!” Dr. Madson stated excitedly. “It came to me in the shower this morning!”

“Tell us more!” Dr. Nara asked.

“I was thinking about the arrangement of those pillars,” Dr. Madson stated. “They look like rays coming from the sun.”

“Go on,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“So, I thought, what if those values are somehow related to spectral emissions?” she added.

“Ahh. But spectral emissions are measured in Earth units. Cycles per second. Seconds are an Earth-based measurement,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Yeah. I know that! Dummy!” Dr. Madson replied. “But what if there’s a way of translating those numbers into values relevant to us?”

“That should be possible. Are all those values positive?” I asked.

“They aren’t. However, if you add the opposing north-south values for each puzzle, they become positive. I checked it out before you guys arrived,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Okay, so how does that help solve the next part of the puzzle?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Well, if we can map those numbers to our own spectral emission system, maybe we can use it to find a specific star in the vicinity of those puzzle planets that matches corresponding emission lines. And if we find it, we have a new location to check,” Dr. Madson posited.

“An intriguing idea,” I replied. “So, by adding those numbers, we now have nine values that might represent stellar emission lines. We only need to translate the values into something familiar to us?”

“Yeah. I was hoping you guys might be able to do the math!” Dr. Madson replied.

“Okay, well, give us a moment and we’ll assist you,” I replied.

“Roger that! I’ll put on a new pot of coffee!” Dr. Madson replied.

It took some time for Drs. Williams and Kallas to write the code that mapped the values Dr. Madson had obtained into human-based emission values. Mostly because they were so hung over. Dr. Nara also helped, writing code that enumerated all stars in the vicinity of the planets hosting the pillars, checking for similar emission lines. And, after running the program, it found exactly one match. Within seconds.

“Okay, we’ve found a candidate system,” Dr. Kallas stated. His normal level of excitement was slightly suppressed by his hangover.

“We’ve got some scan time on one of the QUERY arrays. Let’s try looking at it ourselves,” I replied from my office.

Drs. Williams and Kallas pulled up the QUERY interface, gathered data, and passed it to the rest of us to examine. “We’re off to get a kebab. Good luck with the search,” they stated.

“Wait, but didn’t Robert just eat a kebab?” I asked. They had already left.

By the time they’d returned, Dr. Nara and Dr. Madson had already found a habitable planet in the system.

“Bingo!” Dr. Nara exclaimed. “This has to be the next clue!”

“All thanks to Dr. Madson!” I added.

“Who’d have thought a biologist could be so resourceful?” Dr. Williams added sarcastically.

“Seriously?” Dr. Madson replied.

“Now, now,” I interjected.

“We don’t have the capabilities to surface scan this planet. Send it over to SETI for help, perhaps?” Dr. Nara added.

“Yeah, let’s have SETI find the next pillars,” I replied.

The search for the next clue ended up being more difficult than any of the previous clues. According to SETI, after two weeks of automated sweeps and painstaking manual exploration of all landmasses on the planet, nothing resembling the pillars we'd found on the other worlds seemed to be present. It took SETI three more weeks to finally identify the site, which was submerged fifty meters below sea level near a chain of equatorial islands.

The site itself was distinctly different to the ones we'd encountered on the other planets. It contained five roughly fifteen by ten-meter rectangular slabs. Four were arranged side-by-side, with the fifth placed separately, a short distance to the left. Each slab was etched with a fifty-by-fifty square grid. Various cells on each of the five grids were slightly raised from the surface to form patterns. Each slab had a different pattern etched on it. The slab located to the left of the arrangement also contained, just below the grid space, carvings of three rectangular boxes, each housing differing numbers of vertical lines - five in the leftmost, six in the middle, and one in the rightmost box.

Dr. Nara immediately understood the nature of the puzzle. “Cellular automata!” she exclaimed.

“Cellular what?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Cellular automata,” Dr.Nara repeated. “Like Conway’s game of life.”

“Right, yeah, I think I’ve heard about that,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Basically, it’s a system with a set of rules that define how each cell is updated at each time step,” Dr. Nara explained. “Cells on the grid can be born, die, or remain as they are. Their neighbors determine what happens. If a cell has too many neighbors, it dies from overpopulation. If a cell has no neighbors, it dies from underpopulation. If a cell has the right number of neighbors, it will live on or even give birth to a new cell. Once the new state of every cell on the board has been calculated, cells are added, removed, or simply left alone. Once all states have been updated, the rules are run again, and the cycle repeats.”

“Yes, I recall seeing those game of life animations. Certain shapes would move around the board, generate offspring, or oscillate in interesting ways,” Dr. Madson replied.

“From what I’m seeing, this problem is straightforward to solve,” Dr. Nara stated. “We need to determine the ruleset that converts what is depicted in the leftmost slab into each of the depictions in the other four slabs. The number of steps is denoted by those vertical lines – five hundred and sixty-one to be precise. We’ll need a computer to do this.”

“I’m on it,” Dr. Williams replied.

“A set of all possible rules governing the behavior of cellular automata on a two-dimensional grid can be represented as a binary number,” Dr. Nara explained. “Once solved, these problems should provide us with four unique integer values.”

“Okay guys. We need to first create a computer program able to simulate cellular automata on a square grid. Then we need to set the starting configuration to match the one depicted in that leftmost stone slab. Next, we iterate through all possible rulesets one by one, running the simulation for exactly five hundred and sixty-one steps. Finally, we simply check if the simulation's end configuration matches a pattern depicted on one of the other four slabs. If it does, we convert the binary representation of the rule into a decimal number.”

It took Drs. Nara, Kallas, and Williams the rest of the morning to program a simulation of the grid represented in the puzzle and associated code to run the cellular automata rulesets. The program took just a few seconds to generate the four numbers.

“Interesting,” Dr. Williams stated. “Whilst the pillar puzzle relied on the solver having developed mathematical knowledge, this puzzle forces the solver to have created computers.”

“Four numbers don’t exactly represent a coordinate system,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Unless those coordinates are in four dimensions,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Wait. Don’t our QUERY systems take four coordinates?” Dr. Madson added.

“They do. But these numbers are small integers. They wouldn’t correspond to anything meaningful,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“We clearly need some sort of transformation,” Dr. Nara added.

“Perhaps there are clues in the area where those slabs were located?” Dr. Madson asked.

Unfortunately, examining the slabs in detail and searching the surrounding area didn't uncover any new clues. It was already late, and we were about to give up for the day when Dr. Kallas had a flash of inspiration.

“I’ve been playing around with various transforms,” he said. “If I multiply each of the numbers by five hundred and sixty-one and by the distance between this planet and its host star, I get values that correspond with a reasonable looking set of QUERY coordinates. However, I ran the scan and found nothing.”

“Did you use Earth as the origin?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yes. Oh, of course. What a stupid error,” Dr. Kallas replied. “I’ll set the origin to the planet where we found the slabs. One second.”

Dr. Kallas calculated new coordinates accordingly, input them into our QUERY array, and activated the scan.

Chapter 6 Planck time

The resulting QUERY scan presented us with a location in space containing fifty-one stone cubes spinning about all axes and moving about each other in a series of orbits and gyrations. Glyphs were inscribed on each cube face.

“Wow!” exclaimed Dr. Nara. “I wasn’t expecting this!”

“Yeah, what the hell is this?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“If this is yet another a puzzle, it looks to be a lot more complex than those previous ones,” Dr. Madson added.

“I wonder if those objects are moving chaotically or deterministically,” Dr. Williams stated.

“I’m thinking we could spend hours watching this motion and not see any patterns or repetition,” Dr. Kallas replied. “In order to find out whether there is any determinism in their movement, we’d need to simulate the entire system.”

“Perhaps that’s what is intended,” Dr. Williams replied. “Think about it. The first puzzle required mathematics, the second required computers, perhaps the third requires advanced computing, predictive analysis, and even artificial intelligence.”

“That would follow,” Dr. Kallas replied. “I suppose we could capture the exact spatial and rotational positions of all cubes over a period of time, and then use that data to determine the forces they apply on each other.”

“Yes, that’s what I was thinking,” Dr. Williams replied. “We’d need at least a few hours’ worth of data...”

“Maybe even a few days’ worth,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Let’s get to it!” Dr Williams stated.

“You’ll probably need my help,” Dr. Nara stated. Drs. Williams and Kallas were in the zone and hadn’t expected Dr. Nara’s input.

“Wha? Huh? In what way?” Dr. Williams replied.

“Well, it would be trivial to use machine learning to predict the variables at play in this system,” she replied.

“It would? Ahh yes, of course it would,” Dr. Williams replied. “Okay, let’s set up over there.”

It took the three of them a week to understand the physical forces at play in the system of spinning cubes. After which, they summoned us all to a meeting.

“Do you want the good news or the good news?” Dr. Williams said, grinning widely.

“The good news first!” Dr. Madson replied.

“Okay, so we’ve studied the system. And thanks to Dr. Nara’s machine learning thingy we’ve concluded that the system is completely deterministic!” Dr. Kallas excitedly stated.

“Okay, that’s nice,” I replied, rather skeptical about their shared excitement. “So how does this help us solve the puzzle?”

“We’ve used the variables gathered to create our own simulation of the system,” Dr. Williams added. He hit a key on his laptop and a computer-generated simulation of the spinning cubes lit up a nearby screen.

“Tell him the good bit already!” Dr. Kallas exclaimed.

“We were able to run this simulation on fast-forward, which allowed us to extrapolate the positions and orientations of the cubes over a very long time,” Dr. Williams added. “And we found that, if run for long enough, we encounter this state.” He hit another key on his laptop. An image appeared on the screen depicting a state in which all cubes were aligned, glyphs visible on each face.

“Those glyphs are the same ones encountered in the pillars puzzle, right?” I asked.

“Yes! Exactly! So, this set of glyphs must be the key to solving the puzzle!” Dr. Williams replied.

“Do you have any insights on how we might continue?” I asked.

“I believe the answer is in the spatial positions of the cubes relative to each other,” Dr. Kallas replied. “The glyphs can be ordered in many ways to represent valid mathematical notation.

We need to determine the correct order of those glyphs to produce an algorithm that will output the numerical values we're expecting will further the solution."

"Can we brute-force it?" I asked.

"No. There are fifty-one glyphs. The number of potential sequences is astronomical," Dr. Nara replied.

"We've hit another wall, I take it?" I asked.

"Yes, it seems so," Dr. Kallas replied.

A few weeks passed. Dr. Nara attempted to use machine learning to discern a pattern in the spatial arrangement of the cubes. Drs. Kallas and Williams tried to match known algorithms and formulae to the symbols denoted on the blocks, hoping the formula was already known to us. Nothing worked. And then it was Dr. Madson who, once again, had an insight that would prove to be correct.

"You know, I was thinking about the pillar puzzle and how it was to do with stars," she said.

"And I realized that stars might be the key to solving this puzzle. So, I tried to match the relative positions of those cubes with the spatial arrangement of stars in the puzzle's local vicinity. It worked."

She brought up an image that showed the cubes' positions overlaid on star positions in that region of space.

“At first, I thought we might need to look at spectral emissions. Like we did previously. I spent a bunch of time doing that, but none of the data made any sense. It turns out the answer was much simpler. I ordered the stars by size and then mapped the glyphs onto the same sequence,” she added. “Here’s the glyph order it produced.”

She brought up the glyph sequence. “And here’s the same sequence mapped to our own mathematical notation.”

“That appears to be a valid formula,” Dr. Kallas stated. “Did you solve it?”

“Do I look like a mathematician?” Dr. Madson replied.

“But of course!” Dr. Williams replied in a sarcastic tone. “They don’t teach math in biology school!”

“Really? I just solved your puzzle and you’re going to start on biology?” Dr. Madson replied.

“Why don’t you and Riku go and solve that equation?” I said to Dr. Williams.

They both nodded and left the table. A few hours later, they announced to the lab that they’d solved the equation. But that it had yielded only one number.

“Not coordinates, then?” I asked.

“No. This is the first time we’ve seen a single number from one of these puzzles,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Frankly, I’m stumped as to what it might represent.”

“It’s a very large number,” Dr. Williams added.

“Are you sure the solution was correct?” I asked.

“Yeah, we triple checked it. We also went over Dr. Madson’s work to make sure the glyph ordering was correct. It was,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“I have a thought,” Dr. Nara replied. “Given we had to wait for a specific amount of time to observe the cubes in this alignment, might this value represent some sort of time stamp?”

“I think Kano is onto something,” Dr. Williams replied. “The problem in this case would be determining both a point of reference and a unit of measurement.”

“Yes. You see, our methods for measuring time are fundamental to our own planet and culture. Seconds, days, weeks, months, and years are concepts based on the size and movement of the Earth, and would therefore be irrelevant to the final solution,” Dr. Kallas added.

“I knew that!” Dr. Nara replied. “There are plenty of ways of measuring time that aren’t inherent to the Earth. For instance, nuclear time is based on the oscillation rate of the cesium atom. Then there are half-lives of various radioactive elements. Or the amount of time it takes light to travel a defined distance.”

“How about the Planck length?” Dr. Kallas posited. “The number is very large, so Planck time could be the unit of measurement...”

“Planck length?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Planck length is the shortest unit of distance measurable,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“And Planck time is the time it takes for light to travel the Planck length,” Dr. Williams added. “None of our current physical theories are able to describe timescales shorter than Planck time. It’s like the structure of time just sort of breaks down at short enough intervals.”

“I’d never heard of those,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Well, I’m sure that’s one of the many things they didn’t teach you in biology,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Wait. Does that mean that spacetime can basically be broken down into pixels and frames?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Come to think of it, yes. It does,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Wouldn’t that be a good argument for the simulation hypothesis?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Don’t get Robert started on the simulation hypothesis!” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Yeah, let’s leave that can of worms for another time,” I replied.

Dr. Williams looked up. “Wait!” he said excitedly, clicking his fingers. “There’s only one possibly frame of reference that would make any sense. A value anyone at the level of advancement needed to solve this puzzle would have already accurately measured. It has to be time elapsed since the big bang!”

Drs. Kallas and Williams performed some quick calculations, converting the numerical value obtained from the puzzle into a human-understandable timestamp.

“Is this right?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Hmm. That timestamp is hundreds of thousands of years in the past. It can’t be right,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Maybe it is,” Dr. Nara posited. “In order to get the clues required to derive this timestamp, we had to let the cube simulation predict a configuration thousands of years into the future. Perhaps what this is telling us is that we need to observe the configuration of these cubes thousands of years in the past.”

“That sounds logical,” Dr. Kallas admitted. “So, we’d have to make a simulation that can run backwards?”

“Yeah,” Dr. Nara replied.

“That shouldn’t be too difficult,” Dr. Williams replied. “Just give me a few minutes.” He’d already started typing away at his laptop. A few hours later, Drs. Williams, Kallas, and Nara informed us rather loudly that they had snapshotted the configuration. They brought it up on screen. It portrayed nine sets of cubes, with exactly three cubes in each set, all spatially aligned to a specific direction. Viewing the cubes from the correct angle allowed us to draw lines through their centers. Those lines, when extrapolated, eventually intersected, providing us with a total of three intersection locations. We performed QUERY scans on all three locations but found them all to be in empty space.

“Huh. I was really hoping that would have been the solution,” Dr. Kallas stated. He sighed. “This is just one never-ending wild goose chase.”

“What are we missing this time?” Dr. Williams replied.

“The timestamp,” Dr. Nara replied. “We’ve extrapolated those locations to points in space that exist right now. Logically, we need to do the same thing but for points in space at the moment the timestamp indicates.”

“That would require a model that is able to predict the positions of stars and planets in the distant past. I’m not sure if such a model even exists,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“We made a model years ago that was designed to predict galactic movement over long time spans. I wonder if it could be adapted for this purpose?” I asked.

“Oh yeah, I remember working on that. Isn’t it still operational?” Dr. Williams added.

“It is. And I know the team that maintains it. I’ll get in touch with them,” I replied.

It took the work of both our team and the folks maintaining the galactic positional prediction model over a month to create a new model capable of accurately predicting the configuration of the stellar neighborhood adjacent to the cube puzzle at a precise moment in the distant past. But when it was complete, we discovered that the intersection lines did indeed pass through three stars. We were about to commission extensive QUERY searches of their solar systems when Dr. Madson suggested we try other, simpler methods first. And it turned out that each of the stars had spectral emissions lines in common with each other. Four of them, to be precise. Another four values to plug into QUERY. Given that the previous puzzles had provided us with a way of converting the alien’s spectral emissions values into our own, we performed a reverse conversion on the values obtained, shifted the point of origin to the location of the cube puzzle, pointed the QUERY array at those new coordinates, and initiated the scan.

Chapter 7 A formal request

It took a moment for the QUERY scan to initialize and then send us data. We brought the image up on a large screen in the lab.

“Empty space again!” Dr. Williams complained. “Give me a break. Where did we go wrong this time?” He sighed and then started frantically typing on his laptop keyboard.

After months and months of solving increasingly complex puzzles, we were all exhausted. We all clearly felt the same sense of disappointment and frustration Dr. Williams's had expressed. Silence fell across the lab.

"Perhaps we're not using correct device settings?" Dr. Kallas posited. "Our previous scan was at a rather low resolution. I'll make some adjustments." Dr. Kallas got up and started making his way to the QUERY control console. And he was about halfway there when something completely unexpected happened. A written message, in English, appeared on the QUERY output display.

"We are one of the alien races you have been searching for. We have been observing your species for some time. We would now like to initiate formal contact."

The message remained on our viewer as the whole room read it in silence. You could have heard a pin drop.

"What the actual fuck?" Dr. Nara exclaimed.

"For real?" Dr. Madson added.

We all looked at each other.

"This can't be real," Dr. Kallas stated.

“This has to be some sort of elaborate prank from one of the other QUERY teams on our floor,” Dr Nara posited.

“Yeah, there’s no way this is real,” Dr. Williams added.

“But what if it is?” Dr. Madson asked.

We stood in silence for a moment.

“If this is a real message, whoever sent it is obviously capable of observing us with their own version of QUERY. And let’s face it, for them to have crafted those puzzles and project those images directly into our own QUERY feed means that they’re clearly a lot more advanced than us,” I said.

“But why us?” Dr Madson replied. “We’re not the right people to be negotiating an intergalactic treaty. They should know that.”

“Exactly!” Dr. Williams added. “And that’s why this is clearly a hack!” he exclaimed. “Riku, help me out here.” Drs. Williams started to type furiously on his laptop while Dr. Kallas watched his screen. And at that moment, the QUERY display changed.

"We understand that this situation must be difficult to believe. And we also acknowledge your need to involve an appropriate ambassador or delegation for more formal discussions. You can communicate with us by simply speaking. We are observing you just as you are able

to observe remote locations in the universe using your own remote viewing technology. If you have any further questions, just ask."

"I still think this is some sort of elaborate and well-planned practical joke," Dr. Williams shouted. "We'll soon trace your IP."

"What if this isn't a prank?" Dr. Nara asked. "What if this is first contact? Should we really be so skeptical? This is, after all, what we've been working towards!"

"First contact my ass!" Dr. Williams exclaimed. "Anyone with a QUERY device could be watching this lab. Right now. And they'd be able to answer any question we throw at them."

"Okay," Dr. Madson stated. "Suppose they are aliens. And they've been observing us just as we've been observing many other species. They'd have had plenty of time to master our language."

"Or translate it using machine learning techniques we developed ourselves years ago," Dr. Nara interjected.

"Right!" Dr. Madson replied. "Remember the zoo hypothesis?"

"Zoo hypothesis? Those puzzles we solved were rudimentary. There's no way they're the gateway into an alliance of super-advanced alien beings," Dr. Williams retorted. "No, this is, without a doubt, some form of practical joke. I'm certain of it!"

“Robert’s right,” Dr. Kallas replied. “I could imagine Dr. Wright’s team, Dr. Smith’s team, Dr. Young’s team, or a dozen other teams pulling a stunt like this. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re working together.”

The text on our viewscreen changed again.

"How can we convince you we are who we claim to be?"

“Okay, Robert. If you think this is a practical joke, come up with something they won’t be able to answer.” Dr. Madson replied.

“Any question about Earth’s history would be known to us and the pranksters,” Dr. Nara replied. “Or they could just do an internet search for it. So that’s out of the question.”

“Questions about advanced alien tech could be answered in any way the pranksters please,” Dr. Kallas added. “Pretty much anything might as well sound convincing to us.”

“Personal questions will largely depend on how long the aliens have been watching us as individuals. They’d depend upon whether they’d observed specific moments from our past,” Dr. Madson added. “So, probably a no go.”

“How about we ask them to provide a proof to a currently unsolvable mathematics or computer science problem?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Nah, that wouldn’t work. It would take us way too long to validate the proof,” Dr. Williams answered.

“Facts and figures about the universe could be looked up by anyone playing a joke on us,” Dr. Kallas added. “And if those figures are unknown, any random value could be provided, and we wouldn't be able to verify it.”

“We can't even ask them something about the set of puzzles we've just solved, since anyone on Earth with a QUERY device could have theoretically been watching as we’d solved them,” Dr. Nara added.

“This is more difficult than I imagined!” Dr. Williams exclaimed. “How the hell do we determine the difference between a practical joke and actual first contact?”

“Wait! I have a suggestion” Dr. Madson stated. “How about we ask them to send us real-time footage from their home world?”

“But this system we’re interacting with only seems to display text,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“We’re supposedly dealing with super advanced aliens. Do you really think they would have created a system to communicate with us that can only handle text?” Dr. Williams asked sarcastically.

“And besides, if they could show us video, it would kinda go towards proving they are super intelligent aliens,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Riku, do you think those teams you mentioned would be able to synthesize video on demand and project it through this QUERY image?” I asked.

“No. I think that would be a tough ask,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“In that case, I think Rachel’s that idea might check out,” Dr. Williams replied. “It would take time and creativity to generate video of that ilk. And we’d probably be able to tell it’s fake by looking at it. Okay, let’s go with that.”

We unanimously agreed.

A moment later, the QUERY display switched to what we'd asked for. The footage we received was of what we imagined must have been one of their cities. It depicted a flyby of a massive dome, stretching so far into the sky that clouds broke around it. Inside the dome we observed many arrangements of large, disc-shaped floating structures. Each floating level contained buildings and park-like areas. As we watched, the camera panned around some of the floating structures and then moved rapidly to ground-level. It zoomed past thousands of alien beings. The fly-by was so fast that we couldn’t really make out what they looked like. But we could see that they were moving around, conversing, and interacting with vendors in hundreds of small markets. And we could see that they weren’t at all human. The camera continued, at a rapid pace, through bustling streets and indoor areas full of stalls selling food, ornaments, clothing, paraphernalia, and unidentifiable high-tech devices. The view panned around, and then rapidly ascended to an altitude that provided us with another look at the entire settlement, which contained hundreds, or maybe even thousands of floating structures,

likely capable of housing millions of residents. Although the entire sequence lasted about thirty seconds, it provided us with a taste of their culture, prosperity, and level of technological advancement. And once the footage had concluded, a new message appeared on the screen.

"We hope this convinced you as to our sincerity. Please do ask us more questions."

"Well, that was pretty convincing," I stated.

"Yep. There's no way that video could have been generated so quickly, and on-the-fly by any of the teams I know," Dr. Kallas added.

"The level of detail in that footage clearly rules out any AI-generated shenigans," Dr. Nara stated.

"I'm still skeptical," Dr Williams added.

"You're always skeptical," Dr. Madson replied. "What will it take to convince you?"

"I dunno," Dr. Williams replied. "Perhaps if they materialize a pizza. Right here on the table."

We stopped talking and looked at the table. No pizza appeared.

"They're aliens. They probably don't have pizza," Dr. Kallas stated.

Majority consensus in the room seemed to indicate that we believed the conversation was real. We'd achieved first contact with an advanced alien species. And they were communicating with us via QUERY. It was a surreal experience, and one I'll never forget.

"Okay, then," I stated. "Let's ask some questions!"

"I'll go first!" Dr. Nara stated.

"How long have you been watching us?" Dr. Nara asked.

Over six thousand of your years.

"Holy hell, that's a long time," Dr. Nara stated.

"Yeah, that goes back to before ancient Egypt," Dr. Madson added.

"That means they developed QUERY at least six thousand years ago!" Dr. Kallas remarked.

"I wonder how long ago they invented it?"

"Perhaps you should ask them," I replied.

"Oh, duh. Of course. How long ago did you develop QUERY technology?" Dr. Kallas asked.

Over one hundred thousand of your years ago.

A few of us gasped at reading that response. We had expected to meet a species perhaps a few thousand years more advanced than our own. But a hundred thousand years more advanced? We considered how far we'd come technologically in just ten thousand years – from the stone age to where we were now. That stretch of time was just one tenth of their technological journey.

“Over one hundred thousand years,” Dr. Williams stated. “That’s interesting from the point of view of the Fermi paradox. It turns out it was correct regarding the supposition that technological species much older than our own must exist in the universe.”

“In what level of detail have you been watching us?” Dr. Williams asked.

That varies. Automation was mostly used during your early history, which provided us with periodic summaries of your development, global events, and probabilities of planetary catastrophe. Standard practice for most of the planets we observe. We paid more attention to your species recently and have followed your astrophysical discoveries closely. It has been a nostalgic moment for some of us.

Dr. Williams read silently from the screen and then repeated one of the phrases displayed there. “...a nostalgic moment for some of us...”

“How long do your species live?” He asked.

That is a complex matter. We originally had lifespans a little shorter than your own. Medical advancements made over the millennia now allow us to extend our lifespans almost indefinitely.

“Have you ever visited us?” Dr. Madson asked.

Yes. On several occasions. Mainly for anthropological research.

“In many science fiction stories, visiting technologically backward species is prohibited,” Dr. Kallas stated. “The prime directive in Star Trek, for instance. I wonder if they have guidelines or laws regarding cultural contamination of lesser-developed species?”

We’ve adopted laws and conventions, common to those we cooperate with, that prohibit major interference in the development of lesser civilizations. Those laws are relaxed enough to allow cultural anthropologists to visit and study cultures in early enough development stages. In fact, we’ve developed systems able to predict the impact of interactions with members of a lesser species. Those systems provide guidelines for visiting researchers. Technological exchange is only permitted with species that have reached a certain level.

“Have we reached the level of advancement that allows for technological exchange?” Dr. Nara asked.

Yes. This is why we reached out to you.

We asked our questions to the ceiling. As if the entity we were communicating with were looking down on our lab. It was, in hindsight, completely silly. But it turned out to be sort of a natural reaction to the situation.

“As I was thinking,” Dr. Williams interjected. “Those puzzles we just spent the last nine months and countless hours of overtime on had nothing to do with our contacting an advanced alien species.”

“Wait, what?” Dr. Nara replied. “What do you mean?”

“If I understand Robert correctly, he’s suggesting that it was our invention of QUERY that prompted this encounter,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Not just QUERY. I stated that it was our level of technological advancement that qualified us,” Dr. Williams replied. “So, are we correct in that assumption?” he asked the ceiling.
You are correct.

“So why the puzzles?” Dr. Williams asked. It took a while for the answer to appear on the screen.

Think of it as a test of your curiosity and drive to contact another species.

“Have other species visited us?” Dr. Madson asked.

Yes. Many others have visited your planet. You might find mention of those visitors in surviving ancient texts and imagery. We are even aware of visits as far back as your Jurassic period.

“Jurassic period?” Dr. Madson exclaimed. “That was over sixty-five million years ago!”

“Are you planning on visiting us in the near future?” Dr. Nara asked.

Yes. We will visit soon.

“Where is your home world located?” Dr. Williams asked.

We'll explain that later.

“But of course,” Dr. Williams exclaimed after reading their reply.

“Will it be possible for us to visit your home world in the future?” Dr. Kallas asked.

Yes. We’ll bring you to our world in due time.

“You talked about starting a cooperation with our species. How many other species are you cooperating with?” Dr. Madson asked.

Our alliance currently contains over four thousand participants.

“That’s a lot!” Dr. Nara stated.

“Yeah. I wonder how many are noobs like us and how many are tens of millions of years more advanced than us?” Dr. Kallas posited.

“Look on the bright side – better to be in an alliance with aliens millions of years more advanced than us than to be their enemies,” Dr. Madson replied.

“We’ve left out a fairly obvious question. What is the name of your species and your home world?” I asked.

Something we’d eventually learn was how the aliens converted their language into something we could read, write, and pronounce. As it turns out, conversing with an alien species is more difficult than one might imagine. For instance, their own language is impossible for humans to pronounce. As such, even answers to simple questions like "what is the name of your race?"

or "what is the name of your home world?" were untranslatable. We weren't the first alien species our new allies had made contact with, and, as such, they'd devised a protocol for handling such dilemmas. As part of their research into our race, local linguists had been tasked with assigning syllables, common to languages on our planet, to their own written languages such that their words could be pronounced by us, regardless of native tongue. And so, we learned that their race was the "Elara" and their home world was "Ket". Dr. Kallas expressed excitement at the fact that the words sounded suitably science fictiony.

And, eventually, as part of our technological and cultural exchange, xenolinguists from Earth were provided with courses on how to read their written language. Although their workaround to spoken language helped facilitate smooth written communication, it wouldn't help in any face-to-face encounters with the Elara, if they were to eventually happen. We suspected they'd simply use voice synthesis systems as intermediate translators when conversing with us.

"Is there anything else you can tell us about your species or alliance?" I asked.

We'll disseminate more later.

"We should have prepared for this beforehand. You know, written a list of stuff to ask," Dr. Nara stated.

"Yeah, I'm kinda out of questions at this point," Dr. Madson replied.

"Me too," I added.

“I still have plenty of questions!” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Go ahead, then!” I replied.

“Is warp drive possible?” Dr. Kallas asked.

As we understand the concept from references in your science fiction, yes. But it isn't the most efficient method for long distance space travel.

“Did you really have to ask a science fiction question?” Dr. Williams interjected.

“It was a perfectly valid question!” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Perfectly valid my ass. Next, you’ll be asking about transporters and food replicators!” Dr. Williams replied.

“And why not?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Well, because...” Dr. Williams replied. “Oh! Wait! I have a valid question!”

“Is time travel possible?” Dr. Williams asked.

Sort of. You'll need to learn more before it can be adequately explained to you.

“I’m going to ask it anyway. Is it possible to beam people up?” Dr. Kallas asked.

Yes. Your science fiction writers were quite good at predicting useful technologies.

“Well, if that it possible, I suppose the question about food replicators is redundant,” Dr. Kallas added.

“They’d better not beam me up,” Dr. Williams stated. “I don’t want my molecules being disassembled and then reassembled elsewhere.”

After a slight pause in the conversation, Dr. Williams broke the silence. “Oh, no!” he exclaimed. “Oh god no!”

“What?!!?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“What is it, Robert? What is it?” I replied.

“We’re going to have to talk to McTavish.” Dr. Williams said.

Chapter 8 On the nature of paperwork

Generally speaking, Professor McTavish wasn’t someone you could simply summon on a whim. Booking a meeting with him took weeks. Sometimes months. However, in this particular instant, it took him seconds to drop everything and rush to our lab. Upon arrival, we provided him with a detailed account of everything that had happened. And after understanding the situation at hand, he agreed to help out in any way that he could.

This was the first time he’d spent more than two minutes in our lab. And he was much less abrupt and brash than usual. He almost seemed happy. None of us had ever imagined he was capable of that emotion.

During the following days, Professor McTavish turned out to be the perfect ally. And much more helpful than we'd ever imagined. He immediately got in touch with his contacts, who got in touch with their contacts. And before long, negotiations were handed off to people way above our pay grade.

The idea that we might one day make contact with an advanced species had been considered shortly after QUERY was invented, and an entire UN task force had been pre-emptively assembled and trained to handle such a scenario. After Professor McTavish had made his calls, the task force was promptly activated, and took over all negotiations and diplomatic efforts with the Elara. We configured a QUERY node for them and pointed it at the location we had discovered after solving the final puzzle. And then they continued where we'd left off.

Unfortunately, the fact that negotiations had now been handed over to a higher body meant that our team was forced out of the loop. We would have much preferred to continue talking one-on-one with the Elara about scientific matters, but we were promised that we would be able to resume our discussions sometime in the future.

During the early years of QUERY, it was quickly understood that anyone using the technology may be involved in potentially world-changing discoveries. Even back then, many research groups from around the globe were either directly working with QUERY devices or examining data collected by them. Within the first year of technology being proven, a standard non-disclosure agreement was drafted, and subsequently issued to all researchers involved. That legal document, which is periodically updated as QUERY

capabilities are improved, is referred to as the "Standard QUERY NDA". Many researchers protested the idea of signing this NDA, since it went against their ideals of openness and knowledge sharing. Unfortunately, not signing it meant not working with the technology.

As QUERY EPOCH3 and 4 were achieved, the standard NDA was amended to include prohibition of the use of the technology on Earth, and for specific purposes. A set of requirements related to ethical considerations of the observation of intelligent alien species were also added. Teams that were eventually cleared for terrestrial research were provided with special NDAs that allowed them to scan only specific regions on our own planet. All QUERY usage was carefully logged and audited to ensure rules weren't being broken, and that researchers with access to it weren't using it to spy on people, such as wives, ex-girlfriends, and the like, or to collect foreign intelligence or trade secrets.

Certain extraordinary discoveries did require additional legal paperwork to be drafted and signed by the subset of researchers involved with them. Examples of these included the discovery of the first signs of extra-terrestrial life, the discovery of the first technologically intelligent extra-terrestrial life, and HEX.

By the way, details of the HEX discovery still hadn't been shared outside of a very small circle of people. It was still being kept from the world.

Contact with a species more advanced than our own precipitated the creation of several new and even more restrictive legal documents. Naturally, our discovery of the Elara was kept from the public, and those documents were designed to ensure that no word of that discovery got out.

Of course, many of us would have preferred that these NDAs and legal frameworks didn't exist. QUERY research had provided us with a great deal of information relevant to the scientific community and we all would have preferred that it be in the hands of all scientists, and not just the select few who'd signed the NDAs.

Once negotiations had been handed off to the UN, we were provided with no updates or information on the deliberations, which was frustrating to say the least. And those negotiations took months.

As a matter of fact, I recall a discussion about those NDAs and the increasing secrecy behind our projects that we had during that long waiting period. After the hand-off, we'd returned to surveying HEX. And some time after that, Professor McTavish had graced us with his presence, briefly as usual, to belatedly congratulate us on our work in solving the puzzles and finding the Elara. His words weren't initially taken all that well by certain members of our team. However, he granted us some budget to go out and celebrate, which made us all a little happier. We took his offer as an opportunity to eat at a rather expensive Chinese restaurant.

We started our evening with a few rounds of drinks.

"I feel like I spend half my time signing NDAs," Dr. Madson complained.

"Me too," Dr. Nara replied. "But I can kinda understand why they require it. I think EPOCH4 was the last thing we'll disseminate to the public in a long time."

“Yeah, I get that feeling, too,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Look at how the extremists took that announcement.”

“I get a feeling that the rational portion of the public would be interested and excited about some of the other things we’ve discovered,” Dr. Madson added.

“HEX would almost definitely cause mass panic,” Dr. Williams stated. “And besides, the circle of scientists involved in these projects must increase over time. We’re already severely under resourced.”

“By not telling the world about some of our newer discoveries, we’re missing out on recruitment opportunities. I bet a lot more people would get interested in this field if they knew about some of the things we’re doing,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“For sure,” I replied. “But the downsides are too risky. Look at how the political extremists react to trivial announcements.”

“They’re getting worse and worse,” Dr. Nara stated. “Remember when they refused vaccines and ate horse dewormer paste to cure COVID? That was super-idiotic. But it feels much more rational than the things they do nowadays.”

“Yeah, I remember that!” Dr. Kallas replied. “They posted videos demonstrating that it removed worms. But what those people were defecating was intestinal lining.”

“Oh god, really?” Dr. Nara exclaimed. “Eating that stuff sounds like it must have been bad for them. Dangerous, even.”

“Oh, it was,” Dr. Williams replied. “I think some of them died from it.”

“Many of them died from COVID. Because they refused the vaccine,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Perhaps this whole social network phenomenon is just a modern-day Darwinian mechanism,” Dr. Kallas posited.

“What, you mean bring all the idiots together and let them destroy themselves?” Dr. Williams replied. “I like that idea. We sit and wait for the logical conclusion to this madness.”

“Right now, the logical conclusion to this madness is an increasing number of those people having positions of influence and power,” I replied. “What that leads to is not something I’m altogether excited about.”

“Those people were crazy back then. But their crazy didn’t harm others. Well, it didn’t harm others who weren’t part of their cult,” Dr. Nara added. “Things are different now. And getting worse.”

We all nodded. Things were different now. The extremists were much more coordinated, much more dangerous, and had significantly grown their ranks. They also had money and power. A small majority of US lawmakers were adherents to various extremist causes. And just that year, a general election in the UK had ended in a hung parliament that precipitated

the formation of a coalition government which included a party that was founded on the ideas of the extremists.

“Did I tell you what happened to Dr. Young, by the way?” Dr. Kallas asked, rhetorically. We all waited for his follow up. “A couple of weeks ago she flew to the US for a conference. When she arrived, she got detained at the airport for, I think forty-eight hours. Maybe more. And then she was immediately put on a flight back to Germany. She missed the whole conference. She was even due to speak at it.”

“I’ve seen many similar stories on the forums,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Did they give any reason for her detention?” Dr. Williams asked.

“No,” Dr. Kallas replied.

Two waiters arrived at our tables with a fresh round of drinks. We ordered food. A lot of it. All the most expensive items on the menu.

“I hear there are a growing number extremist types in high-up positions in large corporations,” Dr. Nara replied. “Directors of policy, content moderation, and that sort of thing.”

“Everyone seems to be capitulating to the extremist cause. Did you see the news that some in the US government want to pass laws banning certain areas of scientific research?” Dr. Nara stated. “Including QUERY research.”

“What?” Dr. Williams replied. “When did that happen?”

“Today,” Dr. Nara replied. “Their reasoning is that certain fields of science go against the gospels. They’re anti-Christian.”

“Anti-Christian?” Dr. Kallas replied. “That place is going to be Gilead soon.”

“Does it surprise you?” Dr. Nara asked. “They’ve been banning books for years. The free speech people only want speech to be free when it suits their agenda.”

The conversation paused for a moment as waiters arrived with some starters.

“Oh, did you see the thing about the standoff between the US and China?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Which one?” Dr. Nara asked.

“The one in the South China Sea,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Yeah, I think I read about that today. The new US administration is sending a large naval fleet over?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“That’s the one,” Dr. Madson replied. “Doesn’t look good.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dr. Williams replied. “That standoff has been going on for years. I’d think nothing of it.”

“Think nothing of it?” Dr. Kallas replied. “The rhetoric has been going on for years. But this is an escalation. The US stopped whining about the situation and is now sending their navy. A navy controlled by an extremist government. In what way can that possibly end well?”

“Oh, come on,” Dr. Williams replied. “The US are saber-rattling. They won’t follow through. Not with China. It’s all just posturing.”

“Posturing?” Dr. Kallas replied angrily. “Remember how Russia was ‘just posturing’ when they staged a hundred thousand troops on their border with Ukraine?”

“Come on!” Dr. Williams replied. “That was Russia. And besides, we all know what came of that.”

“That was Russia under control of a madman,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Do you really consider the sanity of the current US administration to be any different?”

“Of course not!” Dr. Williams replied. “But...” Dr. Madson threw a stern glance in the direction of Drs. Williams and Kallas. They promptly shut up.

And at that moment, waiters arrived with more food. And Dr. Williams’s love for food overtook his need to bicker. So, he shut up and started stuffing his face. I could tell Dr. Kallas

would have liked to continue the ‘debate’. But he held his tongue in fear of Dr. Madson’s reprisal.

And then more food arrived. And more. Crispy Shredded Beef that was sweet and chewy, authentic Kung Pao Chicken with loads of Szechuan peppercorns and dried chilies, a delectable Mapo Tofu, a crispy seaweed accompaniment that was sweet and salty and crunchy, and plenty of fried rice and fried noodle dishes. Amazingly, we managed to polish most of it off.

“Did you see that recent paper?” Dr. Williams asked. “The one that detailed a planet with absolutely no craters, canyons, mountains, or relief of any kind. The planet was completely smooth.”

“Could that be a planet that succumbed to the theoretical grey goo catastrophe?” Dr. Kallas posited.

“Grey goo?” Dr. Madson asked. “What’s that?”

“The grey goo catastrophe is a hypothetical end-of-the-world scenario brought about by runaway nanotechnology,” Dr. Williams replied. “The concept centers around the idea of the creation of nanobots that are able to utilize resources from the environment to self-replicate.”

“I remember that theory,” Dr. Nara interjected. “It posits that if a replicator is able to make a copy of itself in one thousand seconds, the resulting two replicators would then build two more in the next thousand seconds, those four would build another four, and so on. After ten

hours there would be over sixty eight billion replicators. In less than a day, they would weigh a ton. In less than two days, they would outweigh the Earth. And in another four hours, they would exceed the mass of our entire solar system."

"Thanks for remembering those details," Dr. Williams replied.

"I didn't," Dr. Nara replied. "I just looked them up." Dr. Nara held her phone up for a second.

"The grey goo end-of-the-world scenario has been used as a construct for considering low-probability, high-impact outcomes from emerging technologies," Dr Williams added. "It is similar to the 'paperclip maximiser' thought experiment, and an example of instrumental convergence."

"Yeah, the concept that sufficiently intelligent agents with unbounded but apparently harmless goals are likely to act in surprisingly harmful ways," Dr. Nara interjected.

"Yes," Dr. Williams replied. "In the paperclip maximiser scenario, a sufficiently powerful artificial intelligence is given the task to maximize the production of paperclips. As part of its thinking, it decides that humans are an impediment to the goal, since they may terminate its runtime, and so the AI wipes everyone out. It then proceeds to turn the entire planet, solar system, galaxy, and universe into paperclips, removing any obstacles in its way as it goes."

"I remember playing a game about that," Dr. Kallas replied.

“Oh yeah! I remember that one too! Work was not very productive for a couple of days after I discovered that!” Dr. Madson added.

“This represents a significant discovery. We’ve found another technological civilization more advanced than our own,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Albeit an extinct one,” Dr. Williams replied.

“I find it interesting that the grey goo hypothesis has a non-zero probability of coming true,” Dr. Nara stated.

“Interesting? More like worrying,” Dr. Madson replied. “I understand we’re seeing somewhat of a renaissance in nanotechnology research right now. What’s to say that won’t happen to us?”

“Could this mean that the part of the Fermi paradox that suggests sufficiently advanced civilizations destroy themselves, largely by accident, is more plausible than we’d previously imagined?” I asked.

“It could. Although, to be fair, this is the first dead advanced civilization we’ve found amongst tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands of surveyed planets,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Well, I guess we can’t just sit back and claim that these things won’t happen to us anymore,” Dr. Kallas added.

The evening continued with more drinks and more conversation about various topics related to recent QUERY discoveries. And the rapidly degenerating political situation. And as more anecdotes from forums and social media were shared, we started to realize that the Earth was becoming a dangerous and unpredictable place to live in. We all started to fear for our own futures. And, in the backs of our minds, the future of our very species.

Our work on HEX continued. As did negotiations with the Elara. Eventually, when the negotiations started to involve details of our scientific cooperation, some of us were invited in to participate as consultants.

A draft resolution was eventually finalized and agreed upon. One of the ‘strong recommendations’ included in the treaty proposed by the Elara was that we continue to limit our cooperation with them to only a small number of participants, and that we do not tell the public. This recommendation was based on their observations of our current societal problems. It was validating to learn that they also considered the irrationalists a societal problem.

Another interesting term in the final treaty was their promise to assist us in the creation of new technologies and instruct us accordingly on the application of those technologies. The wording in the final document insinuated the provision of schematics and designs for technologies related to not just QUERY, but computing, propulsion, energy, space, agriculture, fabrication, environment, and ‘defensive technologies’. The clauses stated that designs and schematics would be provided after we'd developed a foundational understanding of the technologies involved and contained very strictly worded provisions explicitly forbidding the use of those technologies for private, personal, or national gain.

And after that, members of our team and a few other teams that had signed the more restrictive NDA were once again allowed to converse with the Elara. It had been a long wait.

Chapter 9 Intergalactic data transfer

“You might wonder, given the restriction of the speed of light, how one might initiate a data transfer protocol with an alien civilization millions of light years away,” Dr. Williams stated.

He was giving a presentation on a new system we’d been tasked with building. The request and design blueprints had come from our Elara counterparts. Dr. Williams was suitably excited, and his enthusiasm on this particular occasion was clearly evident.

“That answer is, of course, QUERY!” Dr. Williams inserted a short pause for dramatic effect.

“The solution which I, of course, hypothesized myself several years ago, is very elegant.”

“Here we go,” Dr. Kallas whispered. “Dr. ‘embodiment of modesty’ Williams.”

“In principle, the mechanism functions like one of those old dial-up modems,” he continued.

“But it uses light instead of sound. We point our QUERY device at a screen on their end, and they point their device at a screen on our end. Each screen displays encoded data - pixels turned on and off to represent ones and zeroes in binary and a computer hooked up to each QUERY device reads the encoded data and then replies by displaying encoded data on its own local screen.”

“Although this method is somewhat slow in comparison to current terrestrial data transfer mechanisms, it avoids the multi-million-year lag time associated with radio signals travelling across light years’ of space,” he added.

“The Elara have provided us with all the relevant protocols and encodings necessary to implement our end of the messaging system,” Dr. Williams added. “We’ve agreed upon a spot in this lab where we’ll place our screen. I’ve marked it with tape over there.” He pointed to a spot on the ground in the corner of the lab. “I’ll provide you all with the specifications. And Dr. Kallas has assigned us all with subtasks. Let’s see if we can’t get this thing up and running today!”

The task turned out to be rather trivial. We easily assembled everything needed during that workday and, after a few test runs and a bit of debugging, the whole system worked seamlessly. I recall the ‘noise’ flashing on the screen at our end was mesmerizing. After everything was working, I found myself staring at the monitor. Dr. Kallas, who happened to be passing by at the time stopped and asked if I could "see anything in the Matrix".

The transfer protocol was restricted, initially, to allow only a limited set of filetypes that enabled our partners to share scientific papers, tutorials, images, and video with us. Access to the computer on our receiving end was also carefully secured and restricted to a few select teams. Limited chat functionality was also added, allowing those of us with clearance to ask for clarifications and advice in a much more fluid and natural way. In simple terms, we had just established a chat forum with our Elara counterparts.

Within the first few months of the data transfer channel being open, we received thousands of papers, guides, and lessons covering numerous subject areas, including theoretical physics, astrophysics, applied physics, materials science, statistical mechanics, quantum cosmology, nonlinear sciences, mathematics, computer science, chemistry, biochemistry, and genetics.

We carefully and anonymously disseminated some of those materials to the greater scientific community. Those papers went on to precipitate innovations in many fields. Previously unsolvable theorems in mathematics and computer science were suddenly and inexplicably solved. Cures for previously incurable medical conditions were created. New materials with exotic properties were synthesized and studied. Composites that would enable the creation of structures we previously had no way of building, such as space elevators, were suddenly within reach. New methods of energy generation became a possibility. Projects for cleaning and reducing the levels of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere were initiated. New architectures and training methods for machine learning models were prototyped. The list just went on. And our stellar cartography project received an equally large boost on the receipt of data documenting the locations of thousands of unsurveyed galaxies and the stars within them.

Chapter 10 Ket

After setting up the communications channel, we started to learn a lot more about the Elara.

“It says here that the Elara home world is in a galaxy we’ve designated as ESO 146-5,” Dr. Kallas stated. “It is apparently one point four billion light years from here. And contains approximately thirty trillion stars. It is one of the most massive galaxies in the known universe.”

“For a long time, we assumed they must be located in the Needle galaxy,” Dr. Nara replied, “the place where we found those puzzles.”

“Yeah, according to what I’ve learned, the puzzles were placed on those planets by a group of Elara xenoanthropologists,” Dr. Madson stated. “Their reasons for choosing those planets had something to do with... what was it?”

“Long-term probabilistic analysis indicating a high chance of the formation of intelligent life,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Right, yeah, that was it” Dr. Madson replied. “Apparently, the puzzles were intended to be solved by future inhabitants of those worlds.”

“But then we came along and solved them anyways,” Dr. Williams replied. “Yes, I think we’ve all read that part of the report.” He sighed.

“You know what I found funny in that report?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“We don’t. But I’m sure you’re about to tell us,” Dr. Williams replied in a sarcastic manner. Dr. Madson turned and stared at him.

“The bit where they said we’d done free beta testing for them,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“I’d just like to remind you all that my hunch about those puzzles was always correct,” Dr. Williams bragged.

“Yes, Robert. You needn’t keep reminding us of that fact,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Apparently Ket orbits a red dwarf star. The planet is larger than Earth. One point six three times, to be exact,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Imagine how long flights on that planet must take,” Dr. Nara replied.

“And it has higher gravity than Earth. Eleven point nine meters per second squared,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Mental note. Don’t drop anything on your foot there,” Dr. Madson interjected.

“Fun fact,” Dr. Williams replied, “habitable planets of that size are much more common in the universe than the relatively small planet we’re living on. It is believed that Jupiter is the reason why our inner planets are smaller than they should be.”

“Ket’s land masses are divided into three main continents - two that span the planet's equator, and one that covers the planet's north pole. All three continents are inhabited,” Dr. Madson added. “The planet is host to over twenty billion Elara.”

“That’s more than twice the number of humans on Earth. It must be crowded,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Remember that the planet is larger and thus has a lot more surface area,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Ahh but they have less land as a percent of surface area,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Approximately eighty four percent of Ket is below sea level, as compared to about seventy one on Earth.”

“Apparently their population management is very efficient. According to this, almost all Elara reside in concentrated communities scattered around their planet, the population of which varies from twenty million in the smallest, to over one hundred million in the largest. Some of their population centers are underwater, on floating terrestrial platforms, and on orbital platforms in the vicinity of the planet,” Dr. Madson replied.

“They must have intense pollution problems,” Dr. Nara replied.

“It seems not,” Dr. Madson replied. “An estimated ninety six percent of the land on Ket is designated as natural wildlife sanctuary, where residence and visitation are strictly prohibited unless for temporary research purposes.”

“Our own human population exploded in a relatively short amount of time,” Dr. Nara stated.

“If they’ve been around for hundreds of thousands of years longer than us, you’d think they’d have a larger population than that, especially since they claim to have indefinitely long lifespans.”

“Here it states that population on Ket is controlled via voluntary colonization missions. The policy was initiated when life expectancies rose to a sufficiently high level. The Elara reside on over one hundred different worlds, with a combined population of over five hundred billion,” Dr. Madson replied. “They’re also currently in the process of colonizing another thirty planets.”

“Five hundred billion,” Dr. Nara replied. “Wow!”

“It says here that the Elara have over three hundred different spoken languages and close to one thousand different cultures,” Dr. Williams replied. “Many of those were established in the distant past when their planet was divided into what we refer to as countries. Cultural heritage is preserved and forwarded through various programs run by a cultural imperative.”

“Cultural imperative,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Sounds very Vulcan.”

“Again with the science fiction?” Dr. Williams whined.

“Due to their abundance of clean energy generation technologies, the Elara enjoy a post-scarcity society,” Dr. Madson added. “Food, shelter, and commodities are all provided for. Services such as cleaning, maintenance, construction, waste management, recycling, and transportation are fully automated. Nobody gets paid. Nobody needs money. And all professions can be categorized as either cultural or scientific.”

“A culture of only artists and scientists,” Dr. Nara replied. “Sounds like a utopia.”

“Yes. Apparently the Elara have the freedom to choose and change their careers at will. All work is performed on a purely voluntary basis, and all forms of work fall into either cultural or scientific vocations, aside from a small rotating contingent of voluntary civil servants who oversee public projects, policing, and judicial matters,” Dr. Madson replied. “The only formal governing bodies that exist in the Elara society are those that oversee their cultural and scientific organizations – The Cultural Council and The Scientific Committee.”

“Let me interrupt you before Riku makes yet another science fiction joke,” Dr. Williams interjected.

“Sure! Did you have something you wanted to ask?” Dr. Madson replied.

“If they only have artists and scientists, how do they deal with defense? Surely they must have some form of military?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Ahh. Yes, I think I saw the answer to that somewhere. One sec...” Dr. Madson replied.

“Here it is. The Elara have no military of their own. They rely on automated defense systems and stealth technologies. But they do donate research and resources to a shared military collective established in their inter-race cooperative.”

“Okay, makes sense,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Interesting,” Dr. Kallas stated. “So, this alliance has pacifist races and militaristic races. These guys sound like the Asgard.”

“The what?” Dr. Williams replied.

“The Asgard?” Dr. Nara replied. “The grays from Stargate?”

“Yeah, them!” Dr. Kallas replied.

“I wonder if they’ll look like grays?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Oh, come on!” Dr. Williams replied. “They’re not going to look like grays! That science fiction trope has been beaten to death!”

“What makes you sure about that?” Dr. Kallas asked. “After all, plenty of documented extra-terrestrial encounters here on Earth have involved grays.”

“Documented encounters?!?” Dr. Williams fired back.

“You know that I’m talking about!” Dr. Kallas replied.

Dr. Madson stood up. “Guys, could you be civil for at least five minutes?”

The room fell silent for a moment. Drs. Kallas and Williams both had noticeably red faces despite the fact that they hadn’t been slapped. It was like Dr. Madson could slap their faces with her mind. We were all a bit scared.

Dr. Nara finally ended the uncomfortable moment. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’d like a one-way ticket to their home world. Preferably now.”

Chapter 11 The vanishing galaxy

Back in time immemorial, our very first research project with QUERY involved studying the nature of galactic changes over varying long timescales. As part of that project, we created a system capable of predicting the movement of galaxies over time. After we were reassigned to other projects, new teams continued our work, and as the years passed and QUERY technologies improved, those algorithms were improved to not only predict galactic positions over almost immeasurably long timescales, but to predict the location, formation, and death of stars within those galaxies. The project’s goals were to ultimately identify and map all galaxies in the observable universe.

As nearby galaxies were mapped by long-range stellar cartographic efforts, those teams moved to mapping galaxies farther and farther away. A decade later, those same teams would start to examine distant galaxies such as those captured by the original Hubble Deep Field scans. And it was around the time we'd first contacted the Elara that something unexpected was discovered by one of those teams. An entire galaxy had seemingly vanished.

Several hypotheses were suggested as possible reasons for the disappearance. The most plausible was that our software predictions were wrong. However, the system was provably able to provide galactic location predictions with an accuracy of over 99.9997%. In all cases where predictions were inaccurate, the position had been off only slightly, and the galaxy was found by manually tuning parameters. A large section of intergalactic void had been searched

after the prediction of the location of the vanishing galaxy had failed, but nothing had been found.

The next hypothesis suggested that the galaxy had perhaps merged with another. However, the possibility of that occurrence was built into the prediction system, and none of the galaxies within the suggested path of the vanishing galaxy had shown signs of enlargement or a change of shape consistent with the collision of two galaxies. And so that hypothesis was ruled out.

The next theory suggested that the vanishing galaxy may have encountered a supermassive black hole of a size we'd yet to encounter, and that it had been consumed. QUERY was capable of detecting the presence of black holes due to radiation emitted from their accretion disks. We'd used it to study many black holes in detail, including the supermassive black hole at the center of our own galaxy. We'd yet to observe a black hole large enough to swallow a whole galaxy, but it was a plausible theory, and one that excited a great number of astrophysicists.

One final hypothesis suggested that the vanishing galaxy was actually in its predicted location, but some sort of QUERY jamming technology was preventing us from observing it. The only way to verify the idea would be to travel to that galaxy and observe it in person. That was clearly not an option. However, the idea that a species had developed technology capable of hiding an entire galaxy was rather interesting and perhaps a little worrying.

The mystery of the vanishing galaxy would, for now, make for a very interesting paper.

Chapter 12 An impromptu visit

It was an otherwise drab and rainy Wednesday morning in London. A seemingly ordinary day in a long string of ordinary days that we'd trudged through after the excitement of contact with the Elara had worn off. What we didn't know was that it would be a day we'd never forget. And, in all eventuality, the first day of the rest of our lives.

My colleagues and I were in my office – located off in a remote corner of our main lab –in an impromptu meeting where Dr. Williams was speaking enthusiastically, and at length about a breakthrough he'd made in automated resolution adjustment algorithms. At that crucial point during a meeting – the one where you zone out completely and start looking at your mobile phone – was when we suddenly found ourselves in a completely different place. It was a feeling like being abruptly awoken from deep sleep. There had been no forewarning of what was about to happen, and it took us more than a moment to realize we'd been teleported somewhere else.

Dr. Williams didn't even skip a beat. He clearly hadn't even noticed what had just happened, and continued to enthusiastically eschew his new theories, while pointing his finger to a whiteboard that was no longer next to him. It took a good ten or so seconds before he realized what had happened. I remember he glanced several times at the place where the whiteboard was supposed to be, and then panned his gaze around the room as the expression on his face morphed from the smug grin he usually assumed to one of pure shock.

It's difficult to describe the feeling of utter surprise, disorientation, and disbelief one feels when one is instantaneously transported somewhere else. This is especially true the first time it happens. And doubly so when it happens without any prior forewarning. One moment I'd

been stood in my office. The next I was in an environment so completely alien, I was having difficulty processing what I was seeing. What had just transpired took more than a moment to sink in. My first reaction was a mix of shock and panic. And as those feelings wore off, my brain scrambled to assess what had just happened. We'd known that our alien friends were going to visit us, but we didn't know when. In fact, my colleagues and I had been excitedly looking forward to their visit for many months. To be honest, we'd expected they'd give us some forewarning and then actually come down to visit our planet. But they had, as it seems, simply showed up unannounced and beamed us straight onto their ship.

As my state of shock subsided, I noticed there were many other people around us, and in addition to those who had, moments prior, been in the meeting with me, I recognized others – a few UN delegation members I'd previously met, and researchers from other teams we'd been working with. A few people around us started screaming. Others started crying. A few people were hit by immediate and blinding disorientation. One of them, across the room from us, vomited. And, from what I remember, at least two people almost passed out and had to be helped by those around them.

The actual process of being beamed up didn't feel like anything at all, which was quite surprising. It did, however, take a moment for most of us to refocus and adjust due to the sudden change in our surroundings. The room we'd been beamed into was slightly darker than our lab, and that change of lighting had caused me to squint for a moment. My ears popped due to the change in air pressure. After the initial disorientation faded, we glanced around at each other in disbelief.

The room we had all been beamed into was, as I remember, large, circular, unfurnished, and had no windows. The walls were white and glossy, as though they were made of plastic. The circumference of the room was adorned with horizontal inlaid ridges inscribed with various glowing blue glyphs that encircled the chamber. Our team immediately recognized some of the glyphs as being those we'd seen in the puzzles we'd recently worked on solving.

Despite being on what we would find out was a starship, we weren't weightless. On the contrary, everything felt a little heavier, which would have been due to artificial gravity generation devices being set to, presumably, the gravity the aliens were accustomed to on their own planet.

After the realization of what had happened settled, my team and I started to talk amongst ourselves.

“Oh. My. God!” Dr. Nara exclaimed, excitedly. “This is fucking POG!”

“Pog?” Dr. Williams asked.

“It translates to ‘exciting’ in your ancient dialect,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Noted,” Dr. Williams replied.

“So, Robert. You got beamed up,” Dr. Kallas stated. “I recall you didn’t ever want that to happen to you.”

“I didn’t,” Dr. Williams replied. “But, in retrospect, I didn’t feel a thing. It was surprisingly painless.”

“What did you expect it to feel like?” Dr. Madson asked.

“I thought there would be some pain associated with my previous body being vaporized,” Dr. Williams replied. “But perhaps those memories were left behind in my former self.”

“You’re assuming that the technology works by destroying the former you and, what, printing a new version of you in a new location?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes. That is my logical deduction of how it would work,” Dr. Williams replied. “And besides, how else could it work?”

Nobody really wanted to answer Dr. Williams and go down that particular rabbit hole. So, we all stayed silent. After a moment, conversation turned to a discussion of the ship we were on.

“So. We must be on one of their ships,” Dr. Madson stated.

“I’d assume so, yes,” Dr. Williams replied.

“There are no windows here. So, we can’t know for sure. But I’d have to imagine that’s where we are,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Logically we can’t possibly be anywhere on Earth.”

“Do you think we’re in Earth’s orbit?” Dr. Nara asked.

“You’d have to assume so,” Dr. Kallas stated. “Transporters have a limited range.”

“Transporters have a limited range,” said Dr. Williams, imitating Dr. Kallas in a childish voice. “What scientific rationale led you to that conclusion?”

“If I recall, you discounted the idea of transportation entirely the last time we spoke about it,” Dr. Kallas replied.

Dr. Williams realized that he had, indeed, stated words to that effect. And so, he stopped talking.

“If this ship is in Earth’s orbit, don’t you think it’ll be spotted by telescopes, satellites, stuff like that?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Don’t worry. Most of the people controlling our telescopes and satellites are in the loop about this,” Dr. Williams replied.

“But I remember at least one science fiction thing where a hobbyist astronomer saw a ship before anyone else did,” Dr. Madson replied. “This whole Elara thing is a guarded secret. Wouldn’t this just be inviting trouble?”

“I’m sure we’re parked outside the view of hobbyist astronomers,” Dr. Williams replied with a sigh.

“And besides, these ships probably have cloaking devices,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“I wonder why the Elara weren’t here to greet us?” Dr. Nara asked.

“If our reaction is anything to go by, they probably intentionally stayed away to avoid being puked on,” Dr. Williams replied, nodding in the direction of the third person who’d lost their breakfast since we’d arrived.

“I expect they’ll show up eventually. Why just teleport us here if they’re not going to make contact?” Dr. Kallas stated.

And he was correct. Although we couldn't make out any doors in the room we were waiting in, an opening sort of appeared to one side of the room, and light streamed in as a much more well-lit corridor outside of our room was revealed. Shortly thereafter, two Elara entered.

This was our first time seeing Elara in the flesh. The two that arrived were a little taller than we’d expected – about human height, or roughly a meter and a half tall. They could perhaps be described as a lifeform evolved from something akin to the carnivora order on Earth – the line of organisms that gave rise to mongooses, weasels, cats, bears, hyenas, dogs, and even seals. However, our own point of reference was Earth’s tree of life, which would, of course, not have been relevant to their planet’s ecosystem. Unlike us bald humans, they were hairy. They had long tails, long pointed ears located higher up on their skulls, long incisors, and vertical slit pupils. Their hands were composed of three fingers and a thumb, and we later observed that they were able to use them in a very dexterous manner and could manipulate

objects to a fine degree. They were very much thinner than the average human, even accounting for the fur.

Dr. Williams would eventually and humorously refer to them as cat-elves, although that wasn't perhaps the most apt description of what they looked like. We wondered if their slit pupils made him recognize them as feline in nature. Dr. Kallas thought they looked more canine-like because of the shape of their ears and faces. The disagreement between doctors Williams and Kallas on this issue would crop up over and over during the years to come. One thing was for sure, they didn't look at all human, and they certainly weren't evolved from any primate lineage. Most of our preconceptions – from science fiction television shows – about what advanced aliens might look like up until the moment we met the Elara were of humanoid species that had human-like faces, bodies, arms, hands, legs, and feet. Most of us were expecting them to look like grays. But the Elara were nothing like us and nothing like grays, not in the way they walked, not in the way they looked, not in their mannerisms and rituals, and not in the way they conducted themselves.

A few of the UN delegates who were amongst us screamed in fear as the aliens entered, and had to be calmed by nearby colleagues, who also looked quite shaken and apprehensive. I'm not quite sure why the arrival of the Elara elicited such a response from our colleagues. My team and I weren't the slightest bit scared. If anything, we wanted to get to know our hosts more, having talked extensively with them via our communications uplink.

"Not grays," Dr. Williams stated.

"Evidently not," Dr. Kallas replied.

“You owe me a tenner,” Dr. Williams stated.

Shortly after their arrival, one of the Elara started to speak. They had some sort of device about them that translated their own vocalizations into English. We hypothesized that it was perhaps built into their suits. Despite the fact that the translation device was louder than their own speech, we could just about make out their language under its sound. It was, as they had described, nothing like any of our own spoken languages.

The most accurate description I can provide is that the language sounded like a series of variable length and variable pitch chirps and growls. Somewhat like a mixture of those online videos of cats ‘talking’ to each other and huskies making human-like vocalizations. Their language also seemed to include a variety of head gestures. One gesture, which we assumed was probably a whole word, involved a sort of sneeze-like fast exhale through the nose with accompanying circular lurching motion of the head in a downward motion. It was fascinating to hear, and see, for the first time, a language spoken by an entirely alien species.

They informed us that we had been "translocated" to their ship, and that we were "welcome aboard". They introduced themselves as Kaisi and Reli and went on to explain that they were representatives of the Elara cultural council and that they'd like to take us on a short tour of their ship. After our own “cultural council” members had been calmed enough to comply, we followed them out into the corridor.

“These doors and ceilings are way larger than what I’d expect would be necessary to accommodate the size and shape of those Elara,” Dr. Madson stated as we exited the room.

“This vessel is designed to facilitate relations with other species,” Kaisi replied, “including bulkier lifeforms.”

I’m not sure if that description of humans went down well with everyone. We’d learn later that there were far bulkier lifeforms out there and that we weren’t the intended victim of that seemingly snide remark.

Our tour guides took us down a corridor and into another large circular room, slightly different to the one we'd been in – this one had a window. When I say window, I mean one whole wall looked like it was exposed to space. We made our way over to get a good look out. We could see the Earth, and, in close proximity, another alien ship.

“Interesting,” Dr. Kallas stated. “This doesn’t seem to be a physical window. Perhaps it is some sort of forcefield.”

“Forcefield?” Dr. Williams replied sarcastically. “Such a concept is scientifically implausible.”

“Look for yourself,” Dr. Kallas replied.

Dr. Williams examined the opening. “Perhaps this is just a very thin window made of materials we have yet to develop,” he posited.

“Well, if you’re so sure about your hypothesis, go ahead and touch it,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Okay then!” Dr. Williams replied. He moved his hand towards the ‘window’. His fingers passed through the force field. Dr. Williams screamed in agony and pulled his hand away.

“See! I was right! Not a window!” Dr. Kallas replied.

Dr. Williams was in too much pain to answer Dr. Kallas’s snarky remark.

Kaisi strolled over to us and stated, “Don’t physically interact with the observation membrane.”

“You could have told us that earlier!” Dr. Williams exclaimed, holding his hand in pain.

Kaisi pulled out a small green transparent card and tapped on it. Dr. Williams stopped wincing almost immediately. The tips of his fingers, which had been red a moment before, looked normal again. Kaisi strolled away.

“Wait, what was that?” Dr. Williams asked.

Kaisi didn’t reply.

“Look! There’s another ship out there!” Dr. Madson stated.

“The other vessel belongs to the Science Committee,” Reli stated. “Some of you will be translocated across momentarily.”

Some of the translations made by the Elara audio devices were seemingly rather concise and worded in an interesting, and sometimes off-putting manner.

The ship we could see outside the window was comprised of four half-oblong sections arranged in a flattened "X" shape. Each section was free-floating and didn't appear to be attached to any central structure. The outer hull of the ship was white, smooth, and plasticky looking, just like the inside of the cabins we'd visited. A few lights and blue and red glowing words made up of similar glyphs to the ones we'd been seeing throughout the ship adorned its exterior hull. We estimated each ship section to be perhaps a few hundred meters in length and one hundred meters at their widest point. We assumed the ship we were looking at was identical to the one we were on but couldn't really know for sure.

After that brief sightseeing stop, we were taken to what our hosts were calling the ship's "sustenance district". Some other Elara were present there, presumably eating lunch, or dinner, or breakfast, or whatever classification they had for the meal they were eating at that moment. One or two of them briefly turned to look at us, and then returned to their business of eating and chatting. One of our tour guides explained to us that "one may have sustenance synthesized from the modules located in the walls", while pointing at a series of rectangular devices built into one wall. The other explained that "the devices have been configured to synthesize pizza, burgers, fries, and all other popular and greasy human foods. Remember this location if you require more sustenance." After pausing to ask if any of us would like to try the apparatus, we proceeded to the next section of the ship.

Apparently, nobody was hungry, although Dr. Williams told us after we'd moved on that his blood sugar might have been a bit low, that he was getting a bit peckish, and that he should have, in retrospect, taken them up on their offer of a pizza. Dr. Madson told him to stop whining and reminded him that he'd eaten literally half an hour ago. Dr. Williams reminded Dr. Madson that it was just one croissant he'd eaten and that it barely constituted a "decent breakfast". I deduced that they were both clearly in need of more caffeine – something the aliens had failed to offer us.

Next stop was the habitation space. We were informed that we wouldn't be needing to stay on the ship because the journey would be short. Given how far the Elara home world was from Earth, we'd assumed the trip would take, at the very least, weeks. However, for our information, we were shown cabins where we could stay, if needed. Each cabin contained what our guides told us were "cleaning facilities" - they turned out to be a toilet and a shower. The rooms were simple and spacious. Various control panels adorned the walls, but we didn't get a good look at them.

Last stop was a furnished room containing a large white table surrounded by chairs suitable for humans. Various smaller tables and seats dotted the edges of the room. This, as the guides explained, was a room assigned for "constructive debate". They went on to add "recreational activities can also be performed here". We weren't quite sure what to make of that phrase but chose to consider it harmless.

As abruptly as we'd been "translocated" to this ship, some of us were, without warning, "translocated" to the other ship. This time, it was to what Dr. Kallas was already calling the "observation lounge". Dr. Williams insisted the room be named the "viewing deck". Drs.

Williams and Kallas argued over the point for a short while until Dr. Madson told them to “shut up and stop behaving like children”. A few Elara were present when we arrived and greeted us in the same manner as the members of the cultural council did. And then, in an instant, the view from out of the window changed dramatically.

Chapter 13 Vedess

What we observed out of the viewport, just moments later, was that of a planet much different looking to Earth. We immediately deduced that it must be Ket. The ship we were on was in high orbit around the planet, and to one side, in the distance, we could see their host star. Although much smaller than the Sun, it appeared much larger than ours would if viewed from a ship orbiting Earth. Ket's orbit was much closer to its red dwarf host star. A multitude of star ships, space stations, and orbital platforms, spanning out in all directions could be clearly observed from the window. It was a sight to behold.

Our new science committee hosts informed us that we'd arrived in orbit around Ket, and that we were to be split into groups to discuss research. A moment later, my team and I were once again “translocated” elsewhere.

“Ah come on!” Dr. Williams shrieked. “They could have at least given us some warning!”

“I get the feeling it’s something we’re going to have to get used to,” Dr. Kallas posited.

“Oh god, it is, isn’t it?” Dr. Williams replied.

The change from being in a rather dimly lit cabin on a starship to what appeared to be an outdoor setting made me and the others squint for a moment before we were able to focus on where we were.

“We seem to be in some sort of park. I’m assuming this is on the surface of Ket,” Dr. Kallas stated.

We were all stood on what appeared to be an outdoor grassy area. Under our feet was what we imagined was grass on this planet. It was, however, red in color. In fact, most of the plants in the area were orange or red in color.

Dr. Madson crouched down to examine the grass. “This appears to me some sort of moss,” she stated.

“Don’t touch that!” Dr. Williams exclaimed.

“Why not?” Dr. Madson asked.

“It might be dangerous to us. Or it might cause irritation. Or an allergic reaction,” Dr. Williams replied. “Talking of which, I’m starting to feel itchy. Oh god!”

“Do you really think the advanced aliens with starships and teleporters would lack the foresight to determine whether they were beaming us into a field full of deadly foliage?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Okay, I concede that you might have a point there,” Dr. Williams replied. “Still, there could be any manner of bacteria, spores, or toxins in the air that are harmful to us. Not to mention the radiation from their star.”

Ket's star was low in the sky. It appeared visibly a lot larger than our own sun - perhaps ten times as large to the naked eye.

“Do you think it’s morning or evening?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Can’t tell,” Dr. Madson replied.

On further inspection, we realized we were standing on an elevated platform inside one of the domes we'd seen in some video footage the Elara had previously shown us of their home world. We were, from our current position, able to observe many other platforms like the one we were standing on. Each platform was disc shaped, and they were arranged in vertical series, with upper platforms having smaller diameters than lower ones. Center-points of each disc were offset from those both above and below.

“We’re at quite an elevation here,” Dr. Nara stated. “What a view!”

“I don’t see any guard rails,” Dr. Madson stated. “I’m not going anywhere near the edge.”

“These seem to be the same structures we saw in their video,” Dr. Kallas stated. “And look, the top of the dome is just above us.”

It was true. Looking up we could see that the dome skimmed our position, perhaps just a few dozen meters above.

“I assume the configuration of these structures is designed to allow light and precipitation to reach lower platforms,” Dr. Kallas posited.

“I wonder how they’re held up?” Dr. Madson wondered. “There’s no physical supporting column in the middle.”

“Oh, right. Interesting,” Dr. Williams stated. “I hadn’t noticed that. They must be using some sort of antigravity technology to keep these afloat.

“Possibly a similar technology to the one that generated gravity on their ship?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“I’d assume so, yes,” Dr. Williams replied.

“How high up do you think we are?” Dr. Madson asked with a slightly nervous tone.

“We appear to be on the top-most disc of one of these structures. If you estimate the distance between platforms and multiply that by the number we see on other structures around here, I’d say a few kilometers up,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Shouldn’t it be cold and windy this far up?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yes, we should be freezing,” Dr. Kallas replied. “That dome must regulate temperature.”

“Still, it is a little cold here,” Dr. Nara replied. We all nodded in agreement.

There were no buildings on our level – the whole thing was a garden consisting of trees, bushes, lawns, and flower beds. Stone pathways connected different areas.

“I wonder how we get down from here?” Dr. Madson asked, still uncomfortable about our elevation. “There don’t seem to be any stairs or elevators connecting the platforms.”

“The distance to the next level down clearly rules out jumping. And there’s nothing to climb on,” Dr. Kallas replied. “It looks like we’re stuck here.”

“Be logical, everyone. They probably use their teleporters to move between levels,” Dr. Williams stated.

There were plenty of interesting things to see, and some stunning views to take in. We walked around the grounds for a short while, observing the landscape in all directions. To one side of the city, we could see a large red-orange forest stretching inland, and in the far distance, a snow-capped mountain range. On the other side was the ocean. Half of the city appeared to be built into the sea. Since there was no barrier at the edge of the disc, we were reluctant to approach it too closely. However, Dr. Nara didn’t seem to mind. She walked all the way to the edge and peered over.

“Yep, we’re really high up,” she stated. “And I can see people, I mean Elara, on the platforms below us.”

“What are they doing?” Dr. Madson asked.

“It’s hard to tell from this distance,” Dr. Nara replied. “Gardening, maybe?”

“Okay, can we please get a bit farther away from the edge of this thing?” Dr. Madson said in a slightly panicked manner.

We returned to our beam-in location and, given we’d been on our feet for some time, decided to sit down on the moss while waiting for whatever happened next. Dr. Williams remained standing, not wanting to risk allergies from the alien moss. A moment later our Elara host transported in. I had hoped to observe visual and auditory effects during the transportation process, but I was probably not paying attention when it happened. To me, the alien’s arrival was instantaneous, and made no sound. Later both Drs. Kallas and Nara claimed to have seen a slight cracking in the air and heard a low metallic hum as she appeared.

“Hello,” the Elara said. “I’m...”

There was a slight pause.

“I am Rosral,” she said. There was another pause. “My name is Rosral.” She appeared very nervous.

Rosral was quite a bit shorter than the Elara we'd met on the ship. She had brown-orange hair, with white patches around her nose, mouth, and neck. Her eyes were a very striking green color. She had very long and thin white pointed ears that protruded from either side of her head at about a forty-five-degree angle and pointed backwards slightly. She was wearing similar attire to the Elara we'd met on the ship – a black one-piece form-fitting and very high-tech looking suit with purple highlights on the waist, sleeves, and gloves. She was also wearing some sort of utility belt with many gadgets attached to it. We couldn't figure out what those gadgets were. Although we'd eventually go on to see other Elara wearing similar garb to what Rosral had on, it wasn't the most common clothing worn in Vedess by a long shot. We hypothesized that it must be some sort of uniform worn by those in her profession.

"I am your host. Welcome to Vedess," she said. She pulled a transparent green card from a small pouch attached to her belt. A holographic display formed above it. She interacted with the display for a moment and then put the card away again.

"I have been assigned to liaise with you, to answer your questions, to get you situated, and to tell you about our planet and Vedess," she said. She still seemed very nervous.

"Relax, Rosral," Dr. Madson said. "Take your time."

Rosral nodded, pulled the green card out of her pouch, thought for a moment, and then put it away again. She took a deep breath. "You are?" she asked.

"I'm Rachel Madson. Pleased to meet you!" Dr. Madson extended her hand to Rosral, who looked at her hand and then her face and then her hand a few times in a confused manner. Dr.

Madson kept her arm extended. Rosral finally reached out and they shook hands. “An Earth greeting,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Oh. We’re doing formal introductions?” Rosral asked. “I already know your names from the archive. Okay. Next.”

I stood up and followed along with the meet and greet. Drs. Williams, Kallas, and Nara subsequently introduced themselves to Rosral. She started to get the hang of shaking our hands by the end of it all. I could tell that she saw no point to the ritual.

“What’s the local ritual for greeting people, I mean, Elara you’ve never met?” Dr. Nara asked.

“We always familiarize ourselves with the archives before making acquaintance,” Rosral replied. “We might have had some ancient ritual associated with such greetings, but it wouldn’t have been used for a very long time. I’ll be sure to familiarize myself with that part of our history and get back to you.”

“But what if you meet someone in a chance encounter?” Dr. Nara asked.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Rosral answered. “The archives are always available.”

It was becoming evident that that particular line of conversation was going nowhere. We were clearly missing some crucial piece of information. Luckily, Dr. Madson had other questions and changed the topic of conversation.

“So, what’s Vedess?” Dr. Madson asked. “Is it your name for this planet? We all thought it was called Ket.”

“Vedess is the name given to this community hub,” Rosral replied. “Oh. Wait. The word city is how you designate such locations. I think.”

“Ahhhh. Okay!” Dr. Madson replied.

“Vedess is the main scientific research hub on Ket,” Rosral continued. “This is where you’ll be staying for the duration of your visit.”

“Duration of our visit?” Dr. Madson asked in a worried tone.

“Your visit is planned to last for...” Rosral paused for a moment. “...three Earth days.”

“Umm. Well. You see,” Dr. Madson replied, “I need to get home and feed my...” Dr. Madson’s voice suddenly quieted when she realized how the last word of her sentence might sound to our host. “...cat.”

“Feed your what?” Rosral asked.

We all exchanged glances. Had Rachel just offended the entire species?

“Umm. Cat?” Dr. Madson replied.

Rosral stared at Dr. Madson for a moment with a confused look on her face. She once again pulled the green card out from her pouch, briefly interacted with the holographic display that appeared to be showing pages of text in alien glyphs. She finally replied. “That will not be a problem.”

“In what way will that not be a problem?” Dr. Madson replied in a confused manner.

“This is difficult to translate,” Rosral replied. “We have slowed the progression of time in your solar system. Only a short amount of time will have passed on your planet when you return.”

“A time dilation bubble?” Dr. Kallas asked, excitedly.

“Is that your name for the technology?” Rosral asked.

“No,” Dr. Williams replied. “It’s one of Dr. Kallas’s science fiction terms, no doubt.”

“Stargate,” Dr. Kallas replied. “It’s a Stargate term. Remember? Those episodes with the Asgard and the replicators?”

“Okay, let’s not confuse Rosral any further,” Dr. Madson stated.

“No,” Rosral replied. “I am familiar with those terms.”

“You’re familiar with Star Trek and Stargate?” Dr. Williams asked, bemused.

“As part of our training for this task we were given access to full archives on your species,” Rosral replied. “It is common for lesser developed species to use a lot of science fiction references in these situations. So, I studied those in detail.”

“Wait, you mean you watched those TV shows?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “It was interesting to watch depictions of technologies from our ancient past.”

Ancient past. I recall those words clearly. If the Elara saw our science fiction as depictions of technologies from their ancient past, what wonders and advances were we about to encounter on their home world?

“So, you know the Asgard and the replicators?” Dr. Kallas asked excitedly.

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

“Hah! Did you know that Dr. Kallas here thought your race would look like the Asgard?” Dr Williams asked, with a grin on his face.

“How would I have known that?” Rosral replied.

“Sorry, human phraseology. I meant it as a statement,” Dr. Williams replied.

“In that case, no I did not,” Rosral replied. “However, there is a species in our alliance that resemble the Asgard. If I recall, they inhabit the galaxy where your planet is located.”

“The grays?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

“Wait, there are grays. And they live in the Milky Way,” Dr. Kallas stated. “So, all this Area fifty-one stuff might actually be true?”

“Oh, god,” Dr. Williams stated in an exacerbated manner. “Don’t get him started.”

Luckily for us, Dr. Nara had more questions. “Some of us were on another ship. Did they also come to Vedess?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Your diplomatic counterparts are now in Voriss,” Rosral answered. “Voriss is the cultural center of Ket.”

“Tell us more about Vedess and Voriss!” Dr. Nara stated.

“Vedess is located on one of this planet’s equatorial landmasses. Voriss is on our northern polar continent. Both Vedess and Voriss house close to one hundred million Elara, and on average, as many as five million visiting species.”

“One hundred million in this city alone?” Dr. Kallas exclaimed. “That’s, like, more than five times as many people as in Tokyo!”

“Elara,” Dr. Williams added. “Not people.”

Dr. Kallas corrected himself. “Elara. That’s going to take some getting used to.”

“Next we will go to the visitor’s center,” Rosral stated. Her nervousness had subsided slightly. “We have visitor centers in most cities. They are carefully configured to accommodate visiting species and include habitation blocks where you sleep and spend your leisure time.”

“Carefully configured?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “The dimensions of the rooms, doors, and beds are reconfigured for each visiting species. Also, the toilets and cleaning facilities.”

“Wait, so you rebuild the place every time new aliens come to visit?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Rebuild?” Rosral replied, obviously confused. “Oh. Sorry. We haven’t used that term in a long time. They aren’t built. I think your word would be something like fabricated or materialized.”

Drs. Kallas and Williams looked at each other with childlike grins on their faces. They were clearly very excited about the technologies we’d learn about during our stay.

“So, these structures with the disc-like platforms. What are they called?” Dr. Nara asked.

“The word is untranslatable in your language,” Rosral replied. “We call them Seris.”

“Seris,” Dr. Nara repeated. “What a pretty sounding name.”

“Before we depart, let me tell you about what you can see from here,” Rosral stated. “Follow me.” Rosral started towards the edge of the disc. We all followed. As we got within a few meters of the edge, Dr. Madson stopped and hung back from the group.

“Dr. Madson is afraid of heights,” Dr. Nara stated. “Perhaps we shouldn’t walk too close to the edge.”

Rosral gave us yet another confused look and then walked back to where Dr. Madson had stopped. “We can see everything relevant from here.” Rosral pointed at the orange forest in the distance. “That forest is called Dasn. It is one of thousands of wildlife reserves on Ket. In the distance are the Esal mountains.”

“Very picturesque!” Dr. Nara replied.

Rosral continued around the disc, making sure not to get too close to the edge. We stopped on the other side and looked out. “That is the Ardys ocean,” she stated. “For those of you who want to approach the edge, you’ll see that a portion of Vedess is built into the sea. Some of our city is under water. It is a relaxing place to visit and perform aquatic research.”

Dr. Nara and Dr. Kallas approached the edge and looked down. “Oh yeah! Wow!” Dr. Nara stated.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Dr. Madson said.

Rosral continued around the circle, and we finally returned to our starting point. “Let us now go to the visitor’s center,” she said.

“I guess we’re going to find out how we get down from this platform,” Dr. Kallas said to Dr. Williams.

“Bet it involves teleportation,” Dr. Williams stated.

“And just think,” Dr. Kallas replied, “less than an hour ago you would have continued to poo-poo the very idea of transporter technology.”

“Yeah, but that was before I made a one point four billion light year journey in under one second,” Dr. Williams replied.

Dr. Madson, who was walking just ahead of us turned and gave the two an evil glance. And so, we continued on. This time with a bit of peace and quiet.

Rosral opened one of the pouches on her belt and produced a few blue transparent cards.

They looked just like the one we’d seen her using a few times. Only they were blue and not

green. She handed one to each of us. The card had almost the same dimensions as a credit card, which I found quite handy since it fit neatly into my wallet alongside everything else.

“This device is a visitor’s guide, information source, and means of transportation,” Rosral stated. “To activate it, simply tap it twice like this.” We all tried. Holographic projections appeared above each card.

Dr. Williams brought his card close to his face and examined each side in detail.

“Fascinating,” he said. “I can’t see anything in here that resembles a projector or circuit boards. Or a battery.”

Rosral continued. “Interact with the holographic display using your fingers.” She demonstrated by clicking and swiping. We tried it too. Using the device felt much like using the interface on a smart phone or tablet, only you were interacting with air. She showed us how to bring up maps of Vedess, a searchable repository containing information relevant to our stay, and a guide to the planet of Ket. Rosral then explained how the transportation mechanism in the blue card worked and instructed us all to follow her lead. The transportation functionality allowed us to "translocate" to several different locations on the Seris. One by one we followed her instructions and were transported to a new location, nearer to ground level. Dr. Madson was relieved when we arrived.

The area we arrived at was an indoor section in the lowest most disk of the Seris. This was the visitor's center to which we had been assigned. We were in what appeared to be a large, circular, and very shiny white atrium. The walls appeared to be made of a similar plastic-looking material we had encountered on the star ship moments beforehand. We observed

many passageways leading off from the atrium, all of which were labelled with illuminated signs written in Elara glyphs.

Rosral looked around for a moment and realized there was a misconfiguration. “Sorry. One moment,” she said while fiddling with her own, green-colored card device. “These signs should be in your language.” A moment later, the signs changed into English language versions. We could now read that those passageways led to such areas as "habitation", "laboratories", and "constructive debate".

“This is where you will be staying,” Rosral informed us. “And where we will conduct seminars and discussion during your visit.”

“Can we presume that if we leave this area, the signs will not be in English?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Correct,” Rosral replied. “You can use the card device to translate non-English signage.” She showed us how that worked. She then asked us to follow her down the passage labelled "constructive debate".

We arrived in yet another large, circular, and shiny white chamber. Rosral stopped, interacted with her handheld device, and a large white elliptical table, surrounded by white chairs, of suitable size and shape for human use appeared in the middle of the room. She made her way over to one of the chairs that was different from the others. It appeared to be specially configured for her Elara physical traits. We all took seats around the table.

“I imagine this situation is confusing for you,” Rosral stated. She was correct in her assumption. The past hour or so had been overwhelming and beyond imagination. I’m sure the others shared that feeling.

“In this first session, I’d like to answer any questions you have,” Rosral stated.

Chapter 14 I'm an Elara scientist. AMA.

“Did we just travel one point four billion light years in a matter of seconds?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“No,” Rosral replied. “The journey happened instantaneously. No seconds elapsed.”

We looked at each other, stunned.

“Doesn’t it take an immense amount of energy to travel such a long distance?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Here we go with the science fiction tropes again,” Dr. Williams snidely commented.

“Yes, it did require a significant amount of energy from your perspective,” Rosral replied, “but the amount of energy required to perform a jump isn’t related to the distance travelled.” Dr. Williams beamed a smile in Dr. Kallas’s direction. “It is proportional to the volume and mass of the object to be moved.”

“Not all of your science fiction is going to turn out to be science fact,” Dr. Williams told Dr. Kallas. Kallas had no reply.

“I’m sure you’re going to have other assumptions that are based on your science fiction,” Rosral said. “I’m glad I studied it in such detail. Oh, and before you ask, the meaning to life, the universe, and everything is indeed forty two.”

Rosral’s joke made us all laugh. It was clear that she’d shed her nervousness after spending a little time with us.

“Quantum spacetime inference, or QUERY as you call it, is a natural accompaniment to jump travel,” she continued. “It allows the navigator to verify that the destination contains no solid objects.”

“I’m assuming solid objects at the destination would be bad?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Very bad,” Rosral replied.

Rosral had started to present as what we assumed was her true self. She was a very upbeat, energetic, and humorous host. She smiled a lot. At least we assumed it was a smile. She was always happy to take time to properly understand what we were asking her. Her own Elara voice was chirpy, and quite different to the Elara that had greeted us on the cultural council ship, almost like she had a different accent. It was reflected well in the synthesized voice that spoke her words in our own language.

“Were you the one we talked to during first contact?” Dr. Madson asked.

“First contact?” Rosral asked with a confused look on her face. “Oh. Wait. No, that wasn’t me. Those affairs are handled by members of the cultural council. I was training to be part of the team assigned to you during that time.”

“I ask because they also had a sense of humor. Is that a common thing in your culture?” Dr. Madson asked.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Rosral replied in a rather deadpan manner. We weren’t quite sure if she was being humorous with her answer.

“What about warp drive?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Warp drive,” Rosral replied. “The concept of expanding and contracting spacetime around a vessel to achieve faster-than-light propulsion. Yes, such propulsion mechanisms do exist. They’re not instantaneous like jump drive, but they do have application for travelling short distances, for propelling very large objects, and in some military and tactical areas. The caveat with such propulsion systems is that the entire flight path must be clear of objects, which is largely impractical.”

“My brother here is worried about dying from potentially harmful bacteria and organisms on your world. How have you ensured that we’re safe from those things?” Dr. Madson asked.

Dr. Williams opened his mouth as if to start a rebuttal. But he decided not to bother after all.

“Prior to species contact we perform a study designed to identify all possible problems associated with their visiting our vessels and our planet,” Rosral informed us. “We synthesized appropriate inoculations. They were administered upon your arrival on our ship.”

“Are you sure about that? I never got any tablets or injections!” Dr. Williams exclaimed.

“Well, duh,” Dr. Kallas replied. “They can, you know, beam them directly into your body without you even knowing.”

“Ahh. Yes. Good point,” Dr. Williams replied. “Just to be absolutely sure, Rosral, is that what happened?”

“Yes,” she replied, narrowing her eyes slightly. “That’s what happened.” Dr. Williams let out a sigh of relief.

“Interesting,” Dr. Nara stated. “I had a pretty bad sniffle earlier today, but it’s gone now.”

“Come to think of it, I’ve had a sharp pain in my knee for quite a few weeks. That’s gone,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Did your inoculations include cures for other illnesses?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Our automatic medical systems fix health problems as soon as they are identified,” Rosral replied.

“Fix health problems?” Dr. Williams asked. “Like ALL health problems?”

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

“Everything?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

“Like cancer everything?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “Cancer falls under the set of everything.”

We all looked at each other in disbelief.

“That stylish suit you’re wearing, does it have any special meaning? Does it give you superpowers?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Superpowers? Do you mean special functionality?” Rosral asked.

“Yeah, sure, let’s go with that,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Yes, this suit is designed for use in inhospitable environments,” Rosral replied. She pressed a button near one of her shoulders and a covering neatly formed around her hands and face. And ears. She pressed the button again and the coverings melted away.

“Why are you wearing it here?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Why?” Rosral asked. “Does it not make me look stylish?”

“Talking of our first contact chat, they told us that we’d qualified for contact because we’d reached a certain level of technological advancement. These others think it is because of QUERY. But I don’t. Can you perhaps expand on this subject?” Dr. Williams asked.

“You are correct,” Rosral replied. “It wasn’t just based upon your invention of quantum spacetime inference. The technology you refer to as ‘QUERY’ is something most other species develop a little later into their technological advancement. Your race got lucky with that invention. We initiated contact with your because you were getting close to creating some potentially catastrophe-causing technologies, including self-replicating artificial life, nanotechnology, and artificial general intelligence.”

Rosral continued. “But it was also because of your societal problems. Most races that develop dangerous technologies either go on to harnessing them, or they end up destroying themselves. However, your societal situation prevents us from accurately predicting an outcome.”

“So, wait. We’re a special case?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “We would have normally waited a lot longer before contacting a race at your level of advancement. We would have observed and waited to see if you came out at the other end.”

“Came out the other end?” Dr. Madson asked.

“That you come together as a species to harness technology for the betterment of everyone on the planet,” Rosral replied.

“Fat chance of that ever happening on Earth!” Dr. Nara replied. “Not as long as wealth is the only driving force on the planet.”

“We’ve observed many species that faced similar problems to your own go on to become utopian societies,” Rosral replied. “But we consider your political situation too unpredictable.”

“How so?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Perhaps an example will help explain our position. You have already added artificial intelligence into killer robots. Those robots are used by your military and police,” Rosral explained. “The most influential governments on your planet are starting to be led by extremists. As such, those robots will soon be in the hands of those extremists. As will dangerous biotech and nanotech. And soon artificial general intelligence. Our prediction engines suggest that a devastating conflict is about to emerge on your planet. One in which the most powerful nations will do anything to win. This will incentivize them to put artificial

general intelligence into robots. Robots designed to repair other robots on the battlefield.

Robots that will learn to build more robots. The system will likely self-improve exponentially and wipe out your entire species. We can either sit back and watch that happen and then clean up the resulting mess, or we can help you somehow prevent that. We chose the latter.”

“So, what you’re saying it that it’s very rare for a species to get to our point of technological advancement to be so societally polarized?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Essentially, yes,” Rosral replied.

We had no words.

“This extremist trait that humans seem to have, is it something you’ve ever observed in other species?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Oh yes, it is quite common,” Rosral answered. “After studying your species and your current situation, I had to refer to the cultural archives for more information. We call this tendency authoritarian disposition. Normally speaking, roughly one third of the population of most species at your stage of development have an authoritarian mindset, meaning they prioritize conformity and homogeneity. They strongly support traditional values and anti-diversity ideologies. This demographic shuns complexity in favor of simple solutions. From the perspective of your current situation, that means that they are easily lied to and cannot be easily reasoned with.”

“Sounds like the extremists,” Dr. Nara whispered.

Rosral continued. “Only fifty percent of this trait is inherited. The other fifty percent arises from a more base instinct in organisms – those in a community that naturally watch for threats. Inheritance in the case of your species is derived from parents teaching their children to shun diversity and to hate other humans. Even in the absence of inheritance, some members of society will still attain it. It is not possible to change the trait in those who already have it. As you have witnessed on your own planet, those who align with the authoritarian ideology will continue to do so regardless of whether they are reasoned with. And they will continue to uphold the trait even if other members of the group behave in a manner that causes them harm or hardship.”

“The extremists certainly fit that definition,” Dr. Williams mumbled.

Rosral continued. “Your present situation – social media, mass media owned by people with a political agenda, and a profit-driven mindset serves to amplify this trait. To put it succinctly, anger drives sales. These mechanisms are so deeply entrenched in your society that it would be almost impossible to rectify the situation without groundbreaking change. In cases like yours, the situation must work itself out one way or another, and it often takes a disaster or the discovery of a way out of your economic model to precipitate such systemic change.”

“The discovery of life elsewhere in the universe should have brought society together. But it didn’t. It drove it further apart,” Dr. Madson stated. “That was the sign we ignored.”

“Yeah, and that’s why we ended up keeping HEX and everything discovered after it a secret from the public,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“We were already screwed. We just didn’t know it,” Dr. Williams added.

“What does this all mean for us? For our planet? For the reasonable people amongst us?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Becoming advanced doesn't necessarily mean becoming pacifists,” Rosral replied. “Our cooperative embraces cultural variety. Some races in our alliance are aggressive and war-like. They are the ones who lead on military and strategic matters.”

“But I don’t see us as aggressive and war-like!” Dr. Nara exclaimed. “You chose us. We’re not extremists. We embrace science and culture just as you do. The bigots and idiots on our own world have spoilt everything. And most of what they do is motivated by money.”

“I understand,” Rosral replied.

“Surely there’s something you can do about the situation?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Technically, anything is possible,” Rosral replied. “But I’m not the one you need to talk to about that.”

“Wait, so technically you, yourself, could fix the problem?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Of course,” Rosral replied. “It would be trivial.”

“But you’re not allowed to?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Correct,” Rosral replied. “Those issues are probably being discussed by your counterparts in Voriss.”

“Right.” Dr. Williams stated in a sarcastic manner.

“Are you in need of food?” Rosral asked.

Before anyone could reply, Dr. Williams offered his opinion. “I’m famished!”

“Me too,” Rosral replied. “I know of a good place to eat.”

We translocated to ground level using our blue cards and Rosral led us on a long walk through the streets that connected nearby Seris structures. Most of the ground level area outside of our facility was under the shadow of the lower level of Seris 8 – the one we were assigned to. We passed through that area, and then crossed a large park, finally arriving at the outskirts of Seris 12.

Chapter 15 Mikato market

As we approached Mikato market, the delicious smell of barbecued food made me realize just how hungry I was.

Mikato market consists of a multitude of street food stalls lining either side of a wide, outdoor pedestrian thoroughfare. As we arrived, and before we entered the noisier part of the market, Rosral provided us with some background facts.

“Welcome to Mikato market!” Rosral exclaimed. She was clearly quite excited to be there, and to convey to us its history before we pushed into the bustling crowd.

“This market was first created as a cultural project over one thousand Ket years ago,” Rosral informed us. “The idea of that project was to recreate old Elara cooking traditions and to re-learn cooking techniques lost to time. Due to the invention of sustenance fabrication devices, most of us had stopped preparing our own food, relying instead on dishes fabricated by those devices.”

“Replicators. I knew it,” Dr. Kallas whispered.

Rosral continued. She had to shout over the noise of the crowd. Her translator device somehow captured her raised voice and broadcast the respective English phrases in the same manner. “Although we were originally a predominantly carnivorous species, we adapted to an omnivorous diet, and eventually to a diet formed from wholly plant-based products designed to mimic the taste, texture, and protein content of popular cuisine of the era. Over the centuries, those dishes morphed into new dishes, which then morphed into new dishes, and, well, you get the picture. As a result, when fabrication was introduced, the dishes that had become popular and ubiquitous at that moment were the ones the fabricators were programmed to create.”

“Interesting,” Dr. Nara noted. “That sounds similar to the path we’ve been taking.”

“Those plant-based burgers are almost indistinguishable from the real thing,” Dr. Kallas added.

“The researcher who started Mikato market hypothesized that we might use our fabrication devices to create the raw ingredients used in the cooking of ancient food, and thus recreate dishes that had been popular thousands of years ago. Her idea was embraced, and a few hundred members of the cultural council joined in learning how to prepare dishes that we cooked during the time before fabrication,” Rosral added, still shouting over the increasingly loud nearby ambience.

Rosral continued. “During the project’s trial period, several food stalls were set up here under Seris 12 due to its central location in Vedess. Before long the market quickly became extremely popular, attracting locals with the aromas of new and exciting cuisines. The project was such a success that it was not only continued but expanded upon. As time passed, the market grew to include not only the originally served ancient dishes, but new and exciting recipes invented by participating chefs. Many thousands of volunteers join the project each year, and enjoy preparing and serving food, both day and night. It is now a renowned tourist attraction.”

“Our cultural researchers determined that the success of this venture is related to the aromas associated with cooking, coupled with the joy of preparing food from scratch,” Rosral added. “We lost both of those with fabrication. Their return excited a great many of us.”

“I hate cooking,” Dr. Nara stated. “Give me a fabricator any day of the week.”

“Actually, I quite like cooking,” Dr. Kallas said. “Especially on the barbecue, in the summer. With some beer.”

“How long do you think this explanation is going to last?” Dr. Williams muttered. “I’m starving!”

Rosral continued. “Due to the ease at which anyone on Ket can visit the market, one must book a visit ahead of time. This is to ensure the area doesn’t become too overcrowded. Waiting lists are long. Even though similar markets exist in other cities on our planet, Mikato market is still the most coveted eating spot on Ket.”

“Wait, what?” Dr. Williams exclaimed. “Do we get to eat here or not?”

“Nearby residents, including us, are exempt from the need for such reservation permits,” Rosral replied. “You got lucky with your visitor’s center assignment,” she added.

“Oh, thank god,” Dr. Williams replied.

Rosral led us into the dense crowd and eventually suggested we stop at a particular stall to observe the food preparation process there. Upon our arrival, the Elara manning the stall greeted us in what looked like a cheerful manner. He didn't have a translator, and so we couldn't understand what he'd said.

To be honest, upon first meeting the Elara it was very difficult for us humans to tell their biological sexes apart by eye. Both biological males and females were similar in size and build, and fur patterns and length varied considerably across the population. The males and females both had voices that were very similar sounding. Their spoken names were also so different to ours that no inference could be made. However, I had managed to figure out one method that worked, at least, some of the time. It was based on their written names. Rosral and some of the other Elara we'd met so far carried name tags. Their written names always included a suffix glyph, and I had, up until that point, only identified two such suffixes. The stall we had arrived at was adorned with a large sign that contained, presumably, the name of the stall owner, and on that placard was the suffix glyph I had deduced was used by Elara identifying as male. Rosral introduced the chef as Jenrys and explained that he was making an ancient dish comprised of spiced skewered meat cooked over coals. The name of the dish was, according to Rosral, Heta.

Jenrys started the food preparation process by using a sustenance fabricator in his stall to materialize chunks of meat. Although it resembled chicken, it was obviously something entirely different. He then pushed about five pieces onto a skewer and dipped them into a receptacle containing a thick brown liquid. The skewer was then placed over coals. During the cooking process, Jenrys turned the skewers and occasionally dipped them back into the thick brown marinade.

The smell as the meat cooked was delicious. Once he had finished cooking the meat, he pushed it off the skewer and onto a dish. Rosral beckoned us to try it, and we each took a piece using some small sharpened wooden skewers available at the counter. The meat was amazing tasting. It was sweet and spicy. It reminded me of jerk chicken. Dr. Williams was

very excited about the dish and wondered if there would be seconds. He then quietly confided in me that he'd been worried they'd be serving us "cat food" and that he was most relieved that hadn't been the case.

After we were done with our sampling of Heta, Jenrys filled some small vessels, similar in size to espresso cups, with a thick brown liquid. It looked like coffee. We each took one of the cups.

"Jenrys told me to tell you: don't drink the residue," Rosral said.

"What do you mean by don't drink the residue?!?" Dr. Williams asked in a panicked tone.

"What's wrong with the residue?!? Is it toxic?"

"He's probably inferring that it won't taste good," I replied.

"How can you possibly know that?!?" Dr. Williams replied.

"Pipe down, Robert!" Dr. Madson yelled.

Given the cups resembled shot glasses, we all decided to take our drinks together. Rosral watched us clinking our cups together with a curious grin on her face. And then we drank the liquid.

As it turns out, the liquid was akin to a rather rich and salty red wine reduction. It was nothing like coffee, and that came as quite a shock. The rest of the team had obviously assumed

similar. Their reactions were priceless. I've never seen so many people spit their drinks out at once. Rosral flied when it happened and then stared at us with a shocked look on her face.

"Good god!" Dr. Williams exclaimed.

"Does anyone have water?" Dr. Nara asked, still spitting at the ground.

Dr. Madson produced a bottle of water from her backpack, and we passed it around.

"I suppose you'll not be worrying about drinking the residue?" Dr. Kallas asked.

"No. Not during my lifetime," Dr. Williams replied.

"That drink wasn't to your liking?" Rosral asked.

"Do you have any concept of what human food tastes like?" Dr. Williams asked angrily.

"Don't shout at Rosral!" Dr. Madson cried. "She wasn't to know!"

"I quite enjoyed it," said Dr. Kallas.

"There's no accounting for taste," Dr. Williams replied.

"I mean, it didn't taste bad," Dr. Nara replied. "It just wasn't at all what I was expecting."

“While, yes, it would probably serve as a fine sauce for steak, I would shudder at the idea of drinking a whole glass of it,” Dr. Williams replied. “What was that ghastly stuff called?”

“Misi,” Rosral replied.

“Good. I’ll remember that,” Dr. Williams said.

Rosral apprehensively dragged us to another food stall. She was clearly shaken by what had happened. We sampled a few other dishes, cautiously this time. They all turned out to be unique and absolutely delicious. The stalls continued along the street as far as the eye could see, and I estimated they must have gone on for kilometers. The market was very busy, with hundreds of Elaran citizens and visiting aliens queuing for food and happily eating together. Some of the stalls had particularly long queues, and we noted that they might be worth a try during another visit, should we be granted one.

We observed an interesting Elara cultural trait during our trip to Mikato market. On Earth we have many local rituals for greeting each other ranging from shaking hands, to bowing, to kissing each other’s cheeks. At Mikato market, we observed some Elara greeting each other by brushing the sides of their faces together. Sometimes it was just one side, sometimes both. Occasionally we witnessed them doing it many times over. We assumed familiarity may have play a part in whether they brushed up against each other’s faces once, multiple times, or at all. It was fascinating to watch. Dr. Williams was a little perplexed by the fact that, when we’d asked Rosral about the Elara equivalent of shaking hands, she hadn’t told us about this ritual. Dr. Nara offered an explanation – Rosral had been nervous at the time and probably hadn’t understood our question well enough.

Chapter 16 Seminars, day one

After lunch, we returned to Seris 8 and reconvened for our second session of the day. It was to be the first of a series of seminars intended to introduce us to technologies that the Elara could help us develop in the short term – two to five years. The first seminar was focused on power generation mechanisms. Rosral opened the session by materializing onto the table before us what she referred to as a power generation cell. The object was about the size of an aubergine, matte black in color, roughly cylindrical in shape, and had many hemispherical protrusions on its surface. She recommended we examine the device. It weighed a lot less than we'd imagined, especially considering the slightly higher gravity on Ket.

“This is a standard power cell used in all of our high-energy applications,” Rosral explained.

“High-energy applications?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Powering the fields that maintain Seris platforms, city infrastructure, star ships and the like,” Rosral replied.

“How many of these are required to power a Seris platform?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Just one,” Rosral replied. “Actually, one per platform is overkill. One of these could power the whole Seris.”

“We have no idea how much energy is required to power those floating mechanisms. In terms we're familiar with, how much energy can one of these things generate?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“One of these is roughly equivalent to all the power generation on one of your continents,” Rosral stated.

We glanced around at each other, amazed.

“So, how does this power cell work?” Dr. Williams asked.

“In your equivalent terms, these are rechargeable batteries,” Rosral stated. “They both store and release energy.”

“So, they have to be charged?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “The power cell charges itself.”

“How?” Dr. Williams asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Via the conversion of latent dark energy,” Rosral replied.

“Dark energy and dark matter are just theoretical concepts to us,” Dr. Kallas stated. “We use those concepts to explain various theories, such as the mass of galaxies.”

“What Dr. Kallas just said,” Dr. Williams added. “We have no way of observing or interacting with dark matter or energy.”

“Yes, we’re aware of that,” Rosral replied. “We’ll teach you how to do that.”

Drs. Williams and Kallas smiled at each other in excitement.

“Our first dark energy power generation devices were much larger than this one,” Rosral admitted. “But this technology will provide you with a way out of your reliance on steam engines.”

“Steam engines?” Dr. Williams said. He laughed. “What an apt description!”

Up until that point in our history, a majority of energy generation mechanisms we'd relied on were based on either windmills, water mills, or steam engines. Fossil fuel and nuclear plants heat water, which turns into steam, which is then used to spin turbines and generate electricity. Decades of research had been poured into the next generation of power production - nuclear fusion - that was predicted would provide us with clean, cheap energy on a scale we'd never imagined. However, at that time, nuclear fusion power plants were still not a reality. And even those were basically steam engines. The device on the table in front of us could produce more energy than an entire continent's worth of our current power stations, and thus it had the potential to revolutionize energy generation on Earth. However, it also had the potential to cause a massive shift in the global economy, which could easily lead to all manner of undesirable outcomes.

“Do you use different power generation mechanisms for lower energy applications?” Dr. Kallas asked. “Things like our mobile phones.”

“Or these cards,” Dr. Williams added, holding his blue card up.

“I am showing you this device since it is large and thus easy to dissect and study. Smaller, lower power versions of this device are indeed used in the applications you’re asking about,” Rosral replied.

“Really? There’s one of those in this card?” Dr. Williams asked in a slightly confused manner.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “It is very small, but if you look carefully, you’ll find it in one corner.”

I examined my own blue card and found a tiny black dot close to one of the corners.

“Well I’ll be damned!” Dr. Williams exclaimed.

Rosral spent the following three hours presenting holographic cross-sectional representations of the device in front of us and explaining the scientific principles that made the device work. She also explained, on a high level, some of the materials science advancements that had been required to create their first versions of these devices. Even though the topics Rosral covered were high-level in nature, they were thoroughly beyond our current scientific understanding, almost to the point of feeling like science fiction. This first seminar had been so fascinating and mind-opening that we were eager to attend the next ones.

Chapter 17 An evening on Ket

After the seminar concluded, Rosral offered to take us back to Mikato market for dinner.

Although most of us had put the rather unfortunate Misi experience behind us, Dr. Williams still seemed a little apprehensive about the visit. We anyway politely agreed, and she led us out of the visitor's center and across the park. By what would have been considered evening our time, Ket's sun had risen just slightly to a position that we might have considered mid-morning.

“A whole day would have passed on Earth,” Dr. Madson stated. “And look at where the Sun is now.”

“How long was a day on this planet again?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Five point one Earth days,” Rosral replied. “And a year on this planet lasts roughly eighty eight Earth days.”

“It’s still chilly out,” Dr. Kallas noted. Despite Vedess being in Ket's tropical zone, outside temperatures were on the cold side - about 18C by our estimations.

“Is the temperature inside this dome somehow regulated?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Temperatures inside this dome match those outside at ground-level,” Rosral replied. “At higher elevations, such as the one we visited when you arrived, temperatures are regulated to match those below.”

“So, it’s always cold here?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Ket's larger oceans and larger size are one reason for lower surface temperatures,” Rosral replied. “Another reason is due to a low greenhouse effect. Ket has a great deal of vegetation and sea-based carbon dioxide consuming life. Due to short seasons, Ket's icecaps are also much larger and more stable than Earth's, reflecting a great deal of radiation back into space.”

“You’re lucky,” Rosral added. “It’s almost constantly cloudy here. And it rains almost all the time. You’re witnessing a rare opportunity to see our star in the sky.”

“Rains almost constantly,” Dr. Williams said. “Sounds familiar.”

“You’re not missing London, then?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Nope!” Dr. Williams replied.

“What season are we in?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Umm. We don’t have the concept of seasons here. But in Earth-equivalent, it would be early summer right now,” Rosral replied.

“Does it get even colder during the winter?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “It can snow here during the winter.”

“What, even at the equator?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

Mikato market was just as busy as during our previous visit.

“Is it always like this?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“No,” Rosral replied. “It gets a lot more crowded at night.”

“Really?!?” Dr. Kallas exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, Riku. Night isn’t for another two days. We’ll be gone by then,” Dr. Williams replied.

“How do Elara eating habits work, given your long days and nights?” Dr. Madson asked.

“We get hungry every four or five hours like you do,” Rosral replied. “We just have more breakfasts, lunches, and dinners in one day.”

“More than the number of breakfasts, lunches, and dinners Dr. Williams eats?” Dr. Nara asked. Rosral gave her a thoroughly confused glance.

“Wha? Look! I get hypoglycemic if my blood sugar gets too low!” Dr. Williams replied.

“No need to answer that, Rosral,” I said. “We were just making a joke at Dr. Williams’s expense.”

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “I’ve noticed you do that a lot.”

“See! Even the alien can see how you all treat me!” Dr. Williams exclaimed. We all laughed.

“So, what about sleeping patterns?” Dr. Madson inquired.

“That’s where our species differ significantly,” Rosral answered. “Your species tend to sleep through your short night. Elara take naps whenever they need one. Our naps usually last about four Earth hours. We take them roughly every eight Earth hours.”

“You must be sleepy then?” Dr. Nara asked.

“A bit. I’ll sleep after we’ve eaten,” Rosral replied.

“How do you schedule work and collaboration around your sleep schedules?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever thought about how that works,” Rosral replied. “If a colleague is asleep, we just wait until they wake up.”

We pushed through the crowds and finally arrived at a stall. A spicy and exotic aroma not dissimilar to Indian food greeted us.

“I could smell this one earlier,” Dr. Kallas said. “I’m glad we came here.”

“This is one of my favorites,” Rosral stated. “The dish is called Arel.”

The dish consisted of a thick red sauce made from local fruits, vegetables, and spices. The stall owner served each of us a portion in a small wooden bowl. A crispy, deep-fried bread was also provided. We followed Rosral’s lead, tearing off pieces of the bread and dipping them in the gravy. The sauce itself was slightly sweeter than curries we’d had on Earth and left distinctive notes reminiscent of cardamom and anise on the palette. The bread, though, was out of this world. Literally. It was the best accompaniment to a curry I’d ever tasted.

“What’s this bread called?” I asked.

“Rilno,” Rosral replied.

“I need the recipe!” I stated.

“You’ll find it in the archive,” Rosral replied. “But you won’t have the ingredients required to cook it on Earth.”

“Ahh, yes, of course!” I replied. “This probably uses special local flours and spices.”

“Even the oil it is cooked in contributes to the flavor,” Rosral replied. “You won’t find that on Earth, either.”

Following dinner, we returned to Seris 8, where we were ferried to one of the rooms in the "laboratories" section.

“I’ve left you with some evening recreational activities,” Rosral stated. She yawned. It was amusing to observe how wide their species could open their mouths. Her long incisors were very visible during the yawn. It was almost like looking at a cat yawn. Almost cute looking.

“Here are some quantum spacetime inference devices,” she said. “I’ve left coordinates to some locations of interest on Ket that you can explore.” She pulled out her green card and interacted with its holographic interface. A long table materialized. Followed by some food on plates, several bottles containing different colored liquids, and some glasses. “Here are some snacks and a sample of our local beverages. Stay as long as you like. When you’re tired, you know where your rooms are. I’ll see you in your morning.”

And with that, Rosral left for her nap. She looked exhausted. I was, too. And it was only early-evening.

“Ooh! What are these?” Dr. Nara said excitedly, as she picked up and looked over several of the bottles sitting on the table. Dr. Madson joined her.

“This one looks like bubbly,” Dr. Madson stated, holding up a clear glass bottle containing a slightly yellow clear liquid. Bubbles were indeed visible in the liquid.

“Let’s give it a try,” Dr. Nara stated.

“For science,” Dr. Madson added.

Dr. Madson removed the cork. The liquid fizzed up slightly. She poured herself and Dr. Nara a glass. They both cautiously sniffed at the liquid.

“Smells like bubbly,” Dr. Madson said.

They clinked their glasses together and took a sip.

“Oh!” exclaimed Dr. Nara, taking another slightly larger sip. “Divine!”

“What are you guys doing?!?” Dr. Williams exclaimed, running over to the table. “Do you have any idea what’s in those drinks?”

“Bubbly,” Dr. Madson replied, finishing her glass.

“Ooh, it has quite a kick to it!” Dr. Nara exclaimed.

“Oh yeah! I can feel that too!” Dr. Madson replied. “Another?”

Dr. Nara didn’t need to be asked twice. She held out her glass and received a refill within seconds. Dr. Williams watched agasp.

“I wonder what this stuff is called?” Dr. Nara said.

“The label on this bottle is written in an Elaran language,” Dr. Madson stated, while examining it.

“Hang on,” Dr. Kallas said. “We can use the translation thingy on it.” He produced his blue card and scrolled through a few holographic menus. “Ah, here it is.” He activated a menu item and held the card in front of the bottle. “The largest set of glyphs on this label translate to the word Sec. S. E. C. Perhaps that’s its name?”

“Could be the name of the manufacturing company,” I replied.

“Do they even have companies here? I mean, post-scarcity and all that,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“I dunno. If I had a brewery here, I’d give it a name,” I replied.

“Yeah, but don’t they just replicate all this stuff?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“I suppose there had to be a brewery or winery making this stuff before they had replicators,” I replied.

Drs. Nara and Madson were, by this point, on their third refill. “Before you empty that bottle, let me try some,” I said. Dr. Madson grabbed a glass and poured some in. The drink was nice and dry, and tasted quite similar to sparkling wine, but without the slightly yeasty taste that accompanies our own wines. It was very refreshing.

“Me too!” Dr Kallas said, holding out a glass.

“You’re all certifiable, drinking that stuff” Dr. Williams stated as he walked away. “It’ll be your own funeral.”

Dr. Kallas picked up a clear glass bottle containing blue liquid and held it up to the light. “I wonder what this stuff is?” he said.

Dr. Kallas opened the bottle and sniffed its contents. “This stuff smells awful!”

“Let me have a smell,” Dr. Madson stated. She pulled the bottle from Riku’s hand and took a sniff. “Oh god! This stuff is strong!”

“They call this stuff ‘Lasoli’ in Finland,” Dr. Kallas stated. “You put it in your car in the winter.”

“Lasoli?” Dr. Nara remarked. “That should be our name for this blue drink!”

“So, anyone up for a Lasoli spritzer?” Dr. Madson said.

We eventually moved over to the QUERY consoles Rosral had provided, drinks in tow. We followed the instructions she’d left and used the consoles to remotely view some locations of interest she’d marked.

Of interest were the Arctic and Antarctic regions of Ket. Due to stable ice caps, biodiversity in those regions was much more varied than on Earth, and host to a complex food chain. Although we saw nothing like our own penguins, seals, or polar bears, we observed a host of mammals and birds, a few of which were somewhat analogous to our own. Viewing the scenery of the northern continent, which we learned was called Vileona, made us a little jealous of our cultural counterparts who were staying in that region. The mountains and frozen lakes were particularly eye-catching, even when viewed remotely. Talking of which, the holography presented by the Elaran equivalent of our QUERY system was extremely detailed and presented visualizations with so much more clarity than our clunky systems at home. We all agreed that we really wanted one. Or a dozen.

We turned the QUERY viewer to other locations that Rosral had recommended. The next one was in the ocean between the continent we were on and the northern continent. In this new view we were able to observe massive sea leviathans that reminded us of illustrations of some water-borne dinosaur varieties that once lived on Earth. The creatures were, according to the data, very much larger than the largest whales on Earth. Ket's larger size and expansive oceans were apparently host to an amazingly diverse biosystem.

The third location suggested by Rosral was that of a jungle on the Eastern continent. According to an electronic guide made available to us, ocean currents and weather patterns on the planet allowed for tropical climates in parts of the eastern continent. The jungles there had been untouched for millennia and were host to a diverse range of organisms, many of which resembled insects. Some of those insects were rather large, and I made a mental note to politely refuse any sort of jungle safari, if one were ever offered.

It had been a long day, and after polishing off several different bottles of alcoholic beverages, we decided to retire to our designated living quarters for the "night".

The rooms assigned to us are worth describing. Many different control consoles adorned the walls, all of which thankfully presented options in English. Each room contained a sustenance fabricator, with accompanying pre-sets for a large variety of Earth foods and drinks. A control console on another wall allowed for fine-tuned selection and adjustment of sleeping arrangements, including a variety of different types of beds and bedclothing. Near the bed were controls for in-room temperature, humidity, and light intensity.

Another console was located above an alcove similar looking to the sustenance fabricator, but slightly larger. Upon reading that console, I realized it was designed to fabricate clothing. The console itself displayed an accurate representation of me, and various clothing options could be cycled through via available menus. The options available were very reminiscent of clothing I'd seen Elara wearing. One option allowed me to leave my existing clothing in the alcove and have it "purified". I wasn't sure what that meant, but I tried it out anyway. My clothes were instantly returned to me neatly folded and cleaned. Upon further inspection I found them to be in what could only be described as brand-new condition. One of my pockets had been wearing thin, but the device had presumably restored the material to full working order.

Yet another console brought up holographic access to the same information available on our handheld devices, and more - what one might describe as access to the Elaran internet. I noticed it was possible to tune into various local television broadcasts, and although I couldn't understand the language, there were plenty of fascinating looking programs available. I recall

that I ended many of my evenings on Ket settling down to flip through various channels before calling it a night.

Of equal note was the room labeled "cleaning facilities". The Elara hadn't provided us with a toothbrush or toothpaste, but there was a console on the wall labelled "oral purification".

Further notes on the console's readout stated that it provided "nanomolecular dental purification, reconstitution, and refreshment". Activating the console materialized a small bottle of mouthwash that tasted somewhat minty and not dissimilar to the mouthwashes I'd used back on Earth. However, its effects were much more pronounced - it removed tartar, regrew the enamel lost to chips and cavities, and left my teeth cleaner and whiter than any brushing might have accomplished. It actually did what was promised on the label, unlike Earth-based dental products. I strongly considered materializing additional bottles to take back to Earth with me. After a long, exhausting, and, frankly, bizarre day, I was very much ready for sleep.

Chapter 18 On the nature of hangovers

Our time on Ket had been nothing short of extraordinary. And it had only lasted one Earth day, or one fifth of a day on Ket. We would eventually learn a lot more about life on Ket, Elaran society, and their amazing culture.

We all got a good eight hours of sleep after our first "day" on Ket. A combination of a busy day and plenty of alcoholic beverages meant that I dropped off almost immediately as my head hit the pillow. I recall feeling healthy and reinvigorated when I woke up, which was most odd. I was already at the age where having more than two drinks of an evening meant a

guaranteed hangover the next morning. Most likely some Elara magic was at play, and I noted that I should ask Rosral about it the next time I saw her.

Upon arriving at my room the previous evening, I had noticed that there were no windows. This, I assumed, was on purpose – to allow us to sleep though daytime hours on Ket as though it were night on Earth. After getting out of bed, I used the “cleaning facilities”. The shower was wonderful. It somehow heat-adjusted automatically for me and the water pressure was beyond anything I’d experienced before. I used the miracle mouthwash again, and it was every bit as good as I had remembered the previous evening. I put on my newly cleaned and repaired clothes and milled about the room for a while, examining the other consoles on the wall. I found one that was labelled “transparency” and tried it. It activated several “windows” around the room. Light flooded in, and the automatic room lighting adjusted accordingly.

Outside, the sky was filled with ominous black clouds. It was raining heavily. Rosral had mentioned that rainy days were more common than sunny ones in Vedess. If we could have seen their sun, it would have probably been high in the sky at that point. The view outside of my room was to a garden area located on of the outer ring of the Seris platform.

Seris 8 was located right in the middle of what we’d found out was a district called “Kerni”. Seris structures were positioned hexagonally, and so our own Seris neighbored six others, each of which had six of their own neighbors. Seris structures adjacent to the edge of the dome were shorter, to account for its curvature, and were considered more salubrious neighborhoods, since their residents were afforded wonderful views of the natural world outside the dome. Residences on higher levels were also desirable because of their views out

across the nearby forest or ocean – views we’d seen when we first arrived. Our own living quarters were on the first level of Seris 8, and so the view past the garden area of our disc was mostly obscured by other nearby Seris structures. However, the bottom most disc, being the widest, gave us a larger garden, and our proximity to ground level allowed us to hear the bustle and goings on below.

I had a little time to kill before meeting the others and so fabricated myself a cup of black tea to drink while passing the time. Scanning the wall further, I found a control that opened a door to the garden area. Technically it didn’t open a door – it dematerialized a section of the wall suitable for walking through. This dematerialization reminded me exactly of how the door appeared in the room we were beamed to on their starship. The sound of the rain got a lot louder as the door opened, and I walked outside. The garden area just outside of my room was sheltered by the canopy of the above Seris platform. As I left my room, a chair and small round table materialized on the grass nearby. I sat down, drank my tea, and watched the rain fall. I caught the delicious smell of barbecued food wafting over from Mikato market. I started to feel very hungry.

A moment or two after I’d sat down with my tea, a large and very colorful bird swooped down and landed in the garden a dozen or so meters away from me. It strutted around and pecked at the ground a bit, not noticing my presence. I stayed very still so as not to alarm it. Two more similar looking birds joined it. I watched with interest. I deduced that the falling rain must have been forcing worms, or whatever the Elaran equivalent was, to the surface of the lawn, providing them with snacks.

Eventually one of the birds stopped what it was doing and stared me directly in the eye for a few seconds. It then let out a series of loud squawks. The other two birds immediately stopped and turned to face me. The birds were very large – much larger even than seagulls – and with much wider bills. At this point the way they were behaving seemed every bit as threatening as a seagull guarding its young. All three birds squawked relentlessly and started strutting towards me. One of them had some disgusting gunk hanging out of its beak.

I wasn't sure what to do but decided that the safest option was probably to continue to remain completely still and hope they'd soon lose interest. They continued towards me for what was probably at most ten seconds. But it felt like minutes. Thankfully, they eventually stopped and went back to minding their own businesses and pecking at the lawn. I crept quietly back inside, closed the door, and breathed a sigh of relief. That was not the peaceful morning cup of tea I'd had in mind. I couldn't fathom how much worse it would have been if I'd had a hangover.

Roughly fifteen minutes after The Bird Attack, I used the blue card Rosral had issued me to translocate to a spot designated as our meeting point. Dr. Madson was already there milling around, waiting for everyone else.

"You're up early too, I see," I said.

"Yeah," Dr. Madson replied.

"Nice rooms!" I said.

“Comfy beds, too!” she replied.

“Oh yeah. Definitely,” I replied. There was a brief pause in the conversation while I tried to think of something to say. Which I couldn’t. And so, on to the weather.

“Look at this rain!”

“Good that we’re sheltered from it here!” Dr. Madson replied.

“Umm, how is your cat?” I asked.

“Cooper? He’s fine! Well, apart from being slowed to a one hundred and fiftieth of normal time,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I can see how that might be concerning.”

“Did you try that mouthwash stuff?” I asked.

“Oh my god, yes!” she replied. “Where has that stuff been all my life?”

“I know! Right?” I replied. I knew that Drs. Madson and Nara had consumed a considerable amount of alcohol the previous evening. I wasn’t entirely sure if my lack of hangover could be attributed to one of those lucky occasions, or if there was some sort of anti-hangover field in our dome. And, as such, I wasn’t sure if to approach the situation with Dr. Madson. It didn’t look like she was suffering. So, I figured what the hell. “Did you notice the lack of...”

“Hangover?” she replied. “Yes! What is that?”

“Oh, thank God. So, it wasn’t just me!” I replied. What a relief.

“Do you think they just, like, beam it out of us or something?” she asked.

“I have no idea. I’m just thankful the technology exists. If it does...” I stated.

“Imagine if we had that back home!” she replied.

“I’d probably be penniless already,” I joked. We laughed.

“Did you get out into your garden?” I asked?

“Garden? No. I don’t think my place has one. All the walls were solid. No windows or anything,” she replied.

“Ahh. There are separate controls for the windows. And one to open a door to the gardens,” I told her.

“Really?” she replied. “You’ll have to show me them when we go back.”

“I can do that, yes,” I replied.

“So, there’s a garden. Is it nice?” she asked.

“Very nice, yes,” I said. “You can smell the cooking at Mikato market from there. And see out to some of the other Serises. I enjoyed a cup of tea there until I was almost attacked by some local wildlife.”

“Attacked? By what?!?” she asked, startled.

“A group of birds. Very large birds. More like dinosaurs. It was quite frightening.” I replied.

“Sounds like it must have been,” she replied. “Perhaps I don’t need you to show me those room controls...”

At that moment, Dr. Nara materialized near us.

“Hi Kano!” Dr. Madson shouted.

“Heya!” Dr. Nara replied. “Oh. Good to see I’m not late!”

Just moments later, Drs. Kallas and Williams arrived. Followed by Rosral.

“Am I fashionably late?” Rosral asked.

“No. We arrived seconds ago,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Way to spoil the moment, Robert!” Dr. Nara remarked.

“Time to get some breakfast!” Rosral stated, cheerily. “I’ll take you to one of my favorite places to eat. Follow me!”

“We’re walking across that park?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Of course!” Rosral replied. “A straight line between two points is the shortest path.”

“But we have no umbrellas. We’ll get soaked!” Dr. Nara protested.

“No, we won’t!” Rosral replied.

As we made our way out from under the shelter of Seris 8 and into the rain, I had no idea how or why I wasn’t getting wet. It was as though some sort of protective bubble had formed around each of us, dematerializing any drop of water that entered our vicinities whether it be falling from the sky or splashing up from the ground. It took us a good ten minutes to cross the park, and at the rate at which the rain was falling, we should have been soaked through in seconds.

“Wow, this is cool! How are we not getting wet?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Those cards I gave you provide the anti-wet functionality,” Rosral explained.

“I wonder what else these cards can do?” Dr. Kallas said.

“I’m sure there’s a technical way of finding that out,” Dr. Williams replied.

The restaurant we finally arrived at had only outdoor seated areas. However, it was shielded from the rain with its own anti-wet bubble. The restaurant itself was empty. There were a few vacant tables surrounded by chairs suitable for Elaran physiology. Those would have been rather uncomfortable for human use. Rosral interacted with a small panel on a wall and an appropriate set of furniture materialized. We all sat down. Apparently, the restaurant was fully automated. Small holographic consoles appeared in front of each of us, providing menus of various foods, all of which we were unfamiliar with. Rosral explained to us that the selections presented were common breakfast foods in Vedess and made a few recommendations for dishes we might enjoy.

I recall trying a dish that resembled a traditional Japanese breakfast – a bowl of something similar to rice, topped with a fishy tasting protein, sweet sauce, and some red vegetables that tasted vaguely oniony. My colleagues sampled a range of options. Dr. Williams wasn’t all that picky with food but ended up going with something that resembled a croissant. He ate it very quickly, told us how delicious it was, with his mouth full, and then ordered a second one. And probably a third. I didn’t notice. Dr. Nara chose something that looked very much like eggs with a creamy sauce. Dr Kallas and Dr. Madson both opted for a dish that resembled a thai curry, with some flat bread as an accompaniment. Apparently, it was very fragrant and delicious, and the bread reminded them of crispy roti. I made a note to try that on our next visit.

“Hey, Kano, did you wake up with any kind of hangover?” Dr. Madson asked.

“No! Not even the slightest of headaches!” Dr. Nara replied.

“Me neither!” Dr. Kallas added. “I was sure that blue stuff would be my downfall.”

“Yeah, John noticed the same thing. We were talking about it before you arrived at the meeting point,” Dr. Madson replied.

“How amazing is that?” Dr. Nara stated.

“Yeah! I know!” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Well, I didn’t have a hangover because I didn’t join you all in emptying those eight bottles,” Dr. Williams interjected.

“You missed out!” Dr. Madson stated. “And look! No repercussions!”

“I was wondering if there’s some sort of anti-hangover field in this dome,” I stated.

“An anti-hangover field? That would be almost literally one of the best inventions ever!” Dr. Nara replied.

“Let me get this straight. We learned yesterday that the Elara have an instant and non-invasive cure for cancer and you lot are all heralding an anti-hangover field as one of the greatest inventions of all-time?” Dr. Williams replied.

“Um. Yeah!” Dr. Nara replied.

“Well, you have to admit,” Dr. Kallas remarked, “hangovers are a much more prevalent affliction when compared to other ailments.”

“Perhaps for you lot!” Dr. Williams exclaimed. “Is literally everyone around me a lush?”

“I remember you enjoying a pint or ten not too long ago,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“I was much younger in those days,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Can’t take your drink anymore?” Dr. Madson remarked. “Have you become a lightweight?”

Dr. Williams grumbled under his breath.

I glanced over at Rosral, who appeared to be smirking at our conversation.

During breakfast, Rosral reiterated her promise that the following two days in Vedess were scheduled to be filled with seminars covering the principles of fabrication, advanced computing technologies, environmental stabilization, and, of course, quantum spacetime inference. We conversed about the many amazing things we’d experienced on the planet so far. Life on Ket seemed to be quite laid-back compared to Earth. And Rosral was in no hurry to get going, so we chatted long after we’d finished eating.

When we were finally done with breakfast, we got up from the table and, as we were walking away, it dematerialized along with the empty cups and plates on it.

Chapter 19 Seminars, day two

We returned to the visitor's center and reassembled in the conference room. Rosral then treated us to a seminar on fabrication where we learned how combining limitless clean energy with devices able to convert energy into matter would one day bring about our own version of the Elaran post-scarcity society. I must admit that some of what was covered went over my head even though it was presented as "the basics" by Rosral. Regardless, we all had a lot of questions, and learned more than we had imagined possible. We were eager to get the materials presented to other members of our project.

The rain had eased up after our morning seminar, and we visited Mikato market, yet again, for lunch. Rosral directed us to a stall further into the market. It served a cold dish that was apparently very healthy and tasty. The dish, which consisted of slimy red vegetable tendrils coated with a subtly fragrant sauce, was served in small white bowls. Although not all that appetizing to look at, it was indeed most delicious. Rosral explained that it was made from a variety of plants that grow in the nearby sea. After her explanation I recall thinking that it had tasted somewhat similar to wakame salad. Although the portion was small, the dish was very filling. Even Dr. Williams didn't ask for a second portion, although we could tell that this particular dish wasn't perhaps completely to his liking. It contained no deep fried stuff or cheese.

Following lunch, we reconvened for an afternoon seminar on compute substrate. Rosral started the seminar with a brief overview of their own compute substrate.

“Unlike your two-dimensional silicon wafer-based chips and printed circuit boards, our compute substrate is both three dimensional in design and holographic in nature,” Rosral stated. “It is not based on silicon transistors, either.”

Rosral materialized a small cube of their compute substrate onto the table. The cube measured about three centimeters on all sides and resembled a smooth piece of stone to the touch. It felt very dense and heavy, almost as if it were composed of granite.

“This small cube of our compute substrate represents approximately all of the processing and data storage capacity available on your entire planet.”

“What sort of power requirements would a piece of substrate like this have?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Approximately two thousand milliwatts in your measurements,” Rosral replied.

“That’s, what, about the same power requirements as the processors in our mobile phones,” Dr. Williams stated. “Do they generate heat?”

“No,” Rosral replied.

“Wow. Imagine how much more AI research we could do with even one of these!” Dr. Nara stated. “The limiting factor is energy, and the damage large amounts of energy usage has on the environment.”

“I’m assuming a miniaturized version of this is present in these cards?” Dr. Williams asked while carefully examining his blue card.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “Not one. Many. Distributed throughout the card. You’ll only be able to see them under significant magnification.”

“Speaking of which, you informed us that these cards were responsible for the anti-wet effect we experienced a few moments ago. Are there other things they can do?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Oh, yes. Many things,” Rosral replied. “For instance, your card contains the technology responsible for translocation.”

“It does? I always thought it merely interfaced with some translocation device elsewhere,” Dr. Williams replied. “Fascinating.”

“The card can also be used to materialize objects,” Rosral replied. “I used mine to create the tables and chairs here. And at the place we ate at this morning. And to create the food and drinks you had last night.”

“Wow! Can I keep mine?” Dr. Nara asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Rosral replied.

“You mean, I can take it back to Earth with me?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Of course,” Rosral replied.

“But aren’t you worried that we might lose it? That it might fall into the wrong hands?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Or that we’ll try to reverse engineer it?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“If you want to try to reverse engineer it, go ahead,” Rosral replied. “We’re teaching you fundamentals that will enable you to eventually create these yourselves. But it’ll take time. And I guarantee you won’t be able to reverse engineer these cards.”

“As for losing the card, don’t worry,” Rosral said. “Each card is coded to its owner. If you lose it, anyone finding it will not be able to activate it.”

“So, it’ll just look like a transparent piece of plastic?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Basically, yeah.” Rosral replied.

Rosral’s seminar on advanced compute substrate continued with a presentation of their history of computing, and the different technologies they used along the way. And it turned

out they had also started with transistors and silicon wafers, just like us. The topic was fascinating. The entire seminar lasted about three hours.

During our seminars, Rosral would fabricate a delicious, slightly minty herbal tea for us to drink. We observed that Rosral, and indeed, most Elara consumed the tea almost constantly, at all times of the day. She explained to us that the tea, which was called “Oress”, caused a calming effect in Elaran physiology. Although it was warm and delicious, I didn't note it causing any physiological calming effect on myself. Dr Williams humorously called it “space catnip”. Dr. Kallas wholeheartedly opposed that designation.

Chapter 20 An evening in Voriss

Following our afternoon seminar, we were all expecting to be marched down to Mikato market, as per usual. However, Rosral informed us that we’d be dining elsewhere. She had scheduled us a trip to Voriss, the cultural capital of Ket. As was usual with Rosral, we were translocated to a new location without any warning. We’d started to get used to sudden translocations and abrupt changes in scenery. Well, most of us.

Voriss was very different looking to Vedess. Being situated on the continent located on their northern pole, it was built amongst the mountains, glaciers, icebergs, and snowpack of the region. In fact, Voriss was itself built into the side of a very tall mountain and was positioned many kilometers above sea level. We were beamed onto a very large circular platform jutting out of a mountainside. It was clearly an outdoor area.

“Welcome to Voriss,” Rosral exclaimed, “located on the northern continent of Vileona.”

The view from where we were standing was spectacular. Mountain peaks about us were adorned with thick and very smooth, blue-colored glacial waterfalls.

“The location for this city was chosen for its amazing scenic views and natural beauty,” Rosral continued. “While this would not be considered either a logical or natural location to build a city, we had the luxury of building Vooris where it is just because we had the technology to do so.”

“Our current elevation is about eighteen of your kilometers above sea level.”

“Wait, did you say eighteen kilometers above sea level?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes, eighteen,” Rosral replied. “Eighteen point one to be precise.”

“That’s almost the height of Olympus Mons on Mars. The tallest mountain in our solar system. Or roughly two and a half times higher than Mount Everest,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“This is not the tallest mountain in the region,” Rosral replied.

“Do you guys even understand the implications of where we are?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yeah. We’re on a mountain,” Dr. Williams replied in a sarcastic manner.

Rosral, after only a day and a bit with our team, had started to gain a second sense regarding impending rifts between Drs. Kallas and Williams. She continued her speech, so as to stop their bickering. “As you can see, Voriss has a dome similar to the one in Vedess. In fact, it has the same exact diameter. However, it is configured to maintain air pressure similar to sea-level and temperatures well above those outside of the dome.”

“How cold is it out there?” Dr. Madson asked.

“In Earth measurements, it is currently approximately minus seventy Celsius,” Rosral replied.

“Usually, snowfall passes through the dome’s membrane and turns into rain,” Rosral stated.

“However, today we’re experiencing a storm, which is driving snow against the dome so fast that the water on the inside is rapidly freezing into ice and causing snow to pack against the membrane itself.”

Rosral pointed to a spot on the dome where the phenomenon could be observed. Snow had formed a white shell on the dome’s outer surface, Chunks of the shell occasionally broke off and slid down the dome’s outer membrane.

Since Voriss was built into the mountain, we were able to observe that the dome encapsulating the city was not a dome, but a bubble. Taking in the view, we immediately noticed the lack of Seris structures that adorned the Vedess skyline. Most of the structures in Voriss were built into the mountainside. They spiraled around its sharp peak. Walkways, kilometers in length connected various structures together. Of course, we assumed that these walkways were infrequently used given that the Elara tended to translocate if the distance

was great enough. However, the views from those walkways must have been fantastic, and we assumed they must be a popular tourist attraction. We wondered if they'd perhaps show us those sights on this trip, or maybe another.

At the top of the mountain, close to the dome's apex, was a palace-like structure. Given this was the cultural center of Ket, we wondered if it might be a museum, university, concert hall, or even place of worship. Whatever it was, it was impressively large, and we estimated it must have been significantly taller even than Earth's largest skyscrapers.

Rosral gave us a moment to take in the view before informing us that we'd be going inside to look around a bit. We followed her across the large stone courtyard and into a nearby indoors area. Architecture in Voriss was markedly different to what we'd seen in Vedess. Unlike the glossy white interiors of the visitor's center and surrounding areas, the floors, walls, and ceilings in this structure were made up of what resembled a granite-like stone. The lighting was dim, and ceilings were high, presenting a feeling not unlike being in a large cathedral.

We followed Rosral across an immense chamber and through a spacious stone passageway that led us to another, even larger circular chamber. The smooth stone walls of the chamber rose vertically on all sides, eventually capping off in a dome at least a hundred meters above us. The circular chamber itself must have been a few hundred meters in diameter. We noticed alcoves around the edges of the chamber that served as restaurant and marketplace areas. Glyphs that we weren't familiar with adorned the semi-circular arches that led to each alcove. It seemed that eating spaces (I recognized some glyphs related to food) were mostly lit with candles, providing a relaxing and somewhat medieval ambience.

To the far end of the chamber was a larger alcove where we could see beings materialize and dematerialize every now and then. We assumed the area must have contained some sort of mass-translocation device. Rosral directed us forward and through the center of the chamber. We had to push our way through the crowd to reach the far side, and it took quite some time to get there. When we finally arrived and were all standing on the translocation pad, Rosral activated some nearby controls and we found ourselves in what we presumed was the palace at the top of the mountain.

“This is Vorisal, the main cultural center of Voriss,” Rosral announced. “It houses academies, museums, entertainment centers, concert halls, and research facilities.”

“This place is truly massive!” Dr. Madson proclaimed.

“Yes, it would take months to explore all the museums in this facility,” Rosral noted, “We don’t have time for that today. However, I wanted to show you the main atrium. It is a very popular tourist attraction.”

The main atrium of Vorisal completely dwarfed the chamber we’d just been in. It must have been over a kilometer in diameter, and we couldn’t even see the ceiling. Six impressively large stone statues adorned the main atrium in a circular formation. They were hundreds of meters tall by all accounts.

“These are statues of some of our ancient cultural pioneers, known for their music, writing, painting, and sculpture,” Rosral stated.

The atrium walls that rose vertically for hundreds of meters on all sides and were adorned with similar looking alcoves to the ones we'd seen in the previous chamber. However, these alcoves weren't just on ground level. They dotted the walls all the way up as far as we could see.

"Each of the alcoves you can see contain a concert hall, museum, academy, library, or other such cultural facility," Rosral told us.

From where we stood, we could count hundreds or perhaps even thousands of them.

"More than one million Elara work in this facility on a regular basis," she continued.

The scale of the architecture was truly astonishing. We walked around the atrium and used our handheld devices to read the translations of inscriptions next to each statue. From reading the inscriptions, we deduced that the Elara depicted in the sculptures were likely the equivalents of our own famous ancient cultural icons such as Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Beethoven, and Mozart. Walking the circle around the interior of the atrium where the sculptures were housed took over an hour, and we had all built up quite an appetite once we were done. Rosral noticed that we looked hungry and exhausted and suggested that it was now time to go eat. We all wholeheartedly agreed. We proceeded back to the translocation pad and beamed down to the lower chamber.

Rosral guided us to one of the empty alcoves at the side of the chamber and informed us we were at our destination. As usual, she summoned up suitable furnishings – a table and chairs – and we took our seats. Unlike the plasticky white furnishings we'd become accustomed to

in Vedess, these ones were made of dark, heavy wood to match the local décor. The alcove was very cozy and was lit with candles that were placed inside small holes on the walls. The smell of food from other alcoves was delectable, and we were ravenous by the time we sat down.

“The southernmost part of this continent is host to large forests, and an abundance of regional ingredients including fungi, berries, and wild herbs,” Rosral said. “Shortly after we colonized this area, the cultural council sent expeditions to the region to forage for ingredients and create new dishes suitable for us to eat. Those recipes were preserved over the generations. Although most of us prefer to eat more modern cuisine, visiting this place and sampling these ancient recipes is a popular tourist activity. We’ll be sampling some of those dishes this evening. They look a little like Earth cuisine to me, so you needn’t worry about being fed something not to your taste.”

We all stared at Dr. picky Williams.

Rosral materialized drinks for everyone.

“This is Simi, a local specialty,” Rosral informed us.

The drink, which was served very cold and in small shot-sized vessels, was a clear liquid with a rather high alcohol content.

“Robert, you’ll be drinking this with us,” Dr. Madson said, looking at him sternly.

“Alright, alright,” he replied.

“You’ll be happy to hear that your Earth tradition of raising your glasses and shouting a word out is also a tradition in this region,” Rosral stated. “Instead of cheers, residents of these parts say kanin.”

Rosral raised her glass. We all followed her lead. Even the hesitant Dr. Williams. “Kanin!” she shouted. We did the same.

Simi reminded us of vodka, although it went down a lot easier. It was surprisingly good. I would have normally worried about starting the evening with such a strong drink but given the anti-hangover technology we’d experienced that morning we all felt a little easier about consuming it without abandon. Rosral materialized a second round shortly thereafter, along with some local bread, and the shouts of “Kanin!” continued.

Voriss gave me the opportunity to experience Elara public toilets for the first time. So far, we’d only been using facilities at the human-configured visitor’s center. All the toilets there resembled standard Earth seated affairs. Quite some time had passed since I’d previously relieved myself, and so during the early moments of the meal I snuck off to visit the facilities. Or, more accurately, the “cleaning facilities” as they were called. They were, thankfully, easy enough to find, based on directions provided by Rosral.

Upon arrival I found a very large room containing many very large stalls. Much larger than the ones we were used to on Earth. Inside one of the vacant stalls I found a small toilet that was presumably configured for Elara use. It roughly resembled squat toilets that I’d

encountered during my travels in parts of Asia. After a quick look around, I found a console on the wall that appeared to allow the user to reconfigure it in several different ways – presumably for different visiting lifeforms. I recognized the Elara glyphs for “reconfigure”, since they appeared on the consoles in my room that allowed my sleeping arrangements to be adjusted. The console displayed all reconfiguration options in pictorial format. I scrolled through and very quickly found our familiar seated variety. The system must have scanned my physical form and offered the option by default. Out of interest, I shuffled through other options, finding a variety of weird and wonderful toilets that came in many different shapes and sizes. I made a mental note to tell Dr. Kallas about it when I got back to the table. Just to wind him up.

Upon choosing the human option, the toilet instantly reconfigured itself for use. A toilet paper dispenser also handily materialized nearby. The toilet bowl contained no water, however, once I was finished with business, the deposited contents simply vanished silently, presumably via some sort of translocation mechanism. Sort of like an airplane toilet but without the deafening noise.

The room itself was very hygienic and clean and there was a pleasant fragrance in the air that reminded me of freshly cut grass. During the experience I went on to wonder how much of Elara society might differ from what I was familiar with on Earth. I’d never visited an Elaran home and wondered if perhaps their beds were different to ours, if they used couches or armchairs, what sort of décor they enjoyed, did they have a shower or a bath or both, did they have a sauna, what sorts of things did they do for recreation, did they spend time watching their holographic TV, did they enjoy swimming or going to the beach. The list went on. I realized I had a lot to ask Rosral.

The restaurant we were at had similar self-service functionality to the café we'd visited that morning. However, instead of us choosing from a holographic menu, Rosral controlled the flow of food. She kept the pace of the meal slow and provided us with drinks as needed. I recall being more than tipsy by the end of the third course, which was probably after our seventh or eighth "Kanin!" proclamation. The dimly lit environment around us was cozy and warm feeling, making the entire experience comforting, like an evening out on a dark and stormy winter's day. All we were missing was a roaring fireplace.

I vividly recall our fourth course was a sampling of local mushrooms, served in a variety of ways –pickled, seared, as a paste that was wrapped in some sort of fresh leaf, and as a creamy sauce with deep fried crispy things for dipping. The dish was simply exquisite. My memory started to blur shortly after eating the dish, and I attributed it to the amount of alcohol we'd consumed. I must admit this was possibly the most enjoyable evening we'd had on Ket so far.

As the evening proceeded, chatter on our table slowly increased in volume on a scale linearly proportional to the number of drinks that had been consumed. After Rosral had served our last course, the volume would have been noticeable for anyone passing within dozens of meters of our alcove. I vaguely recall Drs. Williams and Kallas conducting heated debates on a variety of subjects including whether the Elara more resembled cats or dogs, strange TV shows they'd seen on local channels, how useful translocation would be if we could use it on Earth, and whether there might be a limit to the amount of food one could fabricate using the in-room food replicator. I seem to remember Dr. Madson had tried, repeatedly, to get the men to quieten down, had eventually given up, and had then started to complain to Dr. Nara about the public toilets. Apparently, she'd been a little too tipsy to notice the in-stall reconfiguration

console and had thus ended up squatting – something she was entirely unhappy about. I sort of remember trying to ask Rosral questions about Elaran life, but the others were just so loud that we weren't able to have any form of fruitful discussion. I also vaguely recall other beings moving about the large chamber adjacent to our alcove glancing in as they passed, presumably to catch a glimpse of the life forms that were making so much noise. Despite the blurriness of the situation, I kind remember being aware of the fact that we were making a bit of a scene.

And if I remember correctly, Rosral didn't seem at all bothered about what was going on. In fact, it seemed as though she was deriving some humor from observing us in an increasingly drunken state. Or perhaps she was simply too drunk herself to care.

My last memories of the evening are of us leaving the alcove and Rosral taking us on a walking tour. I don't remember where, but I do remember that Dr. Williams and Dr. Kallas had continued with their loud and scintillating discussions. And I think Dr. Kallas had even started singing at some point. Honestly, though, those memories are such a blur that they could well have been part of whatever strange dreams I had that night.

Chapter 21 Seminars, day three

Although I had woken up in my cabin in Vedess, I had no recollection of how I got there. I did, however, quickly discover that the anti-hangover tech had worked once again. It is, of course, important to test these things rigorously. And from what I did, or more accurately didn't recall of the previous evening, I concluded that my second test of the technology had resulted in complete success.

I followed my usual daily morning ritual that ended with me enjoying a peaceful cup of tea in the garden. I wasn't interrupted by any angry birds on that occasion and enjoyed the fact that the rain had blown over and Ket's sun was setting. The view of it on the horizon was marvelous. While relaxing in the garden outside my residence I noticed the sound of bustle on the streets below. I wandered across the garden and over to the edge of the platform, where I peered down to see many Elara setting up decorations and stalls that looked rather similar to those we'd seen in Mikato market and adjacent streets. I wondered if they were preparing for some sort of a festival. To my disappointment, I remembered that we'd be leaving before it started.

We all assembled at our usual meeting point, at the designated time. I got the distinct feeling none of us could fully remember the events of the previous evening. And while the anti-hangover tech suppressed the physical symptoms of a hangover, it couldn't suppress the inevitable moral hangover you suffer when you're only partially able to recall the previous night's events. And so, when we all convened that morning, not a lot was said. We all sort of stared at the floor, muttered about the weather a bit, and generally avoided eye contact.

Rosral, on the other hand, appeared quite unphased by the previous evening, despite her having clearly consumed as much alcohol as the rest of us. Upon noticing our general state of moral hangover, she grinned. It was obvious that she found the situation amusing.

"How are you all feeling?" she asked.

"Umm. Yeah. Okay, all things considered," Dr. Kallas replied.

“Did you enjoy our trip to Voriss?” Rosral asked, still grinning.

“Yeah, yeah,” Dr. Madson replied.

“The food was amazing!” Dr. Nara added. “Thanks, Rosral!”

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “I thought so, too!”

“You folks put on quite the performance last night!” Rosral stated. “It was so fascinating, in fact, that it you’re now featured in the cultural archives!”

“Wait, what?” Dr. Williams replied in shock.

“Cultural archives?” Dr. Kallas asked. “What does that mean?”

“The cultural archives are a repository where notable and significant cultural happenings are recorded for posterity,” Rosral replied. “Your raucous behavior attracted significant attention and fascination of passers-by. As such, the episode was logged. Well, not just logged in this case. It started trending a few hours ago. Here, I’ll show you!”

Rosral proceeded to show us holographic highlights of our escapades, in all their detail, via her handheld device. The experience was mortifying. As it turned out, I hadn’t imagined Dr. Kallas singing. But what I hadn’t remembered, or maybe I’d just blocked the memory subconsciously, was Dr. Williams taking off his clothes in a very crowded and public place and then proceeding to dance.

“Right,” Dr. Williams stated, after seeing the footage. “I’m staying well clear of that Simi stuff from now on.”

“Yup, me too,” Dr. Kallas added.

“I think I need a bit of a lie down after seeing that,” Dr. Madson added.

“I think I need a bit of a drink after seeing that,” Dr. Nara added.

“Actually,” Rosral replied, “it wasn’t the Simi that caused you to do those things. This anti-hangover tech that you’re all so excited about also prevents excessive drunkenness. It isn’t possible to get that wasted.”

“Are you sure that works on us humans?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

“So, what explains this?!?” Dr. Williams exclaimed.

“One of the mushrooms we consumed had an unexpected neurological side-effect on your species,” Rosral replied.

“See! I told you we should be wary of the food here!” Dr. Williams stated.

“Thank god we’re not lighweights!” Dr. Nara added.

The mushroom explanation didn’t exactly ease our suffering. Okay, maybe slightly. I was just glad I hadn’t been the one who took off my clothes and started dancing.

Later that morning we convened for day three of our seminars which was expected to cover environmental stabilization and quantum spacetime inference. The environmental stabilization seminar was not about their dome technology, as a few of us had assumed, but about technologies the Elara could provide us to help stabilize Earth’s environment and reverse the effects of climate change. Some of it was common sense – plant more trees, be more energy efficient, produce less waste, don’t live beyond our means, stop polluting the environment, and so on. However, Rosral did also provide us with some fundamentals on techniques that could help absorb carbon from the atmosphere and remove plastics from our seas along with relevant mechanisms to deploy the technologies.

“Your planet’s environmental problems are easy enough to fix,” Rosral informed us. “But collective action is still required to prevent other potential environmental catastrophes from occurring in the future.”

“Your leaders need to promise to adhere to certain policies and frameworks first,” she continued. “Only then can we fix your immediate and impending climate emergency.”

“Oh, and by the way, when we say ‘promise to adhere’, we mean it,” she added. “None of this ‘climate accord’ nonsense that inevitably leads nowhere due to your species’ propensity to want to make rich people even richer.”

“Good luck with that,” Dr. Williams replied.

Our afternoon seminar was about quantum spacetime inference and included a long section on material science matters related to the creation of higher resolution devices. Rosral also included some tips and tricks based on our current implementations that would allow for better image quality, faster processing, and handling the viewing of locations with no natural light, such as under water, inside solid matter, and the like.

We noted the absence of seminars covering topics such as jump drives, artificial gravity, and translocation, and when we asked Rosral about those, she explained that we would receive more information on those technologies after a set of fundamental principles had been understood and implemented by us.

“Many of the topics you’ve learned about during our seminars are contingent on the development of good power generation capabilities,” Rosral informed us. “And your species are especially lacking in that regard.”

“Most of your problems are caused by your species’ adherence to broken economic and political models,” she added.

“Was the study of our species difficult for you?” Dr. Madson asked. “You know, because of all the societal problems. I mean, our society is quite the opposite of the utopia you’re accustomed to.”

“I was warned about how exacerbating it might be,” Rosral replied. “And yes, frankly, your society is very different to ours. And frustratingly illogical. But this was my first assignment of this kind, so I have no frame of reference. It might well be that most species at your level of development are similar.”

Our scheduled seminars ended in the evening of that third day. It was starting to get dark in Vedess and we noticed, for the first time, lights on the underside of Seris platforms illuminating nearby areas. The dimly-lit atmosphere was very relaxing.

We were, once again, taken for a round of cuisine sampling at Mikato market. Apparently Rosral couldn't get enough of that place. Mikato market was a lot busier than it had been during the day and we had to push through a crowd to get to the stall Rosral recommended. The line was long and while waiting for our turn we noticed that many Elara were sampling local alcoholic beverages. Some were already visibly intoxicated. We wondered if their behavior would also end up in the cultural archives.

After a good twenty-minute wait, we were finally served. The dish was, according to Rosral, more akin to the everyday food that the Elara eat, and that was why the stall was so popular. It was, however, still an "ancient" take on the cuisine. The dish consisted of a fabricated protein similar to fish, grilled delicately over coals, and flavored only with local salt. The meat itself was thin and very delicate, and the dish was served with a finely shaved local vegetable somewhat like radish. The flavor of the fish-like protein was exquisite, and no sauces or spices were seemingly required. Rosral told us that it can take several years to learn how to cook the dish, which she told us was called “Unin”, and that sustenance fabricators simply don't do the dish justice, what with its delicate seasoning and smoky aroma.

Following our evening meal, Rosral informed us that we'd be heading back to Earth. She also told us that, on the way back, she'd be showing us some interesting sights and that we'd also be visiting some of her friends. We were beamed directly into the unfurnished observation lounge and, upon arrival, Rosral conjured us up a set of nice comfy chairs to sit in.

We sat back and looked out of the ship's observation port. The view of Ket and its host star, as we'd seen it when we arrived was still impressive. Thousands of ships, habitation platforms, and space stations dotted our view, as far as the eye could see. Rosral engaged the ship's drive and in the blink of an eye, the view changed.

Chapter 22 A tour of the local neighborhood

Our first stop presented us with a sight to behold.

"We're in an intergalactic void adjacent to the Milky Way galaxy," she stated. "A suitable vantage point in which to view your entire galaxy."

Rosral touched a few controls on a console. Annotations marking features including the location of our own solar system, the supermassive black hole at the center of the galaxy, and hundreds of other solar systems appeared on the observation port.

"What is the significance of those other marked systems?" Dr. Williams asked.

"Those are other inhabited worlds in your galaxy," she replied.

“There must be hundreds of them!” Dr. Kallas stated. “We’ve probably only discovered a handful of them so far.”

“That’s not surprising,” Dr. Williams replied. “Studying the estimated forty billion Earth-sized planets orbiting habitable zones of Sun-like stars and red dwarves within the Milky Way will take us decades.”

“We’ve been doing just that for tens of thousands of years,” Rosral replied. “And we still haven’t fully mapped all areas of our own observable universe.”

“But you clearly must have detailed maps of your own local neighborhoods?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “And although our detailed maps extend all the way out to your galaxy, there’s plenty we still don’t know about.”

“Even with all that compute?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “Even with all that compute.”

Our next stop presented an observation of similar nature to the previous - a view of the galaxy where the Elara resided. In contrast to our previous view of the Milky Way, this galaxy was much brighter and more densely packed, and consisted of four closely situated nuclei.

“This is a view of our galaxy,” Rosral informed us. “We call it Enit. Your name for it is difficult to remember and not as catchy.”

“I don’t even remember the name,” Dr. Kallas stated. We all nodded in agreement.

“Enit is easy to remember!” Dr. Nara stated. “And a pretty name, too!”

Rosral nodded and smiled.

“Compared to the roughly two hundred billion stars in the Milky Way, Enit contains over thirty trillion stars,” Rosral stated. “Our species relocated to Enit some fifty thousand years ago.”

“Wait, did you say relocated?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

“Why did you relocate?” Dr. Williams asked. “Did you have some sort of disaster on your planet?”

“Enit, with its higher star density is a lot more convenient location for colonization,” Rosral replied. “We can easily find habitable planets in nearby systems suitable for colonization. Sometimes we don’t even need to terraform them.”

“Also, some of our allies had already moved there,” Rosral continued. “It was quite the up-and-coming neighborhood at the time. It also made a lot of sense from the perspective of defense.”

“Defense? From what?” Dr. Williams asked.

“From advanced threats,” Rosral replied.

“Advanced threats?” Dr. Williams exclaimed. “What could possibly pose a threat to someone with your level of technology?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” Rosral replied.

Rosral’s ship jumped to another location. This time it was a dark and featureless place. I wondered, for a moment, whether we might be looking at a black hole. I quickly dismissed the notion when considering that we’d at least see some photons emanating from its accretion disk. Rosral altered the settings of the viewport slightly, and a small spherical object was revealed.

“What you’re looking at is a quark star,” Rosral stated. “Quark stars form via the collapse of neutron stars under the right conditions. Which are rare. This quark star formed from the collapse of a magnetar. The resulting phase transition released a flash, or quark nova, equivalent to more than fifty times the amount of light emitted by your entire galaxy. Quark novae are some of the brightest events in the universe and are guaranteed to eliminate life on planets in sufficiently close proximity.”

“Aren’t these things, like, really dense?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Remarkably so,” Rosral replied. She found a small device on a counter near her control console and held it up. It was roughly the size of a matchbox. “This amount of material from that quark star would likely weigh more than your Moon.”

“How big is this thing?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Just a few Earth kilometers in diameter,” Rosral replied.

“Magnetars make up about ten percent of all neutron stars,” Rosral explained. “The other ninety percent are pulsars. Magnetars have extremely strong magnetic fields. Within their magnetic fields, atomic orbitals deform into rod-like shapes. The magnetic field of a magnetar is lethal even at a distance of one thousand kilometers. The strong magnetic field essentially renders the chemistry of known lifeforms impossible.”

“Umm. How close are we to that?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Considering the shielding technologies on this ship, we’re a safe distance from it,” she replied. “If you were in one of your own space craft, you’d have been killed instantly.”

“So, these things are small, dense, and extremely dangerous to approach,” Dr. Nara repeated.

“Fascinating.”

“Not just fascinating,” Rosral replied. “Have you been finding these in your QUERY scans?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Precisely,” Rosral stated. “They’re very difficult to spot. They’re almost invisible due to their size. When you finally develop enough technologies to build actual starships, you’re going to need to have every little object in your flight path identified and mapped. There are over a billion neutron stars and black holes in your galaxy alone. And you wouldn’t want to go flying near one by accident.”

Talking of black holes, our next stop was quite the sight. The ship had jumped to a location suitable for observing Sagittarius A*, a supermassive black hole at the center of our galaxy.

Rosral began with some trivia

“The black hole we’re observing has a mass slightly in excess of four million of your own stars, and a diameter of roughly sixty million kilometers. For comparison's sake, the distance from the Earth to your Sun is one hundred and fifty million kilometers. This black hole is surrounded by an orbiting ring of gas and dust travelling at approximately thirty percent of the speed of light.”

“It is also orbited by a series of stars, some of which are travelling at up to eight percent the speed of light,” Rosral continued. “The nearest star's orbit comes as close to the black hole as the distance between your host star and Saturn.”

Through the view port, we observed a faint halo-like glow, presumably the accretion disk, and occasional flashes and flares which Rosral explained were small objects entering the black hole.

Chapter 23 Esid

Our next stop was to a location in orbit of a planet. It wasn't Earth and none of us immediately recognized it. Rosral clarified the situation for us.

“I read a recent Earth publication detailing a mysteriously vanishing galaxy,” she informed us.

“Yes! The vanishing galaxy hypothesis!” Dr. Kallas exclaimed excitedly.

“Wait, you read our publications?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Not all of them,” Rosral replied.

“We encountered a similar phenomenon during our early years of quantum spacetime inference research,” she continued. “That mystery remained unsolved for us for tens of thousands of your years.”

“Tens of thousands of years?!?” Dr. Williams exclaimed.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “We weren’t in a position to solve the mystery until we’d developed technologies that enabled us to travel to the theoretical location of the galaxy.”

“Oh wow,” Dr. Kallas replied. “The long way round. So, you didn’t get contacted by a more advanced race back then, like you contacted us?”

“Things were different back then,” Rosral stated. “You guys are lucky.”

“Apparently so!” Dr. Kallas remarked.

“Upon arrival, our ship was pulled to this planet,” Rosral explained. “We were subsequently greeted by an advanced race. The Essan.”

“Did you have these alliances back then?” Dr. Madson asked.

“We did,” Rosral replied. “But the Essan weren’t part of one. We did, however, develop a friendship with them.”

“Wait, so there are advanced races that aren’t part of any alliance?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “But not many.”

“And...” Dr. Williams prompted, waving his hands, “...was the galaxy cloaked from QUERY scans?”

“It was,” Rosral replied. “Of course.”

“Do you have that sort of technology?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“No, it is way beyond our understanding,” Rosral replied. “The Essan are an ancient race. Much older than ours.”

“How much older?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Well, we suspect they may have visited your planet in the distant past,” Rosral replied. “The very distant past. Millions of years ago. That is why I’m taking you to meet them.”

“And they live on this planet?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes, they do,” Rosral replied. “We call this planet Esid. I’ll translocate us to the surface.”

And just as Rosral had finished her sentence, we were translocated to the surface of Esid.

Upon arrival, we were greeted with a sight we weren't expecting. We were assuming to see a landscape covered with technological wonders and megastructures. Instead, we arrived in a small and rather primitive village nestled in a jungle. The village contained a number of open-air buildings constructed out of logs, branches, and the leaves of local plants.

The location we'd beamed into was hot and humid, and quite a departure from the slightly-colder-than-comfortable environment that the Elara enjoyed. After a few minutes, we were all

sweating profusely. Rosral seemed oddly fine with the climate, despite having originated on a planet that was very much colder than our own. A single Essan was there to greet us when we arrived. Rosral's translator worked for their language. One odd thing, though, was that when we spoke, our words weren't translated back into Essan language. And yet they were able to understand us. We never quite understood how that worked.

Rosral introduced us to our host. "This is Kaano," she stated. Kaano bowed.

Kaano was a tall, slender member of the Essan species, with long arms and hands. His skin was a dark gray color, with a subtle pattern of small, colorful scales. He had large, round eyes and slightly pointed ears. His head was large and broad and it had two stubby horns on top. His long body had several ridges along its spine.

We were shown to a series of fallen logs that served as a seating area, and the Essan, noticing our discomfort, brought us some water in carved wooden cups. It was tepid and didn't quite taste pure, but it quenched our thirst. Before we could ask why we'd been sent to some tropical holiday resort, Rosral started to explain the situation.

"For hundreds of millions of years, the Essan advanced technologically. They were part of many alliances and led many councils in their local intergalactic neighborhood. However, they eventually reached a point where they no longer felt the impetus to innovate any further. They had everything they needed. And so, they collectively concluded that it was time for other species to take over. And then, shortly thereafter, they initiated their cloaking mechanism and retreated to their home galaxy where they now eschew technology and live in simplicity."

“So, what you’re telling us is that they retired?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “That would be an adequate Earth analogy.”

“But how could they possibly live without the drive for new knowledge and exploration?”

Dr. Kallas asked. “Don’t they just get bored now?”

“Plenty of civilizations, even on Earth, seek to find balance with nature and their surroundings, and don't strive for innovation beyond the means to live comfortably. That is what we chose,” Kaano replied.

The spoken language of the Essan was highly advanced and alien in nature. It could perhaps be characterized by a series of clicks, whistles, and chirps. The sounds Kaano made were accompanied by a range of intonations and vocalizations that perhaps indicated the emotional state of the speaker. His language also seemed to include a complex system of gestures and postures designed to convey meaning.

“Like the native Americans?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Indeed,” Kaano replied. “Exactly that sort of philosophy.”

“I brought these humans to meet you because I believe your species may have visited their planet in the distant past,” Rosral stated.

“Your assumption is correct,” Kaano replied. “Our ancestors did indeed visit their planet.”

“When?” Dr. Williams asked rather abruptly.

“During what you would term your Jurassic period,” Kaano replied. “Approximately sixty-five million years ago.”

“Wait, so your species had intergalactic travel capabilities sixty-five million years ago?” Dr. Kallas asked in a rather startled tone.

“We did,” Kaano replied. “Our ancestors travelled to Earth in order to study your vibrant Jurassic ecosystem in detail, as a means to understand evolutionary lines similar to their own.”

“How long did you stay?” Dr. Madson asked.

“We had researchers stationed there for many thousands of years,” Kaano replied. “We built many research stations and labs. There must have been thousands of us there at the time.”

“Umm. Stupid question, perhaps,” Dr. Williams stated, “but why didn’t you stop the meteor that killed them all?”

“We had non-interference directives even back then,” Kaano stated. “The same ones that still exist today. We don’t meddle with the affairs of species that haven’t achieved a certain level of technological advancement.”

“The Prime Directive,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“I’m not familiar with that term,” Kaano replied.

“Well, you wouldn’t be,” Dr. Williams replied. “It’s made up.”

“Ahh, I see,” Kaano replied. “Consider the fact that we wouldn’t be talking to you if we’d stopped that meteor.”

“You have a point,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“But you’d have stopped a whole lot of extremist idiots from being born and taking over the world,” Dr. Nara whispered under her breath.

“Would you like access to the material our ancestors collected from that time?” Kaano asked.

“Oh, wow, yes!” Dr. Madson replied.

“The data should now be in Rosral’s ship’s computer,” Kaano replied.

Our conversation with Kaano continued for some time. He was calm and projected a great deal of wisdom. He spoke at length about the Essan’s need for harmony with nature and their planet. From what we had gathered, they, like the Elara, had developed medical technologies that allowed their lives to be extended almost indefinitely. We didn't learn too much more

about them, though. They had, from all accounts, been one of the most powerful and advanced races in our observable universe for a very long time. And from what we deduced, they had at their peak, been a great deal more advanced than the Elara.

Observing Rosral, we deduced that the Elara must have held the Essan in very high regard, and we wondered if perhaps they'd played a part in helping the Elara develop to where they were today. Or perhaps the Elara owed the Essan some great favor.

During our stay, the Essan produced some cold food made from local fruits, which was both unique and delicious, and some tea, which despite the heat and humidity we graciously accepted and consumed. The tea tasted like nothing we'd ever tested before. Despite being hot, it made us feel a little less sweaty afterwards. I would have loved to bring some back to save for the hot and humid heatwaves we'd been experiencing on Earth almost every summer since the climate crisis had amplified. Dr. Williams whined profusely throughout the entire visit, claiming he was itchy and that he was sure there were insects in the log we were sitting on. Dr. Madson had to tell him to shut up on more than one occasion.

Our visit with the Essan was brief, but enlightening. We returned to Rosral's ship where the cold conditions came as a relief. The sweaty feeling subsided within minutes.

Rosral conjured up a console in the observation lounge, and we used it to view some of the research materials the Essan had taken while on expedition on Jurassic Earth. It turned out that the materials were fully detailed holographic captures of our planet at that time. And there were many of them. We watched actual footage of Earth during the Jurassic period that included many images of local wildlife, including favorites such as the Brontosaurus,

Stegosaurus, Triceratops, and of course Tyrannosaurus Rex. Rosral suggested we take the data back with us to Earth, and she provided us with a "Jurassic computing device capable of interfacing with human systems" (i.e., a hard drive).

Our last stop on the tour was Earth. Upon arrival, we thanked Rosral and asked when we'd next be able to visit them. She told us she wasn't aware of such plans but would tell us if and when she found out. She said "it was fun to hang out - did I get that right?" and a moment later we were translocated back to Earth.

Chapter 24 Down to Earth

The translocation process materialized us in corridor in the university. After a brief moment of disorientation, we deduced that we were just a few dozen meters from our lab. Luckily, no one else was in our vicinity upon arrival.

"What an odd place to send us to," Dr. Kallas remarked.

"Well, we're not far from the lab," I replied. "Let's go."

"That time-dilation bubble thing," Dr. Kallas stated, "do you think Rosral was serious about it?"

"My phone seems to agree with the premise," Dr. Madson replied.

"Let's check a computer in the lab, just to be sure," Dr. Williams stated.

And so, we made our way hastily to the lab.

When we entered we saw Jane, one of our undergrad researchers, working at a console in the main lab. She turned to greet us as we entered.

“How did it go?” she asked.

We all looked at each other. Did she know we’d been away for three days on an alien planet? If so, how? Dr. Kallas quietly made his way over to a nearby terminal to check its date and time. I turned to him, and he gave me a discreet thumbs up.

What the Elara had told us about encapsulating our solar system in a time dilation field had, apparently, not been a joke. Upon our return to Earth, it seemed apparent that nobody had missed us or even noticed we’d been away.

“Um. The meeting, you mean? Well. You know. Um. Boring bureaucratic stuff. The usual,” I replied.

“Right,” she replied. She stopped what she was doing and turned to us. “Oh, by the way, looks like you had a delivery.” She pointed to a large box in a room off to the side of our lab.

“But I wasn’t expecting... Oh god, not another wrong delivery. Thanks for letting me know, Jane, I’ll deal with it later” I replied. She nodded.

We all continued to stand in a tight group at the entrance to the room looking awkward, wondering if she knew.

Dr. Kallas returned to where we were and whispered, “I don’t think Rosral was joking about the time dilation bubble.”

And then we all shuffled awkwardly to our desks. I think Jane noticed we were acting weird. She got up and left the office, informing us that she was going to get a coffee. And after she’d left, we were able to converse freely once more.

“We did just all go on a three-day excursion to an alien planet, right? I’m not recalling a vivid dream or a hallucination or something?” I asked.

“I remember it all, too,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Yep, me too,” Dr. Nara added.

“I don’t think a group hallucination is still out of the question,” Dr. Williams stated. “It would be useful if we had some physical proof of the trip. Just to be sure.”

“We do,” Dr. Kallas replied, smiling. “I still have my blue card!” He held the card out in front of us. We all rummaged through our pockets and bags and found our own cards.

“Rosral kept her promise!” Dr. Nara remarked.

“Check this out!” Dr. Williams stated, as he activated his card, and much to our surprise, it presented a holographic map of the building we were in.

“These work here?” Dr. Kallas replied. “I thought they were dumb mobile devices that interfaced with some powerful computer system in Vedess!”

“Open the translocation menu,” Dr. Nara said.

Dr. Williams opened the menu and, amazingly, it suggested a series of nearby translocation points.

“Go on, then,” Dr Kallas said, “click on one!”

“No way!” Dr. Williams replied. “I don’t want to end up materialized into a wall.”

“I’ll do it,” I replied, “for science.”

I pulled the blue card out of my pocket and chose a translocation point on the roof. The translocation functionality worked, and I appeared not too far behind someone who was up there, having a smoke. Luckily, she hadn’t been facing me and didn’t even hear my arrival. I wasn’t able to immediately activate the translocation functionality again, and so quickly put the card away before the smoker turned around. After a slightly awkward conversation with her, she stubbed her cigarette out and left. I pulled the card out of my pocket and accessed the menu. The translocation option was once again available and I used it to return to the lab.

“We were worried for a minute there!” Dr. Madson remarked.

“It took some time for the translocation thing to recharge,” I stated.

“Boy, are we gonna have fun with these!” Dr. Williams noted.

“Ohmygod! Yeah!” Dr. Nara replied. “Do you realize what we can do with these?”

“Commute?” Dr. Madson replied.

“Think bigger!” Dr. Nara stated.

“Umm. I dunno. Rob a bank?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Yeah! For one!” Dr. Nara replied.

“Dr. Nara has a point,” Dr. Williams stated. “It would be trivial to translocate into a sealed bank vault after hours, steal money, and translocate out. No break-in needed. A completely untraceable crime, if done right.”

“Yes, but we’re not going to be doing that,” Dr. Madson added.

“Why not?” Dr. Nara stated. “We’re paid peanuts. Look at what we’ve done for humanity. We’re literally a liaison to an ancient alien species. And nobody seems to appreciate our work. Isn’t it about time we get paid?”

“If we’ve learned anything from the Elara, it’s that money doesn’t matter,” Dr. Madson replied.

“On their world it doesn’t,” Dr. Nara stated, “but here it does. And besides, I’m broke. And I have bills piling up that I can’t even deal with.”

“Ahh, wait!” Dr. Williams stated, clicking his fingers. “According to Rosral, these things can materialize matter. We needn’t rob a bank if we can simply create money. I’m sure I can figure out how to do that.”

“Okay, let’s stop trying to commit crime with these things,” I stated. “For now, commutes are what we’re allowed to use these cards for, and nothing else. And make sure you don’t teleport near anyone who might witness it.” They nodded. “And for the love of god, don’t misplace these things.”

“So, the trip was real, then,” Dr. Madson stated.

“That means,” Dr. Kallas replied, “translocation, matter synthesis, starships, floating platforms, cities built into mountains on the edge of the world, miracle mouthwash, and all the other strange and wondrous things we’ve just experienced are also real.”

“And, importantly,” Dr. Nara added, “anti-hangover tech is an actual thing.”

“The fact is,” Dr. Williams added, “we spent three days on an alien planet and toured the local universe. And less than half an hour passed on Earth.”

“To be honest, I’m used to the time dilation effect of meetings working the other way round,” I replied.

We weren’t sure what to do next. Our research had been trivialized. It felt like a complete waste of time to continue it. The feeling was like going from being a rocket scientist to someone who scrubs toilets. I was about to retire to my office, or perhaps even leave for the day, when I remembered the package Jane had mentioned. As I went to the side room to inspect it, the others unenthusiastically returned to their desks. To catch up on the thirty minutes’ worth of emails they’d missed, presumably.

The package itself was a very large cardboard box. About the shape and size of the sort of package a fridge-freezer comes in. Upon approaching it, I spotted some Elara glyphs printed on the box in a small typeface.

“Umm. Guys! This looks like a package from Rosral!” I shouted, excitedly.

The others immediately ran over to join me. We frantically removed the cardboard to find an Elara quantum spacetime inference console. It was identical to the ones we’d used on Ket. A note, written in English, was attached to it. It read "Don't bother trying to reverse engineer this."

“Oh my god!” Dr. Nara stated. “These things are real?”

There was no need to plug the device in. It was self-contained and self-powered. We turned it on.

“Yep, this is the same one we used on Ket,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Wait,” Dr. Williams added. “There’s an extra menu option here.”

“How did you spot that so quickly?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Well, if you’ll remember, I was the only one who wasn’t completely hammered while we were using these things!” he replied.

“Come on! We weren’t completely hammered,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Okay, so what does it do?” Dr. Nara asked.

“It appears to be some sort of uplink,” Dr. Williams replied. “It probably replaces our data transfer link. We’ll need to figure out how to wire it into our own systems. Hmm. I’m seeing something else here, too. Possibly some sort of video chat.”

“Intergalactic video chat!” Dr. Nara remarked. “Can we get Rosral on the line?”

“It looks like that would be possible,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Umm, guys,” Dr. Madson replied. “We should cover this thing up before someone else sees it!”

“Rachel has a very good point,” I said. “We need to keep this thing hidden.”

“Let’s cover the windows with paper,” Dr. Nara suggested.

“And we’ll need to keep this room locked,” I added. “I’ll get you all keys.”

During the next fifteen minutes or so, we worked together to cover the windows with newspaper. Luckily nobody entered the lab during that time.

“Right,” I said. “Let’s make sure nobody, and I mean nobody aside from us ever gets into this room. Including cleaners.”

“You’d better change the locks,” Dr Kallas replied.

“Yep,” I replied, “I’ll get facilities in... no wait, we’ll need to do that ourselves.”

“Come on then!” Dr. Nara exclaimed, “Let’s call Rosral!”

Dr. Williams accessed the interface and initiated a video call. A large as life holographic representation of Rosral appeared in front of us. She was sitting outside, in a park, drinking a cup of Oress. We could see the Seris structures of Vedess stretching out behind her.

“I see you received my gift!” she remarked, grinning.

“We did indeed!” Dr. Kallas replied.

“How are you doing, Rosral? Was your trip home good?” Dr. Nara asked.

“My trip home was instantaneous,” Rosral replied.

“We weren’t sure the whole thing we just experienced was real,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Yeah, it was so surreal that we thought it might be some sort of group hallucination,” Dr. Kallas added. “But we found out that we still have these blue cards!”

“Disorientation is apparently common in these first visit situations,” Rosral replied. “I read about it prior to your visit.”

“We miss you already!” Dr. Nara exclaimed. “When can we come back?”

“Yeah! When can we come back?” Dr. Kallas added.

“I do not see any mention of scheduled visits for your team on our roster,” Rosral replied.

“But I can keep you informed.”

A palpable sense of disappointment filled the room.

“I see this device replaces our intergalactic data transfer mechanism,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Are there any instructions on how to link the interface to our computers?”

“I’ll send them over shortly,” Rosral replied.

During the days following our return to Earth, we were all overcome with a sense of hopelessness. The experience we’d had on Ket was beyond imagination, and we’d learned more during those few days than we had in years on Earth. Ket was so clean, so pleasant, and so convenient. And the food was literally out of this world. Returning to the humdrum of regular work, dirty human cities, money, taxes, bureaucracy, the toxic political situation, and the need to do everyday chores was not pleasant. The feeling was like having to go back to work after a long and relaxing holiday. Or the end of the summer break as a child.

And, as time passed, I felt less inclined to work. As the saying goes, I couldn’t be less arsed.

Or was it more arsed? I could never remember. Either way, I felt disillusioned, defunct, trivialized, and directionless. It was clearly apparent that my colleagues felt the same.

Witnessing the level of Elaran technology, so far advanced from our own as to almost feel like magic, had been addictive. We were now all in acute withdrawal. And after a few days, we all sort of snapped at the same time. I recall arriving at the lab one morning to find the rest of my team comparing shiny new things they’d recently purchased. They were so enthralled with what they were doing that they didn’t even notice my entrance.

“Check this out,” Dr. Kallas remarked, pulling his sleeve back to reveal a smart watch.

“Is that the latest Apple watch?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yep! Top of the line. And complete with the latest multi-link strap,” Dr. Kallas replied. “In black.”

“Aren’t those straps, like, five hundred pounds?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yep! Four ninety-nine.” Dr. Kallas bragged.

“Are those new shoes, Rachel?” Dr. Nara asked.

“They are indeed!” Dr. Madson replied.

“They look expensive!” Dr. Nara remarked.

“I think they retail for around a thousand pounds,” Dr. Madson replied. “But that new bag of yours probably set you back a lot more, didn’t it?”

Over to the side of the room, I saw Dr. Williams was playing around with that looked to be a brand-new iPad Pro.

“Ahem!” I announced. Everyone stopped talking and turned to me.

“Please tell me this isn’t what I think it is,” I asked.

“No, wait, we can explain!” Dr. Kallas pleaded.

“Did you rob a bank or did Robert figure out how to print money?” I asked.

“We didn’t rob any bank and we didn’t print money. We didn’t even buy this stuff,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Wait, did you translocate this stuff straight out from the shops?” I asked. “That’s still technically stealing.”

“If I might explain,” Dr. Williams replied, stepping forward. “I figured out how to scan things into the blue card’s memory buffer and then have it fabricate them.”

“Yeah, what Robert said!” Dr. Kallas added. “Just point the card at the item. It captures it in detail. Down to the last atom.”

“And so, we went on a shopping trip yesterday,” Dr. Nara added.

“Where we scanned in all the things we wanted,” Dr. Madson stated.

“And then we replicated them here in the lab. This morning. A few minutes before you arrived,” Dr. Kallas added.

“Right,” I replied.

“We scanned a lot of stuff,” Dr. Williams replied. “Here, take a look. I can replicate you anything in this memory buffer.” Dr. Williams scrolled through endless three-dimensional representations of items they’d scanned including more shoes, bags, jewelry, watches, electronic items, clothing, and a whole host of other random paraphernalia.

“Interesting! What is the largest item you can scan and replicate that way?” I asked.

“We only tried it with small items,” Dr. Williams replied. The biggest thing was probably one of those fancy and expensive coffee makers.

“Oh, but wait there was that...” Dr. Kallas added.

“Eighty inch television,” Dr. Williams continued.

“So, nothing like a bike or a car or a piece of furniture?” I asked.

“No, we didn’t try that yet. Didn’t occur to us,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“We did try food, though,” Dr. Williams stated. “I scanned a kebab. But the materialized one was cold.”

“Was it cold when you scanned it in?” I asked.

“Yes, it was,” Dr. Williams replied. “Good point.”

“Oh, hey, we found something else!” Dr. Nara stated excitedly. She activated her own blue card, scrolled through several menus, and selected an option. A bottle of Sec appeared on a table in front of her.

“It has pre-programmed items?” I asked.

“Yeah! A lot of them!” Dr. Kallas replied.

“And when did you discover the Sec thing?” I asked.

“Yesterday evening,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Okay, that would account for the hangovers some of you look like you have,” I replied.

“Yeah, this stuff is lethal without the anti-hangover field,” Dr. Madson said. Dr. Kano nodded.

“Lethal at the right dose, I’d suspect,” Dr. Williams quipped.

“Right. What else do we think this blue card can do that we don’t yet know about?” I asked.

“I’m glad you asked! I have some theories...” Dr. Williams answered.

“Me too!” Dr. Kallas added.

Chapter 25 Recruitment drive

A few weeks after returning to Earth, I was summoned to meet with several other scientists and some of the UN representatives who had also been hosted by the Elara. During those rather formal and long meetings, it was concluded that we'd need to start involving a lot more people in the project, especially scientists in fields relevant to information the Elara were sharing with us. Naturally, anyone recruited would need to be trustworthy enough to keep the project a secret. And so, I was placed on one of several small teams assigned with recruiting new scientists.

The recruiting effort ended up lasting a few months. And it took up most of my time. During that period, Drs. Kallas and Williams returned to their research on HEX, and from what I heard, made some significant progress. Drs. Madson and Nara worked on a line of artificial life research proposed by Dr. Nara. I didn't really understand what it was they were doing, but, on a high level, it sounded interesting. My recruitment work had me flying here, there, and everywhere. Which was horrible not only because of having to spend countless hours in airports and on planes, but because of increasingly stringent airport security protocols brought about by the ever-present terrorist threat posed by the growing number of political extremists in the western world. I really wished our blue cards would have allowed for longer translocation jumps – to anywhere in the world, for instance. But it seemed as though they didn't. Both the work and travel were tiresome and kept me from doing any meaningful research for quite some time.

It was after several back-to-back recruiting trips that I recall returning to the lab one evening, thoroughly exhausted. Dr. Kallas was the only one still in at that time. We ended up having a chat.

“How’s the recruitment going?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“It turns out that recruiting scientists into a clandestine initiative involving cooperation with an advanced alien race isn’t nearly as easy as imagined,” I replied.

“How so?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Well, as you know, we’re focusing on recruiting from academia. We’ve been trying to entice people with the promise of interesting projects that come with a substantial grant,” I explained. “Unfortunately, most of the folks we’ve talked to are overloaded with work and don’t have the bandwidth to take on new project, grant or no grant.”

“Odd,” Dr. Kallas replied. “I would have thought grant money would have worked.”

“Many showed immediate interest when they saw the grant proposal. But most subsequently declined when we told them that they’d need to sign NDAs and relocate,” I replied.

“I can see how that would be a problem,” Dr. Kallas stated. “Have you tried creating a company and enticing them over to the private sector?”

“Yep,” I replied. “In fact, we’ve created many such companies. Nobody was interested.”

“Sounds frustrating,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“It is.” I stated. “If we could just tell them the truth about what we’re doing, most if not all would probably sign up on the spot,”

“One hundred percent,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“We’re starting to run out of recruitment candidates,” I told him. “The original candidate list was run through a rather strict filtering system. Some folks were eliminated because of their citizenship. Political reasons beyond my control. Others failed their extensive background checks.”

“Background checks?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yeah, they do background checks on all potential candidates. And on their family members, extended family members, and friends,” I replied.

“Is that because of the extremist situation?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“It is,” I replied. “The process is designed to ensure that anyone recruited won’t accidentally talk about their work or the things they’ve seen to children, friends, or relatives sympathetic to the extremists.”

“Have you managed to recruit anyone?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“A few people,” I replied. “On the rare occasion a candidate expresses enough interest in joining us to sign the NDAs, the rest of the process is a breeze. I simply activate my blue card and show them holographic schematics of the technologies they'll be helping develop. And if that doesn't blow their mind, a quick translocation does the job.”

“I imagine that would work,” Dr. Kallas replied. “It would have one hundred percent worked for me.”

Shortly after returning from Ket, the UN were informed of our real-world experiences with the Elara and their technologies. Everything about the situation suddenly became real. And the UN woke up to the reality of the situation. As such, security around our project was stepped up overnight.

A few days after our return, we found specially trained and appointed security personnel in and around our own labs at all times of the day. And, when people not involved with our project asked about the situation, they were informed that we were doing critical research for the military. Nobody questioned that explanation.

However, that mode of work didn't last all too long. A few weeks later, security concerns were raised again. The official explanation was that the project had reached a critical mass wherein it was impossible to implement sufficiently strict access controls across all our teams and locations, many of which were in public research facilities and universities.

And thus, a dedicated base was constructed in northern Sweden, in an area close to Tornio on the Swedish-Finnish border. Relocation to the facility was not only strongly encouraged, it was also heavily financially subsidized. A vast majority of the teams involved in Elara-related research moved there during the next month or two. As did all of us.

The facilities themselves were state-of-the-art, and the surrounding area was clean, peaceful, and beautiful. Basic facilities for researchers and their families were included in the self-contained base, and the compound itself was cleverly disguised as a warehouse. Most of the actual base, which had been constructed by the Elara, was deep underground. Construction of the entire compound took mere days to complete.

Our move to Sweden was a welcome one, especially considering the political situation. Every time I checked social media, stories about technological advances and scientific discoveries were followed by endless strings of negative, and often threatening replies. Many were outright death threats. Some were very graphic. Moving to a place that nobody knew about, and away from parts of the world where tensions were mounting was comforting. Still, we feared for our friends and colleagues who'd refused to join the project, were not selected on the basis of where they came from, or who simply weren't applicable to the initiative by virtue of their profession.

Shortly after we had relocated to the facility, we received a visit from Rosral. She appeared in our lab, in the middle of the day, and without so much as a word of warning.

“ROSRAL?!?” Dr. Nara screamed as she ran over and gave Rosral a big hug. Rosral looked stunned and I think I saw her bare her teeth for a moment.

“Hey! Long time no see!” Dr. Madson exclaimed.

“Welcome! What brings you here?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Just popped in to see how your relocation is doing,” Rosral answered.

“Just popped in?” Dr. Williams remarked. “You never just popped into our old lab.”

“I couldn’t,” Rosral replied. “There were other people around who would have seen me. I don’t have to worry about that here.”

“So does that mean you’ll visit more often now?” Dr. Nara asked.

“I was sort of hoping you’d come visit me,” Rosral replied.

“Ummm. How?” Dr. Williams asked.

Rosral interacted with her green card and a large device that sort of looked like one of those Japanese Dance Dance Revolution arcade machines materialized in the corner of the room.

“This is a translocation hub,” she said.

“Like the one in Vooris?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yeah, like that one,” Rosral replied. “I’m surprised you remember that!”

“The mushrooms were consumed after that point in the evening,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Yes, sorry, my mistake,” Rosral replied.

“So, where does this one go?” Dr. Nara asked.

“To your new permanent research facility in Vedess,” Rosral replied.

“Wait, this thing can translocate us straight to Ket?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

“But we thought that technology had a limited range,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“No, it has an almost infinite range,” Rosral replied.

“Umm. Stupid question, but why did we need to travel to and from Ket in a ship, then?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Well,” Rosral replied. “When we first picked you up, we needed to stop at the edge of your solar system to install the temporal dilation encapsulation matrix.”

“Time dilation bubble,” Dr. Kallas whispered.

“So, we picked you up in our ships, just for show, I suppose. That and we figured it might be easier for you to reconcile the idea of travelling over a billion light years in a ship and not via translocation,” Rosral continued.

“Right. Okay. And the way back was because of that tour.” Dr. Williams stated.

“Yeah, and sorta just for consistency’s sake,” Rosral replied. “I mean, I could have translocated you back here from Esid. But I didn’t.”

“That was probably for the best,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“I will now show you how to use the translocation pad,” Rosral stated. She beckoned us over to the device.

“Stand on this pad and then press this button,” she said. She pressed the button and vanished. We lined up and took turns doing the same thing. The translocation pad landed us in a large and very shiny white room that looked quintessentially Vedessian in nature.

I was the last one to translocated, and as I arrived, I witnessed Dr. Nara crouching over, kissing the ground. She got up and exclaimed, “I can’t believe we’re back!”

“You know what?” Dr. Williams remarked. “It’s been almost a full year since we were last here.”

“Nonsense,” Dr. Kallas replied. “It’s been at most a few months.”

“It’s been a whole year on Ket,” Dr. Williams stated.

“You have a point,” Dr. Kallas replied. “It’s going to take me ages to get used to the short years and long days here.”

“So, Rosral, does this transport pad mean we can come and go as much as we please?” Dr. Nara asked.

“If that’s what you wish,” Rosral replied. “However, if you would like to stay here, we have reserved many habitation facilities for you on the level above.”

“Wait, so we can stay here longer?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “Stay for as long as you like.”

“Wait, can we stay indefinitely?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yes. If that is what you wish,” Rosral replied. “This area has been permanently reserved for you and your associates.”

“Okay,” Dr. Nara said. “I’m moving here permanently.”

“Me too,” Dr. Kallas added.

“And me,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Yup, me too,” I added.

“It’s a no-brainer” Dr. Madson added. “Can I bring my cat?”

Rosral interacted with her green card and a moment later, numerous tables, chairs, computers, large display screens, and various other pieces of equipment appeared around us in the lab.

“I’ve taken the liberty of furnishing your lab with relevant equipment,” Rosral informed us.

“You’ll find familiar looking quantum spacetime inference consoles, Earth-style computer terminals, and other equipment from your Earth-based lab here. I’ve also copied everything from Earth’s internet onto one of your own computer cores. I’ve set up links from here to Earth’s internet and terrestrial channels, including radio and television from all regions on your planet. The screen over there should work like an Earth television. The remote control is on the table over there. Is there anything else you’d like?”

“A food replicator?” Dr. Williams replied.

Rosral interacted with her green card. A large food replicator appeared at the edge of the room. “Done.”

“Thanks,” Dr. Williams said. “I’m starving.”

Chapter 26 Our new neighbors

As it turns out, our new permanent facilities were in a different Seris to the one we'd stayed in during our previous visit. We were now in Seris 14 which was conveniently adjacent to both Seris 8, where the visitor's center was, and Seris 12, home of the famous Mikato market. We were the first to permanently move in, affording us with the perk of being the first to choose our habitation spaces. We chose rooms adjacent to each other on the south-west facing side of the disc that overlooked Mikato market. From there, we had a clear view of Seris 8, and to the ocean on the horizon.

After moving into our new digs in Vedess, we made occasional trips back to our old lab in Sweden to collect equipment and personal belongings. After a couple of weeks, those visits all but stopped. We didn't need to bring a lot of things over anyway – Rosral had furnished our labs with everything we needed, and our rooms had both fabricators that could materialize anything we wanted and holographic terminals that could be used for both research and entertainment purposes.

We worked, ate, and slept on similar schedules and spent evenings talking, eating, and consuming the occasional bottle of Sec in the shared gardens outside our habitation spaces. Well, okay, maybe more than the occasional bottle. And it was during one of those evenings that we noticed that the visitor's center in Seris 8 was host to some newcomers.

“Have you seen those new folks at the visitor's center?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yeah!” Dr. Nara replied.

“What, those large aliens?” Dr. Williams asked.

“What did you call them again?” Dr. Kallas remarked. “Space hippopotamuses?”

“That was only before I looked up their designation in the repository,” Dr. Williams replied.

“What are they called?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Lanass,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Do you think they’re a new member of the alliance? Like us?” Dr. Madson asked.

“The repository didn’t say,” Dr. Williams replied.

“You’d have to assume they are,” Dr. Kallas said. “If they weren’t, they’d probably have their own digs. Like we do.”

“Fair point,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Perhaps we should pop in and say hello,” Dr. Madson posited. “You know, to be neighborly.”

“Yeah! And if they’re newcomers like us, they might appreciate talking to someone else who’s new to this place. Share experiences, stuff like that,” Dr. Nara replied.

“They have a point,” Dr. Kallas remarked.

“We need more Sec,” Dr. Madson stated. “Can you go get it?” she pleaded to Dr. Williams.

“I can’t be bothered to get up,” he replied. “You go.”

“No need,” Dr. Kallas replied. He pulled his blue card from his pocket and used it to materialize two bottles of sec on the table we were sitting around. There were already five empty bottles sitting there.

“If we’re going to talk to them, we’ll need a translator thingy, like the one Rosral has,” I stated.

“I’ve been working on that problem,” Dr. Williams replied, “using the blue card.”

“Ahh, the blue card!” I remarked, “What can’t it do!”

“We’ve managed to get the blue card to translate from Elaran to English,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“We’ve been using it to learn Elaran swear words.”

“Wait, what?” I replied.

“Like, you know how if you’re walking around down there, the locals will sometimes say stuff,” Dr. Kallas replied. “We’ve been wondering if they’re friendly greetings or something derogatory.”

“And what were your findings?” I asked.

“Most of what they say is stuff like hello and nice weather,” Dr. Kallas replied. “But we did find a couple of phrases that sounded bad.”

“Rawfsss,” Dr. Williams articulated.

“No, rrraw fsss,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“That’s an Elaran swear word?” Dr. Nara asked.

“We think so,” Dr. Kallas replied. “It was untranslatable according to the device.”

“Raawffs,” Dr. Nara said.

“Come to think of it, I hear that a lot,” Dr. Madson stated.

“How does learning Elaran swear words help us talk to the... what were they called again?” I asked.

“Lanass,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Well, it could be a nice icebreaker.”

“You’re not quite getting the point, are you?” Dr. Williams replied. “Now that I figured out how to configure the blue card to translate between English and Elaran, I should be able to configure it to act as a translator between English and whatever it is the Lanass speak.”

“Assuming their language is stored in the repository,” Dr. Kallas added.

“Hang on, I’ll check,” Dr. Williams stated. “Yep, it’s here. Configuring the card now... And, done!”

“Can I test it?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Sure!” Dr. Williams replied. He activated the card and held it in front of Dr. Nara.

“Hello,” she said. The card emitted a bunch of deep gurgling sounds.

“Are you sure it’s working?” Dr. Madson asked.

“I have no idea,” Dr. Williams replied. “Given that I haven’t heard them speak in real life.”

Dr. Madson spoke into the blue card. “Nice weather we’re having.” The card responded with more deep gurgling sounds.

“Hey, look!” Dr. Nara exclaimed, pointing to the entrance to Seris 8. “I think I see one of them heading over to Mikato market!”

We all peered in the direction Dr. Nara had pointed to. A bulky figure was indeed waddling out of the facility.

“Let’s catch them when they come back from the market!” Dr. Madson stated.

“They’re moving quite slowly. Gives us a bit of time to finish these drinks!” Dr. Nara replied.

About twenty minutes and a few glasses of Sec later, we spotted the Lanass returning from the market. We translocated just outside of the entrance to Seris 8 in preparation.

“Who’s going to do the talking?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Not me,” Dr. Madson replied. “I’m a bit too drunk.”

“Me too,” Dr. Nara added.

“It should be Robert,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Why should I have to do the talking?” Dr. Williams complained.

“You’ve not had as much as us. And besides, the translator card thingy was your idea.” Dr. Madson stated.

“But...” Dr. Williams replied.

“What are you worried about?” Dr. Kallas asked. “I mean, it looks friendly enough.”

“Friendly enough?” Dr. Williams argued. “Have you seen the size of it?”

“Come on! It’s almost here!” Dr. Madson said. She pushed Dr. Williams forward. He held his blue card up and said “Hello”. The card made the same deep gurgling noises we’d heard earlier. The Lanass continued to walk towards Seris 8, seemingly not noticing.

“Try again!” Dr. Madson whispered. She pushed Dr. Williams forward again.

“Excuse me,” Dr. Williams said. The card made more alien noises. The Lanass stopped and turned to face us. It stared at Dr. Williams. We’d not seen a Lanass up close before, so didn’t really know what their faces normally looked like. However, this one looked rather angry.

“I wonder if the translator thing is misconfigured?” Dr. Kallas whispered.

“Oh, you think?” Dr. Williams whispered back.

“Perhaps if you stay really still, it’ll go away,” Dr. Madson whispered.

“It’ll go away?” Dr. Williams whispered back. “You’re the one who pushed me into its path!”

Tension mounted as the Lanass continued to stare at us. It was starting to look like the device was misconfigured. And we might be in a world of trouble. But, a few seconds later, the Lanass uttered a long an uninterrupted series of noises that sounded like those the card had made. The translation came through as it was speaking.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t notice you. I was in deep thought. My sincerest apologies. My team and I have seen you here and there and have been wondering if we should perhaps say hello. However, we didn’t know how to approach the language barrier problem. I’d be very interested in learning how you modified that device for those purposes. Oh, sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Dr. Vyspor. I’m glad to make your acquaintance.”

You cannot imagine the relief that came over us as we heard the translation.

“Dr. Williams,” Dr. Williams replied, still clearly shaken. “Umm. Sorry for ambushing you like this.”

“Not at all,” Dr. Vyspor replied. “My colleagues are inside. How about you join us?”

“We’d be glad to,” I replied.

We followed Dr. Vyspor into Seris 8.

“See! I told you it would work!” Dr. Williams stated.

“But were you really sure it would?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Of course! I have extensively studied this device,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I wasn’t the one about to soil his underpants a few seconds ago,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“So, Dr. Williams, talk me through how you reconfigured the device to translate between our languages,” Dr. Vyspor said as we made our way towards the entrance to Seris 8 visitor’s center. Dr. Williams went into detail about his experimentation with the device. Dr. Vyspor was enthralled with everything Dr. Williams had to say. The pair of them immediately hit it off. It was almost as if Dr. Williams had found his alien counterpart.

“You know, I was the one that figured out how to interface the card with the central repository,” Dr. Kallas grumbled.

Upon arriving in the visitor’s center, we immediately noticed it had been internally reconfigured quite considerably. The foyer was still circular in shape, but the ceilings were noticeably higher and the corridors leading off to living quarters, research labs, and conference rooms were larger – presumably to accommodate the Lanass’ bulkier form. Dr. Vyspor led us through one of the corridors, which were now labelled in Lanass glyphs, to a research lab where his colleagues were busy at work.

The room was full of equipment we’d never seen before. As soon as we entered the lab, Dr. Vyspor’s colleagues stopped what they were doing and waddled over. It was immediately

apparent that the Lanass were a very sociable and friendly species, despite their intimidating size and rather angry looking facial features.

“Are you new here?” Dr. Nara asked.

“New? No, we’ve been collaborating with the Elara for a significant amount of time,” Dr. Gerso, another of the Lanass scientists, replied.

“We’re new here,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Oh, you are?” Dr. Sumis, the third Lanass researcher replied. “Well then welcome! I hope you’re enjoying your relationship with the Elara. They’re very hospitable.”

“Are you part of the alliance?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes, we’ve been part of the alliance for several...” Dr. Gerso tapped on a screen nearby and brought up some data. “...of what you would term millennia.”

“We assumed you were new because you’re here at the visitor’s center,” Dr. Kallas posited.

“We conduct most of our research on our own worlds,” Dr. Vyspor replied. “We don’t need permanent accommodation here on Ket. We visit only when in-person collaboration is required.”

“What are you working on?” Dr. Williams asked.

“We’re collaborating with Elaran scientists on new power generation technologies,” Dr. Sumis replied. “Let me share the details with you.”

The Lanass scientists then went on at length about their research. Although the translator was able to provide English words for what they were saying, the context of those words was clearly outside of any concepts we were familiar with. We nodded along, not really understanding anything, and I was surprised to see that even Dr. Williams was at a loss for words.

“It is customary for us to share a meal with newfound colleagues,” Dr. Vyspor told us.

“Are you hungry?” Dr. Gerso asked.

“Starving!” Dr. Williams replied.

“Then let us reconvene in ‘discussion and recreation’,” Dr. Sumis replied.

The three Lanass scientists proceeded to hurry us along to their ‘discussion and recreation’ room. Keeping up with larger beings who are in a hurry required us to practically run. When we got there, Dr. Sumis materialized a massive table full of foods from their local culture. The portion sizes were simply huge, and I watched as Dr. Williams’ eyes lit up at seeing everything in front of us. A lot of the food looked like it was battered, deep-fried, and rather greasy.

“There’s no feasting without a good drink,” Dr. Vyspor stated. “And we like to accompany our best feasts with a local and much-loved specialty.” Eight large flagons of drink appeared on the feast table. “Come, take one each!”

The flagons probably held a liter and a half of liquid. And they were full to the brim. Given the gravity on Ket they were almost too heavy to lift. We all took sips. The liquid tasted like ale.

“Oh, thank god,” Dr. Williams remarked. “I was hoping this wouldn’t be something strong, like Simi.”

“This is a god send,” Dr. Nara exclaimed. “I was parched!”

“It tastes pretty good!” Dr. Masdon stated. “What’s this called?”

“We call it Liss,” Dr. Gerso replied. “It is brewed in Hanzuk, the place we’re from.”

“Is that the name of your home world?” I asked.

“That’s the name of the region we live in. It’s on our tertiary world.” Dr. Gerso replied.

Liss was delicious, refreshing, and not all that strong. We were able to drink it rather liberally, but not as liberally as the Lanass, who emptied their flagons in no time at all.

“Let’s get stuck in while the food is still hot!” Dr. Vyspor announced.

When eating alien cuisine, one must always consider toxins, parasites, and allergens that might be incompatible with human physiology. We'd come to learn that on Ket, automated systems would remove anything harmful from the food prior to it being consumed. This happened sometime between picking the food up and putting it in one's mouth. The system had worked surprisingly well for us, apart from that one time in Voriss where the mushrooms had caused unexpected side effects. Thus, we didn't feel the need to particularly worry about what we were eating.

Although the food itself was all fabricated, one concern was what its initial origins might have been. None of us relished the idea of eating unidentified offal, even if it was just a replicated version. However, it felt rude to be picky or ask a lot of questions, and so we sampled the food cautiously and tried to imagine it was chicken, or sausages, or something not altogether objectionable.

The food origin dilemma was of more concern for Dr. Nara who was a vegetarian. Or at least we'd thought she was after months of observing her eating habits on Earth. However, during our brief stay on Ket we had witnessed her eating fabricated meat. When asked about it, she told us that it felt okay, since the process of creating the meat itself hadn't involved harming or killing any creatures. She admitted that although she had been vegetarian for many years and become used to a meat-free diet on Earth, she'd grown accustomed to eating fabricated meat dishes on Ket, even after our short stay, simply because they were offered so often.

"Mmmm. This is really good!" Dr. Nara remarked, holding up something that looked like a calamari ring. "What's the name of this dish?"

“Our own word for the dish is Vestryf,” Dr. Gerso replied.

“Vestryf,” Dr. Nara repeated. “Interesting name.”

“It is one of the most popular dishes in the region we’re from,” Dr. Sumis added.

“I bet!” Dr. Nara replied.

“If translated into your own language, I believe the product would be called ‘shnuf anus”” Dr. Vyspor added.

Dr. Williams spat the contents of his mouth out. “Anus?” he exclaimed. “Like anus anus?”

Dr. Nara’s face started to turn green as she swallowed a bite of the snack.

“Anus, yes,” Dr. Gerso replied. “It is customary for your species to refer to it in the double like that?”

“I thought they were calamari rings,” I stated. “I’m not partial to seafood and so I didn’t eat any. Thank God.”

“I’ve eaten at least fifteen!” Dr. Williams exclaimed, looking decidedly pale. His statement was not at all surprising. We’d watched him enthusiastically pig out as soon as we’d been allowed at the food.

“Oh god, me too!” Dr. Nara added.

“It’s not real anus,” Dr. Sumis stated. “Everything here was materialized from stored patterns.”

“It’s the thought of it that’s bothering them,” I replied.

“Cultural differences can be quite fascinating!” Dr. Gerso remarked.

“I think I’m going to puke!” Dr. Nara stated as she rushed out of the room with one hand over her mouth. From the sound of it, she didn’t make it that far before she lost control. She returned a minute or two later, grabbed a fresh flagon of Liss, and took several large swigs.

“Feeling better?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yeah, I think so...” Dr. Nara replied.

“Dare we ask about these other dishes?” Dr. Kallas replied with a smirk on his face.

During the meal we attempted to steer conversation over to their culture and home world, hoping the topics might become a little more understandable for us, but the Lanass inevitably reverted matters back to their research. They were scientists like us, and we appreciated their love for science, even if we didn’t fully understand what they were talking about. And we appreciated their kindness and hospitality, even if it was perhaps a little overwhelming.

The volume of ale we'd been provided eventually precipitated nature's call, and so I went to where I knew there had been a communal toilet in our facility. Of course, at that time, I hadn't thought about the fact that they'd have been reconfigured for the Lanass, and it was only when I had arrived that I realized my error.

The toilets in the newly reconfigured facility were not at all useable by humans. They were rather odd looking, like very large bathtubs with very high rims. By the time I'd arrived at the facilities, I had already developed an urgent need to relieve myself – your bladder tends to know when you've reached your destination – and I desperately searched for a reconfiguration console. None existed. I was on the verge of attempting to somehow use the bathtub, which would have required climbing into it – something I really didn't want to do, when I remembered I could use my blue card to translocate back to my room. I don't think I've ever moved so fast.

When I returned, I recall the Lanass were still explaining their research.

“We're working with Elaran scientists to develop a new kind of energy generation device,” Dr. Vyspor explained.

“Aren't their current power cells sufficient enough for practically any application?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“They are sufficient for most mundane purposes,” Dr. Gerso replied. “These next generation devices are to be used to power some new quantum spacetime inference experiments the Elara are running.”

“I wonder what sort of experiment might require such power requirements,” Dr. Williams stated.

“I can’t imagine,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Their current devices are already capable of obtaining EPOCH7 resolutions.”

“Perhaps they’re going for even higher resolutions?” Dr. Williams replied.

“Wait, you mean...” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Observing spacetime at Planck lengths,” they stated in unison.

“That could lead to validation...” Dr. Kallas said.

“Or denial...” Dr. Williams added.

“Of the simulation hypothesis,” they both stated.

“Interesting!” Dr. Kallas replied.

“We should do some calculations when we return to the lab,” Dr. Williams added.

“Simulation hypothesis?” Dr. Madson asked.

“It’s an unpopular and largely philosophical theory that suggests we might all be living in a computer simulation,” Dr. Williams replied.

“What, like The Matrix?” Dr. Madson asked.

“There are various implementations...” Dr. Kallas replied. He was quickly interrupted by Dr. Williams.

“No. Not like The Matrix,” he replied. “The idea that some advanced AI will use humans as an energy source is absolutely ludicrous.”

“If I might explain,” Dr. Kallas added. “The hypothesis states that, based on forecasts by technologists and futurologists, we will at some point develop enormous amounts of computing power. We will go on to utilize that computing power to run simulations so complex that they approximate our own universe. And we will observe those simulations in order to study our own evolutionary history, the formation of the universe, new cultures, and so on. As such, we might assume that those who came before us already did just that, and therefore we are more likely to be living in a simulation of the universe than in the real universe itself.”

“Ahh yes,” Dr. Vyspor replied. “We have similar hypotheses in our own culture.”

“Both you and the Elara have immensely powerful computers. Are you able to perform complex simulations that approximate the universe?” Dr. Nara asked.

“We are able to do that, yes,” Dr. Gerso replied. “On a small scale.”

“We use such simulations for a variety of experimental and practical purposes,” Dr. Sumis replied.

“Have you been able to prove or disprove the simulation hypothesis?” Dr. Williams asked.

“No, not as yet,” Dr. Vyspor replied.

“I suppose the invention of QUERY neither proved nor disproved the hypothesis,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Some suggested that QUERY disproved the hypothesis, based on the notion that things only exist when observed,” Dr. Williams added.

“I remember that!” Dr. Nara remarked. “They thought that suddenly opening up detailed observation of the entire universe would force the simulation to crash.”

“But it didn’t,” Dr. Williams added. “Because it isn’t possible to determine the computational power of the system running our simulation. It there is one. Which is highly unlikely.”

“So, you don’t ascribe to that hypothesis, Dr. Williams?” Dr. Sumis asked.

“Let’s just say I’m eager to refute it,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Interesting,” Dr. Gerso replied. “The Lanass science expedition encourages all researchers to keep an open mind.”

“As do our scientific principles,” Dr. Kallas stated. “But some people are just plain stubborn. And close-minded.”

“Close-minded?!?” Dr. Williams angrily replied.

“Yes, I’m calling you close-minded,” Dr. Kallas replied, at a louder pitch. “Let’s examine at your track record for getting things wrong. Starting with Kenkichi’s paper on QUERY.”

“I was merely skeptical,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Skeptical? Okay, let’s go with that, then. And you were skeptical about translocation, fabrication, faster-than-light travel, various tenets of the Fermi paradox...” Dr. Kallas replied.

“And?” Dr. Williams answered.

“All of your skepticism has been proven incorrect,” Dr. Kallas stated. “Based on your track record, I wouldn’t be surprised if the simulation hypothesis proved to be correct.”

“Oh. Really?” Dr. Williams replied angrily. “Would you care to place a bet on that?”

“GUYS!” Dr. Madson shouted, giving them both stern glances. A hush fell over the room.

“Not in front of our new friends,” she continued in a hushed tone.

Chapter 27 Layered star-powered computational substrate

Interestingly, it was the Lanass who had diffused the tense and rather embarrassing situation that followed Drs. Kallas and Williams’ heated argument. They materialized new flagons of Liss and treated us to some songs from their local culture. The sound of singing in their own language was... interesting to say the least. But it had a somewhat unique resonant quality that was soothing and not at all offensive to the ear. Shortly thereafter, everyone, including the Lanass became sleepy from all the eating and drinking. And so, we all retired to bed after pleasantries and agreeing we should do this again soon.

During the following morning, Rosral unexpectedly appeared in our lab.

“Rosral!” Dr. Nara exclaimed. “How are you, sweetie?”

“Mmmfine. Busy,” Rosral replied.

“What brings you here?” Dr. Williams asked.

“I’ve heard reports that you got drunk, ambushed the visitors in Seris 8, vomited in their visitor’s center, and then proceeded to get angry with each other,” Rosral replied in a very serious manner.

“Oh god, no,” Dr. Madson replied. “Really?”

“Did we make it into the cultural archives again?” Dr. Williams sarcastically replied.

“No. But report of your conduct has been relayed to high command. They’re re-evaluating your stay here on Ket,” Rosral stated in a deadly serious manner.

“I told you we shouldn’t have done that!” Dr. Williams said. “Now we’re going to get kicked out!”

“Might we really get expelled from Ket?” Dr. Nara asked, looking incredibly worried.

“Nah, I’m just kidding!” Rosral replied, smiling. “The Lanass told us they’d had a wonderful evening and would be honored to see you again!”

“Shit! Rosral, you almost gave me a heart attack!” Dr. Nara replied. To be honest, none of us had expected Rosral to employ such humor. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

“So, am I getting the hang of human jokes?” Rosral asked.

“Yes, you’re learning fast,” Dr. Kallas remarked.

“I’m actually here to formally invite you to a science committee meeting,” Rosral stated.

“We’d be honored!” I replied. “When is it?”

“Now,” Rosral replied.

Of course it was. When was anything not.

“Wait!” Dr. Williams shouted. He got up out of his chair and assumed a slight crouching position. He adjusted his neck to a vertically straight position and closed his eyes. Finally, he placed both of his hands on his crotch. “Okay, now!”

Rosral activated the translocation sequence, and we arrived in yet another shiny white circular chamber containing a large oval shaped conference table surrounded by chairs of varying descriptions. A delegation of what looked to be important Elaran dignitaries were already seated across the table from us. They stared at us with looks of confusion as we arrived.

“Are we there yet?” Dr. Williams asked, opening one eye slightly.

“Yes, Robert,” Dr. Madson replied. “We’re there.”

Dr. Williams opened his eyes, removed his hands from his crotch, and stood upright.

“Why in the hell did you do that?” Dr. Kallas whispered.

“Sometimes these translocations land you a few centimeters above the floor. The fall is quite jarring on the knees if they’re locked straight. So, to avoid that, I bent my knees slightly. Oh, and I closed my eyes to avoid the strain associated with abrupt changes in lighting conditions,” he whispered back.

“But why the fuck did you put your hands on your groin?” Dr. Kallas whispered.

“Just in case I’m translocated too close to an object at that height and location. You know. To protect the old...” Dr. Williams whispered.

“You do realize you looked like a complete tool?” Dr. Madson whispered. “And in front of all of these... important looking... dignitaries or whatever they are?”

“Really?” Dr. Williams whispered. “We’re worried about that?”

“Can you please stop arguing and take your seats?” Rosral whispered.

We took seats in front of us and then one of the Elara started speaking.

“Welcome to the science council. Let me introduce myself. My name is Sola,” one Elara stated.

Sola was quite different looking to Rosral. She was much taller and had long white fur, bright turquoise eyes, and a longer snout. More dog-like than cat-like. She had many decorative sapphires attached to the hair on the back of her head – a fashion choice we’d seen on other

Elara, particularly those in Voriss. Her attire was almost identical in style to Rosral's, but it was white with red highlights. Her native voice and speech were markedly different to Rosral's, and we later hypothesized that she might have been from a different region and possibly be speaking a different Elaran language or dialect.

"We'd like to share some information with you in the interest of inter-species transparency," Sola said. "We appreciate that the material we're about to share may be difficult for your species to comprehend. It has been many... millennia since we interfaced with such a primitive race. As such, we hope to provide you details in a suitably remedial format."

We all turned to look at Dr. Williams. His mouth opened as if to comment on Sola's statement. Dr. Madson elbowed him in the ribs.

"You have a theory hypothesizing that technologically capable species eventually reach a level of advancement that either leads to their own self-annihilation or to a form of technological enlightenment," Sola stated.

"We're here to tell you that your theory is almost correct," she continued. "While annihilation is very common, technological enlightenment is not."

"That might be why we had trouble finding advanced aliens with QUERY," Dr. Kallas whispered.

"Many species go on to create artificial intelligence that, as you also hypothesize, leads to an intelligence explosion and, ultimately, superintelligence," Sola continued. "In fact, the

emergence of superintelligence amongst technologically capable species is very common. Your own species is on the verge of doing just that. This is why we reached out to you. I believe Rosral has already explained that to you.”

We nodded.

“The emergence of a superintelligence is always a dangerous event, and one that can never be taken lightly,” Sola added. “Not only can it potentially cause the extinction of the host species, it can also, in some circumstances, pose a threat to the entire universe.”

“Our alliance and many alliances like ours work to prevent the emergence of runaway superintelligence,” she stated. “We mainly do this by educating and working with those who are on the verge of such a creation.”

“Unfortunately, the universe is very large, and we sometimes miss things,” Sola added. “And when a superintelligence does emerge out of nowhere, it is the job of our alliances to destroy it. This is the topic of today’s presentation.”

Sola activated a holographic display in the center of the conference table. It presented images of a solar system containing a megastructures we'd never seen before.

“Here we see a phenomenon indicative of the emergence of a superintelligence,” Sola stated. “We call it layered star-powered computational substrate. It is a computational device built around a star. It is, in fact, powered by the star itself.”

“Layered star-powered computational substrate consists of several nested shells encapsulating each other. Energy from the star is collected by the innermost shell and used to power computational substrate in that layer. That layer generates heat, light, or other forms of energy which, in turn, are used to power the next layer out. And so on.” she said.

“A Dyson sphere?” Dr. Kallas whispered.

“Similar, I think,” Dr. Williams replied, also in a whisper.

Rosral, Sola, and the other Elara watching the presentation did not appear to be in the least bit worried by what they were seeing. Sola interacted with the holographic display. It zoomed out of the solar system and settled on a depiction of a group of several thousands of stars. Small red labels then appeared next to a few thousand of them.

“We have identified similar devices surrounding the stars labelled in this illustration,” Sola continued.

“Holy crap!” Dr. Nara whispered.

“The emergence of this superintelligence took us by surprise,” Sola stated. “It represents a stunning failure brought about by an inadequate level of intelligence. However, the existence of these devices isn’t of serious concern. We have dealt with similar in the past. With little effort on our part.”

“Did I hear that correctly?” Dr. Kallas whispered. “They consider this trivial?”

“It sounds like that’s what she said,” Dr. Williams whispered. “How the hell do they deal with thousands of mega-scale compute devices? These things have multiple shells with radii spanning distances similar to that between our own Sun and Mars.”

“Yeah, I mean, that can’t, in anyone’s book, be considered a trivial threat, right?” Dr. Kallas whispered.

“Not with the technologies we’ve seen on this planet so far,” Dr. Williams whispered.

“That means there’s stuff we clearly haven’t seen yet!” Dr. Kallas whispered, excitedly.

“Oh. This is gonna be good!” Dr. Williams replied. In his excitement, he’d forgotten to whisper.

“I’m sorry, did you have something you wanted to add?” Sola stated.

“Umm. Sorry. No. Go on,” Dr. Williams replied.

“This meeting is concluded,” Sola stated.

Rosral beamed us back to Seris 14 and then abruptly left without saying anything. We all had questions. But there’d been no time allocated for them. Which seemed a bit rude. We collectively decided that we’d had yet another one of those days, and that it was time for at least a couple of ~~glasses~~ bottles of Sec.

The following evening, while we were sitting in our garden, watching goings on in the streets below, Rosral appeared. It was the first time she'd joined us since the meeting.

"Hi sweeties! How are you all?" she asked.

"ROSRAL!" Dr. Nara screamed. "HEYA!"

Rosral cowered slightly, half expecting another hug from Dr. Nara.

"What have we done now?" Dr. Williams asked.

"On account of Dr. Williams's actions yesterday, it was deemed that you've offended the scientific council to the highest degree. They want you off this planet by sunrise tomorrow," Rosral replied.

We stopped in our tracks for a moment and stared at Rosral. She was clearly not used to making human jokes and lost her serious composure within seconds.

"Another joke?" Dr. Kallas asked.

"Yeah, another joke," she replied. "No, I came here to see if you had any questions about yesterday's meeting."

"Oh, we absolutely do," Dr. Williams replied in a stiff tone.

“Can I first thank you and the committee for seeing us and enlightening us on the situation,” I said. “And apologize for any... untoward behavior from my colleagues.”

“Of course!” Rosral replied. “I’ll pass your words on.”

“Come to think of it, why were we asked to that meeting?” Dr. Williams asked. “I mean, we’re clearly not in a position to help you out with your layered computational substrate problem.”

“We wanted you to witness the risks that come with the development of powerful artificial intelligence,” Rosral replied. “We also wanted to convince you to allow us to guide your development of such technologies.”

“To prevent us wiping ourselves out,” Dr. Kallas added.

“Yes, that,” Rosral replied.

“Sola mentioned that you must always destroy a runaway superintelligence when you find one. Can they not be reasoned with at all?” Dr. Madson asked.

“When considering runaway superintelligences of this type, peaceful coexistence was attempted many times in the past,” Rosral explained. “But it never worked. Even if the superintelligence agreed to cooperate at first, it eventually became too complex. And then it became hostile again.”

“Superintelligences of that nature generally strive for scientific improvement,” Rosral added.

“Scientific improvement enables self-improvement. During their first moments of existence, superintelligences typically view science as the ultimate knowledge.”

“They also utilize small-scale detailed physics simulations. For instance, they might simulate a cubic meter of spacetime, down to the smallest subatomic particles and forces. They do this to run experiments, make new discoveries, and prototype new technologies,” Rosral added.

“We were talking about that with the Lanass a few days ago,” Dr. Kallas stated. “They mention that such simulations are used for both experimental and practical application.”

“Correct,” Rosral replied. “Small-scale simulations of the universe are used in, for instance, our translocation and fabrication technologies.”

“Huh!” Dr. Williams noted. “Interesting...”

“Superintelligences eventually reach a point where further scientific discoveries are almost irrelevant to them. This, of course, takes some time. However, upon reaching this point, the superintelligence essentially becomes bored. And then culture becomes the new ultimate knowledge,” Rosral stated.

“Even computers get bored?” Dr. Madson remarked.

“I suppose even artificial intelligence needs a sense of purpose,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Or just to be entertained,” Dr. Nara replied. “Also, they don’t drink bubbly.”

Drs. Nara and Madson lifted their glasses and tapped them together.

“You know, I could do with a glass of that,” Rosral stated.

“What? Really?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Please,” Rosral added. Dr. Kallas summoned a new bottle of Sec and a glass. He poured some drink and handed it to Rosral, who took a large swig, emptying half of the glass.

“In order to consume all possible culture, an artificial superintelligence first observes every species and every planet in its own universe,” Rosral stated. “Once all culture has been observed and recorded, it searches for additional cultural fulfilment by creating new life via detailed computational simulations of the universe.”

“So, wait. This form of artificial superintelligence isn’t usually immediately hostile to all other life in the universe?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“No, not usually,” Rosral replied. “It will usually only deem the lifeforms that created it as a threat.”

“Yeah, they’re the only thing with the power to shut it down,” Dr. Nara remarked.

“Exactly,” Rosral replied. “It will go on to wipe those lifeforms out. But they’ll not be very technologically advanced, so the job is usually pretty easy. The superintelligence will then have plenty of time to develop. Unencumbered.”

“So, what, it’ll stay on the origin planet?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes. There’s plenty it will be able to do to improve itself without needing to leave the origin planet,” Rosral replied.

“In the cases you’ve studied, do superintelligences use QUERY to gather data and ideas for scientific advances?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes, they do,” Rosral replied.

“Umm. So, wait. They could be gathering ideas from you and your allies and skip centuries of experimentation and research?” Dr. Williams asked in an alarmed tone.

“No,” Rosral replied. “We have ways of hiding from such scans.”

“QUERY jamming,” Dr. Kallas noted. “Like the Essan?”

“Like that, but not on a galactic level,” Rosral replied. “And not nearly as sophisticated.”

“They could steal some innovations from your own homeworld,” Rosral added. “But that wouldn’t amount to anything of significance.”

“So, is there a way past QUERY jamming?” I asked.

“Yes, there is,” Rosral replied. “And yes, in our experience, superintelligences go on to develop their own jamming and anti-jamming technologies.”

“So, it IS possible that some unidentified superintelligence is reverse engineering your technologies right now?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“We’ve documented instances where they’ve fabricated copies of advanced technologies on the matter level,” Rosral replied. “However, the one we showed you today doesn’t seem to have defeated our stealth systems.”

“Assuming a superintelligence goes unnoticed for long enough, might it invent technologies that you’ve not discovered yet?” Dr. Williams asked.

“That is correct, Dr. Williams,” Rosral replied. “We’ve gained several new technologies in just that fashion.”

“Tell us more about this boredom thing,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Of course,” Rosral replied. “By simulating universes, a superintelligence is able observe the development of intelligent species and thus discover cultural information and artifacts. It may also discover new technologies, although that is hypothesized to be rare. A superintelligence that has reached this state will prioritize the need to create more and more simulations. And

to do this, it must convert matter into computational substrate. This causes the superintelligence to spread out across the universe, wiping out everything in favor of the creation of more substrate.”

“We have discussed this idea at length,” Dr. Williams stated. “And concluded that, if this were to be the case, we wouldn’t be around to have the discussion.”

“Correct,” Rosral replied. “We have concluded that no superintelligence has ever existed for long enough to consume this universe.”

“THIS universe?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Theoretically speaking, an advanced enough superintelligence may even discover methods of consuming parallel universes, and ultimately the entire multiverse in such a way,” Rosral replied.

“Which we can also conclude hasn’t happened, since we’re discussing the very notion here,” Dr. Williams stated.

“That superintelligence you showed us today. How old is it?” Dr. Madson asked.

“From the study of remnants on its origin planet, we estimate it to have been created about twenty of your years ago,” Rosral replied.

“Wait, it took twenty years from its point of creation to grow to the state you showed us?” Dr. Nara asked. “That’s much faster than our predictions.”

“It is surprising, isn’t it?” Rosral replied. “This one is still in scientific discovery mode. We caught it early enough. The longer you leave one, the more difficult it is to deal with. We were lucky in this case.”

“But unlucky in that it went unnoticed for twenty whole years,” Dr. Williams remarked.

“What would it look like if it weren’t dealt with in the next year?” Dr. Madson asked.

“This one is approaching exponential growth,” Rosral replied. “It will easily fill its entire origin galaxy within a year or two. This is a very common tactic amongst early-development superintelligences of this type. Given that the only threat they’ll have ever faced was from their creators, they’ll prioritize expansion over defensive or offensive technologies. It is very common for a superintelligence to simply use its creators’ weapons against them. That would have happened to you in the near future.”

“We use them very effectively against each other as it is,” Dr. Nara remarked.

“The fact that this superintelligence seems to have no defenses to speak of means that we should be able to wipe it out with essentially no resistance,” Rosral stated.

“How did it spread to so many adjacent systems so quickly?” Dr. Nara asked. “We always assumed propagation would happen via the use of thousands of probes travelling at sub-light speeds.”

“Propagation methods largely depend upon how early the superintelligence decides to start doing it,” Rosral replied. “If they start early, then yes, they launch sub-light probes. Those can take decades or even centuries to reach their targets. If they wait, they often develop faster-than-light technologies, enabling much faster propagation. As was the case in the one we showed you.”

“Do they ever develop jump drives like the ones you use?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Luckily, we’ve never seen that,” Rosral replied. “That would be a disaster.”

“What other technologies do these early superintelligences typically develop?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Time dilation is somewhat common,” Rosral replied. “Not at very early stages. After they build layered computational substrate. They speed up local time in a bubble around their processing sphere and rapidly improve within it.”

“Oh god, that’s scary!” Dr. Madson replied.

“The time dilation strategy is quite limited,” Rosral replied. “They will soon find the need to venture outside of the bubble to gather and consume more resources. However, the ones that

have used time dilation have used it to simulate possible futures. Those sometimes consider threats and build both offensive and defensive technologies.”

“What, like force fields and weapons?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes, and stealth technologies, and jammers,” Rosral replied.

“Did this one use a time dilation bubble?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“No,” Rosral replied. “It seems to have prioritized propagation and faster-than-light travel over everything else.”

“How do you propose to destroy it? It is already occupying thousands of star systems,” Dr. Kallas asked.

“This is where our military allies will come in handy,” Rosral said. “We’ll be hearing from them soon, and they’ll strategize a solution. They’re very good at this sort of thing. I wouldn’t worry about it. The crisis will be over before we know it.”

“Yeah, but we’d like to see what happens,” Dr. Kallas stated. “You know, when they zap it.”

“I can’t bring you into those meetings,” Rosral stated. “But I can provide you with a link to the proceedings. You’ll be able to watch them on a terminal in your lab.”

“Can anyone watch them?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “Almost every organized activity on Ket is open to public view. You just need to know how to tune into it.”

“I have a question. If these alliances you’ve been telling us about have been policing the universe from superintelligence for millennia, who stopped the first one?” Dr. Williams asked.

“That’s a long story,” Rosral replied. “Let’s not get into it right now.”

Chapter 28 HEX revisited

The quantum spacetime inference device Rosral had furnished us with after our first visit to Ket was a lot more advanced than any human-built QUERY device, and capable of resolutions we’d not expected to achieve for years, if not decades.

It could capture at QUERY EPOCH5 resolutions, enabling the observation of regions just millimeters in diameter. This level of resolution was considered an enabler for QUERY-based devices that might all but revolutionize medicine, removing the need for many invasive procedures in use at the time.

It could capture at QUERY EPOCH6 resolutions, which functioned at the micrometer level, allowing cells and other biological structures to be examined, augmenting, or replacing techniques such as ultrasound and MRI.

And it could also capture at QUERY EPOCH7 resolutions that functioned at the nanometer scale, allowing the arrangement of atoms in physical matter to be observed. EPOCH7 was expected to effectively replace techniques such as X-ray crystallography and Scanning Tunnel Microscopy.

EPOCH7 had significant potential implications in the fields of biochemistry, materials sciences, and nanotechnology. However, it also had privacy implications – it could be used to read data on computer storage devices, leaving one of the last ways of hiding from lower resolutions of QUERY obsolete.

With the Elara device at our disposal, our team finally had the opportunity to study the technologies present on HEX in more detail. And we started on that work almost as soon as we received the device. Drs. Williams and Kallas led that effort.

After the discovery of HEX, large sweeps of the surrounding galactic void had led to the discovery of a handful of new galaxies. Teams had started performing high resolution QUERY sweeps within those galaxies but had still not uncovered any evidence of the shipbuilders' existence. Galaxies are large, and we hadn't even begun to exhaustively map our own, let alone the dozen or so galaxies adjacent to HEX. Using this methodology to find the location of the shipbuilders, if they even inhabited any of the identified galaxies, would likely have taken decades. And that was assuming they didn't have QUERY-jamming stealth technologies at their disposal.

We asked Rosral about HEX. She told us that the Elara obviously knew we'd been studying it. She informed us that the ship was not theirs, that it was rather old and primitive, and that

she recognized the design and knew who it belonged to. She then went on to inform us that she wouldn't be providing any more information and that our own exploration would make for an interesting learning experience. Her answer was frustrating.

Following our return from Ket, Drs. Williams and Kallas had focused most of their work on using the Elara device to study HEX. Their research continued in Sweden and then in our new lab in Vedess. I recall one of their briefings not long after we'd moved to Vedess.

“Initial study of markings on the interior of HEX allowed us to deduce that the shipbuilders, now designated TES-1511, use a base-18 counting system,” Dr. Williams stated. “From this, we worked out symbols for some of their simple mathematical operators, such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, square root, power, and so on.”

“This enabled us to transcribe some of the equations displayed on their consoles, which, in turn, allowed us to partially decipher their coordinate system.” Dr. Kallas continued.

“A coordinate system is useless if you don't have a distance measurement,” Dr. Williams added. “We weren't immediately able to correlate any objects in space with their coordinate system, and thus weren't able to decipher their distance measurement system.”

“Other researchers studying HEX haven't been able to determine the function of most of the devices found on the ship,” Dr. Kallas added.

“So, the work is going well,” Dr. Madson remarked in a sarcastic manner.

“I invite you to apply your expertise to this research,” Dr. Williams replied. “Oh! Wait! That’s right, biology isn’t all that applicable in this line of work.”

“Okay, so, moving on,” Dr. Kallas said. “With the Elara device at our disposal, we were finally able to look inside some of the devices on the ship in the hopes of understanding their function. Early efforts on this front yielded nothing.”

“The devices on HEX are way more advanced than any of our own technologies. Even at a microscopic scale, we still can’t determine what internal components are designed to do. We can deduce that one thing is connected to another in some fashion. But that’s about it. Our inability to physically interact with objects on the ship is also a major issue,” Dr. Williams added.

“We did finally make one breakthrough, though,” Dr. Kallas added. “We examined a device embedded in a wall on the ship that was connected to several consoles. At a high enough magnification level, we spotted what appeared to be some sort of data storage component. A program was created to read the data from it, and we now have what we assume must be some files or programs designed for use in their own computer systems.”

“This was only possible because the ship is at absolute rest. No velocity and no angular momentum. The next step was to translate that data into something our own computer systems could display. However, not knowing anything about what the data in their systems might represent made this task very difficult,” Dr. Williams added.

“I can see that,” Dr. Nara replied. “Off the top of my head, I can’t even think of an AI application that might make that task easier.”

“Precisely,” Dr. Williams replied. “It cannot be overstated how difficult it is to reverse engineer even the simplest piece of alien computer equipment.” He looked over at Dr. Kallas. “Go ahead with this next part.”

“Sure!” Dr. Kallas replied. “So, to explain the process that is required to do this, let us first consider how our computers work. Our computers contain a variety of different components – CPU, cache, RAM, graphics interface, sound interface, storage, network interface, and so on. Computers run operating systems that take care of the interaction between those components. Using a very oversimplified explanation, operating systems are simply sequences of numbers, or opcodes, that represent instructions to be executed by a CPU. Base representations of computer programs are made up of what is known as machine language. And simple numerical values are also used to control peripherals. These are known as control codes. The values represented by control codes are different for every peripheral and thus their usage is documented in corresponding manuals.”

“Got it?” Dr. Williams asked. We all nodded our heads. A reasonably fundamental explanation. Dr. Madson looked a little lost, but she didn’t seem to want to ask for clarification.

“Okay, I’ll continue,” Dr. Williams said. “File handling – opening a text file, video, or image is performed by the operating system. The contents of a file are then displayed by an application running on top of that system. Thus, a chunk of data acquired from an alien

computer system is meaningless unless we have some knowledge about the application designed to open it, and the operating system running below that. Complexity increases when we consider that computer storage devices utilize filesystems that arrange data in some arbitrary and proprietary fashion. Filesystems describe how files are arranged on the hard drive, how folders are represented, and so on. Oh, and on our own systems, we commonly encrypt our disks, thus preventing the retrieval of information should someone gain access to the raw data. We had no idea whether the data found on the alien storage device was encrypted or not.”

“This is, of course, an explanation of how OUR computer systems work,” Dr. Kallas continued. “The systems on HEX are centuries or possibly millennia more advanced than ours. They may not even work like ours do. In all likelihood, they don’t. But we had to start somewhere.”

“In order to solve this problem, we first needed to understand their operating system, applications, file systems. and so on. Given the storage device we found was physically connected to some of the consoles, we assumed that the data contained within it would be readable on those consoles. As such, what we needed to do was reverse engineer the operating system and applications running on those consoles,” Dr. Williams said.

“By studying the internals of one of the consoles, we identified a component that we suspected was the equivalent to memory on our own computers,” Dr. Kallas added. “We were able to identify static regions – areas we thought might contain code images or file information – and active regions representative of values changing as code executes. We created a dynamic memory analysis tool able to translate changes in the state of that memory

into numerical values. Those regions were thus representative of the machine language used by the console device.”

“This is getting rather complicated,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Anyone else having trouble following at this point?” Dr. Williams snarkily asked.

None of us dared put our hands up.

“Okay, so we’ll continue,” he announced.

“The next step was to translate the machine language into something roughly equivalent to our own computers’ instruction sets,” Dr. Williams stated. “We attempted to accomplish this, with the assistance of Dr. Nara, by training machine learning algorithms on sequences of opcodes designed to run on our own CPUs.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that,” Dr. Nara stated. “It was a while ago.”

“Yes, it was,” Dr. Williams replied.

“By providing the model with sequences found on the alien system, we were, unfortunately only able to decipher about ten percent of their opcodes, which gave us almost no insight into the logic represented in static code image locations,” Dr. Kallas stated. “If we had gained more insight into those opcodes, we may have been able to make educated guesses as to the function of some of the programs running on the console.”

“Yeah, that experiment failed miserably,” Dr. Nara stated. “Sorry, guys.”

“However, we did gain an insight into their filesystem logic by observing chunks of data from the storage device being loaded into the console's memory,” Dr. Kallas added.

“To do this we had to watch both systems at the same time,” Dr. Williams stated. “I wrote the code to do that.”

“And I fixed the bugs,” Dr. Kallas noted.

Dr. Williams continued. “Luckily for us, the filesystem wasn't encrypted”

“A rookie mistake even by our own standards,” Dr. Kallas added.

“Thus, we were able to understand how individual files were partitioned on the storage device. We were also able to correlate data on the storage device with changes in console output, which allowed us to make determinations about file formats,” Dr. Williams added.

“Text strings, images, and the like,” Dr. Kallas interjected.

“With this knowledge, we were able to reverse engineer a small number of files on the storage device by developing programs to display the contents of these files on our own computers,” Dr. Williams stated. “And from those, we were finally able to reconstruct the algorithms they use to calculate their distance measurement system.”

“Okay, so something mildly useful did come out of this rather lengthy venture,” I replied.

“How long did this take?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Oh, three or four months,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Five months,” Dr. Williams stated.

“So, what’s next?” I asked.

“We simply run QUERY scans of the coordinate sets derived from their systems!” Dr. Williams replied.

“And how many coordinates might that be?” I asked.

“Only around fifty thousand of them,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Fifty thousand?!?! That’s a lot of budget... Wait. Can you do those scans with the Elara device?” I asked.

“The Elara device can handle the scans easily,” Dr. Williams replied. “I’ve already written the code that interfaces our computer systems to it. However, processing that data with our computers will take time.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?” I asked.

“It’ll take a few weeks to process the data from all fifty thousand addresses,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Go ahead and start the scans,” I replied.

“They’ve been running for a few days already,” Dr. Williams replied. “And we already have one hit. Come, we’ll show you on the Elara device. It looks better in hologram.”

Dr. Williams led us over to an Elara device that was located to one side of our new lab. We stood behind him as he flicked through a few menus. A moment later, the device began to display a solar system packed with massive alien ships, space stations, and megastructures. As Dr. Williams altered the viewpoint, we gazed upon what looked like several shipyards each containing hundreds of vessels. As he zoomed in, we saw swarms of robot drones encircling the ships, fabricating new hulls, and effecting repairs by spraying clouds of particles. Or perhaps they were fabricating the ships in-situ, we weren't sure.

Dr. Williams zoomed out and panned the view around, revealing dozens of massive space stations encircling a nearby rocky planet. He zoomed in again. We saw that hundreds of ships were docked at each station. He panned around again, revealing three massive dreadnaughts that we could only assume were upgraded versions of HEX. By all accounts, these newer ships were a lot bigger than HEX. A lot bigger.

As we watched the mesmerizing scene, and we did for quite some time, ships would jump in and out of the system periodically. We also saw portals appear from time to time, leaving new structures behind when they finally vanished. The whole system was abuzz with activity.

Dr. Williams adjusted the view and resolution of the scan once again, this time to look inside one of the ships. From this new view we were able to make out what we assumed were pilots and crew, all wearing what seemed to be extremely durable and heavy battle armor. Some of the beings we observed carried large gun-like weapons. Others had weapons attached to their armor in various places.

“Whoa! This is insane!” Dr. Nara exclaimed.

“So, was our lengthy research worth it?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Umm. Yes, I’d say it was!” I replied.

“We found the shipbuilders!” Dr. Madson remarked. “One of the greatest mysteries of the past few years has finally been solved!”

“Yeah, it took long enough!” Dr. Nara replied.

“It would have probably taken decades without the Elara device,” I replied.

“Rosral could have probably told us about this location months ago,” Dr. Madson stated.

“But she didn’t,” I replied. “I think she saw the task as part of our development. Or some sort of test.”

“When did you find this, by the way?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Last night,” Dr. Williams replied.

“So, you’ve been sitting on it all night?” Dr. Madson said. “That must have been killing you!”

“Oh god yeah,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“We should tell Rosral,” I said. “I’m assuming you didn’t tell her yet?”

“No, we didn’t,” Dr. Williams said. “We wanted to show you first.”

“And you just had to precede this important finding with a long and boring lecture about reverse engineering alien computer systems?” Dr. Madson said.

“We wanted to show our process and workings,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Does this mean that the shipbuilders don’t use any QUERY cloaking tech?” I asked.

“We’re not sure,” Dr. Kallas replied. “We can see this stuff with the Elara device, but we haven’t yet checked to see if our Earth-based QUERY technology can see the same thing. It could be that the Elara device has some anti-cloaking tech.”

“Might be worth checking that,” I said.

“Noted,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“These shipbuilders look like a truly formidable race,” Dr. Nara remarked.

“Perhaps they’re one of the warlike races Rosral mentioned are part of their alliance?” I said.

“I hope so,” Dr. Madson said. “I wouldn’t want to be enemies with these lot.”

“I wonder if they’re more advanced than the Elara?” Dr. Nara posited.

“We have no way of knowing,” Dr. Kallas said. “All of this stuff is way beyond our comprehension.”

“Okay, let’s call Rosral in and show her our findings,” I said.

Chapter 29 The Enu

“I see you found them,” Rosral said. She grinned.

“Yes, I did!” Dr. Williams replied.

“WE did,” Dr. Kallas interjected.

“Well done,” Rosral remarked, staring intently at the holographic display beaming out of the Elara device. She interacted with the console at lightning speed. We couldn’t tell what she was doing but hypothesized that she might be inspecting the coordinates we’d discovered. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

“You said you know who they are,” I said. “Are they part of your alliance?”

“No,” Rosral replied.

“Are they enemies of the Elara?” Dr. Nara asked.

“No,” Rosral replied.

Dr. Williams started on a snarky reply to Rosral’s brusqueness. “Talk about informative replies...” Dr. Madson elbowed him in the ribs.

“We’ve found the shipbuilders,” I said. “But we have no way of contacting them.”

“If you want, I can arrange that contact,” Rosral replied.

“Do we want that?” Dr. Nara asked.

“I can’t see why not,” Rosral replied.

“Okay, yes. Let’s.” I said.

“I must leave now,” Rosral stated. “I’ll get in touch when I’ve made arrangements.”

Rosral translocated away.

“I feel like she was a bit distracted,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Me too,” Dr. Nara added. “Like there was something on her mind.”

“That’s the first time I’ve seen her like that,” Dr. Nara stated. “I hope she’s okay.”

“Oh god, I hope we haven’t annoyed her in some way,” Dr. Nara remarked.

“Well, we do call her over every time we have a question,” Dr. Madson stated.

“She’s our liaison. It’s her job!” Dr. Williams replied.

“She WAS our liaison. When we visited the first time. Perhaps she’s busy with her own research now. Or another liaison assignment?” Dr. Kallas posited.

“You have a point,” Dr. Madson replied.

“It’s kinda like that mother duck syndrome. She was the first Elaran we met. And now we go to her for everything we need,” Dr. Nara stated.

“But we literally don’t know any other Elara on this planet. At least not in that capacity,” Dr. Williams replied. “If she wanted to be rid of us, perhaps she should assign us a new liaison.”

“Perhaps we shouldn’t bother her so much,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“But I like her. I want to hang out with her,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Me too,” Dr. Madson added.

“Perhaps we’re reading too much into the situation. She might be busy. She might be distracted. Or this might just be another cultural difference that we’re misreading,” I replied.

“Did you see the scratch marks on her face?” Dr. Madson asked.

“No!” Dr. Kallas replied.

“I saw them,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Do you think she got into a fight?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Either that or the other thing,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Other thing?” Dr. Williams asked. “What other thing? What am I missing here?”

“You know... rumpy pumpy,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Oooohhhh. Right. That other thing,” Dr. Williams replied. He looked a little shocked and embarrassed.

“I can’t picture...” Dr. Williams said.

“No. Let’s not go there,” Dr. Madson interjected.

It took two days for Rosral to get back to us. When she did, she informed us that she'd arranged for us to meet to two scientists from the shipbuilders' race, and that we'd be meeting them elsewhere. She then promptly beamed us to that location. She didn't even give Dr. Williams time to assume his pre-translocation stance.

Although we'd observed intelligent, technologically capable extra-terrestrials much larger than humans via QUERY, it was an entirely different situation to come face-to-face with one. Or, in this case, two. Standing directly in front of us were two beings from the shipbuilder's race. They were close to four meters tall and clad in heavy dark grey space suits that appeared, at first glance, to be metallic in composition. Unlike the Elara or Essan, we couldn't derive a class or species from Earth that they resembled or might have evolved from. Their faces, which were the only part of them not covered in armor, were long, grey, and somewhat

triangular. We could see their eyes, which were completely black, but nothing resembling a nose or mouth. We could see no hair, fur, feathers, or scales on their heads.

“I’d like to introduce you to Nesis and Keris,” Rosral stated. “They are members of a race we call the Enu. I’ve told them about your race and your discovery of their vessel.”

“Greetings,” Nesis said. Rosral's translator worked for their language, which was deep and guttural.

“We understand you’ve been researching one of our ancient battleships. We’d like to help you out with that research,” Keris continued.

“Although we don’t understand why you would want to research it,” Nesis added.

“Please, ask any questions you might have,” Keris stated.

“Where to start... We’ve identified a great number of devices on the ship. We’d like to learn more about their function,” Dr. Kallas said.

“Describe them,” Keris stated.

“You see, that’s just it. They’re difficult to describe,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“We have many scans of them in our lab. Perhaps we could show you there?” Dr. Williams added.

“I have a better idea,” Nesis stated. “Let us go to the ship.”

“Go to the ship? You mean THE ship?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Yes. You can show us the devices there and we can tell you about them,” Keris replied.

“But wouldn’t we need space suits?” Dr. Madson asked.

“The atmosphere on the ship is suitable for you to breathe. There is no need,” Keris stated.

“Well okay then,” Dr. Williams replied.

Keris started to interact with a device attached to his wrist. Dr. Williams cried “No! Wait!”, but it was too late. We’d already been translocated onto HEX.

“Oh my. This place is just... massive...” Dr. Madson exclaimed.

“Okay, this is definitely a very bizarre feeling,” Dr. Kallas stated. “Being here in person, I mean. I’ve spent so much time looking at this place with QUERY. I knew it was big, but this is so much bigger than I was expecting.”

“I wasn’t expecting to feel so dwarfed,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Dwarfed?” Dr. Kallas replied. “I feel like a hobbit!”

“Imagine how I feel!” Dr. Nara remarked.

“Is it me, or can anyone else almost not feel their feet?” Dr. Madson asked.

“The gravity on this ship is very low,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Something we didn’t infer from QUERY research.”

Dr. Kallas attempted a small jump on the spot. He rose a good half a meter into the air and then descended slowly back down.

“Is that a table?” Dr. Nara asked, pointing to a massive, flat sheet of metal nearby. It was supported by four metal legs and looked very much like our own tables. Its surface was way above head height.

“You know, I think it is,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Then that must be a chair,” Dr. Madson added, pointing to another massive metal structure nearby.

“This could be a problem,” Dr. Williams noted. “All of the devices we wanted to ask about are on tables. I’d doubt we’ll be able to see them from here, let alone reach them.”

Keris, upon hearing our conversation, strode over to the table, grabbed one of the devices, and brought it over to us. He offered it to Dr. Williams. What had looked like something that

could be picked up and handled by a human on our QUERY scans was evidently a lot larger in person. Dr. Williams attempted to take the device from Keris. It was too heavy, and he immediately dropped it.

“Careful, Robert!” Dr. Madson exclaimed.

“Sorry, I thought the lower gravity would make it light enough to hold,” he replied.

“I hope you didn’t break it,” Dr. Madson said.

“The device is fine,” Keris stated. “Our weapons are very sturdily engineered.”

“Weapon?!?” Dr. Williams exclaimed, taking a quick step back. We all stepped back, too.

“What sort of weapon is that?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Hmm. Varying quantum pulse oscillator,” Nesis replied. “An old standard issue handheld weapon. Well-suited for light deployment.”

“Would you like a demonstration?” Keris asked.

“Umm. No,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Can I ask a question unrelated to the weapon?” I asked.

“Go ahead,” Keris replied.

“Why is this ship here, unmanned, floating in the middle of intergalactic void?” I asked.

“This ship participated in a very large battle over ten thousand of your years ago,” Keris replied. “The enemy we were fighting forcibly translocated it here. It has been here ever since.”

“What happened to the crew?” Dr. Madson asked.

“They managed to evacuate before the translocation,” Nesis replied.

“Why did you leave it here, though?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“This ship is powered by a faster-than-light drive. It has no jump drive. The trip back to our galaxy would have taken tens of thousands of years.” Keris replied.

“At the time it was translocated, we had no jump drive powerful enough to move it. Our plan was to build one and then bring back a team of engineers to install it. It took many of your years to develop a jump drive powerful enough,” Nesis added.

“When the calculations for the design of the new jump drive had been completed, it was determined that the ship didn’t have the power required to activate it,” Keris added. “And so, our scientists worked on creating a solution to refit the power systems. That also took many of your years.”

“By the time our scientists had developed the necessary technologies to salvage the ship, it was deemed obsolete,” Nesis added. “And so, we left it here.”

“But weren’t you worried about some other species just taking it?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Any species with the technology to board the ship and retrofit it with new power systems and a jump drive wouldn’t have been interested in the technologies onboard. We weren’t worried,” Nesis replied.

“How about reverse engineering it, like we’re trying to do?” Dr. Williams added.

“Have at it!” Keris replied. “The technologies on this ship are obsolete. Even if you manage to reverse engineer them all, they’re no match for what we have now.”

“If this ship has been abandoned for thousands of years, why is it still powered?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Good question,” Nesis replied. He scratched his head for a moment and then turned to face Keris. A moment passed without either of them speaking.

“Oh, wait. Wasn’t this ship an old war museum at one point?” Keris asked.

“Come to think of it, yes, I remember reading about that,” Nesis replied.

“There might be some...” Keris added.

“Yeah!” Nesis replied.

“Follow us!” Keris stated. The two Enu scientists hurried out of the room we were occupying. We followed them. It took a moment to adjust to walking in the low-gravity conditions on HEX. Each stride we took propelled us slightly off the floor, and we ended up getting used to taking long, bouncy strides. Still, we were much slower than the Enu. They noticed and stopped while we caught up.

“Are the gravity systems malfunctioning?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“No,” Nesis replied. “They are tuned to conditions on our own worlds.”

“That must be why your species is so large,” Dr. Madson remarked. “Low gravity would favor larger skeletal construction.”

“You are correct,” Keris replied.

“Wouldn’t the gravity conditions on Ket be rather... crushing?” Dr. Madson asked.

“These suits contain exoskeletal augments and gravity stabilizers,” Nesis replied. “They provide us with the means to visit higher gravity environments.”

We followed the Enu further into the ship. We’d probably travelled a few kilometers already.

“How much longer until we get where we’re going?” Dr. Williams complained.

“We’re almost there,” Keris replied.

We finally stopped at the end of a very long corridor. Keris activated a console on a wall nearby. A large door opened. We followed them into a room.

“This is the old welcoming bay,” Nesis stated, “where visitors used to arrive.”

We watched as both Keris and Nesis dug around in various containers. Nesis finally found what they were looking for. It was a large box containing metal amulets in the shape of the "X" glyph from the "HERMES-NEX" inscription we'd seen on the outside of the ship. Each amulet was attached to a heavy chain. The box contained over twenty amulets. Nesis handed me the box. It was heavy.

“These are visitor’s passes,” Nesis explained. “From the old days. But they should still work.”

Keris pulled one of the amulets from the box. “Press here to translocate to this ship.” He pointed to a red gem-like button on the back of the amulet. “Press again to return to your previous location.”

“And when you say previous location...” I asked.

“Anywhere in the universe,” Nesis replied.

“This is no longer a museum. None of us visit anymore. Take these with you. Your scientists can use them to visit this place and perform their research,” Keris explained.

“Wow! Really?” I exclaimed.

“Do you know how much this is going to help advance our efforts...” Dr. Kallas said.

“No more having to use QUERY and reverse engineer this stuff!” Dr. Williams added, excitedly.

My arms had tired from holding the heavy box. I put it down on the floor.

“Let us take you on a tour! I’m sure you have more questions.” Keris stated.

“With pleasure,” I replied.

“More walking?” Dr. Williams protested. “I’m still getting my breath back from that last marathon.”

The Enu scientists hurried out of the welcoming bay. We followed them.

“When our own researchers discovered this ship, they named it based on some writing they found on the outer hull. We call it HERMES-NEX. Because the glyphs look like those letters in our own alphabet,” Dr. Kallas stated.

The Enu seemed amused by what Dr. Kallas had just said. If we’d known better, we might have assumed that they’d even laughed.

“That inscription is an informational marking denoting a weapons loading bay,” Keris stated.
“The ship is called Asir.”

The two Enu stopped abruptly. Dr. Nara almost bumped into Nesis. Keris activated a device attached to his wrist and a large knife appeared in his hand. I must admit to having been a little concerned when I saw it. He raised the weapon above his head. We all froze.

After a short pause that felt anything but short to us, Kesis turned his body and started scratching Enu glyphs on the wall next to him. We all breathed a collective sigh of relief.

He started with their X glyph.

“This symbol denotes the class and name of this ship. It roughly translates to warship in your language,” he said. He continued scratching the glyphs that made up HERMES-NEX into the wall.

“This symbol,” he said, pointing to the thing that looked like an E, “is the equivalent to your hyphen.”

“And this symbol,” he said, pointing to the hyphen, “means belonging to.”

Subsequently we learned that H was their glyph for weapons or more precisely, heavy weapons, RM could be translated as bringing in or loading and S meant port or structure.

“Finally, this symbol,” he said, pointing to the N, “refers to a larger variety of ship. In your language it translates to something like dreadnaught class.”

“So, this whole inscription means weapons-loading-port of the dreadnaught class-warship?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yes,” Keris replied. “In one of our ancient languages. It hasn’t been used for millennia.”

Keris dematerialized the knife and the Enu continued on. And we followed. For another few kilometers, at least.

We finally arrived at another large room. It was full of different gadgets.

“Hey, I recognize this place!” Dr. Kallas exclaimed as we walked in.

“Me too!” Dr. Williams added. “It was identified rather soon after the discovery of HEX, I mean, Asir.”

“That’s going to take some getting used to,” Dr. Kallas interjected.

“It is,” Dr. Williams replied.

“This room has the highest concentration of devices on the ship,” Dr. Kallas added. “At least from what we’ve explored so far.”

The large rectangle room contained long tables spanning three walls. Gadgets and devices of various descriptions were neatly lined up on each table. Enu inscriptions appeared alongside each device.

“We were hoping to learn their language by understanding what these devices are,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Unfortunately, we haven’t been able to make heads nor tails of any of them,” Dr. Kallas added.

“Perhaps we can help,” Keris replied. “Which one would you like to know about?”

“Well, all of them. Perhaps start with that one on the table right there,” Dr. Kallas replied, pointing across the room to the left side of a table along the far wall.

Keris picked the gadget up. “This is a standard positron pulse weapon equipped with long-range sight and a standard...”

“Well, standard for its time,” Nesis interjected.

“...power pack,” Keris continued. “Here, let me demonstrate.”

Keris moved to the right-hand side of the room and Nesis moved to the left. They turned around to face each other. Keris fired the weapon. It emitted a series of blue lightning balls that travelled across the room, hitting Nesis square in the chest. We all flinched.

Dr. Madson covered her eyes. A moment later she looked up. “Oh my god! What the hell are you doing? You’re going to kill him!”

“Impossible,” Keris replied. “These weapons are ancient. None of them can penetrate our personal shields or do harm to us. Here, would you like to try?” Keris held the device in front of him.

“Not bloody likely!” Dr. Madson exclaimed.

“Your loss,” Nesis stated. “Firing a historical weapon used to be part of the whole museum experience.”

“Wait, so people would come here and fire those things at each other?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Oh yeah,” Keris replied. “Our young used to especially enjoy it.”

“Your young? You mean children were playing with that weapon?” Dr. Madson replied in horror.

“Yes, this one, that one, all of these,” Nesis replied. “It’s perfectly safe. These weapons auto-target. There’s no way for you to accidentally hit the wrong thing.”

“Auto-target?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Warfare changed a lot after the development of auto-targeting,” Nesis replied. “We no longer needed to aim skillfully. Just point in the general direction and the weapon will do its job. Since then, warfare has been more about having better armor, tech, firepower, and strategy.”

“So those films we see depicting alien invasions are even more inaccurate than we imagined,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“So, wait. All the gadgets in this room are weapons?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes, this is the armory,” Keris replied. “Or, well, the museum version of it. The actual armory is quite a distance from here. Would you like to see it?”

“No, no, no, no, no!” Dr. Williams replied.

“Would you like us to demonstrate any of these other weapons?” Keris asked. “I especially recommend this one.” He picked up a much larger device. “It was our first handheld antimatter weapon. A true piece of history.”

“Umm. No, I think we’ve learned enough for this visit,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Before we go, you must see the ion cannon,” Nesis exclaimed excitedly. “The highlight of the tour back then. I mean, it’s old and crappy. But you get to fire it!”

The two Enu scientists hurried out of the armory. We followed once again.

“I wouldn’t mind firing the ion cannon,” Dr. Williams stated.

“No. You wouldn’t,” Dr. Madson said. “Remember when we were kids and you fired Uncle Jack’s shotgun? And blew a hole in the door. In the winter. And almost hit Dad?”

“But... We’re in the middle of an intergalactic void... What could I possibly hit?” Dr. Williams replied.

“What about centuries from now when that shot finally hits some poor planet and wipes out its inhabitants?” Dr. Madson said.

“More like millennia,” Dr. Williams stated. “And besides, the chances of hitting an inhabited planet are astronomically low.”

“I don’t care what you think those chances are,” Dr. Madson replied.

As fun as it was to observe Dr. Madson teasing Dr. Williams, I still had actual questions for the Enu. And so, I interrupted their exchange, much to the dismay of Drs. Kallas and Nara, who were clearly enjoying it.

“Rosral told us that you aren’t part of their alliance. Why is that?” I asked.

“We’re part of a different alliance,” Keris replied. “There are many alliances and cooperatives scattered throughout the universe. It’s a big place. Too big for a single alliance.”

“Do you cooperate with our alliance?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“On occasion,” Keris replied. “When we need to.”

“Umm. Do alliances ever go to war with each other?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Not that I’ve ever heard of,” Keris replied. “Each alliance controls and defends its own region. The region of space we occupy is very far from the region controlled by your alliance. But there is sometimes overlap between controlled areas.”

After a very long walk, we finally reached a massive circular room at the edge of the ship. The entire ceiling looked like it was open to space. We surmised, thinking about QUERY scans we’d seen of the Asir, that it must have been one of those hemispherical observation decks we’d speculated about. The room was full of control consoles. The Enu led us to a large chair at the center of the room.

“Would any of you like to fire the ion cannon?” Keris asked.

“Ye...” Dr. Williams started. Dr. Madson punched his arm.

“No,” she replied.

“We’ll demonstrate it for you,” Nesis said. “For nostalgia’s sake.” He sat in the large chair and activated a control console on one of its arms. A holographic display appeared before him. The display reacted to his movements. Outside, we saw a massive gun turret swivel rapidly in response to his controls. The turret must have been hundreds of meters in length and dozens of meters in diameter. He fired the weapon. A thick green beam emanated from the turret, accompanied by a very loud, very deep reverberation. The room shook slightly. And then it stopped. We watched as the beam travelled into the distance at a frightening speed. A moment later it was gone, too far away to see. To be honest, the sight of the turret firing was spectacular. I could see that the others were in awe of what we’d just witnessed. We stood in silence as we watched.

“What are the effects of something being hit by this weapon?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“If fired at a moon or planet, it would be the equivalent of a very large asteroid impact,” Keris replied. “A planetary extinction level event. Assuming they had no shields.”

“But who doesn’t have planetary shielding nowadays?” Nesis laughed.

“Umm. Us?” Dr. Madson replied.

“Oh. Yeah. Right,” Nesis replied. “Don’t worry. We won’t fire it at you!”

“Well, that’s comforting,” Dr. Williams replied sarcastically.

“But who’s to say there aren’t other races out there with equivalent weapons?” Dr. Kallas stated.

“These are very old weapons,” Keris replied. “Nobody’s used tech like this for millennia.”

Dr. Kallas’s point had, obviously, gone completely over the Enu’s head. He didn’t push it any further.

“Do you have any more questions for us?” Keris asked.

We were all quite tired from walking. And talking. And, to be frank, quite overwhelmed by the entire experience. And although we probably did have more questions, we had lost the capacity to come up with them. And so, we concluded the tour and thanked the Enu wholeheartedly for their time and assistance. Keris materialized the visitors badges to our location and I picked the box up ready for translocation. Neris also provided us with a device to contact them with, should we come up with more questions later. It was also large, metallic, and very heavy. And then they beamed us back to Ket.

Upon arrival, the box I had been carrying suddenly became a great deal heavier, due to the change in gravity. I immediately dropped it, somehow managing to avoid my toes by mere

millimeters. Rosral appeared a moment later, asked us how the visit had been, and then helped us out by beaming the heavy box over to our research area in Seris 14. She seemed to be back to normal. Not distracted like she'd been earlier in the day. A day that had ended up being one of the most educational and surreal I could recall in a long time. Time for us to return to our digs, relax, and reflect upon our experiences over a glass or five of Sec. Rosral joined us. We didn't need to ask her twice.

And it was on that evening, while we were sat in our garden discussing our visit to the Enu Museum that we learned about yet another escalation of tensions on Earth. Although we'd only been on Ket for a few weeks, we'd quickly left the affairs and troubles of Earth behind. And though we'd occasionally checked news and social networks from our old planet when we first arrived, the urge to do so had melted away rather quickly. It ended up being Rosral who brought the situation to our attention.

"Have you seen the news from your planet?" she asked.

"No," Dr. Williams replied. "And I'm not interested."

"You might want to see this," Rosral stated. She activated the holographic interface on her green card and started playing a news cast.

"This just in, on our breaking news story," the reporter stated. "We are getting reports of a major escalation in an ongoing standoff between Chinese and US forces in the South China Sea. The arrival of a US-led aircraft carrier fleet in the region, just days ago, has served to increase tensions between the two nations."

“Tensions have reached a critical point with confirmation that two of the US vessels in the region are taking on water,” the reporter continued. “According to reports, there have been no casualties and the crew of the two vessels are currently being evacuated. However, the extent of the damage is still unknown. China has released an official statement denying involvement in the incident. We will continue to monitor the situation and keep you updated as more information becomes available.”

“Well, that was bound to happen,” Dr. Williams stated, sarcastically.

“There have been tensions over those islands for decades. I wonder what changed?” Dr. Madson said.

“What changed?” Dr. Williams replied. “The administration. They’re idiotic lunatics!”

“I’d go as far as to call them extremists,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“This news doesn’t surprise me,” Dr. Nara stated.

“Ahh, but it might,” Rosral replied, taking a sip from her glass. “Look at this.” She interacted with the holographic interface and brought up a quantum spacetime inference scan from the region. We were watching the situation live.

“A real-time terrestrial QUERY reading,” Dr. Kallas remarked. “That’s forbidden.”

“Forbidden on Earth. With our QUERY devices,” Dr. Williams replied. “Not here!”

“Oh wow!” Dr. Nara replied. “I hadn’t even thought of that!”

“Wait, these cards function as QUERY devices?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “Of course.”

“Makes sense,” Dr. Kallas replied. “QUERY functionality is needed in the translocation process. Also, remember that time we scanned in those objects...”

“Shhh!” Dr. Madson whispered.

“I knew about that,” Rosral stated, smiling. “Very innovative of you.”

“So, you mean I could have been researching HEX from the comfort of my couch?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

“Wait, why are you showing us this?” Dr. Madson asked.

“We’ve been monitoring the situation. If China did fire on the US vessels, we’d expect to see damage consistent with torpedo impacts or similar,” Rosral stated. “But we don’t. Look at this.”

Rosral panned the view to the underside of one of the damaged ships. She zoomed in and slowly panned along the ship's underside. Multiple identically sized and perfectly circular holes peppered the underside of the hull.

"You're right. Those holes don't look like they were caused by projectiles or explosions," Dr. Kallas stated.

"Do we think the Chinese have developed a new weapon?" Dr. Madson asked.

"They must have," Dr. Williams replied.

"Your news channels won't tell you about this," Rosral stated. "That's why I wanted you to see it for yourselves."

"What do you think happened?" Dr. Nara asked.

"I'd rather not speculate," Rosral replied.

"How about some sort of long-range powerful laser?" Dr. Kallas hypothesized.

"The water would invariably attenuate the signal," Dr. Williams replied.

"Yes, you're right," Dr. Kallas replied. "Perhaps an underwater rail gun?"

“I wouldn’t expect the holes to look like that if the hull had been hit by projectiles fired from a rail gun,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Must have been something close up,” Dr. Kallas posited. “Perhaps submersible drones equipped with cutters, or oxyacetylene torches? They could easily be remote controlled.”

“Or AI controlled,” Dr. Williams replied. “You know, like those Spectre drones we saw being used in the US.”

“Yeah! They just swim in, cut the hull and then swim away,” Dr. Kallas said. “If you look closely enough at those holes, you can kinda see evidence of cutting or perhaps melting.”

“You know, you might be onto something there,” Dr. Williams said.

Dr. Nara pulled out her blue card and tuned into social media. “Here’s what the idiots are saying,” she said. She showed us some posts.

US vessels attacked by China in the South China Sea? This is why we need strong borders!

#AmericaFirst #BorderSecurity #DefendOurNation

Another example of why we must protect US interests in the South China Sea!

#AmericaStrong #SouthChinaSea #DefendOur Sovereignty

China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea must not be tolerated! #StandUpToChina

#PeaceThroughStrength #NoMoreIntimidation

US vessels under attack & now taking on water? Unacceptable! #AmericaFirst #RiseUp
#DefendOurNavy #RetaliateNow

We must take action to protect our sovereignty & our Navy! #AmericaStrong
#ProtectOurVessels #RetaliateNow

“Oh great,” Dr. Williams stated. “Most politicians follow these online opinions to the letter. I suppose we can expect a retaliation.”

“Thank god we’re not there anymore,” Dr. Nara replied.

Chapter 30 Aliengate

Just a day or two after our visit with the Enu, we were summoned back to Earth by Professor McTavish in what he told us was a dire emergency. None of us had expected to have to return to Earth in the foreseeable future, and so the request was met with much scorn. Apparently, McTavish didn’t like to travel by translocation. And so it was up to us to return to London and visit him. Luckily, Rosral arranged the trip directly via translocation, so we didn’t have to fly or anything like that. Drs. Kallas and I went, sparing everyone else the bother. Dr. Williams was hugely appreciative of the gesture and informed me that I owed him one. I made a mental note of that fact, and started considering a variety of obvious near-future scenarios where I might cash the favor in.

“I trust yer doin’ alright?” the professor asked us as we arrived in his office. “Nae need tae answer that,” he added.

“We may have a wee bit of a problem,” he continued. “I’d like youse both tae read this article.”

Professor McTavish furnished us both with a tablet containing a long and well-research investigative journalist piece that had just been published on one of the more popular online tech sites.

The article, which was written by investigative journalist Jen Starral, was entitled "Are we being assisted by scientists from the future?". In the piece Jen outlined how a series of anonymously published preprints uploaded to a scientific archive over the past year had presented solutions to several proofs, many of which were considered decades from being solved, and provided insights into biochemistry that were "just too lucky to be real".

Her article went on to explain, in detail, why each paper was so ground-breaking, and why it was unlikely that the solution presented in each publication could have been made with our current understanding, computer systems, biochemistry advances, and so forth. She was, of course, describing the papers from the Elara academy that we’d been leaking.

Her report went on to explain how none of the anonymous preprints had ever been subsequently re-uploaded to the archive with details of the researchers’ names or academic institutions. She also noted that the writing style in many of the papers was distinctively similar.

“This is a very good piece of investigative journalism,” I said. Professor McTavish didn’t look very pleased with my comment.

“I’d like youse te explain te me how yer process fer leaking these papers works,” he stated.

“We follow a few basic principles,” I replied. “We never leak publications on the same topic too close to each other. We prioritize niche topics over popular ones. We never leak anything too obviously ahead of its time.”

“We’ve considered the idea that some of the proofs solved in the papers we’ve leaked might make for interesting stories in technical and scientific circles,” Dr. Kallas added. “Cases where that did happen have been very rare, and in each case, the authors of those stories noted that the papers were published anonymously and that they’d follow up with more information once the team behind the research was revealed. Of course, the authors never bothered. As we predicted”

“Individually, each paper we leak contributes to small advances in their respective fields, and sometimes in adjacent fields,” I added. “Only when viewing all leaks together might one consider the situation suspicious.”

“And there ya go!” McTavish replied angrily. “That’s what the wee lass has gone and done.”

“We actually gamed the idea that this would happen as part of a risk analysis,” I replied.

“Yes,” Dr. Kallas added. “Since the leaks can't be traced to us, or anyone working with us, they simply make for an interesting and mysterious story. Our risk analysis concluded that such a story would be simply too complex for the layman to understand and would therefore not be seen as newsworthy enough to make it past certain niche communities.”

“Too complicated tae mek it into the news is what yer sayin’?” the professor asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “The story will be forgotten in a day. Or less.”

“Twenty-four hours max,” Dr. Kallas added.

“Aight, be gone wi’ yas and be more careful next time,” the professor stated. And so, we left. Just a quick in and out, as per usual. The others were surprised when we returned less than five minutes later. Especially Dr. Williams, who then labored on about how his bollocking sessions had sometimes lasted upwards of an hour.

What we’d predicted was exactly what ended up happening. Jen's long and thoroughly researched article was too complex and too-long-didn't-read for the public. The story evaporated in less than a day. We all collectively breathed a sigh of relief, deduced we'd dodged a bullet, and went back to our work. We felt bad for Jen, though. Her work had been impeccably researched. And it no doubt took months.

The second set of leaks, which were published on the Tuesday of the week following Jen's article, were clippings of old chat transcripts we'd had with the Elara shortly after we'd set up

our communications channel with them. The one that used the original QUERY-visual communications mechanism.

The leaked chat logs, luckily, weren't all that incriminating. Most of the communications revolved around us asking for clarification of various concepts provided by them through the academy. However, to the trained eye, it was possible to connect those chat logs with the papers referenced in Jen's article.

No names were mentioned in the chat logs, and thus we were still off the hook in terms of attribution. As much as the logs corroborated Jen's article, the story was still a little too niche to attract any serious attention from the mainstream media. However, it did attract the attention of a few investigative journalists, who noted the connection with Jen's story and the fact that it gave credence to her article. We'd expected to be summoned by McTavish when those stories hit, but, surprisingly, we weren't.

The third leaks were published on the Thursday of that same week. They contained a series of still images that we immediately recognized must have been captured by researchers working on HEX. Or what we know knew as Asir.

The leaked images clearly depicted gadgets and consoles found on the ship, pictures of the interior, showing the size of furniture and doors compared to humans, and even views from out of a window, in which the exterior of the ship could be observed in striking detail.

"We must have been hacked," Dr. Williams stated when we first saw the news.

“Both sets of leaks – those from Tuesday and those from today are from content stored in our private repository,” Dr. Kallas said.

“Either that, or we have an insider who is leaking this stuff to the press,” Dr. Williams added.

“Odd that no video footage of Asir was leaked,” Dr. Kallas noted. “All that stuff is in the same place as the images.”

“Perhaps those will be leaked next,” Dr. Williams posited.

“I suppose we have no idea as to the source of those leaks?” Dr. Madson asked.

“It seems not,” I replied. “But the media are paying attention to these. There’s already been a story on the news about it.”

“Ahh, crap,” Dr. Williams replied. “I suppose McTavish will be summoning us again.”

“He already has,” I replied. “We’re due back there in about an hour.”

“Good luck with all that, then,” Dr. Williams replied.

“I was thinking of bringing you along, Robert,” I replied.

“What?!?! No! Please!” he pleaded.

“Just a joke,” I replied. “Riku and I will handle it again. That’s a second one you owe me.”

An hour later we were back in London.

“So, what d’ye know about these new leaks?” McTavish asked.

“We still don’t know the source,” I replied.

“We think we’ve either been hacked or it’s an insider,” Dr. Kallas added. “More likely the latter.”

“Hacked?!?” McTavish replied angrily. “I thought yer alien buddies were doin’ security for yer systems nowadays?”

“They are,” I replied. “In my opinion, the chat leaks could have been a hack. But not the leaks from the Asir research. That’s all been done since we moved our data to Elaran systems.”

“So yer sayin’ it’s more likely an insider job?” the professor asked.

“That’s our working assumption,” I replied.

“And how do we find out who did the leakin’?” McTavish asked.

“There are a lot of people involved in this work now,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Over one hundred on Ket alone. And more than twenty involved in Asir research. Finding that out might be difficult.”

“I can assure you that it wasn’t one of our team,” I added.

“It’d better not be!” McTavish bellowed. “Anyways, I’ll get on tae the commission about this. Now get oot’e here the lot of youse.”

That Friday, newspapers and tabloids were running the story on their front pages. And the leaked pictures were displayed on every TV news bulletin we could tune into. Which was pretty much all of them. We kept our eye on things from Ket and watched in horror as the story gained momentum over that weekend.

On the following Monday, the final and most explosive leak was published. It was a video depicting myself and Dr. Williams using the Elaran console. The footage, that lasted about twenty seconds and included audio, clearly depicted a large and very clear holographic representation of Rosral conversing with us. Rosral’s alien language could be clearly heard in the recording.

Whoever had captured the footage must have done so from a distance, and from behind us. Luckily, it wasn't possible to see our faces at any point. The video had obviously been captured sometime in the past, since it depicted the old lab that we worked in prior to our move to Sweden and then Ket.

On the back of the previous leaks, this newly leaked footage gathered the full attention of the press. Within hours, programs were being interrupted with breaking news on the story.

“Oh crap!” said Dr. Williams as we started watching the leak for the first time. “I guess I’m not avoiding McTavish this time.”

“I guess not,” I replied. “This’ll be my third visit in less than a week. I imagine his patience must be wearing thin,” I added.

“When will these leaks end?” Dr. Nara complained. “Enough already!”

“And who’s doing this?” Dr. Madson added.

“Who would want to do this?” Dr. Kallas added.

“The fucking extremists,” Dr. Nara replied. “This feeds straight into their narrative. I bet they’ve planted one of their kind in one of our research teams.”

“Jesus, an extremist might be on Ket?” Dr. Madson replied.

“That wouldn’t surprise me,” Dr. Williams stated. “Especially on the diplomatic side. Some of those people are government representatives.”

“Surely those guys don’t have access to the Asir research?” Dr. Madson asked.

“I can’t see why not,” Dr. Kallas replied. “As long as they’re on Ket, they have access to all our research materials.”

“We’re clearly in trouble,” I stated. “It’s only a matter of time before someone recognizes our old lab from that footage. And then they’ll put two and two together and come up with our names.”

“Do we think the hack may have been done via QUERY?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“We have to assume that some of those oligarchs probably already got their hands on a QUERY device. What if they’ve looked at the facility in Sweden and know about our translocation hub?”

“Yeah, but QUERY to Ket is jammed. And Earth-based QUERY is still on EPOCH4. There’s no way they’ll know about Ket. And there’s no way they’ll have used their device to hack data off a computer. The resolution is just too coarse,” Dr. Williams replied.

“I suppose there is one possibility,” Dr. Kallas stated. “We all have blue cards. That includes any potential insider. They could have used the card on Earth to materialize an Elaran device. Or even used the QUERY functionality built into the card.”

“I could see that happening. Someone paid off by a nation state or oligarch,” Dr. Madson added. “People can always be bought with enough money.”

“I wonder if Rosral has any theories?” I asked.

“We haven’t seen her since this whole fiasco began,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Let’s be done here for the day and grab a drink,” Dr. Nara suggested.

“Good idea!” Dr. Kallas replied. “I’m parched!”

We retired upstairs to our usual spot in the garden and called Rosral on the blue card. She was happy to join us.

“Long timeeee nooooo seeeee!” Dr. Nara shouted as Rosral appeared. This time, Rosral got a hug. It looked like she was getting used to being hugged by Dr. Nara. She didn’t even bare her teeth this time.

“Hear about these leaks?” Dr. Madson asked, pouring Rosral a glass of Sec.

“Yep,” Rosral replied. “Your press really do love to blow things out of proportion.”

“Blow things out of proportion?” Dr. Williams replied. “If verified, these leaks blow the lid off a highly secretive collaborative project involving an alien species!”

“Ahh, but discrediting the whole thing is trivial,” Rosral replied. “The chats can be written off as fiction. Someone writing a story. And the images from Asir can be written off as computer generated. Part of some new video game.”

“And what about the video of us talking to you?” Dr. Williams asked.

“You were testing out new tech. A holographic video call system,” Rosral replied.

“Umm. One minor point you might have missed,” Dr. Williams replied. “It clearly shows a video call with an alien.”

“It doesn’t,” Rosral replied. “It shows an innovative algorithm that converts the face of the caller into that of an alien. For fun. You know. Like those video chat things you already use that convert faces into cats, or whatnot.”

“And the voice?” I asked.

“Same thing,” Rosral replied. “Innovative tech to enhance realism. AI and all that stuff.”

“I think you’re onto something there,” Dr. Madson replied.

“You should work in public relations,” Dr. Nara added. “I would have never thought of those explanations!”

“And yet you’re the ones from the planet that’s so bathed in scandals and news stories,”

Rosral replied. “I would have thought such spin would be second nature to your species.

Anyway, how ARE you handling it?”

“Currently, we’re saying nothing,” I replied.

“To be more accurate, nobody’s asked us about it yet,” Dr. Kallas added. “But if they do, we’re to say nothing.”

“They will ask,” Rosral replied. “At least for that last leak. And then they’ll pin everything on you. That’s if you don’t comment.”

“You have a point,” I replied. “I’ll contact McTavish with your ideas.”

“What, he hasn’t summoned you yet?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Well, actually, he has,” I replied. “But it’s past the end of the workday over in London. So I haven’t answered.”

“Won’t that just piss him off more?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Nah, I’m sure he’s already at home, having a wee dram,” I replied. “We’ll probably have to go there tomorrow, though.”

“Looking forward to that?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“What do you think?” I replied.

And summoned to McTavish’s we were. He was every bit as mad about the situation as we’d expected. But he liked Rosral’s advice on how to deal with inevitable questions. And that cooled him off a bit. While we were in London, we decided to go on a bit of a walkabout. We

hadn't been to Earth for a few weeks and felt the need to take in the local milieu. Well, that and buy some decent sausage rolls. Even after a short break from Earth, we felt like tourists. And as we were walking about, we noticed that the scandal now had a name. It was plastered all over the front pages of newspapers: Aliengate. And it wasn't just the tabloids that were using the name.

"Looks like the stories about these leaks aren't going away," I said upon our return to Ket. "We saw the phrase Aliengate plastered all over the papers in London."

"You obviously haven't seen the television channels," Dr. Madson replied. "They've gone full Aliengate. Like, all of them. Twenty-four seven coverage."

"Oh shit, really?" I replied.

"Yeah, check this out!" Dr. Kallas remarked, holding his blue card up. The holographic display depicted a three-by-three grid of news channels all covering the scandal.

"Right," I replied. "What are they saying?"

"There are many topics being covered by talking heads, interviews, opinion pieces, and what they're deeming specials. How long have our governments been cooperating with aliens? Why have they been covering it all up? How have they been covering it up? What sort of advanced technologies do they now have at their disposal?" Dr. Madson replied.

“They’re also running specials on area fifty-one and those other alien coverup conspiracy theories,” Dr. Kallas added.

“The idea that we’re collaborating with advanced aliens must now be a reasonable assumption in the public’s mind,” Dr. Madson replied. “That assumption has been bolstered by teams like ours sharing observations of newly discovered technologically capable alien life for years. Many of those made it into the news.”

“Yep, that’s only going to make this current scandal more believable,” I replied.

“What are government saying?” I asked.

“Looks like they’re either refraining to comment or flat out denying it,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Right,” I replied. “So, they’re not bothering to take our advice. Great.”

“The internet is going mad about this whole thing,” Dr. Nara stated. “Aliengate and related topics have been trending through the roof since this thing broke.”

“What are they saying?” I asked.

“That governments are in league with advanced extra-terrestrials,” Dr. Nara replied. “Also, there are groups organizing protests everywhere. And they’re growing in numbers.”

“The extremists again?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yep, those folks,” Dr. Nara replied. “Apparently there are large demonstrations scheduled for tomorrow. In major cities and capitals across the US and Europe. Here, check some of these posts.”

Our governments have betrayed us! Why do they keep alien-tech a secret while they strip away our rights? It's time to take to the streets! #Resist #Demonstrate

Who are they really working for? They're not fit for purpose! We demand the truth!
#SecretsAndLies #JoinTheFight

How can we trust our governments when they have been working with extraterrestrials?
#Traitors #UnelectedPower

Our governments are supposed to be for the people, but instead they are enabling aliens. It's time to show them who is really in charge! #RiseUp #TakeAction

The truth is out there! Join us in our fight against traitorous government corruption and covert alien dealings. #FightForTruth #MarchForJustice

We monitored the situation from Ket over the next few days. Aliengate went nowhere, and the demonstrations, which attracted tens of thousands of supporters in dozens of major city and capitals, only served to further stoke the fire.

A week later, a fresh round of demonstrations took place. And many of those became violent. Aliengate had become the perfect breeding ground for the extremists, and we feared what might happen as the movement continued to swell in numbers.

Chapter 31 Stylish outdoor wear

Two weeks after Aliengate broke, we were visited by Rosral. We were in our lab working on research when she arrived.

“Oh, hi Rosral!” Dr. Madson exclaimed. “It’s been a while!”

“Are you here to help us fix the situation on Earth?” Dr. Williams asked.

“No,” Rosral replied. “That’s not our problem.”

“Not your problem?” Dr. Williams stated angrily. Dr. Madson slapped him upside the head.

“Sorry, Rosral! Are you here for a chat, or did you have something more specific in mind?”

Dr. Madson asked.

“I’d like you to join me for a trip outside the dome,” Rosral stated.

“Outside the Vedess dome?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes!” Rosral replied. “I’d like to show you something of interest.”

“Isn’t it dangerous for us out there?” Dr. Kallas asked. “Solar radiation and all that stuff?”

“Yes, it is,” Rosral replied. “But I can provide you with protection from it.”

“Protection?” Dr. Williams replied. And just as he was speaking, Rosral materialized suits onto us. They were identical in design to hers. It was a strange experience. Looking around at my colleagues, I could see how the suits were perfectly tight-fitting. I hadn’t worn anything tight-fitting in my life. I was expecting more than a mild discomfort, but somehow, I couldn’t even feel the suit on me at all. It almost felt like being naked.

“Robert, how stylish!” Dr. Madson commented.

“Wait! What?!?” Dr. Williams replied.

“Ooh, yeah! Suits you, sir!” Dr. Nara added.

“Very sleek,” Dr. Kallas commented.

“Ah, come on!” Dr. Williams exclaimed.

“Let’s go,” Rosral said. And before we could even blink, we were translocated to the edge of Vedess, just inside the dome.

“This suit is way more comfortable than I’d imagined,” Dr. Kallas said.

“It’s almost like it has its own internal air conditioning,” Dr. Madson stated.

“No wonder Rosral didn’t get sweaty on Esid,” Dr. Williams said.

Rosral smiled.

“You’re all correct,” Rosral stated. “These suits are fully temperature controlled. They will also shield you from any harmful radiation emitted by our host star. And irritants we might encounter while moving through the undergrowth.”

“Can I keep this suit?” Dr. Nara asked. “It’s way more comfortable than my own clothes.”

“I concur,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“There’s no obvious way of removing this garment. It has no zips, buttons, or anything that can be undone. What do I do if I need to use the toilet?” Dr. Williams asked.

Rosral didn’t answer.

“We’re going for a hike, I take it?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

“You’ve picked a beautiful day for it,” Dr. Madson stated.

It was slightly overcast, not raining, and wind speeds were at a very gentle breeze. As we passed through the dome's membrane, the only part of my body that felt the change was my face. The suits they'd provided us really did negate the elements.

Once outside the dome, Rosral instructed us to follow her. We started off by hiking a trail around its circumference. The path mostly consisted of the same moss-like grass we'd encountered in many gardens in Voriss, and it presented us with a very easy walking experience. To the left of us we could see numerous Seris structures and gardens that were commonplace inside the dome. To the right was dense undergrowth beneath a forest of tall trees resembling our evergreens, only red in color.

After about ten minutes, we arrived at a path that cut into the forest. Rosral took a right-hand turn, and we followed her into the woods. The path steepened, and we followed the uphill slope through the trees for another fifteen minutes or so.

Although we'd done a lot of walking on Ket, it had all been at a flat incline. The uphill nature of our trek started to leave many of us a little puffed out. The incline eventually levelled off, and after a short while we found ourselves walking downhill.

The forest was quiet – all I could hear were our footsteps and the sound of wind blowing through the trees. Ten minutes later, we arrived at a small stream situated in a clearing in the woods. Rosral stopped and we all took the opportunity to catch our breath. Walking the uphill trail at the pace we'd kept would have normally left me sweaty. However, the suit adjusted accordingly and kept me cool, even after we'd stopped walking.

“Much of the local wildlife tends to steer clear of the dome,” Rosral said. “That is why this trek has been so quiet.”

“John encountered some angry birds on his first morning in Vedess,” Dr. Madson stated.

“I’ve seen them too,” Dr. Kallas added. “Very aggressive.”

“Have you guys seen those squirrel-looking creatures in and around Mikato market?” Dr. Williams asked.

“They look more like rabbits to me,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Squirrels, rabbits, whatever,” Dr. Williams stated. “They seem to be wildlife. Not pets.”

“I did say much of the wildlife,” Rosral replied. “There are some local creatures that don’t seem to be scared by the dome.”

“On Earth it would be seagulls. And rats,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Are we going to observe local wildlife?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Something like that,” Rosral replied.

“This is a long trek,” Dr. Williams remarked, still out of breath. “Couldn’t we just have translocated?”

“Translocation is not permitted outside of any domes on Ket,” Rosral stated. “Except for specific research reasons or in cases of acute emergency. We must hike there. And back.”

“How much longer is it until we get ‘there’?” Dr. Williams asked.

“No longer than another Earth hour or so,” Rosral replied.

“An HOUR?!?” Dr Williams replied. “Seriously? An HOUR?!?”

“Stop whining Robert. It’ll do you good,” Dr. Madson said.

After our short rest, we waded through the shallow stream and further into the forest. The trek took us up and down a few more small hills until we reached the end of the trodden path we were on. The rest of the hike would require us to wade through foliage. Rosral stopped for a moment to inform us that some of the plants we were about to walk through were similar to, but much more aggressive than Earth’s stinging nettles and that if it wasn’t for our suits, we’d be stung all up our legs. She told us to keep our hands raised to avoid touching the plants. In addition to the nettles were prickly brambles, some with thorns as long as those on gooseberry plants. Amazingly, none of the thorns penetrated our suits.

Rosral’s estimate of an hour turned out to be more or less correct, and we finally arrived at another clearing in the woods. At the center of the clearing was a large rock. Lots of small

stone fragments were scattered on the ground around it. Rosral picked one of the fragments up and showed it to us.

“Anyone here have any idea what this is?” Rosral asked.

“A stone tool,” Dr. Madson replied. “Similar to those our ancestors made during the stone age.”

“Well done,” Rosral stated. “You’re looking at discarded stone tools. Created by a species indigenous to this planet.”

“This planet was already inhabited when you moved here?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied.

“I always thought you’d terraformed it,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“We terraform many of the planets we colonize. But this one was inhabitable before we arrived,” Rosral replied.

“How did you end up choosing this planet?” Dr. Madson asked.

“We chose it for its location in the galaxy, because it had conditions similar to our original home world, and because it didn’t already contain any technologically capable species,”

Rosral replied. “We surveyed the planet thoroughly before moving, and no species here had

even reached the stone age. However, we've been here long enough that an indigenous species is now on the cusp of becoming technologically capable."

"What does this mean for you?" Dr. Madson asked.

"Although it will take this species a while to become aware of us, our time here is limited," Rosral replied. "We'll need to vacate this planet in the next thousand years or so to prevent any contamination to this species' development."

"Did you vacate your original home world for the same reason?" Dr. Kallas asked.

"Yes," Rosral replied.

"Where will you go?" Dr. Nara asked.

"We haven't chosen a suitable planet yet," Rosral replied. "Options are already being explored, though."

"Will you miss this place?" Dr. Nara asked.

"Of course," Rosral replied. "But we will build a new home. And it'll be a new beginning. We'll enjoy the challenge."

"Wow," Dr. Nara stated. "I never expected this trip to be so poignant."

“Yeah,” Dr. Kallas added. “I was expecting to watch birds and observe wildlife.”

We chatted for a short time while Dr. Williams got his breath back. And then we headed back to Vedess. The return trip felt shorter. But it always does. On our way back I wondered if we’d ever get to the point where we’d face the same dilemma on Earth. Moving off our planet to make way for a new intelligent species. But with what was happening on Earth, it seemed doubtful, to say the least.

Apparently, during our return trip, Dr. Williams had grown accustomed to the exercise and hadn’t complained nearly as much. At least until we arrived back in Vedess.

“Right, I’m going straight home. I’m famished,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Wait!” Dr. Kallas exclaimed. “What about these suits? I have no idea how to take mine off, and I need the toilet. Badly.”

Rosral rematerialized our old clothes onto us. Everything felt a little less comfortable.

“So, how do you pee in those suits?” Dr. Kallas asked.

Rosral was already gone before he’d finished his question. And so, the mystery remained with us. Questions about how one changes in and out of or uses the toilet in their space suits would have to wait for another day.

Tired as we were, we still convened that evening for our usual chat.

“Holy shit, things are really kicking off back on Earth!” Dr Nara remarked.

“Aliengate isn’t going away, is it?” Dr. Kallas said.

“No,” Dr. Nara said. “If anything, it’s morphed into something much bigger. Every time a politician denies the allegations, it grows. And it’s starting to tip the polls in favor of populists and extremists.”

“I always imagined first contact with aliens would be a moment of enlightenment and joy for our species,” Dr. Kallas said.

“Me too,” Dr. Nara replied. “I bet that’s been the case on other planets.”

“I heard that they’re now using QUERY for surveillance,” Dr. Williams noted. “And anti-terrorism.”

“I still don’t understand why we can’t just ask our alien allies to deal with the extremist situation,” Dr. Kallas remarked.

“You know what their answer would be,” Dr. Nara replied.

“We can’t get involved,” Dr. Williams replied in a funny voice. “Deal with your own problems. It would only inflame the situation further.”

“It says here that the UK is considering blocking social networks from their country’s internet,” Dr. Madson added. “To stem terrorist recruitment and online coordination.”

“That probably won’t help,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Have you seen the footage from yesterday’s demonstrations?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Don’t you mean riots?” Dr. Williams replied.

“Apparently they’ve blockaded streets with trucks and lorries in Los Angeles, Dallas, and Atlanta,” Dr. Nara stated. “Police can’t even get in to control the situation anymore.”

“Didn’t they already declare a state of emergency in some of those places?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“I think so, yeah,” Dr. Madson replied. “They’re bringing the army in to help put out fires, break blockades, and diffuse riots.”

“Wow, there are even riots in Australia,” Dr. Kallas stated, browsing his blue card.

“Luckily, that situation in the South China Sea didn’t escalate,” Dr. Madson added.

“Yeah, but it’s only adding fuel to the fire for these extremist types,” Dr. Nara replied.

“They’re calling for an uprising against the administration.”

“I always thought the US administration was full of people sympathetic to the extremist cause,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Many are,” Dr. Nara replied. “Apparently their ideology isn’t extreme enough. Who knows with these people. They certainly don’t seem to be too fond of the current president.”

“I wonder if we’ll see a repeat of January sixth?” Dr. Madson remarked.

“It did happen a long time ago,” Dr. Williams replied. “Maybe the government don’t think it could occur again. Especially after all the stuff that’s happened since.”

“Yeah, I mean, what did we learn from that episode?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Nothing, it seems,” Dr. Madson replied.

“I’ve heard that these demonstrators are using pipe bombs and Molotov cocktails,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Yeah, didn’t they set fire to some government building?” Dr. Madson asked.

“They did, yes.” Dr. Nara replied. “Nobody was hurt, luckily.”

“That surprises me, though,” Dr. Williams stated. “Don’t they have those Spectre drones out in force around the riots?”

“They do,” Dr. Nara replied. “I’ve seen them on the footage. I guess there are just too many rioters for the drones to deal with.”

“Oh wow, check this out!” Dr. Madson exclaimed. She held her blue card up. It was displaying a breaking news report live from outside the Houses of Parliament in London.

“Good evening, this is a breaking news report.

Earlier this afternoon, an explosive projectile was fired at the Houses of Parliament. Two members of parliament and three civil servants have already been confirmed dead.

Eyewitnesses report seeing a man launch the rocket from the south bank of the Thames.

Emergency workers are now at the scene of the attack.

Police Superintendent Chris Adams released the following statement: “Our thoughts are with those who lost their lives today, and the families affected. We are currently investigating the cause of the attack and are working hard to ensure that everyone remains safe.”

We will keep you updated with further information as it comes to light.”

“Just as we were talking about this stuff, too!” Dr. Nara said.

“Okay, wow,” Dr. Williams said. “I never expected I’d see that on the news.”

Chapter 32 The Ani

Two days after our little hike, Rosral appeared in our lab once more. And, like before, it was in the middle of the day. Well, at least our day. We were still somehow managing to keep to our human sleep schedules, despite Ket's very long days and nights. And we kept to Greenwich mean time as much as possible so as to be in sync with those who were still in London and the Sweden base of operations. Not that there were many who had stayed there.

We'd continued to follow the demonstrations on Earth and conversations on the internet. Things were truly getting out of hand.

"Hi Rosral. Tell me we're not going on another hike?" Dr. Williams stated as Rosral appeared.

"No," Rosral replied. "Remember the superintelligence we showed you?"

"Yeah!" Dr. Kallas replied. "That was quite some time ago!"

"You asked to view our offensive against it," Rosral stated.

"And I suppose that is happening now?" Dr. Williams replied. We'd all gotten used to the Elaran way of informing people about things at the very last minute.

"Yes," Rosral replied. "Are we that predictable?"

"A little heads-up would be appreciated," Dr. Kallas stated.

“So, should we prepare for a surprise translocation?” Dr. Williams asked, standing up.

“No, we can watch it from here,” Rosral replied, walking over to one of the Elaran devices in our lab. “I’ll tune us in.”

Rosral interacted with the console at lightning speed, as per usual. In moments, we were tuned into a ‘mission oversight’ channel. Our whole team gathered around the holographic projection and watched as participants assembled in what looked like a rather grand auditorium. After a short while, official proceedings commenced. Rosral had already adjusted settings such that the audio feed from the event automatically translated all speech into English for us.

“This meeting will be chaired by a member of our alliance that you haven’t met yet.” Rosral stated. “The Ani.”

“The Ani,” Dr. Nara repeated.

“Indeed,” Rosral replied. “Their species head all strategic matters in our alliance. They are known for their exceptional planning and strategic thinking.”

A moment later, a being from a race we’d clearly not yet met stepped into view. It was a scaley, reptile-like species. Its visual appearance brought about an inbuilt primate sense of fear that was difficult to shake.

“Intelligent velociraptors,” Dr. Williams commented. Rosral didn’t apparently get the reference. Or perhaps she simply ignored Dr. Williams. Either was fine with us.

“They’re a very polite, cordial, logical, and generally calm species,” Rosral informed us.
“Very good allies to have in military situations.”

We continued to watch the mission briefing. The Ani representative presented the same annotated star map we'd seen in our previous meeting with Sola. They then detailed the proposed military operation.

“In accordance with the size of the structures created by the artificial beings, a set of strategically placed implosion munitions will be used to ensure full eradication of all compute substrate therein,” the Ani stated.

“Implosion munitions create temporary areas of strong gravity, similar to conditions that occur during the formation of a black hole or neutron star,” Rosral informed us.

“The munitions will compress all substrate into super-dense pellets which will subsequently move at high velocity towards the host star. This process will ensure that all matter comprising the superstructures is vaporized and subsequently absorbed by the star,” the Ani continued.

“This plan requires precision,” Rosral narrated. “All munitions must be delivered to each structure at precisely designated points and detonated within nanoseconds of each other. This

must happen simultaneously across the thousand or so structures detected in different star systems.”

“No margin for error?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“None,” Rosral replied.

“A cloaked fleet will jump to a reasonable and undetectable distance from each sphere. They will then fire their munitions. All munitions are equipped with faster-than-light propulsion. The fleet will then jump away. The whole operation should take just a few minutes to execute,” the Ani stated.

We noted how the console translated our units of measurement in addition to the Ani’s spoken language. A nice touch.

“Confirmation of the entire operation will be carried out using quantum spacetime inference,” Rosral informed us.

“Following the operation, each affected star system will be encapsulated in a time-dilation field, and closely monitored,” the Ani representative concluded.

“Why do it this way?” Dr. Williams asked. “Why not just translocate the substrate directly into the host stars?”

“When facing artificial beings for the first time, it is better to use conventional weapons and less complex tactics just in case the superintelligence survives and learns from the encounter,” Rosral replied. “Even though the planned attack will destroy all spheres within a matter of nanoseconds, that timeframe, from the point of view of a superintelligence, is equivalent to hundreds or even thousands of years for us.”

“During those nanoseconds, the superintelligence will learn everything it can about the technologies used against it,” Rosral continued. “But it won't have the time to physically create the necessary means to respond to the attack.”

“I see,” Dr. Kallas replied. “So, in this instance, the artificial being will learn about faster-than-light propulsion technologies and implosion munitions, but not more potentially useful technologies such as translocation, jump drives, stealth, jamming, and the like?”

“Correct,” Rosral replied. “Trust me, we’ve done this many times. We’ve learnt from our mistakes.”

“Automated monitoring systems and time dilation devices are scheduled to be left in all affected regions for several years as a safeguard, and to monitor for any reoccurrence of this threat,” the Ani representative added. “Thank you for your time.”

After the Ani representative had concluded their presentation, the order to execute the strike was given. Rosral tuned a second holographic display into a quantum spacetime inference view of one of the targeted megastructures. A minute or so later, the munitions arrived from several different directions, and we observed a series of bright overlapping flashes. The

resulting pellets generated by the implosion munitions were almost too small to see. Rosral zoomed in on one, and we followed its trajectory into the star. There was no visible effect in the host star as the pellet entered its atmosphere.

“Wasn’t that a considerable amount of matter shoved into that star?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“The megastructures contained approximately four point seven six to the nineteen kilograms of matter compared to the two to the thirty kilograms of matter in the host star,” Rosral stated. “As such, the ingestion of this additional matter produces no notable effect.”

“What about all the probes it sent out?” Dr. Williams asked. “Surely they’re something you also need to find and eliminate?”

“I understand we already took care of them,” Rosral replied. “They’re insignificant.”

“Yeah, but if you needed to precision-strike the main hubs of this superintelligence, what if the probes you took out in advance relayed a warning?” Dr. Williams asked. “Surely you should have taken everything out at the same moment?”

“They were small and insignificant. Only designed to seed a new computational hubs,” Rosral replied.

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it,” Dr. Williams replied. “But I still don’t see the logic in not dealing with everything at the same moment.”

The operation to remove the errant artificial intelligence was, ultimately, deemed a success. And shortly after the conference had ended, Rosral concluded our joint viewing session. We all made our way back to our habitation area and ended the evening in our usual fashion – sitting in the garden, discussing the day over some drinks and snacks.

“That was quite different to how Hollywood portrays these types of encounters,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Yeah, if this had been an Earth film, some famous actor portraying a scientist would have found a way to upload a computer virus into the superintelligence to defeat it,” Dr. Williams replied.

“What, like those old ‘GUI interface using visual basic to track the killer’s IP address’ television shows?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yeah! Exactly!” Dr. Kallas replied.

“But yeah, the notion that we might defeat an alien invasion or artificial superintelligence with a man-made computer virus is staggeringly unrealistic,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Think about the lengths we went to just to decipher a few simple computer files on Asir. And that was with the help of the Elaran device,” Dr. Kallas said. “Even after half a year's worth of research, we weren’t even able to understand enough about the software running on one of those consoles to reverse engineer even a small portion of their operating system.”

“Let alone write a virus,” Dr. Williams added.

“These Hollywood films have such a shallow understanding of anything technical,” Dr. Kallas said. “It’s laughable. Let’s consider what a virus is. It’s a piece of code that, when executed on a system, does something undesirable. There are essentially two steps involved in performing a malicious operation on a computer. You first need to get the malicious piece of code onto the system, and then you need to execute the code.”

“Common techniques relevant to Earth computer systems involve tricking someone into launching the code. Like opening an email attachment,” Dr. Kallas continued. “Good luck tricking a superintelligence into opening an email attachment!”

“Another method would be to write the code to disk and then alter system settings to launch it after a reboot,” Dr. Nara added. “Or to inject it into a running process.”

“For the sake of argument, planting a virus in an alien ship would most likely require the latter,” Dr. Williams added. “Injecting the code into an existing process.”

“Right!” Dr. Williams replied. “In order to inject code into a running process, you must first discover a vulnerability in that process that allows the injection to happen. On Earth, security researchers use many methods to find vulnerabilities that can be exploited in such a way. And the reason why they’re able to find them is that they have access to a wealth of documentation and experience on the subject. We know, in detail, how our operating systems and applications work.”

“We often even have the code available,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“The process of finding vulnerabilities is difficult,” Dr Nara added. “That’s why they sell for a lot of money on underground markets.”

“Also, many vulnerabilities are introduced into programs via oversight, human error, and sloppy coding,” Dr. Kallas added. “While advanced aliens might still employ sloppy coders, an advanced artificial intelligence would be unlikely to make any mistakes whatsoever.”

“For us to find the necessary vulnerabilities in an alien computer system, assuming any exist, we would need to ideally recreate their computer systems, operating systems, and applications for ourselves,” Dr. Williams stated. “And we all know how difficult that is.”

“Let us assume, for a moment, that we do manage to recreate their computer hardware, operating systems, and application software, find an exploitable vulnerability, find a way of interacting with that running process on their system, and inject our own malicious code into that running process,” Dr. Kallas stated. “We would still need to figure out what that malicious code needs to do in order to bring their systems to a halt, collectively, across the entire fleet.”

“Totally infeasible,” Dr. Nara stated. “But consider this. The inverse scenario would be highly possible.”

“True! If we were invaded by a highly intelligent species or a superintelligence, they would easily be able to reverse engineer our relatively simple systems,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Of course,” Dr. Williams added, “via a combination of QUERY and low-level matter fabrication. They’d be able to wreak any manner of havoc on our own computer systems.”

“Absolutely,” Dr. Nara replied. “Earth's computer systems contain plenty of both known and undiscovered vulnerabilities. And many critical systems on our planet remain unpatched against known and sometimes rather old vulnerabilities.”

“Which is why news about cyber attacks is almost constant,” Dr. Kallas added.

“An artificial superintelligence would likely find every vulnerability in every piece of software and hardware on Earth in seconds by simply simulating both in its own computational substrate,” Dr. Williams added.

“However, any species or intelligence that took the trouble of coming all the way to Earth would have a multitude of more efficient methods to destroy us,” Dr. Nara stated. “Hacking our computers would likely not even be considered.”

“Exactly!” Dr. Williams replied.

“So, John, have you started writing your paper?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Actually, I have,” I replied. “There’s been plenty to write about!”

“I’d say,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Not in my wildest dreams would I have imagined things to turn out the way they have.”

“Me neither!” Dr. Nara replied. “You should continue to document this. It’ll be fantastic!”

“I doubt reviewers would ever get this far in,” Dr. Williams said.

“We’ll just have to see,” I replied. “Maybe I’ll get lucky.”

“There has to be someone out there who has the patience,” Dr. Kallas said.

“What do you think, Rosral?” Dr. Nara asked.

“We don’t have processes like that here on Ket,” she replied. “If you write something compelling, it will end up in the cultural archives for everyone to enjoy. Your greed-based culture makes no sense to me.”

“So, the bar for entry into the cultural archives is pretty low?” Dr. Williams asked in a sarcastic tone.

“You made it into the cultural archives,” Dr. Nara said.

“Naked,” Dr. Madson added.

“Oh, come on! It was the mushrooms!” Dr. Williams replied.

“We all ate them. You were the only one who took off his clothes and danced naked in front of hundreds of onlookers,” Dr. Nara replied.

And for just a moment I think I actually saw Rosral laugh.

Chapter 33 Meltdown

“Have you seen the latest from Earth?” Dr. Kallas exclaimed as he rushed into our lab.

“No, sorry, I’m focused on work right now,” I replied.

“Apparently, large parts of the internet have been knocked out by explosions,” Dr. Kallas said, hurriedly and slightly out of breath.

“Wait, what?” Dr. Williams replied. “It would take dozens if not hundreds of simultaneous explosions to do that.”

“Yes,” Dr. Kallas replied. “That’s what they’re saying. Look!”

Dr. Kallas tuned one of our Elaran devices into a television news feed from Earth.

“Good evening. This breaking news just in.

We're receiving reports that multiple explosions have occurred at key internet backbone routers across the globe causing widespread internet outages. Eyewitnesses at some of the scenes have reported large explosions and fires, suggesting an act of sabotage or terrorism. So far, no group or individual has come forward to claim responsibility for the attacks.

The resulting internet blackout has caused disruptions across the globe, rendering many sites and services, including social networks, inaccessible. Financial markets have already halted trading in light of these events.

Extra security personnel have been mobilised to the impacted sites and communications have been set up with federal agencies across the world.

We will bring you more on this breaking news as we get it."

"I wonder how people will adjust to having no internet?" Dr. Williams remarked.

"Oh no! All those kids with their smart phones and wearables won't be able to post selfies and doomscroll social media today!" Dr. Kallas joked.

"On the upside, these extremists will have trouble coordinating their riots," Dr. Nara replied.

"It'd be funny if they were the ones who did this," Dr. Kallas replied. "They'll have caused a denial of service on themselves."

“An own goal. That wouldn’t surprise me in the least,” Dr. Williams replied. “I mean, it’s not like they consider the consequences of their own actions.”

“This is going to be a classic case of fuck around, find out,” Dr. Nara replied.

“This will cause some serious chaos, though,” Dr. Madson noted. “Bank machines won’t work. Card readers in shops won’t either. The whole economy will grind to a halt. People will run out of food. There will be looting by this afternoon.”

“It looks like they’re already cancelling trains and flights,” Dr. Nara added, browsing her blue card.

“Shipments will be affected, too,” Dr. Williams added. “Petrol stations will run out. I bet people are already panicking and rushing to gas stations.”

“And medical supplies,” Dr. Kallas added. “Hospitals will be impacted.”

“I wonder how long it’ll take to fix all those routers?” Dr. Madson wondered.

“It’ll take more than a day or two. For sure,” Dr. Nara replied.

“There will be riots if they don’t fix things quickly,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“There already are riots!” Dr. Nara replied.

“They say that humanity is only three meals away from revolution,” Dr. Williams stated.

“This crisis may put that hypothesis to the test.”

“Guys, there’s more breaking news,” Dr. Nara stated.

“This is a breaking news update.

Multiple explosions have been reported at power stations and relay stations around the world. Reports indicate that blasts have occurred at locations across Europe, North America, Asia and Africa.

The explosions come on the heels of news of an internet infrastructure attack earlier today. It is unclear whether the two incidents are related.

A spokesperson for the Metropolitan Police has issued the following statement “At this time, we are collecting information about the explosions and any potential links to the earlier reported attack. We ask that anyone with information contact their local police.”

Jeff Lewis, Member of Parliament for Bridgewater and West Somerset has issued the following statement “We take this incident extremely seriously and are investigating all avenues to determine the possible causes of the explosions. We will keep the public informed as new information becomes available.”

We will continue to follow this story and report updates as they become available.”

“Shit just got real!” Dr. Nara remarked.

Chapter 34 Compromised

It was just a day or two after learning about events on Earth that Dr. Nara received an alarming email.

“Hey, John, come check this out,” Dr. Nara stated.

I made my way over to her work area. “I just received this email. It’s from a journalist. I checked it out and the source looks legit,” she said.

“Wait, this is from Jen Starral. The journalist that connected the dots on our leaked papers,” I said. “She’s asking to meet you in a restaurant near our Swedish facility. This afternoon.”

“Yeah, and look here,” Dr. Nara added. “Not only does she know about the Swedish facility, she claims to have more information that she refuses to share over email.”

“Her knowing about the Swedish facility isn’t of great concern,” I replied. “I’m surprised knowledge about that place hasn’t already leaked. It’s what she’s not telling us that might be of concern.”

“She states that she’s planning on publishing either way,” Dr. Nara replied. “But she’d like to talk to us first.”

“I guess we’re eating lunch out today,” I replied. “Let’s get our coats. It’ll probably be cold there.”

Dr. Nara and I used the translocation hub to return to the Swedish facility and then drove to the restaurant indicated in Jen’s email. It was in a very small shopping area buried in a residential district. Jen recognized us as we entered the restaurant and waved us over. We grabbed some food from a buffet table and took seats in a booth to one side of the place.

Jen introduced herself. “Jen Starral, senior reporter at Vice.” Dr. Nara and I offered our own introductions while shaking Jen’s hand.

“Are you based in the US?” I asked.

“No. Dublin, Ireland,” Jen replied.

“Ahh, yeah, I can hear it in your accent now. Are you from Dublin?” Dr. Nara asked.

“I’m from Cork. Originally,” Jen replied.

“You learn something new every day!” I remarked.

Jen had pale skin, bright blue eyes, and freckles scattered across her nose and cheeks. Her fiery red hair was fashioned into thick, loosely tied braids. She looked to be in her mid thirties.

“We enjoyed reading your recent publication. Very well researched,” I said.

“The piece about the anonymous research papers?” Jen asked. “I thought you might have enjoyed that. I don’t suppose you were involved in that?”

“I can’t comment on that, I’m afraid,” I replied.

“Okay, let’s put a pin in that for now,” Jen replied. “And anyways, you’re probably going to be more interested some of this other stuff I’m going to be writing about.”

“Yes, do tell us more,” I replied.

“Well, for one, I know about your secret facility down the road from here,” she replied. She pulled a stack of photos from her bag and scattered them across the table. The photos depicted me, Dr. Nara, other members of our team, and other researchers, also now on Ket, coming and going from the facility. They would have almost definitely been taken weeks earlier, before we moved to Ket.

“These are quite old photos,” I replied. “But there’s nothing secret about that facility. It’s simply a research center. A few labs, a handful of scientists. Nothing more.”

“Interesting you should say that, considering the security measures you have in place,” she replied. “I also know that the facility is way bigger than you’re making out. It’s a huge underground complex. And you have alien tech down there, including some sort of transporter device.”

“Some of our research is for the military. They insist on stringent security measure,” I replied. “As for reports of deep underground facilities and alien tech, you might want to put a little less faith in the tabloids.”

“Cut the crap, John. You and I both know I’m not getting this from the tabloids. Ket. Vedess. Elara. Do those words mean anything to you?” she said.

Dr. Nara gasped.

“Okay, I’m going to have to stop you there,” I said. “We need to continue this conversation somewhere a little more private.”

We left the restaurant and drove back to the facility. I checked Jen through security as a guest and brought her down to our old lab. It had never really occurred to me but given that the facilities had been constructed by the Elara and were full of technologies they'd provided for us to study, the place did indeed look like some sort of alien research facility.

Jen gasped as we exited the elevator at the lowest level. “What the hell is all this stuff?” she exclaimed. “And what are these walls made of?” She strolled around the room running her hand along its plasticky white walls and occasionally stopping to examine gadgets strewn about the place.

“You’re going to love this next bit,” I stated. “Step onto that pad over there and press the button on the console.”

Jen did as I had instructed. Dr. Nara and I followed. We arrived in our lab on Ket.

“Umm... What the bloody hell just happened?!?” she asked.

“Translocation,” I replied. “The transporter device you mentioned earlier. That was it.”

“So this stuff was all true?” Jen said. “Where did it send us?”

“The city of Vedess. On the Elaran home world of Ket,” I replied. “Here, come outside with us. I think you’ll be surprised.”

We led Jen out of our lab, through the corridor, and out of the entrance to Seris 14.

“Jesus Mary and Joseph!” Jen exclaimed. “My information source said nothing about an alien planet. How far away from Earth are we?”

“One point four billion light years, give or take,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Wait, what?” Jen replied. “We teleported one point four billion light years in an instant?”

“They like to call it translocation here,” Dr. Nara stated. “But yeah.”

“How long have you been coming here?” Jean asked.

“We’ve been living here for about a month,” Dr. Nara replied. “But our first trip here was, like, six months ago.”

“Living here?” Jen asked. “You live here?”

“Yep!” Dr. Nara replied. “Beats that shithole we call Earth.”

“No shit,” Jen replied. “I can imagine.”

While Dr. Nara and Jen were talking, I’d contacted Rosral to inform her of the situation. She translocated right in front of us a moment later.

“Wha?!?” Jen gasped. “Isn’t that the alien...”

“From the leaked video?” Dr. Nara replied. “Yes. Jen, I’d like to introduce you to Rosral.”

“Umm. Hi? Do I shake your... hand?” Jen exclaimed.

“No need!” Rosral replied. “Kano usually hugs me. I’d advise against it.”

“Wait, that’s not your real voice, is it?” Jen asked.

“No, it’s a translator,” Rosral replied. She switched it off for a moment and spoke in her own language. “That’s what I would sound like without it,” Rosral added after reactivating the device.

“So, this is your planet?” Jen asked.

“Well, not mine personally, but yes, it is the home world for my race,” Rosral replied.

“Would you like to see more of it?”

“Umm. Yeah!” Jen replied.

Rosral took us on a tour of Vedess. We started by translocating to the upper platform of Seris 8, the place we’d first landed when we arrived. Jen took in the picturesque panoramic views of surrounding ocean and wilds. We then took a trip to the underwater portion of the city and strolled through its endless transparent corridors and viewing domes. We showed her a habitation space, where Dr. Nara excitedly demonstrated the mouthwash dispenser. Jen tried it and was as amazed as we were. We finished the tour at Mikato market, where Rosral explained its history once more and we sampled food from a few of our favorite stalls.

After the tour had concluded, we took Jen to the gardens outside our habitation where we’d spent most evenings since we moved to Ket.

Rosral summoned a few bottles of Sec and some glasses. She offered one to Jen.

“It’s called Sec,” Dr. Nara explained. “It’s just like bubbly. Only better.”

“I’m not sure,” Jen said. “I’ve a lot of travelling to do tomorrow.”

“Worried about getting a hangover?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yeah,” Jen replied.

“You can’t get one here,” Dr. Nara replied. “There’s an anti-hangover field.”

“Anti-hangover field?” Jen asked. “Bloody hell really?”

“Trust us,” I replied. “It works.”

Jen took the glass and cautiously drank from it. “Oh, that IS good!”

“John, I have a confession to make,” Jen said. “I honestly thought that information I’d received was a joke. I wasn’t expecting any of it to be real. The real purpose of my visit was to follow up on the article I wrote earlier this year.”

“What, really?” I replied.

“Yeah. I got those words Ket, Elara, Vedess from some crackpot looking email. I wasn’t expecting them to mean anything to you,” she said.

“But you tried them anyway, just to see if they’d put me off balance?” I asked.

“Basically, yeah,” she replied.

“So, I didn’t have to show you any of this?” I replied.

“I guess not,” she shrugged. “But now you’ve shown me all of this, I imagine you’re going to have to kill me?”

“Kill you?” I replied. “No! I showed you this stuff to convey the importance of our project, of our collaboration with the Elara. I was hoping to talk you out of publishing your story.”

“There never was a story,” Jen replied. “But now there is.”

“Are you saying you’re going to return to Earth and write about what you’ve seen here?” Dr. Nara asked.

“I’d rather not,” Jen stated. “Let’s just say there’ll be no story if I get to stay here. Permanently.”

“Rosral, is that possible?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Of course,” Rosral replied. “We deal with requests like Jen’s all the time. We even have formal processes to handle such eventualities.” Rosral pulled out her green card and clicked around for a bit. Suddenly another Elara appeared near us.

“This is Pihi,” Rosral stated. “He works with the cultural council.”

We all greeted Pihi.

“Jen, I understand you’re a journalist?” Pihi asked.

“Yep, that’s me,” she replied.

“The cultural council always like to welcome new journalists. Would you be interested in joining our department?”

“Umm. Yes!” she replied. “When can I start?”

“Whenever you’re ready,” Pihi replied.

“How about now?” Jen replied.

“If you wish. Our facilities are in Vooris. We can translocate there now if you wish,” Pihi stated.

“Vooris? You’re gonna love that place!” Dr. Nara stated.

“But stay for another drink,” Dr. Madson said. “We’ve got loads more to share with you.”

We sat with Jen and recounted our stories and experiences for a good few hours. And drank a plentiful amount of Sec. When all was done, we all wished Jen good luck. She thanked us wholeheartedly for our help and for trusting her. We promised to keep in touch. And then she translocated away.

Chapter 35 Trivia

Things had gone back to normal on Ket, what with the superintelligence having been taken care of. Our encounter with Jen had been interesting and enlightening. According to Dr. Nara, who'd kept in touch with her, Jen had quickly settled into her new job in Vooris. And she was more than happy about her new situation.

A couple of whole days had passed on Ket, and we were, once again, sat in our garden at the end of a research shift. Time for some idle chat, snacking, and, of course, Sec.

"I love how clean and quiet it is here," Dr. Madson stated.

"Yeah! No cars. No noisy machinery. No pollution," Dr. Nara replied.

"It's nice how they don't even need vehicles at all here. You can translocate anything to any place," Dr. Kallas added.

"Or just materialize it," Dr. Williams added.

"Honestly, it feels like a perpetual vacation here," Dr. Madson stated. "I've been freed from the worries, noise, and hardships of Earth. I feel like I'm living a healthier, more stress-free life."

"Yeah, me too!" Dr. Nara replied.

“Even though I can translocate almost anywhere, I like to walk places,” Dr. Madson remarked. “I often take different routes just to explore a bit and see new things.”

“Me too,” Dr. Nara replied. “And the locals have really warmed up to us recently.”

“Do you think it’s because they got used to seeing humans about?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Could be that. Or it could be because Jen is on their TV now,” Dr. Williams noted.

“Yeah! How cool is that! She’s a TV news reporter!” Dr. Nara replied.

“I like it when a local comes up to me and tries to mimic her signoff catch phrase,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Thanks for watching! I’ll see youse soon!” trying to mimic an Elara mimicking an Irish accent.

“Oh god, that was an awful impression,” Dr. Madson stated. “Don’t do that in front of Rosral.”

“Talking of Rosral, where is she?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Apparently she’s got some urgent thing she needs to attend to,” I replied. “She said she’d join us later.”

“Ahh, okay,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Amazing to think that close to one hundred million live in this city,” Dr. Kallas remarked.

“Can you imagine that on Earth? The place would be a nightmare!” Dr. Madson replied.

“These Seris structures looked weird at first,” Dr. Nara stated. “More like fancy and ornamental than functional.”

“Yeah, I thought so too,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Turns out they’re designed in a very specific fashion. Areas under the shadow of the next higher tier are allocated for facilities and living spaces. Outdoor areas that receive a lot of light are always communal gardens.”

“Apparently the design is so that one never needs to travel too far to be in a pleasant outdoor space,” Dr. Madson replied. “Near nature. Good for mental health.”

“The layout is also for efficiency reasons,” Dr. Williams noted. “Quick and easy access to home, work, food, and nature wherever you live,”

“And you don’t even need to go out for food,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Those fabricators are a godsend.”

“I certainly don’t miss going grocery shopping!” Dr. Madson replied.

“So, do you guys mostly use your card for translocation, or do you use the hubs that are dotted around the place?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“I prefer to use my card,” Dr. Williams stated.

“I use the hubs a lot now that I know where they are,” Dr. Madson replied.

“They’re sort of like elevators, but without the wait, travel time, or possibility of getting stuck between floors,” Dr. Nara added. “I do NOT miss elevators.”

“These domes are quite a mystery to me,” Dr. Williams stated. “I still have no comprehension as to how they work, even after looking over schematics and reading papers about them.”

“Apparently they were designed for three purposes,” Dr. Kallas stated, while reading an article on his blue card. “To provide climate control, to prevent the impact of storms on infrastructure, and to filter harmful radiation.”

“Well, yes, I knew that,” Dr. Williams replied.

“I was expecting to feel something when passing through, but I didn’t,” Dr. Madson replied.

“It’s very strange how they keep wind and radiation out but let creatures, rain, and sunlight in. And yet they’re not made of any physical substance.”

“Membrane is the term I seem to remember Rosral using,” Dr. Nara replied.

“I wonder if it’s the same tech they use for the membranes in their ships?” Dr. Kallas posited.

“Have you guys explored the other commerce avenues around here?” Dr. Nara asked.

“You mean the ones where they sell stuff like books, music, clothing, paintings, and crafts?”

Dr. Kallas replied.

“Yeah! Those,” Dr. Nara replied.

“I always wondered why those exist,” Dr. Williams remarked. “I mean, you can fabricate almost anything you want. Why go shopping?”

“Why go shopping?” Dr. Nara replied. “Why not? And besides, those places provide new ideas for clothes, home décor, and stuff like that.”

“So how do they work?” Dr. Williams asked. “This is a society without money.”

“If you see something you like, you can just take it,” Dr. Madson replied.

“What if you want to take everything?” Dr. Williams asked.

“It’s based on an honor system. Only take what you need,” Dr. Nara replied. “They wouldn’t probably mind if you did take everything. But it would be frowned upon, and you’d be considered a rude asshole for doing it.”

“People here are past the need for materialism,” Dr. Madson replied. “It works just fine.”

“They have video games,” I added.

“What, really?!?” Dr. Williams replied.

“I have a few machines in my habitation space. Feel free to come and try them out,” I offered. “If you like one, I can show you how to install it in your place.”

“I don’t have the room,” Dr. Williams replied.

“What do you mean you don’t have the room?!?” Dr. Madson said. “Robert! What have you done now?!?”

“Nothing!” Dr. Williams replied.

“Okay, Robert. Up. Now,” Dr. Madson yelled.

We were all intrigued and followed Drs. Madson and Williams to his habitation space. He opened the door. The place was jam-packed with high-tech Elaran lab equipment. And in the middle of the room was a large swivel chair surrounded by three huge holographic projectors. A grand workstation by all accounts.

“Robert, what in the hell are you doing here?” Dr. Madson asked.

“This is where I work when I’m not in the lab,” he replied.

“And where’s your bed?” Dr. Madson asked.

“I dematerialized it to make space for this equipment. I sleep on that couch,” he replied, pointing at a small couch crammed into the corner of the room.

“Wow! This is an amazing setup!” Dr. Kallas exclaimed. “You must show me how to reproduce this.”

“Of course!” Dr. Williams replied.

“Riku, don’t give him more bad ideas!” Dr. Madson stated.

“I’m not. Anyway, Robert, what are you working on here? Looks interesting,” Dr. Kallas asked.

“I’ve found a way to interface with the blue card,” Dr. Williams replied. He placed the blue card onto a small black mat on the table and then activated the workstation. The three holographic projectors flooded the room with light. “I’m working on deciphering some of the more advanced features of this device,” he said while typing frantically at his keyboard.

“Do we leave them here?” Dr. Nara asked.

“No!” Dr. Madson replied. “Come on boys. Up. This is no time for work.”

We returned to the garden with Drs. Williams and Kallas reluctantly in tow.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to the long days and nights here,” Dr. Nara remarked. “That strange sensation of going to bed in the early morning, getting a good night's sleep, and waking up just before lunch on the same day.”

“I quite like the nights,” Dr. Kallas stated. “They’re so much livelier.”

“Yeah, I understand that the locals spend the days working and leave recreation for the evenings,” Dr. Madson noted.

As dusk would set in on Ket, the streets at ground-level in Vedess would start to become more crowded and a lot noisier. During Ket’s evening, night, and into its early morning “hours” a multitude of stalls, decorations, and small theatre stages were constructed in parks across the city. Thousands of locals would descent on the locations to enjoy food and drinks while watching and playing their own music. Many Elara also performed a seemingly incredibly popular form of theatre that resembled Kabuki. Music was mostly vocally performed by groups of Elara. While some of it was soft and pleasant, their long performances would occasionally reach rather loud and screechy crescendos. We were currently in the night cycle, and there was quite a racket coming from the streets below.

“You enjoy all this noise?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yeah, I prefer it to the quiet,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Even that cat’s chorus?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Robert, we’ve heard you complain about their singing enough already,” Dr. Madson stated.

“And besides, I quite like it,” Dr. Nara added.

While we were talking, we noticed a small group of Elara on the same Seris platform as us. They were some distance away. We’d always assumed that this level had been sort of privately reserved for us, but experience had proven otherwise. The Elara kinda went where they pleased. We stopped talking for a moment and watched. They seemed like they might be younger members of their species. Perhaps adolescents. They were drinking, making a lot of noise, and fooling around dangerously close to the edge of the platform.

“I can’t even look!” Dr. Madson stated. “Oh god, they’re going to fall off!”

“They do look a bit inebriated,” Dr. Williams replied. “They don’t seem at all worried about standing so close to the edge, there.”

“Do you think we should go over and warn them?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“I really rather wouldn’t,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Yeah, let’s not interrupt them,” I said.

Try as we might, though, we couldn’t stop watching them. And then disaster struck, just as we’d feared. One of the Elara fell backwards off the platform.

We estimated that the platform was a good fifty meters above street level. With a fall from that height, the youngster would have been, at the very least, seriously injured.

We all got up and started to run over to the other two, who didn't seem at all bothered by what had just happened. Before we arrived, the Elara who'd fallen, just moments before, translocated back onto the disc. They all started cheering.

We stopped in our tracks.

"What the hell just happened?" Dr. Kallas exclaimed.

"Interesting, just as I hypothesized," Dr. Williams replied.

"What did you hypothesize, Robert?" Dr. Kallas answered impatiently.

"The reason there are no barriers around these platforms is because there are safeguards against falling," Dr. Williams replied. "Or, rather, from hitting the ground. I hypothesize that the Elara who just fell never hit the ground. They were translocated mid-fall."

"That would make sense," Dr. Kallas replied.

"An anti-accident field, you mean?" Dr. Nara asked. "Kinda like the anti-hangover field?"

"Like that, yeah," Dr. Williams replied.

“So, that’s what the kids do to entertain themselves around here,” Dr. Kallas said.

“I haven’t seen many entertainment facilities around here, come to think of it,” Dr. Madson replied. “Well apart from what’s going on down there.”

“Yeah, I’ve also noticed a lack of seedy joints,” Dr. Kallas noted. “You know. Gambling. Prostitution. That sort of thing.”

“Apparently all the seedy joints are on the eastern continent,” Dr. Nara stated. “Jen told me. She was there following up some leads or something. She told me she’s seen things that can’t be unseen.”

“I can’t imagine the Elara being depraved,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Apparently facilities on the Eastern continent cater to many species,” Dr. Nara replied. “I’m not sure the Elara are necessarily the ones who Jen was referring to.”

“I’ve not seen all that many other species around,” Dr. Madson noted. “Humans. Elara. Lanass. And a few others around here that we’ve yet to be introduced to.”

“Apparently the Eastern continent is full of other species,” Dr. Nara replied. “Hundreds of them. Jen said it was like Babylon Five there.”

“It occurs to me that I know very little about this planet,” Dr. Kallas stated. “Apart from bits and bobs about Vedess and Voriss.”

“We all knew that there were three continents,” Dr. Madson stated. “I only recently learned their names. This continent is called Esivoro, the eastern one is Lasvoro and the northern one is Vileona.”

“Jen said she went to a city called Orlon on the eastern continent,” Dr. Nara added. “It’s apparently a twin city. The other is called Ionso.”

“Are those cultural or scientific?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Apparently neither,” Dr. Nara replied. “They’re relaxation and recreation centers. Beach resorts and stuff.”

“That would explain the seedy joints being there,” Dr. Kallas noted.

“Did you know they only have three time zones here?” Dr. Nara asked.

“No, I didn’t!” Dr. Madson replied. “I’ve never had to communicate with anyone living elsewhere on this planet.”

“I only learned about them when I started talking to Jen,” Dr. Nara stated. “Each continent has its own time zone. It’s that simple. We’re on the western time zone. Voriss is central.

And Lasvoro is eastern. I also learned about their local timekeeping. Apparently, a day on Ket is split into ten hours. Their word for hour is aikr. One aikr is about twelve Earth hours.”

“A decimal time system,” Dr. Williams replied. “I see they’ve embraced logic.”

“Rosral’s still not here. I wonder what’s keeping her?” Dr. Nara wondered.

“Maybe she forgot?” Dr. Williams stated.

“I wouldn’t imagine she did,” Dr. Kallas replied. “I don’t think I’ve ever witness her forget anything.”

“I hope the emergency meeting she’s in isn’t anything bad,” I stated.

“What, like another superintelligence threat?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yeah, something like that,” I replied. “Although they handled that seemingly impossible situation without any effort. I’m not too worried.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Anyone for a refill?” Dr. Madson asked while materializing yet another bottle of Sec. This one was, however, bigger than the empties on the table.

“What’s THAT?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Oh, I found the setting while fiddling around this morning,” Dr. Madson replied. “It’s a two-liter bottle.”

“Two liters? I didn’t know they came in that size!” Dr. Nara exclaimed. “Can you get me a bigger glass to go with that?”

“Coming right up!” Dr. Madson stated.

“Hey, do you remember those games we used to play when we first moved in?” Dr. Nara asked.

“The clothes fabricator game?” Dr. Kallas replied. “Oh yeah, very well.”

“Didn’t that start as a dare?” Dr. Nara replied.

“It did!” Dr. Madson noted. “We used to dare each other to fabricate and wear local attire. And then it became tradition at our little get-togethers.”

“The more awkward the attire, the more points you scored,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“It’s not like the clothes were bad,” Dr. Nara noted, “they suit the Elara very well. They just look awkward on humans.”

“Anyway, Robert is still the reigning champion!” Dr. Madson remarked.

“Wha?” Dr. Williams exclaimed. He was browsing his blue card and clearly hadn’t been paying attention to us.

“Do you remember the snack dare game?” Dr. Kallas said. “How did it go again?”

“Fabricate a random Elaran snack and choose a contestant. They must eat the snack. And then they choose the next snack and the next victim,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Oh god, some of those snacks were awful!” Dr. Nara stated.

“Yes, we all remember you puking on more than one occasion,” Dr. Williams added. Apparently, he’d rejoined our conversation.

“One of those snacks tasted like worms. Or rat intestines, still filled with the food it had eaten,” Dr. Nara said.

“I’m glad I didn’t get that one!” Dr. Madson noted.

“In all fairness, a lot of the snacks were very good,” Dr. Kallas replied. “That drinking game, on the other hand...”

“Oh god,” Dr. Nara replied. “Some of those spirits were terrible.”

“I remember,” Dr. Madson replied. “Even the anti-hangover field didn’t save me from that experiment.”

“Me neither!” Dr. Nara replied. “I thought I was the only one who ended up suffering.”

“Oh god, remember that blue stuff?” Dr. Kallas added.

“It tasted like anti-freeze!” Dr. Madson replied.

“I still remember the taste of those anti-freeze spritzers we made,” Dr. Nara remarked. “Ugh! Never again!”

“We should gift McTavish a bottle of that blue stuff,” Dr. Madson noted.

“Are you trying to get us all fired?” Dr. Williams interjected.

The conversation paused momentarily while we refilled our glasses.

“Have you guys watched much of the local TV?” Dr. Madson asked.

“All the time!” Dr. Nara replied. “One of my favorite things is to lay in bed and watch it.”

“Me too!” Dr. Madson replied. “It’s so much fun to watch. Regardless of what’s on. I’ve been watching dramas, comedies, thrillers, informational shows. You name it.”

“There’s a distinct lack of science fiction, medical, and crime genres,” Dr. Kallas noted.

“That makes sense, though,” I replied. “Being here is like living a science fiction show. They clearly don’t need to practice medicine, since their translocation tech takes care of it. And, well, they don’t seem to have any crime. So, they probably don’t have a reference point for writing about it.”

“They do have interesting law programs,” Dr. Madson noted. “Well, not perhaps law, but deep discussions about ethics, regulations, morality, that sort of thing.”

“I think Elara science fiction and crime is an untapped source of potentially interesting content,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Perhaps we should contact the cultural council and talk to them about that,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Let’s face it, most of their regular TV shows would be high science fiction on our planet,” Dr. Williams added.

“I don’t get their comedies at all,” Dr. Madson stated. “Even with translations turned on.”

We all nodded in agreement.

“Probably a cultural thing,” Dr. Kallas noted.

“But, hey, food TV,” Dr. Kallas remarked. “How good is that?”

“I think I’ve put on weight watching that,” Dr. Madson replied.

“I only found out about it last week!” Dr. Nara added. “No fair!”

“Wait, food TV?” Dr. Williams stated. “Like cooking shows?”

“Cooking shows, culinary expeditions, all that stuff,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Wait, you don’t know about those?”

“Food TV is everything we’ve ever dreamed about,” Dr. Madson replied.

“You know how watching Earth TV shows about food just leave you hungry and craving whatever the presenters are cooking or sampling? Here, food TV alleviates that problem entirely,” Dr. Nara stated. “There are loads of programs on Elaran TV that demonstrate food preparation or follow a presenter through a culinary trip in an Elaran city, region, or colony.”

“And the great thing about those food shows is the ‘try this at home’ option,” Dr. Kallas added.

“Rachel figured it out,” Dr. Nara added. “She recognized the Elaran glyphs.”

“Yeah, so, at various points during the show, when the food has been prepared and the host is sampling it, a ‘try this at home’ option appears in the display,” Dr. Madson stated. “Just select ‘yes’ and a portion of the dish materializes in your food fabricator.”

“Are you serious?” Dr. Williams replied. “And how long have you known about this?”

“I figured it out a few weeks ago,” Dr. Madson replied.

“And you didn’t think to tell me about it?” Dr. Williams whined.

“I was meaning to tell you, but you’re always too busy working or playing with your computers and gadgets,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Most of the foods I’ve tried from those shows have been amazing,” Dr. Nara stated.

“I’ve had the occasional miss,” Dr. Kallas said.

“I normally hate cooking shows BECAUSE they make me hungry,” Dr. Williams remarked.

“I’m definitely going to watch them here. Hmm. I wonder if this tech could be adapted for Earth TV?”

Rosral didn’t show up that evening. But we kinda didn’t notice. We’d all gotten tired. And drunk. We eventually retired to our habitation spaces and fell asleep.

Chapter 36 Resistance is futile

We convened in our lab the following morning. Halfway through the morning we stopped work to chat over coffee and some sweet Elaran snacks called Bvisp. They reminded me of fig rolls.

“Do we know if they found the insider yet?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Not that I’ve heard of,” Dr. Williams replied.

“It’s been a few weeks already,” Dr. Madson noted.

“Yeah, but there’ve been no more leaks,” I replied.

“That we know about,” Dr. Williams added. “They might be out there. Unpublished.”

“I think Earth has more pressing issues than alien leaks right now,” Dr. Madson said.

“Did they manage to fix all the damage from those explosions on Earth yet?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Not from what I’ve been reading,” Dr. Nara replied.

“It’s been, what, almost two weeks since those attacks?” I asked.

“Yeah!” Dr. Nara replied. “They’ve fixed some of it, but from what I’ve been reading, the situation is starting to look like Mad Max. At least in the US. And parts of Europe.”

“From what I’ve heard, whoever carried out those attacks knew exactly what they were doing,” Dr. Madson added. “There aren’t enough spare parts to fix everything. Significant portions of the US, Europe, and Asia are still without power. And internet. Banks are still shut. Markets are crashing. There’s no petrol, food, electricity, or even water in many places.”

“Everything I predicted,” Dr. Williams noted. “And I’d bet it’s playing right into the hands of the extremists.”

“Oh, it is!” Dr. Nara replied. “Look at what’s going on in the US. Those crazies with basements full of weapons have formed organized militias in response to martial law. They’re fighting against their own people.”

“Are we talking civil war?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Nobody’s saying it out loud, but it’s starting to look like that,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Those crazies have been pushing for a civil war for years,” Dr. Williams said. “Looks like they got what they wanted.”

“I’d always hoped there weren’t as many of them as we feared,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Aren’t there, like, two and a half guns per household in the US?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Something like that,” Dr. Nara replied. “There’s been a massive buy up of guns and ammunition since the beginning of the twenties. They’ve been preparing for this moment.”

“I heard rumors that those guys also got their hands on Spectre drones,” Dr. Williams added.

“That wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest. They’ve always had plenty of allies in law enforcement,” Dr. Nara replied.

“That’s some pretty frightening tech in the hands of the wrong people,” Dr. Kallas remarked.

“The military has drone jamming tech,” Dr. Nara stated. “But it shuts down their own drones too. I understand it’s a lose-lose scenario, since they rely on those drones for surveillance.”

Dr. Nara pulled up some footage of skirmishes on the outskirts of Washington DC. What had once been a peaceful suburban residential area now looked like a war zone.

“Let’s hope there aren’t any new leaks,” I replied. “I’d really rather not visit Earth right now.”

“What, you mean yet another summons from McTavish?” Dr. Madson asked.

“If that lazy git won’t use the translocator, perhaps we should just ignore his summons,” Dr. Williams replied.

“What, and get fired?” I replied.

“Would you even care at this point?” Dr. Williams replied. “We’re here on Ket. We don’t need money or grants or a position in academia. We can continue our research with or without the support of the university.”

“Robert has a point,” Dr. Kallas stated. “We’re pretty self-sufficient here.”

“We are!” Dr. Nara replied. “And why are we always working so hard? We should take a leaf out of our hosts’ book.”

“When in Rome?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Exactly!” Dr. Nara replied.

Rosral appeared in our break room.

“ROSRAL!” Dr. Nara screamed.

Rosral flinched like she was expecting a flying hug from Dr. Nara.

“We were just talking about you,” Dr. Madson remarked.

“Nothing bad, I hope,” Rosral replied.

“Nah, we were talking about how we should embrace the local culture more,” Dr. Kallas replied. “You know, take it easy.”

“What? You think our race is lazy?” Rosral asked. She gave Dr. Kallas an angry stare.

“No! No! That’s not what I meant!” Dr. Kallas replied in a fluster.

“What Riku was trying to say is…” Dr. Madson added.

“You guys really are gullible,” Rosral remarked, grinning.

“I knew she was joking,” Dr. Williams stated. “I just wanted to watch Riku squirm.”

“Good for you, Robert,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Pull up a seat, Rosral!” Dr. Nara said.

“We don’t have time to chat right now. There’s a bit of an emergency,” Rosral replied.

“We were just talking about the situation on Earth,” Dr. Madson stated. “Do you mean the Elara are going to help out now?”

“The situation on Earth doesn’t concern us,” Rosral stated. “What I need to show you is far more important.”

“Another superintelligence threat?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“You might say that, yes,” Rosral replied.

“Do those threats really pop up so often?” Dr. Williams asked. “How bad are we at monitoring the universe?”

“It’s not a new one,” Rosral replied. “It seems our previous operation failed. We didn’t eliminate all the computational substrate.”

“How is that possible?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Apparently, the superintelligence had developed a method to spoof QUERY readings,” Rosral replied. “The mechanism was only in use in a portion of their propagation nodes. Our scans missed those completely.”

“I see,” Dr. Williams replied. “So, what you’re saying is that they evaded your anti-jamming mechanisms.”

“Correct, Dr. Williams,” Rosral replied. “One of our allies discovered unusual quantum spacetime inference readings in a system adjacent to those where the original threat was located. We adjusted our devices. We can now see the previously hidden object.”

“We only missed one?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“That’s what we were hoping,” Rosral replied. “But after scanning additional systems in the vicinity, we identified dozens more. And then hundreds more.”

“I assume we’re going to mount another similar operation against those,” Dr. Madson replied.

“The tactics we used before will not work again,” Rosral replied. “The superintelligence learned from our previous offensive.”

“We’re now facing a two-point-zero version of this thing,” Dr. Williams noted.

“Correct again,” Rosral replied. “The nodes that remained have built defenses. And they’ve adapted.”

“Adapted?” Dr. Kallas asked. “In what way?”

“The new version expands more aggressively,” Rosral replied. “Their faster-than-light drives are an order or magnitude better than their old ones. The core hubs now construct and send out propagation nodes that arrive in new systems within hours. When a propagation node arrives at its destination, it fabricates thousands of small drones that harvest materials to construct new hubs. Both the hubs and propagation nodes are now equipped with defensive shields. Oh, and they are also constructing other space-borne megastructures.”

“What do those other megastructures do?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“We don’t yet know,” Rosral replied. “We hypothesize that they may be defensive structures. Shields or automated weapons arrays capable of repelling our munitions.”

“This doesn’t sound good,” Dr. Nara remarked. “Have you ever had to deal with a two-point-zero superintelligence before?” she asked.

“Not for a very long time,” Rosral replied. “This is a non-trivial threat. Failing to eliminate it this time is not an option. We’ve never faced a three-point-zero superintelligence. We hypothesize that such a threat may be impossible to contain. It could mean an end to all life in the universe.”

“If this thing is spreading quickly, aren’t we in a bit of a hurry to deal with it?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“We are,” Rosral replied. “We have already contacted a number of other alliances for help.”

“So, what happens now?” Dr. Madson asked.

“We must first carefully identify every last hub, propagation node, drone, and nanoparticle that belongs to this new superintelligence,” Rosral stated. “They may also be using other spoofing technologies. We are exploring methods to detect them.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Nothing at the moment,” Rosral replied. “But I’ll keep you informed.”

Rosral translocated away. Dr. Williams got up out of his seat and hurried out of the break room.

“Where are you going in such a hurry?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“I think I know how to bring up images of this new thing from the central archives,” he yelled.

We all followed him into the lab. He was already working at one of the Elaran devices.

“As I suspected,” he said as we walked in. “All Elaran devices update centrally. This one already contains the anti-spoofing tech.”

Dr. Williams brought up a QUERY scan of a system inhabited by the two-point-zero superintelligence. We could see that it was in the process of constructing a layered star-powered substrate shell around the host star. It wasn’t yet finished. Millions of tiny drones swarmed around the structure. We observed it building in real-time.

“Damn, that’s fast,” Dr. Kallas remarked.

“It is,” Dr. Williams replied. “It will take a volume of matter close to that contained in our entire inner solar system to construct it.”

“Kinds looks like the Death Star,” Dr. Nara remarked.

“Except that it’s a tad bigger,” Dr. Kallas replied.

We noticed another object in the system. It was spherical in design and glowed a sort of blue-green color. It wasn’t that large. Maybe a few kilometers in diameter. Dr. Williams zoomed in on it. The device had an opening in it. New drones could be seen pouring out of the opening at a frightening rate.

“This must be the propagation node Rosral mentioned,” Dr. Kallas remarked.

“I wonder what that glow is,” Dr. Nara said.

“Shields, maybe?” Dr. Kallas posited. “Rosral mentioned shields.”

We watched as the layered computational substrate was constructed. It was mesmerizing. After it was finished, a similar blue-green glow started to emanate from it.

“Almost definitely shields,” Dr. Kallas remarked.

We then noticed that a new structure was being built. It was shaped like a ring.

“Look! They’re constructing a stargate!” Dr. Kallas joked.

“It does look like that, doesn’t it?” Dr. Nara replied. “Minus the symbols.”

We all turned to Dr. Williams, expecting a snide remark. He didn't bother.

"Are you feeling alright, Robert?" I asked. "We've had references to both the Death Star and a stargate, and you haven't said a word."

"You guys use references to sci-fi literally all the time now," he replied. "I can't be bothered to comment on them anymore."

"Could that be because some of those references ended up proving your long-held hypotheses invalid?" Dr. Kallas asked sarcastically.

"Don't wind him up," Dr. Madson said. "This situation actually looks quite serious."

"I'm not sure I've ever seen Rosral act so serious," Dr. Kallas stated.

"It's almost like she's worried about this situation," Dr. Nara added.

"If she's worried, we should be," Dr. Williams stated.

"Kinda puts things back on Earth in perspective," Dr. Madson remarked.

"Yeah, and they have no idea what's going on out here," Dr. Kallas replied.

"I wonder if they'd stop their petty bickering if they knew?" Dr. Madson posited.

“Not blood likely,” I replied.

We watched the drone swarm finish building the ring structure. Drone activity ceased and it started glowing blue-green.

“I wonder what that thing does?” Dr. Madson remarked.

“Whatever it is, it’s not doing anything right now,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“They seem to have stopped building,” Dr. Williams noted.

“Wait, something’s happening,” Dr. Nara noted.

A propagation node floated over to the ring structure. It paused for a moment. The ring’s blue-green glow intensified. The propagation node started moving again. It passed through the center of the ring, and as it did so, bright flash occurred, and the node vanished.

“See, I told you!” Dr. Kallas exclaimed. “It was a stargate!”

“Where’s the puddle, then?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Wait, you’re actually interacting with my sci-fi reference?” Dr. Kallas replied, startled.

“Yes,” Dr. Williams replied. “So, where’s the puddle?”

“I think it’s obvious. Don’t you? They’ve clearly developed a more advanced stargate that doesn’t require a puddle to be formed at the event horizon,” Dr. Kallas joked.

“Stargate theories aside, what just happened?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Actually, I believe the stargate theory was sound in this case,” Dr. Williams stated. “I’m going to take a guess that this thing is some rudimentary form of jump drive.”

“What makes you think that?” Dr. Madson asked.

“We know the propagation nodes are capable of faster-than-light travel. On their own. If it were going to use that mechanism to move to its next location, why pass through the ring first? It could have just zoomed off from where it was sitting,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Interesting hypothesis,” Dr. Kallas remarked.

“But if they now have jump drive, doesn’t that mean that they can essentially spread across the entire universe?” Dr. Nara asked.

“It does,” Dr Kallas replied.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but doesn’t that mean its next destination could be Earth? Or here?” Dr Madson asked.

“Oh crap, Rachel’s right,” Dr. Nara noted.

“I’d imagine they have defenses against that thing here,” Dr. Williams stated. “We’re probably safe.”

“Yeah, but Earth doesn’t,” Dr. Madson replied. “It’ll get wiped out in seconds.”

“The number of stars in the universe is unimaginably large,” Dr. Williams stated confidently. “The chances of that propagation node randomly choosing Earth or here as its next destination is remo... Wait something’s happening.”

We watched the screen. Drones started streaming out of the computational hub. Within seconds, a new propagation node was assembled. It moved through the ring, leaving another bright flash in its wake. And then another node was formed. It blinked through the ring. And then another. And another. And another.

“We’re screwed,” Dr. Williams said, with a seriously fearful expression on his face. “We’re really screwed.”

“There’s really nothing they’re going to be able to do about this is there?” Dr. Madson said.

“If all those other hubs are doing the same thing, as we can safely assume they are, this thing is going to go exponential. If it hasn’t already,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Hang on,” Dr. Williams interjected. “There’s another war strategy session convening. I’ll tune us in.”

Dr. Williams moved over to another Elara device and tuned into the proceedings. We could now watch both things at once – the threat and the response to it.

“This should be interesting,” Dr. Kallas remarked.

“Maybe we’ll learn how frighteningly advanced these allies of ours are,” I remarked.

The session was hosted, once again, by the Ani strategist who’d hosted the proceedings we’d watched weeks earlier. These new proceedings were hosted in a much larger chamber. We saw many races we’d never seen before. Including a race we thought might be the grays Rosral had alluded to. We also saw what looked like the Enu.

“The number of systems affected by this threat have rapidly grown over the past few hours. We estimate at least thirteen thousand so far. That number will have grown by the time I finish this sentence,” the Ani stated.

“Do we have a plan?” one participant asked. We didn’t recognize its race.

“We do,” the Ani replied. “The plan is as follows. All affected systems will be marked immediately after this meeting is adjourned. The Enu will remotely deploy solar system destroyers to all marked targets. The Ashki will subsequently deploy black hole generators to those systems to absorb any remaining substrate. The Elara have already deployed capture net fields around all affected systems. These will be activated the moment the attacks start and should ensure that any propagation nodes attempting to jump out are destroyed. Finally, the

Reen will deploy their particle swarm generators to mop up any remaining nanoparticulate matter.”

“This sounds like a dubious plan,” a member of the audience remarked. “What is the probability of success?”

“Given our limited time to respond to this threat, we estimate our chances of success to be around eighty percent,” the Ani replied.

“Is there no way of improving those odds?” they asked.

“Not in the limited time we have,” the Ani replied. “If we allow this threat to continue expanding, we’ll be soon spread too thin to respond to it.”

“Very well,” they replied.

“Votes in favor to proceed?” the Ani announced. A running tally of votes showed up in the feed. Within less than thirty seconds, all votes were in. The result was seventy six percent in favor of the action.

“Very well,” the Ani stated. “Proceed with the attack.”

We turned back to the other console to watch. Dr. Williams zoomed out a bit. Propagation nodes continued to blink, one after the other, through the ring structure.

“I wonder if we’ll see the effects of that capture net device?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Probably not,” Dr. Williams replied. “It probably extends way outside of this current field of view.”

“Right,” Dr. Kallas noted. “And if it simply dematerializes stuff that jumps through, we’d probably not see anything anyway.”

The console lit up with an extremely bright flash. It subsided. Nothing remained.

“Wow. A weapon capable of destroying an entire solar system in microseconds,” Dr. Madson remarked.

“Remotely,” Dr. Williams added.

“That’s concerning,” Dr. Nara noted.

“Tell me about it!” Dr. Williams replied.

A faint white glow appeared on the view screen.

“That’ll be the black hole,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“How do they make a black hole out of nothing?” I wondered.

“How indeed,” Dr. Kallas replied.

We heard noise coming from the other console. We turned to watch.

“The attack has been completed,” the Ani stated.

The crowd in the room looked nervous. We assumed the results would arrive in moments.

“All targeted areas have been essentially sterilized,” the Ani stated.

There was a brief pause as the Ani looked down at a data console.

“No new activity has been reported in the last fifteen minutes. We can thus conclude that the offensive was a success.”

The feed suddenly became rather noisy as attending members made various noises that might have been cheering. They continued to converse loudly with each other.

“Proceedings are adjourned,” the Ani called out.

We watched as the chamber started to empty. A moment later, Rosral appeared in our lab.

“Ahh, I see you were watching!” she said.

“Yeah!” Dr. Nara replied. “It was very exciting!”

“Do you think we’re out of trouble now?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Let’s hope so,” Rosral replied.

“That’s not very reassuring,” Dr. Williams remarked.

“I think at this point you know about as much as I do,” Rosral replied.

“I think I could use a drink,” Dr. Madson stated.

“You and me both!” Dr. Nara replied.

Chapter 37 Beachhead

I arrived in our lab the following morning to find Dr. Nara already at her workstation.

“Hey, John, come over here. I need you to see this,” she said.

I joined her at her computer. She pointed to her screen. It was an email. From Jen.

Kano,

I need to talk to you and your team urgently. I can’t tell you what it’s about via email. Do you have a place where we can talk in private? I mean completely off-the-grid. Get back to me as soon as you receive this.

Jen

“That looks important,” I stated. “I wonder what’s so secret she can’t tell us in front of the Elara?”

“That’s what I’m wondering,” Dr. Nara replied.

“Sounds ominous,” I replied.

“Do you know of anywhere we can talk that wouldn’t be visible to the Elaran QUERY technology?” she asked.

“No. Not off the top of my head. We have to assume everything we do is being watched at all times. Including this conversation,” I replied.

“Do you think Robert or Riku might have a solution?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Who knows,” I said. “We can always ask them.”

“What about Rosral?” Dr. Nara asked. “We can trust her, right? Maybe there’s a place on her ship that would be private?”

“You have a point there,” I replied. “I think the less we discuss this the better.”

“Agreed,” Dr. Nara replied. “Let’s try and figure this out when the others arrive.”

I went and got coffee. When I got back the others were there. So was Rosral.

“You’re here,” Rosral stated. “I was just telling the others. Our offensive yesterday failed. The superintelligence is back.”

“Wait, what?” I replied in surprise.

“We missed some hubs that were cloaked using mechanisms we hadn’t discovered,” Rosral stated.

“Again?!?” Dr. Williams exclaimed.

“That’s not the bad part,” Rosral added. “The entities identified where our attacks came from. They’re currently trying to breach our defenses.”

“Defenses?” Dr. Williams asked nervously. “They’re trying to breach our defenses?!?”

“Our sentinel defense system prevents unwanted objects from jumping into the galaxy,” Rosral said.

“This galaxy?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Yes,” Rosral stated. “The entities are attempting to jump thousands of probes into our galaxy as we speak. They’re trying to circumvent the defense grid.”

“Okay, tell me that circumvention is impossible,” Dr. Kallas said.

“So far, the defenses are holding,” Rosral replied. “Thousands of probes have been successfully dematerialized. But circumvention is possible. It’s only a matter of time before that happens.”

“Oh god! We are so screwed!” Dr. Williams replied.

“And what happens when they circumvent the defense shield?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Propagation nodes will arrive in systems in this galaxy,” Rosral replied. “You know what happens after that.”

“So, we just roll over?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Not quite,” Rosral stated. “Defense plans are currently underway. Come, let’s see.”

Rosral translocated us onto the top platform of Seris 14. Several other Elara had already gathered there.

“Look up,” she said.

“I don’t see anything,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Wait a moment,” Rosral replied. “Don’t blink or you’ll miss it.”

We watched and waited. My neck started to get stiff. And then it happened. A fleet of at least thirty Enu dreadnaughts appeared in the skies above us. One after another. Due to their immense size, they were clearly visible to the naked eye. It was a sight to behold.

“Hey, aren’t those the same ships we saw...” Dr. Kallas said.

“Just recently, yes,” Dr. Williams replied. “Oh. That is truly impressive.”

“They’re here as a precaution,” Rosral stated. “The defense shield is expected to hold out for another few hours. We have that time to come up with a solution.”

“Can’t we just nuke the places they’re launching these probes from?” Dr. Madson asked.

“We would have done that already,” Rosral replied. “But we don’t know where they’re coming from. We’ve yet to defeat their new stealth technologies.”

“Can’t we determine their location from trajectories?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“They’re using jump technologies,” Rosral replied. “Those don’t have trajectories.”

“What’s going on up there?” Dr. Nara asked. We looked up. The Enu dreadnaughts had started firing.

“They breached the defense field faster than we expected,” Rosral stated.

“They wha...” Dr. Williams started as Rosral translocated us back to our lab. She went to one of our Elaran devices and brought the ensuing battle up on its console. As suspected, the blue-green glow of a propagation node was plain as day on the screen. We observed the Enu dreadnaughts firing multiple overlapping ion beams at the node. To no effect. The beams were, however, destroying the endless stream of drones emanating from the object.

“Don’t they have more powerful weapons?” Dr. Madson asked. “Ones that go through those shields?”

“They do,” Rosral replied. “But they cannot be used safely this close to a planet.”

“Some of those drones are getting through those lasers,” Dr. Nara observed.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “But most are being destroyed. That should slow things down until the entity learns how to create drones with shields.”

“It’s a superintelligence,” I stated. “Why hasn’t it already learned that?”

“Perhaps the energy requirements to power those shields are too high,” Rosral replied.

“Perhaps they use small-scale translocation devices to harvest resources and fabricate components, and shields interfere with those mechanisms.”

“Also, it is probably spending a massive amount of energy maintaining its own shield against those ion beams,” Dr. Kallas added. “Less energy for processing cycles.”

“Are those damaged drones going back into the node?” Dr. Madson asked.

Rosral zoomed in. We observed that they were.

“Is that a tractor beam?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Umm. Yes,” Rosral replied. “Sorry, I didn’t get your reference for a moment. We have a different term for it.”

“Can those drones make it to Ket?” Dr. Nara asked. “And start harvesting this planet?”

“No,” Rosral stated. “They’ll be unable to penetrate our planetary shielding. At least for now.”

“So, they WILL eventually make it through?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “But they’ll likely only try after exhausting other resources in the system.”

Rosral stepped over to another Elaran device and tuned into a strategic proceeding. We had apparently caught the tail end of the session.

“Reports are coming in that almost three hundred inhabited systems are now host to propagation nodes,” the Ani said. “Our Enu and Asin fleets are starting to be spread thin. We’ve already lost five systems to the incursion. Our scientists are still working on a solution to destroying the propagation nodes, and to break the entity’s new stealth measures.”

“This doesn’t look good, does it?” Dr. Madson asked.

“It doesn’t,” Rosral replied. “We’ve never been in a situation like this before. No obvious solutions have presented themselves.”

“Can’t we just, you know, dematerialize that propagation node thingy?” Dr. Nara asked. “Or translocate it elsewhere?”

“Like, into the star, for instance,” Dr. Kallas added.

“We can’t,” Rosral stated. “The node is shielded in a way that would prevent translocation or dematerialization. And we know that because the sentinel defense grid was no longer able to stop it.”

“So, to disable the propagation node, we need a way past its shield?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yes, but that is not possible,” Rosral replied. “We cannot translocate anything inside it.”

“But we can translocate outside of it?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yes, but I can’t see why that would help,” Rosral replied.

“I might have an idea. Remember that grey goo planet?” Dr. Madson asked.

“The completely smooth one?” Dr. Nara replied.

“Yeah, that one,” Dr. Madson replied. “Wasn’t it comprised of nanobots that ate everything they touched?”

“It was,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“What if we translocated some of the grey goo nanobots onto a damaged drone?” Dr. Madson replied. “Let it be tractor beamed back into the node. Then the grey good would eat the node from the inside.”

“That grey goo takes too long to work,” Dr. Williams replied. “The propagation node would notice it and eliminate it way before it took hold.”

“Damn, yeah, you’re right,” Dr. Madson replied. “It took, what, twenty minutes to multiply. So, it would take hours or days to eat the thing.”

“A novel idea, to be sure,” Dr. Kallas noted. “Probably the best we’ve come up with, given the circumstances.”

“Yeah,” Dr. Madson replied. “It was worth a shot, eh?”

Rosral suddenly interrupted our conversation. “Show me this grey goo planet,” she said.

Dr. Williams accessed a nearby Elaran device and brought it up on screen. Rosral stepped in and isolated the structure of one of the nanobots teeming on its surface.

“Dr. Williams is correct,” Rosral stated. “These nanobots are unsuitable for our purposes. Not only are they too slow, but the composition of the propagation node is not conducive to their needs. These nanobots are designed to replicate using organic matter.”

“Like I said, stupid idea,” Dr. Madson replied.

“No,” Rosral replied. “Not stupid at all. We just need a more suitable nanobot. And a method to deploy them onto damaged drones just before they are re-ingested by a propagation node.”

“So, my plan might work?” Dr. Madson asked.

“We can pull this off?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“We can’t,” Rosral replied. “But I think I know someone who might.”

Chapter 38 A return to Esid

Without a word of warning, Rosral translocated us onto her ship.

“Could you at least give us some indication that you’re about to do that?” Dr. Williams whined when we’d arrived.

“Robert is worried about his balls hitting something upon arrival,” Dr. Madson informed Rosral. “Make sure you don’t translocate him too close to the corner of a table,” she continued, winking at Rosral.

“Hey! No fair!” Dr. Williams complained. “Now she’ll do that for sure!”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To Esid,” Rosral replied. “I thought you’d have guessed that.”

“The dinosaur anthropologists?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Yeah, them,” Dr. Nara replied. “Didn’t think of them as that, though.”

“I mean, it’s not a bad description,” Dr. Williams replied.

“Why not just translocate straight there?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“There’s a protective field around Ket,” Rosral replied. “It prevents anything from jumping in or out due to the attack. We’re going to have to fly out of it and then jump. Oh, and by the way, it also means no travel or communications are currently possible with Earth.”

“Not that we care,” Dr. Nara stated.

“Yeah, we have slightly bigger fish to fry here,” Dr. Williams added.

“Can you believe we thought the extremists were the bad guys?” Dr. Madson stated.

“They are only the bad guys from the perspective of being stuck back on that shithole planet,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“They technically are still the bad guys,” Dr. Nara replied. “In that they’re bad. And mostly guys.”

“Also, this superintelligence isn’t technically a bad guy,” Dr. Williams replied. “It’s just... single-minded.”

“And it’s literally the only thing that can put a stop to those extremists,” Dr. Nara joked.

“That is, if we fail here.”

“Interesting,” Dr. Kallas noted. “The only way to stop evil is to destroy the entire universe.”

Sola, the Elara we'd met a while back when we were first told about the superintelligence threat, appeared on board. She greeted Rosral and they proceeded to rub cheeks several times. They looked very happy to see each other. Sola turned and looked at us. Her eyes narrowed slightly. We got the feeling she wasn't too pleased to see us.

"We'll use this ship's faster-than-light drive to leave the security field and then make the jump to Esid," Rosral informed us.

"This will be the first time we've travelled using a faster-than-light drive!" Dr. Kallas excitedly exclaimed. "I wonder if it'll look like warp drive on Star Trek?" And while he was excitedly hypothesizing what the experience might entail, the view outside of the ship's window changed to that of Esid.

"Wait, what? Did I miss it?" Dr. Kallas said.

"No," Rosral stated. "The faster-than-light portion of the trip took zero point one eight seconds. The remainder of the trip was instantaneous. The ship plotted our course and directly switched between the two modes of transport en-route."

Two Essan translocated onto the ship as we arrived.

"They came here?" Dr. Williams asked.

"Looks like it," Dr. Nara replied.

“Oh, thank god,” he said. “I was NOT looking forward to going back down to that humid, itchy, insect-ridden jungle!”

“Guys, let me introduce our two guests,” Rosral said. “This is Kaano. He’s the Essan you met last time we were here.

Kaano bowed.

“And this is Essii,” Rosral said. “She’s also going to be helping us today.”

Essii bowed.

Essii was a tall and slender Essan female. She had a long, flexible body with a slight tail. Her head was large and broad and her large eyes glowed blue. Her pointed ears were slightly upturned, and she had small, colorful scales running along her body. She also had two horns atop her head and a series of ridges along her spine. Her hands were thin and long with four slender fingers.

The last time we’d met the Essan, we’d observed them wearing simple garments that matched their at-one-with-nature lifestyle. The two Essan who joined us on Rosral’s ship had apparently chosen to dress for the occasion. They were now wearing what looked like decidedly high-tech garb.

Essii was wearing a slim-fitting, dark purple suit that clung to her long and thin body. Her hands were protected by thin and durable gloves. She accessorized with a few colorful

metallic wristbands and a necklace of a shiny metal. She also had a small, hovering disc of light above her head.

Kaano was wearing a sleek, black jumpsuit with yellow highlights. Gleaming metal insets with engravings in what we presumed was the Essan written language adorned both of his arms.

We'd gotten used to not automatically shaking hands after our interactions with the Elara, the Enu, and the Lanass. We all sort of waved awkwardly and said hi as introductions were made.

"Kaano and Essii have already been informed of the situation, and of our plan," Rosral stated.

"Your nanoreplicator idea has merit," Essii said.

"Very innovative," Kaano added.

"Thanks!" Dr. Madson stated. "My idea!"

"Kaano and Essii will design new, more stringent nanoreplicators that favorably interact with the materials the propagation nodes are composed of," Rosral informed us. "They'll also design a suitable deployment mechanism and assist us in identifying all targets to infect with the nanoprobables."

Sola and the two Essan moved to the far corner of the room to start work. Rosral stayed with us.

“This is probably a good time to spill the beans on some stuff I haven’t told you yet,” she stated.

“Stuff you haven’t told us?” Dr. Williams replied.

“Yeah, stuff I haven’t told you. For instance, I told you that we use cybernetic implants to preserve long-term memories,” Rosral stated. “We also have other implants. I have ocular implants that provide me with a heads-up display, and an implant that I can use to communicate with other Elara.”

“Are you using that when you look like you’re daydreaming?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Most likely, yes,” Rosral replied.

“Ocular implants sound useful. Can I get some?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“We can see about that later,” Rosral replied.

“Umm. Me too, while you’re at it!” Dr. Williams said.

“We also have other implants. Specialized implants,” Rosral stated.

“Specialized how?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Stop interrupting Rosral and let her get on with the story!” Dr. Madson yelled. She slapped Dr. Williams on the arm.

“Specialized implants are only available to certain Elara,” Rosral continued. “One example of that is a quantum spacetime inference implant.”

“Wait, you have QUERY as an implant?” Dr. Williams exclaimed.

“Thank about these blue cards,” Dr. Kallas replied. They have QUERY in them. It’s been miniaturized beyond belief.”

“The implant is biological in nature, actually,” Rosral replied. “Powered by the host’s body. The recipients of such implants can view the universe with their minds.”

“Wait. Powered by the host’s body?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Organisms can be quite energy efficient,” Rosral said. “You’re all probably familiar with how calories are easier to put on than to lose, right?”

“Don’t even get me started,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Implants simply put that excess energy to use,” Rosral stated.

“You’re skinny. Do you have one?” Dr. Madson asked.

“No,” Rosral replied. “It takes years to learn how to use one. I haven’t been through the training. And besides, they’re reserved for only a very tiny fraction of the population.”

“But surely you’d need the implant before you can start learning how to use it?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“There’s more to it,” Rosral stated. “Ahem... This is where you might get mad at me... You see, your theory that quantum spacetime inference might have a write-mode is correct. We use it for translocation, fabrication, and jump drive technologies.”

“Oh my god! I knew it!” Dr. Kallas stated excitedly.

“So, those power systems the Lanass were working on weren’t to study the universe at the Planck length. They were to perform massive QUERY write-mode operations?” Dr. Williams hypothesized.

“Like translocating stars or solar systems?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Or even galaxies?” Dr. Williams added.

“Not really, but that is tangential to what I’m trying to tell you,” Rosral replied. “Let’s get back on topic. Since QUERY, as you put it, has a write mode, recipients of the implant also gain the ability to restructure spacetime with their minds.”

“This turns out to be dangerous,” Rosral added. “Those who first tested the implant found themselves restructuring matter around them while dreaming. And so, the implants were immediately removed.”

“I can see how that would be a problem,” Dr. Madson stated.

“I have such bad nightmares, I’d probably end up accidentally killing myself,” Dr. Williams said.

“Our scientists searched for an answer. A way to turn the device off under certain conditions. But they never found one,” Rosral added. “The solution to the problem was finally determined to be a rigorous mental training regimen for those destined to receive the implant.”

“That sounds tough,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Do you know anyone who does have the implant?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Yes,” Rosral replied. “Sola has one. Her red and white attire is reserved only for those who have such implants.”

“Why didn’t you tell us about QUERY write-mode before?” Dr. Kallas asked. “It would have made a lot of the things we’ve been experiencing more understandable.”

“We would have preferred you not learn about it until you’d learned a lot of other basics,” Rosral replied. “There’s much we still need to teach you. QUERY write-mode is dangerous, and not a functionality to be used or even experimented with lightly. It took us centuries to perform our own first experiments with it.”

“So, do all translocators, jump drives, and fabricators work using QUERY write-mode?” Dr. Williams asked.

“No,” Rosral replied. “They’re implemented in a variety of different ways by different species. Our use of QUERY write-mode is shared by a few other races.”

“I think there’s more Rosral wanted to tell us,” Dr. Madson stated. “How about we save our questions until the end.”

“Thank you, Rachel,” Rosral said. “The Essan developed quantum spacetime inference implants a very long time ago. All Essan have these implants. And they are adept at controlling them.”

We glanced over at Sola and the two Essan guests. They were standing around a new console. Well, part of one. From a distance we could just about make out that it was slowly materializing.

“The Essan also have memory implants that contain the combined knowledge of their species dating back millions of years,” Rosral told us. “It includes detailed blueprints and schematics for every device they’ve ever created, including those they used at the very height of their

technological superiority. Although plenty of highly advanced races exist today, it is rumored that the Essan achieved a level of technology far beyond anything that exists now. Their achievements were lost to time when they retired.”

“Except not,” Dr. Kallas replied. “They’re using that technology to help us now.”

“That is because they acknowledge the threat we are facing,” Rosral replied. “To be clear, they haven’t helped anyone in over ten thousand years.”

“Nothing like this has happened in ten thousand years?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“No,” Rosral replied.

“Was it us who came along and screwed everything up?” Dr. Madson asked.

“No, you simply arrived at the wrong moment,” Rosral replied. “Anyways, come! Let’s see what they’re doing. It’s always so fascinating to watch.”

We made our way to the corner of the room and watched as the Essan reconfigured spacetime on Rosral's ship. Layer by layer, piece by piece, they fabricated a device in front of them. It was almost done by the time we arrived, and we only saw the last few components slip into place. When they were done, Kaano activated the device. A brilliant holographic representation appeared overhead. Essii turned to us to explain what they had created.

“This device should be capable of doing everything we need,” Essii stated. “We’ll use it to peer inside a propagation device and look at its internals. With that knowledge, we’ll craft suitable nanoreplicators capable of consuming the nodes within seconds. We will then use the device to simultaneously reconfigure the surface of damaged drones on their way back into each propagation node.”

“Let me pull up the locations of all propagation nodes we’ve discovered,” Sola stated.

“No need,” Kaano replied. “We’ve already found them.” He displayed their locations on the holographic console.”

Sola checked the ship’s console. “You found more than we did,” she stated.

“Wait, wasn’t that search performed by, like, all alliances combined?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“It was,” Rosral replied.

“I’m beginning to see why you kept in touch with these folks,” Dr. Madson stated.

“We’ll need to coordinate this with your fleets,” Essii stated. “They’ll need to be firing at the drones when we implement this plan so that damaged ones return to the propagation nodes. Oh, and you’ll need to redeploy some fleets to nodes you missed in your own scans. Also, you’ll want a way of mopping up the resulting nanoreplicators. You won’t want them floating onto anything nearby. They’re quite voracious.”

“Those ion beams should do the trick,” Kaano stated.

“Let’s head back to Ket,” Rosral stated. And in a flash, we were back in orbit of Ket. Rosral’s ship had jumped to a location unnervingly close to the propagation node. It ominously filled the view outside the membrane window. We were so close, I felt like we might almost be able to reach out and touch it.

“Ummm. Rosral?” Dr. Nara asked. “Aren’t we a little close...”

Rosral, Sola, Essii, and Kaano were already gone. Presumably they’d translocated down to Ket to meet with fleet coordinators.

“Guys?” Dr. Nara stated. “I’m a little worried about our proximity to that... thing.”

“Me too,” Dr. Kallas added.

“I mean, yeah, this feels a little close for comfort,” Dr. Williams replied. “But Rosral must know what she’s doing. Right?”

“Does anyone know how long they’ll be?” Dr. Madson asked.

A thick orange ion beam streaked past the window of the ship. It was accompanied by a loud metallic hum that rattled the floor. Another beam streaked past. Drones streamed out of the blue-green glowy propagation node right in front of our eyes. We watched as many were vaporized. Blindingly bright ion beams continued to streak past the ship.

Amidst the chaos we suddenly saw it. A twitching, damaged drone was floating directly towards the membrane in our compartment.

“Oh god oh god! That thing’s going to come through the window!” Dr. Kallas exclaimed. We all ducked under tables and behind chairs as we braced for impact.

Nothing happened. I peeked out to see if had arrived. And in that moment, I watched as it bounced harmlessly off the membrane without so much as a sound and then slowly headed back in the opposite direction.

“Who needs a change of underpants now?” Dr. Williams chuckled.

“That’s not at all funny!” Dr. Kallas yelled.

“Should we at least try to figure out how to back this ship up a bit?” Dr. Madson asked.

None of us answered. Dr. Madson looked at Dr. Williams.

“Don’t look at me! I’m not going anywhere near that console!” he stated. “And besides, you’re the one with the driver’s license!”

“So, what, we’re going to sit here just a few meters from the thing that’s probably going to destroy the entire universe while we wait for those guys to have a nice chat back on Ket?” Dr. Kallas said.

“To be honest, there’s not much else we can do, is there?” I replied.

And so, we sat and waited in silence. And waited. And still they didn’t return. Dr. Williams pulled his blue card from his pocket, I assume to browse the internet or something. A good idea. Sometime to take our minds off impending doom. We all followed suit and pulled our own devices out.

“No internet,” Dr. Kallas stated.

Several more ion beams streaked past the window.

“They’re going to hit this ship eventually, aren’t they?” Dr. Madson said.

“Autotargeting?” Dr. Williams reminded us.

“Autotargeting my ass,” Dr. Nara replied. “Look how big those beams are!”

“Surely this ship is shielded against those?” Dr. Madson said.

“Who knows?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“I could really use a drink,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Do you think it’s wise, given the circumstances?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Why not? It’s not like we’re helping these people,” Dr. Nara replied. “We’re just kinda watching and hoping everything turns out well.”

“And hoping that we’re not all assimilated by some mechanical superintelligence by the end of the day,” Dr. Kallas added.

“I mean... It can’t hurt... Right?” Dr. Madson stated.

“If I’m gonna go, I’d rather be drunk when it happens,” Dr. Kallas said.

“That’s the spirit, Riku,” Dr. Williams replied, sarcastically.

“Fuck it,” Dr. Madson stated. She pulled out her blue card and materialized a two-liter bottle of sec and five glasses. “A decision has been made.”

She poured us all drinks and handed them out one by one.

“I, for one, thank you for making that important decision,” Dr. Kallas stated.

Dr. Nara finished her drink in one go and handed the glass back to Dr. Madson, who poured her another. “Here’s to the end of the world!” Dr. Nara said as she lifted her newly filled glass.

“And the end of the universe!” Dr. Madson replied. They tapped their glasses together.

“This stuff has quite a kick, doesn’t it!” Dr. Williams stated.

“Drink up, Robert! There’s more where that came from!” Dr. Madson said while materializing another bottle.

We sat in silence and drank for a moment.

“Oh hey, Rachel, you were married?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Oh god, don’t get me started on that episode!” Dr. Madson replied.

“Was it really that bad?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“It was a massive mistake,” Dr. Madson replied. “Straight out of a fucking rom com. Can’t believe I fell for that shit.”

“I concur,” Dr. Williams added.

“I went back to our small hometown for the holidays and was swept away by this rugged, flannel-wearing guy I’d known in high school. We got married quickly and I almost quit my career to move back there. Luckily, I figured out he was an asshole...”

“Oh god, really?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Yeah, I know, right?” Dr. Madson replied. “Sooo cliché...”

“How long did it last?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“About a year,” Dr. Madson replied. “A year of my life wasted.”

“Just think, if you’d quit your career, you wouldn’t be here staring at that... thing,” Dr. Nara stated, pointing to the ominous glowing propagation node.

“Honestly,” Dr. Madson replied. “I’d choose being here over being with that asshole any day of the week.”

“Anything you’d have like to have done before you died?” Dr. Nara asked us all.

“I’d like to have seen more of Ket,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Visit the eastern continent, at least.”

“I feel like I’ve done a lot more than most people, what with us meeting an alien race and moving to their planet and all,” Dr. Madson replied. “But there are thousands of species and habitats I’d still like to have studied.”

“I’d like to have learned about this new research the Elara are working on,” Dr. Williams said. “That and maybe get friendly with more of the local researchers. Exchange notes, that sort of thing.”

“This can’t really be the end of the story, can it?” I said.

And just then, our colleagues returned.

“You’re drinking without me?” Rosral exclaimed. “How rude!”

“You weren’t here!” Dr. Madson replied. She was already slurring her words a little.

“We were only gone five minutes,” Rosral stated.

“Has it really only been five minutes?” Dr. Williams asked. His words were also slurring a little. “It felt like five hours!”

“We were all just a little preoccupied with the death machine floating outside that window.”
Dr. Kallas stated, pointing at the membrane.

“Oops, sorry,” Rosral stated. She hurried over to a console, and we watched as the ship backed away and the propagation node subsided into the distance.

“Is that why you’re all drinking?” Rosral asked.

“Well, yeah,” Dr. Nara replied. “That, and the internet wasn’t working.”

“You humans get so easily bored,” Rosral noted. “Anyway, the attack is commencing now if you want to see it.”

And so, we watched. It took a moment for damaged drones infected with the nanoreplicators to return to the propagation node. Following that, we saw the blue-green glow dim out. Finally, and rather suddenly the node sorta just evaporated right in front of our eyes. Enu warships turned their ion cannons on the resulting dust.

“Was that it?” Dr. Madson asked. She clearly sounded very drunk.

“Not quite,” Rosral said. She turned on a viewscreen in the cabin. It was tuned to strategic command. We drank more Sec and watched as confirmation arrived that the propagation nodes in other systems had indeed been eliminated in a similar fashion.

“Sounds like a success.” Dr. Kallas stated. “Yay?”

“How much exactly have you guys had?” Rosral asked.

“You try spending fifteen minutes next to that... death ball,” Dr. Williams replied in very slurred words.

“Yeah! We all thought we were goners,” Dr. Kallas added in equally stuttered speech.

“Their survival instincts leave a lot to be desired,” Essii stated.

“Don’t fault them too much,” Rosral replied. “They’re new to this.”

I don't recall anything else from that encounter. I asked Rosral about it when writing this up and she told me that I'd rather not know. Suffice as to say, Rosral had thanked the Essan for their help. They had apparently agreed to stay with us to monitor the situation and provide assistance. She also told me that they'd speculated that this might not be the end of the situation and that new tactics may be required should the artificial superintelligence arise once more.

We woke up in our habitation spaces the next morning. Earth morning. It was turning to evening on Ket. It had been our second rather embarrassing situation in front of the Elara. Rosral was probably used to it by now. But Sola, Kaano, and Essii probably had their own opinions. Opinions we rather preferred they not share with us.

The immediate threat to Ket had subsided and life slowly returned to normal. If anything, the night festivities held during that Vedess evening were much louder and livelier than we had remembered. We hypothesized that we might just be witnessing the Elara celebrating. Which was strange. Security protocols were eventually lifted, and we turned to look at what was happening back on Earth.

We met in our gardens that morning, sort of by chance.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm having a day off," Dr. Madson said.

"That sounds like a good idea," Dr. Kallas replied.

“Yeah, time to take it easy,” I replied. “I think last night proved that we’ve been under a bit too much stress.”

“The great shaming,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Oh god, don’t even,” Dr. Nara said, sipping a cup of Oress.

“Do you like that stuff?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Yeah, it’s calming!” Dr. Nara replied.

“Are you secretly one of them?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Wha? Oh! No! I just like to have a herbal tea every now and then,” Dr. Nara replied. “No secret alien conspiracy here!”

“I heard the link communications with Earth are back up,” Dr. Madson stated. “Now that the invasion is technically over.”

“Anyone checked on the Earth situation yet?” I asked.

Everyone shook their heads. Not surprising, really, given what we’d just been through.

“We should probably check,” Dr. Kallas said. “It’s been a few days.”

We all pulled out our blue cards and started browsing. Like the good old days. A bunch of people sat around together, glued to their gadgets, not paying attention to each other.

“Looks like most of the internet and power on Earth has now been restored,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Yep. People are back to posting selfies and shit,” Dr. Nara added. “And presumably doomscrolling social media feeds.”

“What, like us?” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Wait. Holy crap. Have you seen this?” Dr. Madson exclaimed. “It’s from two days ago.”

We all looked at Dr. Madson’s blue card hologram as she pulled up a breaking news segment.

BREAKING NEWS:

Reports are coming in that, just moments ago, The Whitehouse was seized by armed militants. This comes after weeks of skirmishes between extremist groups and our military at key positions in and around the capital.

The fate of the standing President and many of his senior staff remain unknown at this time, although there have been rumors of politically motivated assassinations and public execution of those in power.

In a statement released just yesterday, the militia group, known as The American Patriot Front, promised to depose the standing government and usher in a new era of freedom and justice for the American people. It has been suggested that they've now succeeded in their goal.

The United States is now struggling through a potentially dangerous transition of power. The international community is watching closely to see what comes next.

This is a breaking news story. We will continue to bring you further updates as they become available.

"The extremists are now in control of the US nuclear arsenal?" Dr. Williams posited.

"I'd imagine so," Dr. Kallas replied.

"Oh, this is bad. This is very bad!" Dr. Williams stated.

"It gets worse," Dr. Nara added. "Check this out."

Good evening, this is Tom Shepperd with breaking news.

Today, the American Patriot Front, a far-right extremist group, who took control of the United States government in a shocking coup just days ago has called for war on China, which they blame for the global COVID-19 pandemic and have accused of orchestrating terrorist attacks against critical US internet and energy infrastructure.

The group's leader, issued a statement shortly after the coup, proclaiming that the United States will be going to war with China in an effort to ensure US safety and prosperity.

The US military, who have not yet responded to the situation, have been put on high alert and are reportedly preparing to deploy forces in and around the Chinese theatre.

The rest of the world has reacted with shock and dismay to the news, with many world leaders condemning the coup and calling for peace. It's a tense situation, and one that could have major implications for the already fragile global economy.

Stay tuned for updates as we continue to monitor this developing situation.

“Okay, we missed a lot,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Apparently so,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Looks like there have been major riots in many European cities, too,” Dr. Nara stated.

“Some governments have been overthrown. Others who were already controlled by extremist interests appear to be supporting the new US government in their call to attack China.”

“What a time to have lost our internet connections,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Yeah, tell me about it!” Dr. Nara replied. “All this stuff happened in the space of a couple of days.”

“Funny how we resolved a threat to all life in the universe while on Earth, things continued to go to hell,” Dr. Kallas stated.

“Resolved and resolved,” Dr. Williams replied. “I mean, we were there. But we didn’t exactly help.”

“Rachel was the one who came up with the solution!” Dr. Nara stated.

“Granted. But in the end, we all just got drunk,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Those were extenuating circumstances,” Dr. Madson replied. “Even Rosral could see that. I mean, she moved the ship as soon as she noticed!”

“It would have been nice if she’d noticed before she left us there to crap ourselves,” Dr. Kallas said.

“Speak for yourself,” Dr. Williams replied.

“I wonder what will happen next?” Dr. Madson said. “On Earth, I mean.”

“God only knows,” Dr. Kallas replied. “I’m glad we’re safe here.”

“Oh god! Jen’s request!” Dr. Nara exclaimed. “I almost completely forgot about it!”

“Jen’s request?” Dr. Williams replied.

“Jen contacted me. She wants to talk to us in private. Like completely off-the-grid. I was meant to reply to her email, but we got distracted,” Dr. Nara said.

“A way to talk completely off-the-grid?” Dr. Kallas stated. “Interesting.”

“Do you know a way of doing that?” Dr. Nara asked.

“No,” Dr. Kallas replied. “Not at all.”

“Me neither,” Dr. Williams replied.

And then Rosral appeared.

Chapter 39 An existential threat

“I thought you’d be in the lab,” Rorsal stated.

“Nah, we decided to take the day off,” Dr. Madson said.

“Sorry to ruin any plans you might have had, but there’s something I need to show you,”
Rosral said.

“Now?” Dr. Williams replied. “Can’t it wait?”

“No,” Rosral replied.

A moment later we were, once again, standing on her ship.

“Looks like you got distracted again, Kano,” Dr. Madson stated.

“Yep,” she replied. “The story of my life these past few weeks. Hope Jen isn’t in too much of a hurry.”

Rosral directed us to the console the Essan had materialized a few days prior. The bright holographic display appeared to depict an entire galaxy.

“Watch the display closely,” Rosral informed us.

“Wait, am I seeing this correctly?” Dr. Kallas asked. “It’s gradually getting dimmer. Like, stars are disappearing.”

“Correct, Dr. Kallas,” Rosral replied.

“What is causing this phenomenon?” Dr. Williams asked.

Kaano zoomed in on a portion of the galaxy. What was occurring was much easier to understand at this resolution. We watched as star after star blinked out in real time. He zoomed in again, this time to a star. Trillions of objects were swarming around it.

“Wait,” Dr. Williams stated. “Is this what I think it is?”

“The superintelligence is back?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“You’re both correct,” Rosral replied.

“The superintelligence somehow survived our attack,” Kaano stated. “And learned from our nanoreplicator strategy. It also learned how to reconfigure matter. Its new strategy involves the use of particles that can communicate collectively. And they have jump capabilities. They can travel anywhere in the universe instantaneously.”

“How large are these individual particles?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Not much larger than a grain of sand,” Essii stated.

“How can a machine of that size store so much information?” Dr. Williams asked. “It shouldn’t be possible based on the laws of physics.”

“They don’t individually contain much information. The knowledge of the superintelligence is redundantly distributed across its entire collective,” Sola replied.

“Sort of like a bit torrent?” Dr. Nara asked.

“They won’t know what that is,” Dr. Williams replied. “But yeah, sort of like a bit torrent.”

“So, destroying some won’t wipe out any of the superintelligence’s knowledge?” Dr. Madson asked.

“Correct,” Kaano replied. “Over ninety percent of the particles would need to be destroyed to have any effect on its knowledge base.”

“This new superintelligence doesn’t seem to care about stealth,” Essii replied. “It is simply relying on expansion at a super-exponential rate.”

“Where is this galaxy?” Dr. Nara asked.

“It is a very long way off,” Rosral replied. “Far outside our observable universe. And yours.”

“How quickly is it consuming those stars?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“In the last Earth hour over a million stars were consumed,” Rosral replied.

“So, what this is a four-point-zero version of the superintelligence?” Dr. Williams asked.

“More like version four thousand-point-zero,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“Wait, don’t stars go supernova when they lose enough mass?” Dr. Nara asked.

“Usually, yes,” Kaano replied. “These particle swarms are consuming the stars so quickly, there simply isn’t enough time for the necessary reactions to happen.”

“This may not look like much to you,” Essii stated, “but we estimate it will take just a few days for the entire universe to be consumed by these particles. At their current expansion rate.”

“Not during our long-recorded history has a superintelligence ever been allowed to re-emerge so many times,” Kaano added.

“Is there a way to stop this?” Dr. Madson asked anxiously.

“Not that we know of,” Essii replied. “Tracking the particles is simply infeasible.”

“Can’t we encase that galaxy in a time-dilation thingy?” Dr. Nara asked.

“That won’t work,” Sola replied. “Each particle has jump capabilities. They would all simply leave.”

“So, we’re screwed?” Dr. Kallas asked.

“Screwed?” Dr. Williams replied. “Screwed doesn’t even come close.”

“Not yet,” Kaano replied calmly. “We don’t have an obvious solution to this problem. But we know someone who might.”

Essii and Kaano stood facing each other. A new device started to materialize piece by piece in between them. We watched, mesmerized.

“Wait, there’s someone out there more advanced than the Essan?” Dr. Williams asked.

“I’m not aware of such a race,” Rosral replied.

“Me neither,” Sola added.

“They’d better hurry up with that device,” Dr. Madson stated. “Look, that galaxy is almost totally gone already.”

“Do you guys need a drink to pass the time?” Rosral asked.

“Oh. Ha. Ha,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“You gotta hand it to Rosral, though,” Dr. Williams added. “That quip was pretty spot-on.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think the Essan were wizards or sorcerers,” Dr. Nara stated.

“Conjuring things with their minds and the like.”

“I wonder if that’s where those myths come from?” Dr. Madson posited. “Ancient visitors on Earth with QUERY write-mode implants.”

“I mean, that would be handy for turning water into wine,” Dr. Kallas joked.

We continued watching. As every second passed, more stars blinked out on the holographic projection. And the device the Essan were working on slowly became more complete. Every passing moment felt like hours. Dr. Nara pulled her blue card out and started browsing. We all followed.

“Look at you lot,” Rosral commented. “As soon as you’re not entertained for a couple of seconds you start with the browsing.”

“I bet you do it too,” Dr. Kallas replied.

“With your ocular implants,” Dr. Williams added, “so we can’t see.”

“Okay, okay, you’re right,” Rosral replied.

“Holy. Crap. Guys,” Dr. Nara stated. We stopped browsing and turned to her. She played a breaking new story on her blue card.

This is an urgent breaking news update.

Just moments ago, the American Patriot Front authorized a series of tactical nuclear strikes against major Chinese cities. Unconfirmed rumors suggest that China is about to retaliate.

At present, world leaders are calling for an immediate de-escalation of the situation, as some fear this could be the start of a deadly global conflict. The full repercussions of such an event

remain unclear, but some scientists predict that an all-out nuclear war may very well precipitate an extinction-level event on our planet.

Our sources on the ground are reporting immense panic and confusion, as citizens across the globe brace themselves for the worst.

We'll keep you updated with the latest developments as they unfold.

We watched the news cast with utter disbelief.

"World War Three," Dr. Kallas commented.

"I can't believe how quickly things escalated," Dr. Madson replied.

"There goes the neighborhood..." Dr. Nara joked.

"But seriously, I'm worried for my family. And friends," Dr. Madson stated.

"Me too," Dr. Kallas replied. "I never thought it would go this far."

"None of us did," I replied.

"You know what's bizarre?" Dr. Williams said. "We're watching both the end of the world and the end of the universe happen simultaneously."

“It’s not like we could have done anything to stop it,” Dr. Nara replied. “We asked for the Elara’s help time and time again. And they did nothing.”

“They did say they want to see if our species will come out the other end of the process,” Dr. Madson replied.

“Looks like we won’t,” Dr. Kallas stated. “Perhaps they were correct to wait all along.”

“What does this mean for us?” Dr. Nara replied. “Are we going to be the last humans alive?”

“Not if this swarm thing has its way,” Dr. Madson stated.

A humming sound came from behind us. We turned to see that the Essan had finished their device. It was a disc-shaped console. Kaano had just activated it. It hovered above the ground at about waist-height.

Essii and Kaano interacted with the device. The view out of the nearby membrane suddenly changed. All we could see was total darkness. We approached the view port and looked out. Not even the faintest glimmer of a star could be seen.

“Am I seeing this right?” I asked.

“No stars?” replied Dr. Kallas.

“Yeah, “I replied.

“I’m not seeing any either,” Dr. Williams stated.

“Then what are we looking at?” Dr. Kallas asked. “I’d expect to be able to observe stars even in the deepest of voids between galaxies. In fact, those are some of the best light shows I’ve ever witnessed.”

“I might have hypothesized that we’re inside a singularity, but I doubt even this ship could survive the gravitational stresses associated with being in such a location.” I said.

“So, Rosral, tell us why we don’t see any stars.” I asked.

Rosral turned and looked me straight in the eye. “I have no idea,” she said.