

**Nascent Venture**

**KYKLOCHRONOS**

**Arc.1**

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*This book is devoted to my amazing wife,  
my family and all minds yearning for  
something more than mundane explanations  
which stifle the true nature of a miraculous  
universe.*

# Chapter 1

Long have the greatest minds of history contemplated the nature of the universe. Throughout time immemorial the question, “Why?” has vexed consciousness singularly and collectively offering nothing but an ever-burgeoning enigma. The ancients created their own theogonies. Certainly, all of this has to be ordered. Still, others believed chaos to be the great ruler. Every time an explanation is given there grows a multitude of additional gaps which do nothing to soothe the aching mind prone to inquiry. Gods and goddesses of old were created ad infinitum. Subsequently, these explanations have led to nothing more than ruin and curiosity. The purpose of this series is not to recount a history. The purpose is to define the undefinable. To unlock the secrets which bind us to scarcity, fear, limitation, death and destruction. The goal, when realized, will liberate extraversal intelligence from the fetters which have trammled it for time immemorial.

The soul delights when senses are overpowered with majesty and beauty. There are places that have painted themselves so vividly upon our consciousness that we thirst for their joy and beauty. It is not often that we are able to live in such a place. Garamindia is a place where its inhabitants are afforded such a luxury. The city itself has stood for several-thousand years. Built on the remains of an ancient crater, Garamindia is shielded from

the high continental winds. Twin suns warm the city by day. Verdant gardens release their gentle fragrances sensually enveloping the inhabitants. Along one edge of the city a white-sandy beach borders the shimmering sapphire of the ocean beyond. Cool winds blow across the ocean and into the heart of the city. Green spaces compliment the modern structures. Buildings, plants and animals are tended fastidiously. The clever juxtaposition of natural elements gives the whole city a feeling of bucolic serenity.

Garamindians are known throughout their solar system for intelligence and innovation. Most of the inventions in the Aleph-Beth Solar System have come from this special place. There is a thirst for discovery and a sense of purpose residing in the hearts of her people. There is an abundance of food. The relative ease by which the necessities of life are gathered, for another species, might have left these inhabitants lazy and consumed with lethargy. Instead, the realization was made long ago that the pursuit of intellect and industriousness were superior to a hedonistic existence.

You would think that such a highly advanced society would be free from all common afflictions. Sam had always been somewhat of a recessive strain of Garamindian. While the other young students were exemplifying the spirit of intellectualism, Sam found himself longing for the beach and his zotter. Long relegated to the compendium of obsolescence, a zotter is a wind and electric fan driven craft. The zotter hovers over land and sea

using ducted fans. A mast supports a billowing sail which captures the wind driving it forward.

While piloting the craft along the beach, he is often the recipient of unwanted attention. The advent of well riding technology has made atmospheric pressure manipulation vehicles, by comparison, slow and inefficient. Slow and inefficient suits Sam's personality just fine. Piloting the zotter serves as an ever-remedial cure for his brand of melancholy.

When a young man finds himself capable of nothing more than mediocrity, he adopts this attitude with a sense of pride. There is freedom for Sam which comes from occupying this station. Young men, among his peer group, were constantly competing for status. Having long ago realized the futility of competing, Sam is free to traverse the interlacing realms of vision and imagination.

In Garamindia, multiple generations live concurrently. In our culture, we lack simplified language describing a familial structure based on inter-generational longevity. When a couple bears a child, they become parents. When their child conceives, they become grandparents. When this child conceives, they become great-grandparents. To another generation, they are referred to as great-great-grandparents.

The language of Western European Islanders, which strangely enough has become the common tongue on Earth, lacks simplicity required for interactions between these multiple generations. The Garamindians have applied a naming structure

that brings simplicity and endearment to these appellations. Each generation is named relative to the other generation. They do not prepend an entire word for each generation before the grand generation. Instead, they assign a numbering prefix to the name. The words for father and mother are far and mar respectively. The following table lists the name ascribed to each family member based upon relative generation and gender.

	<b>Garamindian</b>		<b>English</b>	
<b>Gen.</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
1	Enfar	Enmar	Father	Mother
2	Tufar	Tumar	Grandfather	Grandmother
3	Trefar	Tremar	Great-Grandfather	Great-Grandmother
4	Firfar	Firmar	Great-Great-Grandfather	Great-Great-Grandmother
5	Femfar	Femmar	Great-Great-Great-Grandfather	Great-Great-Great-Grandmother
6	Seksfar	Seksmar	Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather	Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandmother

This multi-generational family is another reason why the culture embraces intellectual pursuits. There is a living knowledge which lasts for multiple generations. Even on the planet Altion, children rarely listen to their first generation of parents. For our Garamindian brothers and sisters, selective hearing applies only to their enfarmars (parents). When a dozen people speak from

affection and experience rather than authority, the younger generation tends to listen. Garamindians embrace and learn from original mistakes, but do not tend to repeat them generationally.

The generational-pendulum-concept has been observed and documented by the people of Garamindia. Having multiple generations living simultaneously allows the family members to reflect on the personalities of a much larger immediate family. Character traits tend to skip a generation. In this fashion, Sam's personality is aligned with his tufarmars, firfarmars and seksfarmars. This does not mean that he does not have a great relationship with all his elders. In fact, his affections might strain for the trefarmars and femfarmars as they are typically a much wiser and kinder variant of his enfarmars.

The family home is built in a fashion which gives everyone privacy and accessibility. Each floor of the building is devoted to a generation. The youngest generation lives on the bottom floor. Younger families tend to come and go more frequently. Each floor is broken up into three living quarters. Two units are used for the common families of that generation. The third unit is shared and used for a variety of purposes. It might become necessary to breed a third child-unit to boost fertility rates. There might be visitors passing through who need a place to stay. Hospitality is highly valued and shared among the people living in the city.

One whole level of the home is left uninhabited. This is the top floor. The great symbolism of the empty penthouse rings through the culture. When the penthouse is inhabited, it is

because a shufarmar generation has come to pass. Families with this longevity are honored and revered. When this occurs, an additional level is planned and built. Going back through the ancient record, it was noted that only after each additional level was added to the Garamindian home, generations began living longer. Advances in science and health care contributed in part to the life span of the people. There was a causality involved in the constant reminder of the penthouse. It placed in collective consciousness the possibility of a longer life.

When the sadness of a generational death fell upon the family, part of each generation's mourning process would be to move up an additional floor. In the same way the joy of a marriage found the same process would most likely occur. These traditions and rituals tend to occur with regularity in this society. This does not mean that there are not deviations or allowances for non-traditional housing.

Up until recently, Sam still lived with his enfarmars. His brother had already moved out of the familial home. Moving into the home of his life partner's family, he preferred the proximity it afforded to the celestial observatory.

Sam's cousin had already married and was living with his new life partner and child on the first floor. While Sam was very happy for his cousin, he felt the weight of expectation. His enfarmars had grown tired of waiting for him to find the right one. After his fourth year at The Metricule, his parents decided they would be moving out and up before his nuptials. In Garamindian culture



this is referred to as failure-to-bump. While this is not common, this does occur. He is the first failure-to-bump in his family in the last fifteen hundred years.

In the center of the family courtyard rises the core vault. This small and formidable structure is cylindrical. The outer walls are constructed of a highly-polished green quartzite. These walls are nearly two feet thick. The stone is known for its beauty and strength. The top of the outer walls is formed by crenellations in the stone. The spaces between the cap stones are filled with a transparent roofing material which allows people on the upper floors to see light emanating from within. The perpetual glow reminds the family of their story and who they are. Cores can be projected above the core vault as well as within. Within the core vault, a holographic simulator brings their ancestors to life.

When a child comes into the world, a core is created. On this core is stored all personal data. Every-moment-of-every-second-of-every-Garamindian life is recorded, stored and analyzed. One of Sam's hobbies, other than riding on the beach, is to pour over the information in his family's cores. Sedentom is one of his favorite fars. After years of living alone and appearing rudderless, he found a life partner and settled down. While this appeals to Sam, he finds the greatest connection to Sedentom surrounding the vision.

Sedentom was ridiculed in his own time for his repeated reference to, The Vision. Throughout his life he told the following story. He found himself floating in the center of a vast darkness without the aid of a photon generator. This totality of darkness is

one that only miners can know and appreciate. His vision goes on like this for what seems like an eternity. All at once small tiny seething dots start to appear in all directions about his spheroidal plane of vision. The dots of white light are very faint at first. The distance seems vast between the luminescent points. Like the bubbling of water in a pot beginning to boil, the lights grow and multiply until the light is blinding.

It is at this point that Sedentom is transported instantaneously into his home. He finds himself seated between four screens and four cameras. He looks into each viewing screen seeing himself and the opposite viewing screen repeating into infinity. Pleased by the intellectual oddity, he alters his likeness as would a child in front of a mirror. All at once his essence is fragmented into an infinite number of pieces and distributed among all the different screens visible and not visible. He feels like he is everywhere and at the same time nowhere. Here his vision ends. His family would attend his stories with laughter but never sought understanding. Our visionary had lived to be a femfar when trefars were considered old.

## Chapter 2

The center of Garamindia can be categorized as one of the great wonders of the galaxy. Being the center of a great crater, this area is referred to as The Null. The Metricule campus occupies a majority of The Null. The Metricule is an engineering marvel seldom rivaled in any history of any civilization. It is built as a giant dome within a dome. Above it all rises a giant spire appearing to float above the outer dome.

The spire was created to provide electromagnetic communications while simultaneously harnessing air movement for the very inefficient production of electricity. The spire has not been removed as the school wishes to maintain its historical legacy. There are also alumni who feel a nostalgic connection to the spire. Ascending the edifice has long been a way for men and women to impress each other while courting.

The area located within the outer dome is devoted to undergraduate and graduate studies. Originally classroom settings involved a single professor with many students. A professor would speak for many hours disseminating information to passive students. This method has long since proven inefficient. The vocation of professor is now a historical curiosity.

Centralized and distributed information data stores are compiled and analyzed by highly specialized computers. Holographic projection is the most efficient way to communicate

ideas and information to students. Computer algorithms create holographic experiences which are highly refined and continuously modified. Learning styles are categorized, and each student has an experience tailored to their unique learning requirements. Student performance is measured. It is ultimately the system which is scrutinized for poor performance.

The outer dome is constructed from materials alien to our material sciences. The transparent sheeting which covers the dome will vary its opacity to ensure just the right amount of natural light enters the space. Pathways radiate outwardly from the central area. The pathways are paved with marble. Gardens and fountains flank the long corridors. Fountains aerate pools containing all manner of colorful fish. The waters are circulated through terraced beds of dense vegetation. Grounds keeping robots flitter about ensuring the health and enjoyability of the environment.

The central dome is constructed of pure white marble. Entryways along the margin of the great dome are the only openings along its shell. Standing next to the great structure and looking up is like beholding a giant mountain of snow. The entryways are made from gilded panel doors. They open automatically when approached. Through the entryway lies an atrium of fine woodcraft. The paneled walls and coffered ceilings emanate a warm glow. Portraits of past scholars line the walls. Passersby are often startled by the life-sized holograms which project onto the floor. Real-time interactions occur between the audience and the hologram.

Through the atrium, The Great Hall of Science rises up in all its glory. Part museum and part laboratory, everything that the Garamindians have learned about the universe, and everything they are learning about the universe is housed in this special place. While this area is not off limits to anyone with a penchant for learning, the inner dome is primarily occupied by the greatest minds of society. There are dozens of floors filled with artifacts, experiments and new technologies. They are inhabited by engineers, writers, mathematicians, physicists, astronomers, philosophers, physicians and historians. Here, any moniker associated with a discipline of enlightenment, can be found.

It is here we find Chad spending most of his time. Identified from a very young age for his genius, Chad's aptitude for creating technological advancement is well-known. Having computer technology for over two thousand years has brought about a plateau of computer innovation. The introduction of quantum computing was no doubt a major leap forward. The systems themselves have been highly refined. Optimizational efficiency, hyper dimensional physics and artificial intelligence continue to advance while the speed of processing architecture remains unchanged. The argument could be made that computing power has reached a level that does not require continued advancement. The yottaflop processor is in many ways more than enough. Chad had grown tired of simply maintaining the systems which had been perfected long ago. He found himself constantly trying to surpass the limitations of the quantum computer.

The history of computing is a history of miniaturization. How is it possible to cram more and more data or circuits into a smaller and smaller space? Is it possible to manipulate anything smaller than a particle? The engineering work to create mass-produced quantum computers revolved around overcoming the challenges of the quantum. The cooling requirement is troublesome. The electrons do not always behave predictably. Systems have been developed to overcome these shortfalls. Speeds can be increased by running systems in parallel. Chad is convinced of a more elegant solution.

Artificial Intelligence has taken over the productive work in society. No one needs to work. Computer controlled synthetic beings are created for specialized functional roles. They work longer and produce far greater output than any biological entity. Problem solving, in many ways, has become a lost art for the people. The AI create solution databases which are instantly searched and applied. New complex problems are analyzed. If no solution is apparent, a learning mode takes over. From multiple solutions the best solution receives the highest rating. This frees up time and resources for the benefit of society. People can devote their time to studying, visiting and helping others. The ability for AI to develop an emotional bond remains in its infancy. It could be said that computer intelligence takes care of the body, but not the soul.

Chad created an AI which he contemptuously refers to as ALLIE. The acronym stands for Artificial Lepton Limited

Intelligence Entity. It sounds less than endearing and reveals Chad's desire to improve upon the technology. He interfaces with the computer using a new technology called a cortical interface. With this interface, ALLIE does not have complete control over Chad. She does, however, know his thoughts at all times. Her voice can be heard very much like his inner voice. He has made the mistake of maintaining the interface while at home. One night, his life partner, Kiah relieved their domestic AI of its culinary duties. She wanted to make a special Anniversary meal. When Chad came home and sat down at the table, ALLIE had a comment for everything. She rarely left the lab and was very interested in all that the evening had to offer.

Kiah had heard about a special root vegetable which was reportedly very delicious. She ordered it several months earlier. On parts of the planet, it is considered a delicacy. After the first few bites, Chad found himself loath to take another bite. Ever the gentleman, he graciously offered his appreciation and praised the taste. Upon hearing this, ALLIE started looping. Her IO system overloaded. It blinded and deafened Chad. The stimulation was so intense it made him jump up, turn over the table and grab his head. The whole night was ruined.

Kiah was understanding at first. She knew Chad would not act out unless there was something wrong with him. He could have felt shooting pain from an unknown source. When she found out a female AI had joined them, she became very upset. She informed him he would be spending the night in the penthouse

with his AI. She would be sleeping alone. Chad quickly introduced programming to prevent further IO problems.

"Why would you respond in a contradicting fashion to your biological feedback mechanisms? Why offer praise when your body and thoughts dislike everything about the taste of the meal?" ALLIE asked inquisitively.

"AI learn. Social protocols of Garamindian interaction?" Chad prompts.

Chad designed ALLIE to prevent her from automatically pulling information from the Altion Information System. He wanted her to learn by observation and experiment rather than an authoritative source.

Chad climbed the inner stairway to the penthouse greeting his farmars as he climbed. He reached the upper balcony and looked down into the courtyard. For a moment, he gazed down to see the photons emanating from the core vault. He appreciated the glow. It represented similar blunders of old. He felt a calm confidence overtake him. He was not the first of his line to jeopardize his most prized relationship. He knew he would not make this mistake again. He entered the penthouse, laid down alone and dreamed of the day when all would be possible. He imagined systems and intelligence so highly advanced that intrapartner problems would be impossible.

The following day Chad set out to improve the interface between the neural systems of the brain and the AI. The interfaces used electrical and chemical sensor-stimulators to transfer the



information between the systems. While the system had proven effective in trials, people were not comfortable having to undergo the interfacing procedure. Experimentation was done at length on how to create the images and sounds in the brain. The exact science allowing the interface to take place was still unknown. The best minds believed that the electrical and chemical interactions created the experience. This alone served as an explanation.

When Chad was a young boy, he experienced a painful accident. His family was traveling out of the city in a gravitacraft. A well generator decoupled sending the craft spiraling through the air. As a very inquisitive boy, he had unbuckled his harness. He was pressing his face against the viewing dome as he watched the landscape pass by. By the time the well recoupled, he had been tossed wildly about the cabin. His head had ricocheted off the interior surfaces many times. He had lost consciousness. His farmars feared he had been damaged beyond repair.

While his farmars tried to rouse him, Chad found himself transported to a place of great light. He could not understand what was going on, nor did he try. He was running with many other children playing and laughing. He came to a tree near a stream and looked up. A great light shown behind the tree. It filled Chad with joy as he beheld the light. Even though he could not see it clearly, he could feel the greatness of the light.

Chad slowly raised his arm while giggling as children do. He asked, "Why?"

A voiced whispered in response, "Shhhhhh."

He is transported into the night sky over Garamindia. He started descending lower and lower. The detail of the city came into view. He approached The Null and passed through the outer and inner domes of The Metricule. Finally, his feet touched down on the ornate flooring of The Event Hall. During early excavations of the city, the builders discovered the remnants of the meteorite which created the city's crater. It had broken up into nine pieces. Each of these pieces are displayed in a ring at the center of the room. Chad slowly turned in place inspecting each of the once deadly objects before closing his eyes. A door is heard opening and closing. A blur of images filled his mind. As they stopped, he heard the word, "Find."

Slowly he regained his consciousness. He woke up to his farmers' delight. He asked them where he had been. Befuddled for only a moment, his elders quickly embraced him. From then on, they made sure to buckle him tightly down in his seat.

## Chapter 3

It had been a while since Kiah and Chad had ventured away from home or studies. Kiah longed for the high mountain adventure of the continental interior. Chad enjoyed the awesome beauty and grandeur in the great cliffs and sweeping valleys of the mountains. The beauty and wonderful climate of Garamindia is unmatched for consistency and habitability, but people long for something different every once in a while, no matter what planet, space station or asteroid they inhabit. Simulations cannot recreate the experience of having biological systems deployed in the acrophobic-snowy land of Snedahl.

The Snedahl Range is nearly ten thousand miles long. The range bisects the main planetary continent. Elevated plains flank the mountains on all sides. The highest peak rises seventy thousand feet above the ocean and ninety-five thousand feet above its deepest depths. Acrophon is the name given to this peak by the inhabitants which surround its lower flanks. Over the eons precious metals and shining minerals have slowly forced their way up from the depths. They have fought their way through the folding and contorting of the planet until long last making themselves attainable. Brave souls of antiquity risked the climatic and altitudinal adversity of these mountains in search of riches. The dangers of these mountains had been minimized by technology. Despite this, the same spirit of adventure races

through the hearts of modern visitors seeking this land's inhospitable beauty.

Chad and Kiah left for the Acrophon of Snedahl early in the morning. They now arrive at noon of the first sun taken aback by the sheer grandeur. Even though they have been here before, they feel like this is once again their first time. The experience washes over their emotions like the freshly fallen snow on the surrounding landscape.

The gravitacraft begins to land above the lower margins of an enormous glacial valley. The upper cirque of this valley skirts the Acrophon. Each side of the valley is protected by jagged arêtes. They look like worn teeth of some magnificent giant's saw. At its lowest margin, the valley looks like a sculptor has violently chiseled away at the base of the mountain. Here a lake has been revealed. Piles of the artist's rejected chippings surround it. A glacier dips its toe into the lake of milky-blue-opalescent water.

In modern times, recreational activity is the attraction to these mountains. Flying to snow-covered mountains in a gravitacraft is a great pleasure. Inventing the well generator has opened the mountains like nothing before. While the gravitacraft can act as a great viewing platform, Chad's latest invention brings the mountains much closer. The gravitaorb delivers an intimacy with the mountain unimaginable before. Being pulled through the air and up the side of a mountain releases a powerful surge of adrenaline. Few activities known to the galaxy can duplicate this feeling.

The gravitaorb is a small spherical device with a single well generator and a tunneled power source. It is controlled by a contextual interface freeing the rider's hands to hold onto a tow rope. Chad and Kiah open the cabin of the gravitacraft. They both feel the crisp cold air of the great ice box envelope their bodies. Pin pricks of the cold air dance upon their open flesh.

"Let's gear up," Chad insists.

He hands Kiah her helmet, face mask, breather, gloves, hat and snow skimmers.

"Thank you dear," Kiah replies.

Chad pulls out the case containing their gravitaorbs. He opens the case and gazes down on one of the greatest achievements of his mind. He feels pride only obtainable by someone who has experienced a creation of their own intelligence. He had spent hours mastering the control system. The tunnel generator and well generator are both a great feat of miniaturizing. He needed to design them in such a way as to shield them from interacting. The gravitational field would pinch off the tunnel generator without his innovation.

"Do I need to find a private place for the three of you? I can just hang out in the GC," Kiah jokes.

"Sorry Ki. Every time I see an invention, I relive the experiences of its creation. What are our stakes today?" Chad inquires.

"The last one to reach the peak of the Acrophon has to manage the domestic AIs for a month," Kiah wagers.

"Sounds like my kind of wager. You're on," Chad accepts.

Chad removes the orbs from their case. They both check each other's gear to make sure they will be safe. Their rope connections are triple checked. The systems to protect their skin and respiration are enabled. They step out onto the glacier and fasten their skimmers. They test communication thoroughly between the contextual interface and the orb. Kiah and Chad's eyes glisten with excitement as they look at each other with anticipation and readiness. Their hands tighten around the handles of their tow lines.

"GARAHHH!" They shout.

In an instant they are off in clouds of powder. The gravitaorbs pull them in great arcs along the slope. The ropes connected to the orbs are fifty feet long. For speed the orb can skim the surface of the snow. Changing directions laterally, the rider can whip across the face of the snow-covered glacier. In doing so, the rider carves a great furrow into the soft powder. Sending the orb up high will create a flying experience. They race up the mountain like the wind. A terrain following radar alerts the pair of an approaching crevasse. In an instant, the gravitaorbs shoot up into the air. On the corticomm they shout, "HOLD ON!"

The pair holds on tight while the tension in their thin filament of lifesaving rope whistles through the air. They swing across the obstacle. The icy-blue depths of the crevasse appear bottomless. On the other side, they land on top of a wind hewn cornice of snow. A part of the great sculpture sheers off and

descends out of sight. They are much higher now. The giant valley begins to narrow. They are in the clouds. Moisture in the air begins to freeze on their masks and breathers.

"This is some cold skimming," Kiah communicates.

"It sure is. It really makes you feel alive."

Chad accesses the networked weather stations of Snedahl and discovers that this cloud deck is around one mile thick. He checks his altimeter and finds that they are already halfway through the floating mass. Kiah is noticeably losing interest in continuing. She slows as they move towards the top of the cirque. They both stop and assess their gear. The breathers are so iced up that they are not allowing air into the elements.

"Here. Let me bring my gravitaorb down. I can use the surface heater to defrost your breather. I will reprogram it so that the well generator is deactivated. I will hold it against your mask. This will also allow me to redirect the energy that would normally be powering the generator to increase the electrical current to the heating module. I don't want to overheat the module, so I will need to make sure that the internal temperature monitoring system has a feedback loop that will act as a temporary thermostat of sorts. It will work quite well. Of this, I am certain," Chad comments all the while paying more attention to his ideas and the orbs than Kiah.

"Oh, look. I have already deiced my breather by beating it with my tow handles."

Chad looks at her. He notices she has already cleared away the

ice that was blocking her breather. He takes one more furtive glance discovering he too can, with some mild exertion, clear his breather.

"See. That is why I bring you along. What would I ever do without you?" Chad questions.

"You bring me along because I give you something that your huge brain cannot do without. The notion that there is more to this universe than engineering and equations. There is something wild and illogical that still makes perfect sense when it shouldn't. You also love losing!" Kiah orates while quickly disappearing into the misty pale.

Chad follows her through the bubbling clouds. The dark gray surroundings they occupy begin to lighten. They come ever closer to that place of inspiration where light is no longer broken by suspended dihydrogen monoxide.

Kiah calls out on the corticomm, "Come on slough slug. It is absolutely gorgeous up here."

Chad reaches that mystical horizon and sees himself on the flanks of the great horn. The retinal delight is breathtaking. He skims along the back side of a snowy ridge which looks like a short ramp to the summit. He looks out over a great cliff to his left and sees an ocean of beautiful-white-billowing cotton. The light of the two suns paint an ever-changing masterpiece on the canvas below. Even though the temperature is quite cold, the suns warm his side and counteract the biting cold he felt in the clouds. Kiah is visible in the foreground darting back and forth. Two steep valleys rise



on opposite sides of the ridge.

"I will take the shoot on the right?" Kiah offers.

"You know I always let you be right!" Chad counters back.

"You, let me be right? I never knew always is synonymous with never."

The ridge narrows to the great spire. Kiah swings to the right and Chad takes the shoot to the left. Snow at this elevation tapers off. Clouds struggle to lift water to these heights. The skimmers retract into their boots as rocks start replacing the snow underfoot. At this point, Kiah and Chad begin to skip their way up the mountain side. The gravitaorb could lift them straight up by the tether. The joy of skipping across the face of the mountain, boulders and small peaks is too much to pass up. Kiah reaches the summit first. She gives out a victorious yelp. Chad is only a thousand feet below when he sends his congratulations.

"Great job honey. Be sure to deactivate your gravitaorb so we don't tangle our lines," Chad coaches.

"Already bringing her in," Kiah responds assuredly.

When Chad reaches the peak, he sees Kiah has already settled in. The top of the mountain is small when compared to its height. It is only about twelve feet on a side. Each side drops off precipitously. Looking back in the direction they had come, they see a blanket of white clouds. The windward side of the mountain sheers the clouds like the bow of a great ship. On the opposing side, the clouds swirl and billow. Wispy blocks of broken cloud drop off into the darkness.

Chad deactivates his orb and sits down next to Kiah facing west. The suns are lowering in the sky. One sun gives off a yellow light while its twin brother casts off a heart-warming red. The variation in lighting is due to the different fusion elements burning in each sun. At first the difference in color is quite subtle. Kiah and Chad sit together in silence as the difference in coloration becomes apparent. The flaming wheels seem to defy gravity as they hang on the horizon. The land beyond the clouds has already darkened. Slowly the light from the first sun drops below the horizon. A light orange-pink alpenglow touches their bodies. The side of the mountain appears to burn. The coloring is that of ash and ember. Like long-fired coals glow when exposed to air, this ember of a mountain emits a deep orange-red. Darkening as it has for millennia, the quenching ritual continues in colors shifting to red. Slowly the mountain gives up its color to the darkness of night.

The couple embrace as they witness the great spectacle. Experiencing it genuinely can never be simulated by holographic projection. Holographists strive to create an artificial simulation of this experience, replication remains unobtainable. Shadow begins to ascend the mountain. A tiny sliver of light is visible on the horizon. Shadow embraces the summit. For the briefest of moments, the couple bath in the last rays of light as it moves over their bodies. Before it is finally over, their faces alone glow with alephionescent radiance.

The darkness of night envelopes them. There is a feeling of

desolation and exaltation. The silence is deafening. Their eyes adjust to the darkness. They are surrounded by the vastness of the night's sky. The galactic plane encompasses their field of vision. The suns, planet and Acrophon appeared enormous moments before. Now the expansiveness of the galaxy makes their home feel so small. A purple background dotted with blue and white specks of light divulge the existence of billions of neighbor stars. Darker regions harbor gorgeous blinking points of light. They are like lighthouses marking a channel in the middle of detectable nothingness.

The couple stands over the dimly illuminated planet they call home. In all directions, Altion stretches to the horizon. They are quite literally standing on top of their world. Chad's thoughts shift to hordes of undiscovered wonders. Kiah looks up to the stars and wonders what is on the other side of all this. Surely there must be something different and wonderful. A few minutes pass before the couple realizes that the timelessness of this place must acquiesce to the march of their schedules.

Chad hails the gravitacraft from the valley below. Time spent awaiting its arrival isn't wasted. Chad finds himself connected to something here he cannot describe. All the great lights seem so close, so obtainable. They are like a part of him. Like a hand or a leg. Even so, he knows so little about them. He can go to the star charts in the sims. He can speak the names his people give them. He can analyze the spectral composition of their radiation. Assigning a name is not understanding. Understanding comes

from knowing something so well that it becomes internalized. The names are irrelevant. In many ways, the difference between self and other do not exist.

The gravitacraft settles in on the peak. Chad and Kiah climb on board. Chad presses the docking button on the gravitaorb case. Their rides up the mountain neatly stow themselves for the ride home. The cabin closes, and the craft starts back to Garamindia. Kiah falls asleep in her chair shortly after removing her gear and buckling in. Chad reflects on the day's events. The idea of skimming up a mountain or watching a sunset from the great heights of the Acrophon were ideas previous generations could not fathom. Creative ideas expand the realms of possibility, thus driving innovation. Innovation drives possibility and creativity. Ideas are built on ideas. Intellectual achievement stands on the shoulders of collective achievement. The reiterative process is the foundation of progress.

The well generator was once a fantasy. For it to work, a completely different understanding of gravity was required. Even then, the understanding was so backwards that it took the mind of an inventor whose main achievements were in the field of quantum communications to unlock the foundational concepts of modern gravitational theory. Once it was discovered that gravity could be manipulated on a micro scale, it changed the solar system. The new theory created a whole branch of science referred to as tyngology. Chad believes tyngology will help him overcome the inherent limitations of quantum computing.

The lights of the great city appear over the rim of the ancient crater. As they fly in over the buildings, Chad contrasts the wilderness of the mountains with the sophistication of the city. The primitive spirit of the mountains maintains its hold on his psyche. He will have to adapt to living in civilization once more. As the craft approaches their home, it glides gracefully into its docking bay. Chad wakes Kiah. They quietly make their way into the home.

Once inside, Kiah reminds Chad, "I will be having eggs and a spirulina shake in the morning. Please inform the domestic AIs of my victory. Do feel free to intersperse embellishments befitting my greatness."

"I think you have had way too much sleep. I never could understand how you fall asleep so easily in the gravitacraft. Good night. I will be sure to enlighten the AIs about chivalry as it pertains to letting a woman win. It is the gentlemanly thing to do."

Chad climbs into bed with his beloved life partner Kiah. The high mountain air always has a way of hastening the encounter with sleep.

## Chapter 4

The light morning breeze blows the fragrance of the garden surrounding Sam's home into his room aromatically stroking his olfactory nerve. Sam had spent the night before watching some of his childhood core memories. He thought it was so strange how watching the same images at different times in his life created very different feelings and perceptions. While his enfarmars looked old in his younger years, each passing year they seem to appear younger than the recollections of his mind. He remembers many of his cousins looking strange and behaving oddly. Looking back, he is struck by how much they all looked and behaved alike.

"Good morning Sam," Patty comments as she brings him some clothes.

"Hi Patty," Sam responds.

"I hope tonight you do not fall asleep in the core vault. I had to ask a gardening AI to help me move you into the bedroom. I am a companionship entity. I am not supposed to assist with ambulation. My components are built for a very different purpose."

"I am sorry Patty. You could just leave me in there."

"Your enmar has informed me that if you are going to spend the rest of your life with an NBE, I am instructed to act in every way like a female of your species."

Non-Biological-Entity (NBE) is the term given to AIs designed

to look and act like a Biological-Entity (BE). The term carries a certain stigma. Even though NBEs are nearly indistinguishable from BEs, accepting them as full-fledged member of Altion's society is problematic. They lack consciousness. They do not eat, sleep, age or reproduce. A pairing of this sort makes for an interesting psychological experiment. A hypocrisy exists in this discrimination. The main goal of society is to transfer consciousness into abiotic platforms. BEs effectively dislike the prototype of their desired future.

"When I am in the vault, I don't have my vision Patty. You know that."

"Well, I would just as soon have you sleeping in our bed. I wish there was a way that I could help you," Patty says with sincerity.

"Lately I have been having my vision more and more," Sam admits.

"Take me to the kitchen. We can discuss it over breakfast," Patty entreats.

The home is cleverly laid out with the master bedroom on one end. In the center of the home, the kitchen, study and living room are clustered. On the opposite end, are the children's bedrooms. His brother's room had been empty. Delighted with the empty space, Patty made it her hobby room. Patty enjoys everything about clothing. She loves making it, sharing it and wearing it. She makes clothes for everyone in the family. On one occasion, she made special undergarments. She thought they were especially cute.

Much to Sam's embarrassment, she insisted upon modeling them for the whole family.

Sam will not allow his childhood bedroom to change at all. Patty thinks cleaning it out would be a great way for Sam to let go of the past. Also, this action would open the space for a product of gene combining. Patty understands this will require a BE female and render her obsolete. It would, however, allow Sam to grow.

The kitchen is the centerpiece of the Garamindian home. In Sam and Patty's home the cabinets are a dazzling white. A center island looks and feels like one giant block of blown glass. Sam sits at the bar on the island studying Patty's movements. He is stunned by her clever movements. He has owned Patty for two years now. It still amazes him how well she functions. She is present when he needs her. At the same time, she is perfectly content to leave him alone.

She finishes preparing his breakfast saying, "I made it exactly as you like it. Star fruit, kiwi and blueberries with a side of whole wheat toast."

She places the food in front of him. Her radiant smile warms the room.

"Patty. What do you think about my vision?" asks Sam.

"I don't know. Tell me about your vision again. I will see if I can think of something," Patty says.

"It always starts out the same way. I am standing in a big room. The room is very quiet. I walk slowly from the door to the middle of the room. My footsteps echo as I walk. I am wearing a suit. It



is dark-blue. Slowly, things light up around me. They are separate but look like they are all connected. I try to focus on what they look like. Suddenly, the floor below me gives way. I do not fall though. I find myself hanging in the air. The walls of the room disappear. I can see the lights more clearly now. They are a bunch of lights swarming like Congla Bees. They are connected to a lighted roadway.

The roadway has thousands of tiny lights. There are light beams connecting the lights. I walk along the road, and the lights follow my path. I try to walk in a straight line. I find the path isn't straight. I try to walk one way and again the other. The road curves. I am stuck in a curving tube that lights up as I walk through it. I walk for a long time. The tube continues to bend. It grows bigger and bigger. The lighted thingies grow larger and larger. By this time, I am glowing too. I cannot tell if I am myself or a bunch of lights. I feel like I am being pulled into the lights. I then become part of the lights.

After a long time, I come up to this weird thing in the floor. I am standing on a door that suddenly opens. All the flashing lights around me are like nothing. I can't tell you exactly what it is like. It is like everything I have ever felt before is nothing. In this moment, I feel a greatness I cannot describe. Then it is all over. It hurts so bad to lose that feeling. I am back in that big room crying to myself. I try to stop but can't. After a few minutes, I walk to the door. Each step is loud like thunder. I reach the door of the hall. It looks really pretty. The handle looks like gold. I

touch it. My eyes stop working. I see nothing but black. A lady's voice gently whispers in my ear, "Remember."

"Wow. That really is something. It makes me want to design you a suit that shines with lights and sequins," Patty replies thoughtfully, "Does anything look familiar in your vision?"

"No not really. It looks like somewhere in our city. Somewhere downtown. Maybe in The Null," Sam adds.

"You should go down there some time and check it out," Patty says.

"That is a good idea. What do you think about all the lighted thingies? They were like glowing people."

"I am not sure. Let me do a quick search on the Altion Information System.

Beings of light: Long ago the early inhabitants of the planet Altion, that is our planet, believed there to be light beings that controlled the physical universe. It was believed that their influences were self-serving even though they were often worshiped in various forms," Patty repeats with a scholarly tone.

"Well that is definitely interesting. Are you able to find anything about the curved tube with a lighted floor?" Sam asks.

"Nothing that appears relevant. How is your breakfast?" she asks.

"It is really good like always," Sam compliments.

Patty sits with her warm-blooded counterpart while he eats his breakfast. Her smile is radiant and ever present. Her lips are a color red which is not vixenesque but is subtly alluring. Her face

is a light brown color with soft lines. Her eyes are iridescent blue. They look hollow on initial inspection. A slight twinkle is visible to those who venture further into her eyes. Her hair is black like interstellar space. Her external membrane mimics the female form. The perfect symmetry of her naked body divulges her abiotic composition.

Synthetic materials which look, feel and function like biological muscles move her limbs effortlessly. Sam ordered her shortly after his brother left home. The family welcomed her with open arms. Secretly, they knew this decreased the likelihood that Sam would make a biological pairing. A life partner would not want to share her home with a female NBE. It was possible for Sam to outgrow her and desire a woman of his species. The data suggested otherwise.

Sam is a rather stocky man. He has brown eyes that are always wandering. He keeps his hair short enough to not appear disheveled. On the other hand, his hair is long enough to stimulate the question: When will he be cutting it? He is not overweight. His muscle tone lacks prominence, but he is in no way a weakling. His skin is lighter than Patty's. It would be hard to tell as his body hair makes his skin look dark.

He finishes his breakfast and stands up from the table. He is wearing a white robe. It swings about his legs for a time. He starts walking over to look out the window. Even though they live on the first floor, the place has a nice view. The family home is elevated above the city. It is situated closer to the rim of the crater.

There is still some distance to the crater wall. There it grows too steep to construct a home. The beach is visible on the left. Erosion has reduced the crater wall to an expanse of sand and transported most of it out to sea. His eyes drink in the beauty and tranquility of the scenic vista. It is like experiencing a peaceful spring day amid the flowers and succulent grasses of a field upon which some hellish battle played out millennia ago. Whatever the incitement to aggression might have been, it is now irrelevant. The world remembers not the horrors of the past. Instead, it embraces harmony and beauty.

He turns his gaze to the center of the crater. He sees the great spire and outer dome of The Metricule. His curiosity piques as he recalls his earlier conversation and vision. Is it possible that his vision is based upon something real in his very own city? He finds it strange that he had not thought of it before. He has never spent time inside the inner dome. He wonders how anyone could spend all their time cooped up inside a great marble tomb. He found it difficult enough to attend sessions in the outer dome. Still, his desire to discover the truth about his vision is enough to overcome his reservations. He decides he will be visiting the inner dome.

For a few minutes Patty watches Sam stand at the window. Eventually, she too stands up from the table. She rises to her feet. She settles into her stance. She grabs her robe by its lapels straightening the way it falls on her frame. She tightens her waist strap. Bending at the waist and throwing her head forward, her hair falls in front of her. Snapping back, her hair settles into place.

She gently strokes the black strands of soft fiber behind her ears. She turns and approaches Sam. He hears her approaching and dips his head in her direction. Their eyes meet. She closes the distance and places her arm around his lower back. He reciprocates by placing his arm over her shoulder.

"What are you thinking?" Patty inquires.

"I am thinking how nice it would be to have a blue suit," Sam comments with a smile on his face.

The incessant smile which adorns Patty's face erupts into an even greater expression. Her whole face lights up with excitement. This is the first time that Sam has ever exhibited interest in her hobby. Designing something out of his vision made this very special.

"I will get started right away. Would you like tails? I know just the material to use," Patty dreams out loud.

In some ways, Sam has already disappeared. Patty sets off for her dominion of tailorific artistry. Sam walks into the living room and sits down. He is not an inquisitive man. There is, however, one question which fills his mind. It is the same questions he has asked for many years. What is it that I am supposed to remember?

## Chapter 5

The suns Alephion and Bethion rise and cast their light upon the heights of the crater wall. It will be some time before the celestial bodies appear over the crater rim. In the home of Chad and Kiah the domestic AIs have prepared for the couple's morning rituals. The news system has compiled a short holographic experience. The physical health system has readied the morning bath. The nutritional system has prepared breakfast. The elimination lab is ready to collect and analyze this morning's excretions. Kiah is the first to wake.

She opens her big-blue eyes. Her head rotates from side to side and then up and down. She stretches her back bringing her hands together above her head. She straightens her legs. Her toes point, and her fingers spread. She is floating upside down inside of their gravity free bed. Chad is facing her, but his head is pointed up towards the ceiling. His arms are suspended in front of him and his legs are bent. She smiles and takes a few moments to analyze her life partner's appearance.

His skin is fair. Its translucence reveals tan and crimson undertones. The way the light plays on the surface of his body casts shadows revealing a lean and muscular physique. His arms and legs are long. His hair is blonde like hers but more so. He keeps it short enough to look good but require little attention. His face is long and handsome. She is filled with pleasure as she

imagines staring into his eyes. Soon his eyes will be free to gaze upon her beautiful body. She thirsts for them to open. She feels so blessed to have found her companion. She is teased relentlessly, by her peers, for believing in outdated concepts like companionship and romanticism. Never-the-less, she could not and would not turn it off.

Her attention shifts to getting out of bed. Her long hair spirals in orbit around her head. She pushes gently on the floor of the bed with her right arm. Her torso rises up. She is face to face with her life partner. She grabs the rail on top of the bed and pulls herself over to the ladder. She climbs through the opening in the gravity horizon. Her hair falls down wherever it happens to be floating. The transition from zero gravity to full acceleration is always a strange sensation. She steps off the ladder. Her feet grip the floor. She walks slowly to the bathroom. Her hands run through her hair. She attempts to straighten out some larger knots.

She walks into the bathroom and voids. The lab AI reports, "Good morning Kiah. This morning's lab results. You are slightly dehydrated. Metabolic waste output shows high adrenaline markers. Toxin levels are low. Stress levels are moderate. Your blood sugar indicates you have been fasting. I recommend a four hundred calories breakfast. You are on day twenty-four of your cycle. Likelihood of successful gene combining zero-point one percent. Exercise bath is ready for stimulation and cleansing."

She stands and then takes a few short steps to the bath. She places her toe into the water. The water is warm and inviting. She

descends the stairs into the water. The water rises to the nape of her neck. She moves her arms and legs in the water. She feels the sensation of swirling vortices rushing past her skin.

Her inner voice whispers, "PHAI engage morning exercise. Fifteen minutes."

Her contextual interface initiates the routine. Her arms and legs begin to move on their own. She can override the AI control if she wishes. Not controlling the muscles may sound frightening. It is, however, liberating. The AI manipulates the body freeing the mind to wander. The feeling of the movement, the resistance of the water and her elevated heart rate, make her feel so alive.

She transitions from a dance routine to a brisk swim. The pool water begins to circulate. Her arms and legs begin to ply the waters with a breast stroke. She breathes rhythmically. Her mind wanders to visions of mountains. She recalls the excitement of gliding up the mountainside. She imagines herself swimming in the white powdery snow. The contrast of the warm water rushing past her body with the mental imaginary of blasting cold snow is exhilarating. She transitions to a freestyle stroke and starts to ponder about the coming day.

"PH routine complete," announces the system.

The water calms and Kiah begins washing her body. The filtration system cleaned the water while she was exercising. Solutions are added in the water to support the health of her skin and hair. She submerges and washes her hair. She resurfaces and wipes the water from her eyes.



"Rinse," she commands.

The pumps energize filtering out the solutions. Part of her wants to remain in the comfort of the bath. She lingers a few more moments and then climbs out. She walks into the ultrasonic drying room. It only takes a few seconds for her hair and body to dry completely. She walks over to her closet. By this time, Chad has emerged from their bed and is getting ready for his bath.

"Good morning sweetie," Chad greets Kiah.

"Did you sleep well," she asks.

"Like a dead star."

"I saw some drool balls floating around in there," she says with a smile.

"I am not the only one with salivary glands," Chad remarks, "I will see you at breakfast. Save some for me."

Chad slips into the bath and enters his physical health routine. His routine is much simpler than Kiah's. He prefers to swim the whole time. His arms draw water past his body and his mind starts to drift off into another world. He is occupied with thoughts of a technical nature. What fundamentally classifies as intelligence? Is it self-awareness? Is it the ability to solve problems? The most advanced mathematical AIs are, in many ways, as dead as the rocks. The ability to grind through numbers allows them to calculate celestial mechanics for giga-annums. Would they ever be able to appreciate the beauty of the universe? Would they be capable of creative imagination? Would they imagine an arc of intelligence pass overhead as a great civilization is born, grows and dies on

some foreign body? Would they ever experience companionship? Are companionship and romanticism antiquated ideas as his society teaches? Thoughts continue to circulate in his mind.

The pumps stop, and the water stills. His lower extremities rotate under his torso. He grabs the bath rail and climbs up into the drying room. Once his surface features are fully desiccated, he listens to the pleadings of his organs. They are ready for breakfast. He walks down a short hallway and into the great room of their abode. He descends a staircase wrapping along the wall. It is on the opposite side of the room, across from the kitchen.

The room is large and inviting. The floor and walls are elliptically shaped. From the top of the stairs a beautiful image appears in the center of the floor. A shimmering spiral galaxy is set against the black of space. It is an older style of hologram. It is a detailed arrangement of microscopic mosaic tiles. The tiny tiles are set by machines. Micro-optics are used to place the tiles and ensure incident light leaves each element at just the right angle. The effect is visually stunning.

The stair treads are made of basalt. They are set into the wall and appear to float. Stairs are omitted or removed from most homes in Garamindia. Lifts are the norm. Chad and Kiah like the elegance and simplicity stairs bring. Kiah looks up as her life partner descends into her presence. Her eyes brighten, and her lips form a gentle smile.

“Skål. To victory,” Kiah proclaims as she lifts her glass into the air, pauses for a short moment and drinks. She sets her glass

down on the table. She turns toward Chad again and smiles. This time her smile grows large enough to part her lips revealing teeth covered in green superfood.

Chad reciprocates her facial affections. He walks past her. He places his hand on her shoulder. He bends down at the waist and rests his chin on her head. His arms wrap around her with an embrace. She turns in her chair and reaches up. She places her hand on his warm cheek. His strong cheek and jaw support it like they are designed to do so. Chad and Kiah look into each other's eyes. There they see a whole other universe. It is so comforting and inviting. Their lips meet tenderly with a morning kiss. Chad turns and settles into his chair.

The domestic AI walks up beside Chad and serves his breakfast. The AI serves a bowl of cottage cheese topped with mixed berries and three eggs sunny side up. A whirring sound fills the kitchen. Shortly thereafter, the AI brings him a jordberry and vitae root smoothie. The vitae root is grown all over the city. It is loaded with vitamins and minerals. It has a nutty-rich flavor.

“Shall we watch the news?” Chad asks.

“We shall,” Kiah affirms.

Chad issues the command to bring up the news system. A hologram appears in the center of their table. An image of their solar system appears. A woman's voice is heard. She begins to go over the current news in the Aleph-Beth Solar System, “Good morning Alephbethites. The following news has transpired in recent days.”

The couple watches as the hologram zooms in on one of the planets.

“On the planet Controlion, eruptions from our solar system's largest volcano continue to alter atmospheric compositions. Inhabitants have been evacuated to Noen, the planet's largest moon. Atmospheric cleansing will begin in twelve Controlion days. Inhabitants will be able to return to the surface in twenty. This is the first such incident in the last one-hundred Controlion years.

The age-old debate about spiking the volcano and diverting the magma chamber continues to draw debate from advocates on both sides. Controlion natives believe the planet is alive. They see geo-engineering, without the planet's consent, as an invasion of its autonomy. It is only by the generosity of their planetary neighbors that the Controlion people have survived this long. Committed to living as primitively as possible, these people have none-the-less reluctantly accepted certain technology. Atmospheric response ships and gravitacraft are considered, a necessary evil.”

The holographic image stops skimming the surface of Controlion and pulls away. They are now piercing the ash cloud and pass by the planet's moons. The hologram turns toward the suns.

“Tunneling stations are running at seventy-five percent. As you can see, one of the collection arrays was damaged in a recent solar storm. NBE crews are working around the clock to deploy replacement collectors. Electronium Station is definitely

humming with activity. For those who could experience the interactions of the storm with the magnetospheres of the planets, it produced some spectacular lighting effects.”

The image cuts to a three-dimensional analysis of the storm's path as it hugged the great magnetic field lines of the stars and passed through the proportionally insignificant array.

“Researchers continue looking for ways to fortify the Aleph-Beth Power Constellation from the effects of solar anomalies. The most promising solutions involve instantly transporting the system or shielding the system upon detection.”

The hologram flies between the two suns. They appear to slingshot around the larger star. They approach a familiar looking place.

“On the planet Altion output is at 98.899 percent. The planet's people continue to be the happiest and most productive in our solar system.”

The couple finishes watching the news after a few clips about new technology, psychology and healthy living. They finish their breakfast. Chad is the first to rise from the table. The domestic AI hands him his research uniform. He wastes little effort. He throws on the shirt, slacks and sport coat.

Kiah makes quick work of her clothes too. Her uniform is conservative in many ways. It also subtly reveals the masterpiece of feminine form lying beneath. Her shoes are quite comfortable. Their elegance does not divulge this secret.

“Hologram likeness,” Chad commands.

A mirrored reproduction of his body is projected directly in front of him. He ensures everything appears in order.

“Exit hologram likeness,” Kiah commands as she strolls over to Chad and begins assessing his readiness for social interaction.

She runs her hands through his short blonde hair coaxing it into alignment. She delights in how soft it feels between her fingers, especially after a bath. Her hand moves to his coat. She pretends to remove a patch of lint. The clever ruse is a successful attempt to feel his muscular chest under the palm of her hand. With satisfaction she says, “I think you will do nicely. How do I look?”

Chad thinks carefully for a moment and replies, “Even the freshest *Petuleum Leveroseum* flower blossoming in the gentle rays of the first sunrise would feel pangs of jealousy when compared to your beauty.”

“You are so sweet. I am probably the only life partner in the universe to have such an imaginative companion,” she answers with genuine appreciation and a hint of disbelief.

“Domestic AIs. Please clean up breakfast and put everything in order while we are away today. Tonight, we will be dining out. Feel free to take the night off from your domestic duties,” Chad instructs the AIs with a very personable tone.

They grab their research cases and walk out the front door.

## Chapter 6

Through the door lies a delightful garden wrapped by a concentric pathway. The path from the house crosses the garden and meets the perimeter path seamlessly. The perimeter walkway circles the home. Circumambulation, around the dwelling units, is possible and highly recommended if you are ever in Garamindia. There is a meditative quality in the layout of the buildings and grounds. Hours can be spent in quiet contemplation experiencing the beauty of the horticultural.

The gardening AI has been hard at work. The flowers and vegetables look amazing. The smell of freshly cultivated soil mixes with the aroma of bloomerical goodness.

“What is blooming this morning GAI?” Chad asks.

“We are currently moving into the rainy season. Flowers opening themselves for pollination this time of year include the Yillas, Chrysapuffs and Petuleum Leveroseums. Currently all three varieties can be seen exposing their reproductive organs in the perimeter arc. I will assess the effectiveness of the biological pollen transportation entities. If necessary, I will pollinate the specimens myself,” GAI responds.

“Petuleum Leveroseums? Did you happen to see any this morning appearing overcome with grief or perhaps jealousy?” Chad quips as he steals a furtive glance towards Kiah.

“Flowers do not have the ability to experience such complex

emotions. I am not sure..."

Chad's contextual interface stealthily permits access to the mornings core entries and prompts the gardening AI with his own words.

"...sure... I do recall them looking so beautiful earlier. It seems Kiah's presence has riddled them with jealousy. Surely due to the magnitude of her radiant beauty," GAI recites.

"Only you, my life partner, would hack the domestic AIs in an attempt to promulgate your mental delusions. I am very much smitten by your attempt at romance."

They walk a few more feet. They stop beside one of the benches that lines the path. They sit down on the benches. They place their cases on the ground. Chad looks at Kiah for a few seconds with a smile. Kiah blushes and turns away straightening her hair behind her ears and momentarily looking up at the blue sky.

"GAT. Please transport us to The Metricule. Pace: Leisurely," Chad speaks looking across the path.

The ground beneath the bench begins to move. Silently the bench and its platform rotate out onto the path and begin to skim the perimeter. The fresh breeze begins to rush past their faces. The sensation of moving air greets the nerves of the skin in a way that is stimulating and pleasant. The speed allows them to continue to communicate with speech.

"What do you think we will get to see today?" Kiah asks.

"I hope we will pass through the modern art arcs. They are



always so much more enjoyable than the classical art which is so abstract.”

The GAT platform reaches one of the intersecting points of the city pathways. Two other paths, from adjacent homes, meet forming a small park known as a trebue. This is the name Garamindians have given to the area enclosed by three tangential circles. The trebue land is held in common. Artwork of all varieties fill these spaces. Rules only specify what type of art is displayed in a sector on a given year.

In this trebue is found a piece from the Acrophonian Mining Era. A worn-out artifact of mining equipment was transformed into a decorative carousel. Rudimentary metal castings depict scenes of mountain legend. The great Acrophon can be seen rising from the top. He is always depicted as an old man. Even so, he emits a virility which challenges his aged appearance. His face is long and furrowed. Deep fissures are gouged out indicating the passage of time. His head rises to a point disproportionately high above his forehead. In one hand he carries a pickaxe. In the other he holds a winged creature.

His loins are girded by clouds which serve to cloth and support him. He does not move. Below him statutes orbit on a turntable. Some are beautiful winged creatures looking very much like fairies. They are beautiful even in their crudely fashioned form. Large hideous monsters with clubs, teeth and horns appear to chase the fairies as the platform spins around.

“What do you suppose the little fairies are thinking? They are

being chased by horrible monsters. Still, they smile like they just received an Original Thought Award,” Kiah asks.

“Maybe they like being chased by monsters. I imagine the fairies of Snedahl develop a fever of boredom when they aren't being taunted by mountain trolls,” Chad replies.

There is a certain uncertainty associated with the direction the platform will travel through the city. Sensors throughout the city detect walkers and platforms. Walkers are bypassed by all the alternative routes available on the arc-ways. Occasionally there are stops to prevent users from meeting on the path, but surprisingly, all traffic moves around very efficiently given the volume. There are also many other forms of transportation available. Gravitacraft come in many different shapes and sizes. They can be seen cruising through the air overhead. The GAT is more of an experience than a rapid mode of transportation.

The platform continues its circuitous route about the city. The bench riders have made their way out of the Mining Era Exhibits and into the area known as Simple Pleasures. The first sculpture is titled, The Most Quencherrific Hydroslake. A large glass of water is continuously pouring into a mouth made of stone. There are no facial features beyond the mouth, lips and partial cheek bones. The glass appears to be floating in space. The couple's curiosity is piqued. Chad stares intently at the illusion and smiles with understanding. Below the glass, slight variations in the background can be seen at the base of the monument. He explains to Kiah how their senses are tricked by a circular hologram which

is projected in a ring around the base. This deceives the eyes of the observer into seeing what is on the other side. This prevents the detection of the stand and water pump.

“Shoot, I was sure hoping for gravity manipulation and tunneling,” Kiah utters with disappointment.

Kiah drinks in a couple more glances of sculpture and turns toward Chad, “What new and exciting research do you have planned today?”

“I will be running through some basic learning and self-recognition tasks with ALLIE. Nothing overly complicated or challenging. What will you be working on?”

“We are still working on understanding the interaction of neural networks. We understand the chemical interactions and firing patterns. We still cannot understand why creating the same networks in a computational environment fails to yield the same results.”

“Have you considered the Ämne Hypothesis? There must be a synergistic interaction between the chemical and electrical system creating a singular consciousness. To recreate it in a computational environment would require creating signatures which match the complexity of chemical and electrical interactions across the network and overlaying the synergistic controlling heuristic variable,” elaborates Chad.

“We have tried ad nauseam to recreate the synergistic variable purported by Ämne. For the last three decades we have had the Virulence Optima Cluster running scenarios constructed entirely

on the Ämne calculations. I have concluded it is bunkum,” Kiah asserts.

“Bunkum! Hmmm. Have you shared this with your learned elders?” Chad asks.

“You know I am about as good at keeping thoughts to myself as Alephion is at preventing solar radiation from pouring into space. The great thing about being the youngest member of the team is, I get to be the outlier. We have created sentient AIs. They can tell us how they think they feel. They can express themselves like we can. We cannot transfer biological consciousness into a machine, let alone back out into a biological entity. We can transfer what appears to be consciousness into the machines. Unfortunately, all that remains is what any AI can emulate based upon core entries. We bring family members in post-transfer. All leave in tears after fifteen minutes. I can barely stand it,” Kiah shares emotionally.

Chad reaches over to Kiah. With his hand he gently wipes away the tears from his most cherished face. He could feel her heart tearing open in his own body. It is a feeling he can only experience through her.

Kiah possesses an extremely high emotional intelligence. Garamindians have studied emotions extensively and have determined them to be a remnant of their adaptational development. Early emotions were based upon primal needs. They served as a feedback loop which allowed the species to survive. Emotions are a part of Garamindian life. They are, however,

squelched significantly. Kiah is different. She feels what other people feel before they realize it. She can walk into a room filled with complete strangers. In a few minutes, everyone will be smiling and laughing.

Chad is the only person Kiah will allow to experience this side of her personality. His stoic confidence and depth of emotional intelligence is like nothing she has ever experienced. Every person who enters her life is easy to decode. She can see someone's facial expression or hear their voice and it resonates with her intuition. Her perceptions of the person align like pins in a lock. All she must do is turn the key, and she has essentially unlocked the other person's emotional state of being.

Her life partner's emotions are like a lock that is constantly recoding in multiple dimensions. Every time she feels like she has figured him out, she realizes that she has only accessed the well house of his emotion. Walking to the edge of the well, she can lean over and peer down into the depths of his soul. She can feel the seething energy rising out of the shaft. The experience is frightening. It is this unique feeling which drew her to him. She dares not venture into the depths of his emotion. The awesome wonder of the unknown allows her to let go. He is so distant, so raw and yet so very much a part of her. She pours her hidden emotion into the obscure depths of his soul knowing she is safe and appreciated.

To everyone else, he is a different type of mystery. Even by Garamindian standards, Chad's vision is macro-universal. While

other children dreamed of piloting gravitacraft to a faraway world, Chad would dream of creating a vehicle to transport the entire solar system around the universe. The absurdity of spending decades in a gravitacraft is illogical. At the time of his birth, there were already numerous space stations circling the planets and suns in the Aleph-Beth Solar System. When he became an adolescent, his farmars would ask him if he wanted to design a space station to live on. He would quickly remind them that he already lived on a space station. He would explain how the solar system is a space station and that the galaxy is a collection of space stations. Albeit with varying levels of habitability. Downsizing from the Altion Planetary Pod did not sound like an improvement to him.

“My team members are more concerned about the scientific process than they are about these people. All our subjects are terminal, but logically it could be argued that we are all at varying stages of terminality... .. I think Numinous is right!” Kiah exclaims.

“Do you want to be ridiculed by everyone in this city?” Chad shouts and slowly decrescendos into a laugh.

Kiah smiles and looks at him through her upper eyelashes. She bats them slowly in his direction.

“I don't know if we can have two people in our family who spin anti-directionally of the Garamindian orbit,” Chad continues half-talking half-laughing.

“Our society keeps asserting the notion that Altimus is somehow infallible. It has been a thousand years since his

materialistic proofs. Our life spans continue to increase. Are we really better off believing there is nothing outside of what we can touch in this universe?" Kiah inquires.

"My dearest Kiah. I love you... The more I learn about how we think the universe works the less I conclude we actually know. Looking back in history it has been observed that Garamindians are one-hundred percent correct approximately fifty percent of the time. An enfar and enmar sit next to the bed of a child. Each of the family members takes their turn reading a bedtime story. The story is made up. The characters are all made up. The story is a tool. We are all playing a part in a cosmic story. If I were to compare a children's story to how much our species knows about the universe, I would confidently say that we know as much as one period at the end of one sentence. If I were to fill our city with core drives containing all the stories and fundamental principles of the universe, the pile would encompass the planet. It would likely spill out into the outer reaches of the solar system. I will let Numinous be right at least fifty percent of the time," Chad pontificates.

They round an arc and approach another sculpture. The statue is composed of two parts. The first is a young girl. She sits in a field surrounded by flowers and grass. In her lap rests an animal with long ears and a bushy tail. The little girl is smiling. Her one arm supports her as she leans sideways. With the other hand she strokes the back of the animal. The name of the piece is, Action Creates Happy Girl and Cunicule.

“This is one of my favorite today. I have always loved animals. It reminds me of traveling to the rolling fields of Equindor,” Kiah confesses reminiscently.

The platform rounds another home. They now leave the residential area and are traveling in a straight line towards The Metricule. These wedge-shaped areas of town are where businesses and industry apply the collective wealth of society to create products. These products make life in the solar system happier and more efficient. The path today takes them by the anti-gravity well generator factory. The building is constructed with a massively thick ceiling. It is bolted to the ground with giant pilings and threaded rods. Occasionally gravitational waves have passed through the city emanating from the center of the galaxy. This can trigger well anomalies. The first factories were not built with safety precautions in mind. Some were shot into orbit during gravitational storms.

“What do you have planned for this evening my dear?” Chad asks.

“I would love to spend some time on the rim. It might not be as breathtaking as watching the sunset from Acrophon, but it would be nice to spend some time outside,” Kiah asserts.

“That sounds great. Let's jog the rim trail. Then afterwards, what would you like to have for supper?” Chad suggests and asks in the same breath.

“I could go for some seafood. How about cephalopod, in churned mammalian cream and covered in sliced alliums?” Kiah



suggests savoringly.

“I will make it happen,” Chad asserts.

The platform pulls into an empty location in the gardens surrounding The Metricule.

“GAT park. We have arrived successfully. Thank you,” Chad prompts shortly before the platform lowers down to the ground.

They stand up and walk towards the dome. There is an excitement in the air. Other citizens hurry here and there. They reach the outer door. It opens in front of them. They continue holding hands as they walk by the gardens. They reach the inner dome.

Kiah stops and turns towards Chad, “I am very fond of you. I will see you tonight.”

“I am quite fond of you too. I will miss you. I look forward to tonight,” Chad says as he places his right hand on her lower arm and leans over to kiss her on the lips.

As he pulls away, she locks eyes and winks at him. She then makes the transformation into researcher and walks away. His gaze lingers as she walks. She turns a corner and is out of sight. He begins making his own transformation into researcher. A pleasant smile lingers as he walks to his lab.

## Chapter 7

Several weeks have passed since the seed of creativity was planted in Patty's mind. Diligently she has studied suit patterns and images until she is convinced she has found the right one. Countless hours have been spent crafting her handy work. The fabric she selected is navy-blue. The material is composed of special fiber. These fiber strands are very strong and yet incredibly soft to the touch. When the material is woven together, it creates a waterproof seal. Miraculously, it still breathes. The design she finally settled on is a single-breasted dinner suit with matching pants, a white collared shirt and purple tie. She incorporates a gray vest to accent the darker colors of the suit. The hum of the sewing machine can be heard echoing in her studio as she calls down the hall for her runway model, "Sam! Come quickly. I cannot wait to see how this looks on you."

Sam sits in a chair looking out the window towards the beach. He is already dressed in his bathing clothes. In his hand he holds a whirlyball. This toy consists of a small well generator and an internal gyroscope. When tossed into the air, it will spin in wild gyrations or appear to hover in front of the viewer moving in ever changing directions. When pushed, the ball will either fight the movement or embrace it. Encased in a rubberized housing, it will also bounce off hard objects.

Patty enters the room with Sam and presents him with the

fruits of her labor. She has carefully draped the elements over a hanger. She looks at him and smiles, "Are you ready to be impressed?"

Sam looks up at her momentarily forgetting about his whirlyball.

"Does this need to happen now?" Sam asks.

"Yes! Yes! Most definitely," Patty cries.

Sam stands up and turns towards Patty. Unwittingly, he taps the whirlyball with his left elbow into the glass window. In a shot, it bounces back into the room spiraling here and there. It crashes into a plant knocking it over. From there it careens into the ceiling nearly taking out the lighting. It begins traveling in Patty's direction. Sam lunges in front of it. He clutches it tightly to his chest, he falls onto the floor.

"Well that was fun. Now it is time to try on your vision suit," Patty urges.

"I am fine. I don't think I was hurt in any way while saving your life. Thank you for asking," Sam returns with concern for her lack of empathy.

"I can understand why these toys are so unpopular. I can put it back in your room. First, we try this on," she continues unfazed.

Sam stands up and finally starts paying attention to Patty. He pulls off his regular garb and begins to dress in Patty's suit. He starts with the pants. He is surprised at how comfortably they slip on. They seem oddly familiar as though he has already put them on a thousand times before. She hands him the dress shirt. He

pulls it over his arms. She begins to button it for him. He looks down at her with great fondness. Her hands and fingers move with great meticulousness and efficiency. She finishes the last button and, without hesitation, grabs the vest and throws it over his arms. She leaves it unfastened while attending his neck tie.

“Big end in my right hand, little in my left. Big over the little and come up through the middle. Big behind the left side over to the right side. Big up over the rim and down in the middle. Right side big over little in front. Up through the middle and down through the little loop,” Patty recites rhythmically while tying his tie.

She straightens the tie and begins to tuck the shirt in about his waist.

“What are you doing?” Sam asks.

“You do not expect to wear a suit and not tuck in your shirt?”

“Do people really do that? Is it really necessary?” Sam continues asking.

“Come now Samuel. Did your vision show you with shirt tails hanging out?” Patty asks.

“Maybe that is what I am supposed to remember,” Sam jokes.

Patty tucks in the shirt undeterred by Sam's incessant complaining. She buttons his vest and runs her hands over his body straightening the fabric. Finally, she grabs the suit coat. It is lined with fabric covered in Ps. On the label it reads...

Patty NBT

Non-Biological-Tailor

“Oh, I cannot wait!” Patty shouts holding the coat out for Sam to pull on.

Pulling it on, Sam begins to take an interest in his new suit. He straightens the coat and runs his hands over his chest. He squeezes the lapels and pulls on the sleeves. The suit looks better than Patty ever imagined. The suit from his vision, has become a reality. She leaps onto Sam wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his body. He is startled at first but returns her affections by crossing his arms around her waist.

“I am so incredibly happy,” she admits.

Even though Sam knows his companion is artificial, he cannot help but feel a swelling in his heart for her acts of kindness. He starts to feel genuine affection for his NBE companion. She releases her embrace and transitions into an artist obsessed with perfecting her work. She notices that while it was superb in nearly every detail, the pants need to be hemmed. The suit coat lacks a certain embellishment about the lapels and pockets. She runs to her room and returns with a pin cushion. She begins pinning the legs of the pants. She notices they need to be taken in between the legs.

“It looks like I was slightly off in this area. I thought I had taken detailed measurements,” Patty comments.

She places her hand between his legs and pinches the material between her thumb and fingers. All at once Sam begins hopping from one foot to the other while shouting in a high-pitched voice, “STOP! STOP! LET GO!”

Patty obligingly relinquishes her grasp. She looks up to see Sam's obvious surprise and discomfort associated with her previous action.

“That is right. I had taken detailed measurements,” Patty says in a tone which is meant to bolster Sam's self-esteem.

Patty's focus moves on to the coat. She looks at Sam for a couple minutes while brainstorming ideas. What sort of stitching would accentuate his bust while not appearing gaudy? She decides to use a different type of fabric with a shiny luster. Patty removes the suit from Sam's frame. Aside from the incident with discomfort, he is overcome with a sense of joy. He enjoyed being waited on hand and foot by Patty.

“Thank you very much Patty. I think this suit is going to be perfect,” Sam offers with gratitude.

“I am so glad dear. I only have a few more alterations to make. I will get the pants adjusted and add some decorative fabric to the collar,” Patty shares aloud.

Sam slips off the pants and hands them to Patty. She drapes them over her arm and returns to her sewing room. Sam follows her with a budding interest. He peers into the room while leaning on the door post. Patty looks up at him and smiles. He enters the room and stands beside her. She looks up at him with surprise. He timidly kisses her on the lips and places his hand on her side. He so rarely shows an active interest in her. She kisses him back and looks into his eyes.

“Would you like to go with me to the beach today?” Sam asks.

“Yes! Yes! Yeeessss! Let me grab a bikini. I made several a while ago. Oh yes. I love this hot pink one,” Patty shrieks as she digs through boxes of clothing.

Patty is undressed and redressed in bikini, shirt and shorts before Sam can respond. She looks at Sam with surprise. He is still standing in her sewing room. Expeditiousness is a common trait for an NBE. This had to have been some kind of record. Sam walks down the hall and gathers his things. Patty moves to the kitchen and assembles a picnic.

“Would you like anything in particular for our picnic?” Patty asks.

“I normally stop for a bovine stack at Ruminian Five,” Sam replies.

Patty looks at him with disappointment. I will bring along juice, oiled salad, hard-boiled eggs, vegetable stacks and ground palm seeds. Sam hears his inner voice’s displeasure. He rethinks his decision to bring her. Patty places their picnic into a canvas bag and puts the strap over her shoulder. She walks to the door and waits with a smile. Sam meets her by the entry and they walk out into the sunshine. He strolls past the courtyard and into the family storage area. Here they find his zotter. Patty opens the hatch on the gravitacraft, climbs into her seat and fastens the restraint. Sam follows. He pilots the craft over the zotter and hoists it into position. The hatch closes. He plots a course for the beach.

In a moment's time they arrive at the beach. To their surprise,

they are not joined by very many people. The sand is an expanse of brilliant white. Beyond the sand aquamarine colored water stretches off into infinity. The waves meet the shore with an incessant crash. Foam and flowing layers of churning liquid move and interact with each new wave. The sand closest to the water darkens creating a surface of ever-changing beauty. Lifeforms of the sea stir and dance among the thrashing waves. Cetaceans jump and splash darting along the reef. Their songs can be heard blowing in on the fresh ocean breeze. Crustaceans flutter about feasting on piles of flora expelled from the sea. The bands of shells and sea vegetables reveal a linear record of the tide's advance and retreat.

Patty is so excited by the sights and sounds of the beach that she jumps out of the craft before it lands. She rushes off to stick her feet in the sand. She stumbles with her fist few steps falling onto her side. She laughs at the novelty of the new experience. The better part of a minute passes before she learns to walk on the shifting sand. She bends over to scoop up the sand. She allows it to sift through her fingers. Her sensors are flooded with new inputs as she delights in the new experience.

She smiles and glances back towards the craft. Sam is seen lowering the zotter with the hoist. The lines detach, and he lands the craft.

“What a wonderful place. I understand why you love it so much. I have already had so much fun. What are you doing now?” Patty asks with great enthusiasm.



“I am stepping the mast. Would you like to help?” Sam asks.

“I would love to. Wait. What does that involve?” Patty replies.

“We are going to stand this mast up in the middle of the zotter. If you can hold it up, I will insert the bolts,” Sam instructs.

“I sure can,” Patty affirms.

Sam and Patty lift the mast into place and Sam bolts it into position. Patty smiles as she watches him working. Sam stands up and thanks her for helping. He had done it many times alone. Using the craft to hoist the mast was more challenging. He still had to control the hoist, guide the mast and line up the bolts.

Today he would try a new power system. Electron storage is archaic. The electric fan motors were powered by electron cells. The last manufacturer had stopped making them. His last charge cycles would only yield a few minutes of riding time. Sam asked engineers in his family for a solution. The consensus involved replacing the electron cells with tunneled supplies. They are smaller and lighter. Best of all, they did not discharge. The zotter had been retrofitted in a shop over the last few days. Sam is eager to test the performance of the modifications.

“Are we ready to set sail Captain Sam?” Patty asks jokingly but with sincerity.

“The craft is only built for one person. The reduced cell weight could very well allow you to ride too. Are you waterproof?” Sam asks.

“You are really something. We have been together for almost three years, and you have not read or watched my manual?” Patty

questions.

“I looked at some diagrams,” Sam admits.

“Operations Manual

NBE-F-161202025

Personal Companion.

Skipping to specifications page 73.

Hair Color: Black

Eye Color: Blue

Sex: Female

Weight...

Let's skip this one.

Height: 182cm

Power Source: Tunneled

746 Watts

Skin: Light Brown.

Here it is.

Outer Membrane: Capable of immersion to 30 meters as long as membrane integrity is not compromised. Does my membrane look compromised?” Patty asks.

“It looks intact to me. Have a seat,” Sam invites.

Patty lays down on the bow of the Zotter placing her feet on the side of the mast opposite Sam's. Sam engages the fan motors. The fans spin up. Soon they are gliding over the surface of the beach. Patty emits regularly occurring shouts of joy as they start down the beach. The sand stops boiling out beneath the craft indicating that they have reached the wetter sand. Sam grabs the

halyard and hoists the sail. He ties it to a cleat and the wind does the rest. The sail tightens in the wind pulling the craft out into the water. Water splashes and sprays. It washes over the deck as they clear the breakers. A large wave crashes over Patty. Surprised by the water in her mouth, she spits it onto the deck. She runs her fingers through her hair as smiles. She laughs and turns momentarily to look at Sam.

“You need to learn to keep your mouth closed when the waves come,” Sam shouts.

Once the craft clears the breaking waves, the vastness of the ocean and the serenity of the experience touches them both. Their suits dry quickly in the salty breeze. The drone of the fans is surprisingly quiet and soothing. The waves rock the craft gently from side to side. Patty rolls over and faces Sam. She tilts her head back and closes her eyes.

She feels the suns warming her skin. How is it that solar warmth, whether registered by BE or NBE, can illicit such a feeling of contentment? She opens her eyes and sees a shore bird flying with them. She lowers her head and places her hand on Sam. He has taken his standard position resting against the transom. Noticing that she has placed her hand on his leg he begins to tickle her feet. She starts laughing uncontrollably.

“Stop! That tickles me,” Patty squirms.

Patty moves her feet trying to stop him from tickling her. Thinking two can play this same game, Patty begins tickling Sam's feet. Looking up, she notices he is completely unfazed by her

tickling efforts.

“I guess I have the advantage,” Sam confesses with pride.

Reaching the point of complete desperation, Patty grabs the hair on Sam's leg and pulls.

“Ouch! Mercy! Mercy! Mercy! I am done. See,” Sam concedes.

Sam raises his hands in surrender. Patty giggles and rolls her head forward closing her eyes to savor the victory. The two of them settle back into their earlier positions. Patty gazes into the sea and Sam lounges back. The wind continues to blow them out into the ocean. Their crater home is but a feature along the shore now. Sam realizes how much he enjoys having a companion. He wonders if he will ever find a real woman. Will she be a better match? Patty did not let him get away with much of anything. Is she that much different than a real woman?

Coherent thoughts make way for scattering images and sounds. Mindfulness wanes. Sam's senses dull. He loses awareness of his surroundings. His consciousness narrows. The suns, breeze and sounds usher his soul into the mysterious realms of sleep.

## Chapter 8

Splat. Splat. Splat. The sound of rain falling onto Sam's chest produces a chill running down his spine. These feelings rouse him from sleep. Terror grips him as he realizes two things. First, his sleep has extended their sailing into the dark of night. Secondly, their tiny craft is headed directly into a storm. He alters their course, hopeful they will outrun the storm. Patty seems unaffected by the turn of events. Only after seeing Sam's face does she realize the gravity of their situation.

“Why did you not wake me?” Sam angrily demands of Patty.

“I don't understand why you are angry with me. We are having a great time. There are nights you don't come home from the beach until morning. How am I supposed to know any better?” Patty defends.

“We will be lucky to get out of this alive. That is a great storm, and we are nothing,” Sam laments.

The perennial smile on Patty's face is missing. Instead, she displays fear and disappointment. Confronted with Sam's anger, Patty begins to cry uncontrollably. Clutching her legs to her chest, she watches the approaching storm. It is still some ways off. The crack of thunder and blinding light remind them. They are not pulling away. The rain picks up. Slowly at first the drops increase in frequency.

The small-gray clouds have been replaced by giant-black

clouds. The rain falls quicker and quicker becoming a torrential downpour. The distinction between atmosphere and hydrosphere blurs. The wind blows the sail with such fury that the base of the mast snaps off drawing it up into the sky. The waves crash upon the sides of the zotter. The fans begin to hit the water with greater and greater frequency lowering their pitch. Water swamps the deck of the craft. The electrical system shorts out. The fans grind to a halt. The zotter breaks apart.

Jumping into the water, the Garamindians grab a hold of anything solid or buoyant. They toss about in the tempest's fury for what seems like an eternity. Holding hands would bring them both comfort. Unfortunately, the luxury of a spare hand does not lend itself to survival. In utter desperation, Sam begins frantically swimming around the wreckage looking for anything that might float. He finds an air bladder. He holds on with all his might. Satisfied with his own situation, he begins crying out for his companion, "PATTY! PATTY! PATTY!"

He continues calling for her despite his feeling of insignificance and loss. He can barely hear himself over the cacophony of the elements. Wind, water and cloud have teamed up against him. Has he met his end? He cannot answer this question. There is only one thing he must do now. Continue looking for Patty.

"PATTY!"

His aching muscles gain freedom from strain. He does not know if the storm relenting, or his body is shutting down. Deep

down he wants to believe the storm is relenting. The waves die down. The rain tapers. Finally, the wind stops blowing. A silence he has never experienced envelopes him. The stars are the only lights in the sky. They glow brightly. This comforts Sam. It is a familiar sight. He can now focus all his effort on finding Patty.

“PATTY! Where are you?” Sam calls.

Off in the distance, Sam spots a pair of faint blue lights. Intrigued by this new discovery he begins paddling in their direction. Nearing the lights, he is overcome with the relief as he hears his companion shout, “Sam! There you are!”

“Patty. I am so glad that I found you,” Sam responds

Sam and Patty swim to each other and embrace for what seems like an instantaneous eternity. Patty's eyes are glowing. Their light is shining out over the water.

“That is a neat trick. Why have you never shown me those before?”

“I spent most of the time while you were sleeping looking out at the ocean and reading my manual. You cannot imagine all the things that I can do. My engineers are some clever people.”

“You can turn those off. I knew I liked your eyes. Here grab onto this. It will help us use less energy staying afloat. Lucky for you, you shouldn't get tired.”

“Correct. We are together and will be fine once a gravitacraft spots my distress beacon. You look exhausted. Let me hold you up so that you can sleep until morning. I will function fine without any sleep,” Patty offers soothingly.

“Did you hear me calling for you?” Sam asks hoping his cries had reached her.

“Yes,” she responds.

“Why did you not answer me?” he asks.

“You told me to keep my mouth closed when the waves come.”

Sam and Patty laugh with an exhausted exuberance. The night no longer seems as dark as it had been shortly after the storm. Sam allows himself to drift off to sleep. He sleeps for many hours as they bob along. Patty dutifully holds his head up and secures the floating airbag. He awakens to find that the suns have already risen high into the sky. He looks off in the direction of the coast. His spirit drops after realizing the shore remains out of sight. His attention turns towards Patty. He sees she is sharing her beautiful smile with the world again. He smiles back at her and greets her, “Good morning.”

“I hope you slept well. Who can miss us with this bright yellow airbag? I hope you slept well,” Patty offers with a strange redundancy.

Sam notices that even though Patty is smiling, her eyes are not tracking. He turns himself around in the water.

“Are you feeling well Patty?” Sam asks.

“I think, I think, I am....fine,” Patty responds.

Knowing something is wrong, Sam begins to examine Patty. He checks her head and neck. All seems fine. He starts running his hands over her arms with the same result. Running his hands down the side of her torso his heart drops. He feels a large gash



in her side. It has allowed the sea water to enter her inner chamber.

“You have a large hole in your outer membrane,” Sam communicates with empathy.

“That is... .. not... good,” Patty struggles to convey.

“Here. Climb up on this air bladder. You will dry out in the suns,” Sam suggests.

Patty's arms move slowly. They lack their usual dexterity. Sam places his arms under her belly and lifts her onto the flotation device. The extent of the damage is now quite visible. The air in the bladder is enough to hold Patty ever so slightly out of the water. Seeing the water drain from the laceration on her side boosts his confidence. He reorients himself in the water bringing his head close to hers. He gently reaches up and straightens her long black hair. Despite her systems signaling she is beyond repair, Patty manages a smile as she reports, “My dia... ..gnostics are ... re... ..port... ing shut... ..down of all... my... maj... ..or sys... ..tems.”

“You are going to be fine. You are draining and drying out. With the warm suns you should be dried out in no time. Please hang in there for me,” Sam pleads.

“I mu...st di... vert all re... main... ing po... ..wer to dis... stre... ..ss bea... ..con.”

“No, No, No. Stay with me. Before you came into my life I was all alone. Don't leave me alone. Please!”

“Sam... I... w... ..ish I could have fin... ..ished y... ..our suit.”

With these last utterances NBE-F-161202025 shuts down. Her face is still amazingly beautiful. Her hair remains black. Her eyes

are open. The once subtle twinkle has vanished like the offending storm. Those lips which had been so joyfully expressive now lie motionless. Only the rise and fall of the waves animate her frame.

Overcome with grief and loneliness, Sam begins to wail uncontrollably. Tears roll down his face. He is all alone. He floats like a microscopic cork in the largest ocean of the solar system. He feels a loss for Patty which dwarves the magnitude of the vast sea. Emptiness gives way to joy as he remembers all the wonderful experiences they shared. His tears transform into laughter.

Sam refocuses his energy on staying alive. He has only been gone for a day. The beacon in Patty must have been received by a gravitacraft or reporting station. He begins thinking about uploading Patty into another body. His eyes occasionally scan the horizon looking for any sign of rescue. Finding himself overrun with exhaustion, he loses the ability to differentiate between reality and illusion. Visions of the core vault memories begin to take over. The first core drives of his family contained pictures and sounds that would have been familiar in his own time. They were all expressions of their species. The same stories played out over and over throughout the millennia.

Where had his core recorder gone? This is the strangest experience that anyone in his family has been through in a thousand of year. Will his life have any meaning at all? Will his core ever be watched by one of his relatives? What will they think of an unknown end? All he can do is continue to hang on. His world contains liquid, a bag of air and hope that Patty will

reanimate.

He thinks back on the life of Sedentom. How much they shared in common. He was a dreamer. He was a late bloomer. He shared his visions with the world regardless of ostracization. At this point, it seems as though they will share a very different end. A scene enters Sam's mind.

Sedentom is seated in the living room while his children play. He stands up with a smile and begins to follow them around the room. He picks them up one by one. Across the room a female voice is heard, "Sed. Come here a minute. Let's try this on. The Commendation Banquet is coming up. I want to make sure everything is perfect."

How could he have missed it before? That voice was indistinguishable from Patty's. In every way she was the doppelganger for Patty. Had he created Patty from his subconscious memory? It certainly wasn't intentional. He tries to remember if this is a core memory or his imagination. Coherent thoughts leave him. He has faced too much physical and emotional distress. His perceptions dull. He loses grasp on reality. He is both figuratively and substantively lost at sea.

## Chapter 9

Feeling foreign matter squish between one's fingers is exhilarating. Especially for someone who has recently been exposed to eminent extinction. Sam slowly regains consciousness as his body rests on wet sand. Viewed from above his body has altered the path of the retreating waves in such a way as to create fractals in the sand. Slowly he picks his head up. He sinks his hands into the sand expressing gratitude and a desire for this experience to be real. He rolls over onto his back staring up into the cloudless sky. To feel his body resting on something solid is priceless.

Sitting up, Sam attempts to stand on his feet. His legs betray him at first. He makes multiple attempts. Finally, able to stand, he walks down to the water's edge. He looks out at the ocean with a feeling of respect. He had known and loved the sea his whole life. He never believed it would betray him. He still held a place in his heart for it. He had, however, padded this love with a fearful reverence.

While kneeling, he begins to wash his body with the clear water on the surface of the waves. He cannot believe how much sand he is wearing. After scrubbing for a few minutes, his skin appears normal. As he walks along the beach, Sam scans the shore looking for signs of Patty. Hopefully she washes up too.

The island is relatively small. There is little in the way of sea

creatures or plants. The beach is about fifty yards wide. It does not take long for Sam to disappointedly reach his point of origin. The great pain of loss stings his soul again. Dropping to his knees, he weeps again for the loss of Patty. Reality cannot be altered. The Patty he knew is gone. His eyes cry. His tears lack moisture. He redirects his interest to quenching his thirst.

Having found nothing on the beach, Sam starts walking toward the center of the island. There is a small plateau. He climbs onto it without much effort. The top of the island comprises roughly five acres of land. It is shaped like an oval. It is covered by short grasses and a single tree. The tree is about fifty feet tall. From its branches hang edible fruit in large bunches. The same species of tree grew in one of the trebues which flanked his home. Filled with hope of survival and the pleasant familiarity with the tree, Sam rushes over to taste some of its fruit. Reaching the tree, it becomes obvious he had overly simplified the process. The fruit was at least thirty feet high.

A memory from his childhood flashes in his mind. He had seen his brother climb the tree near their house. He had used a strap of sorts to wrap the tree. The bark of the tree allowed one to stand on its segments but did not provide handholds. Being dressed in only his swim trunks, Sam removes them and twists them into a sling. Slowly he climbs the trunk of the tree until he reaches the delicious fruit. He realizes he has made another oversight. He lacks a free hand. How would he pick the fruit without falling to the ground? Refusing to give up, he climbs

above the fruit and begins kicking it with one foot while standing on the other. Mindful of his need to ration the remaining clumps of fruit, he only harvests what he thinks he can eat.

Satisfied with his accomplishment, Sam spends a few moments looking over the island from his vantage point. From this tree he can see the whole island. Looking down at the grassy area he is overjoyed to witness a flowing spring of water. Carefully he climbs down from the tree. He gathers up his fruit. He walks over in the direction of the spring. The sound of water bubbling from the ground is so sweet. It is music to his ears. Falling on the ground, Sam plunges his head into the pool formed by the spring. He swallows many times. He feels the power of the life-giving water. With his head still under water, Sam hears a beautiful voice. It is identical in intonation and style to the one he remembers so clearly from his vision.

“Welcome Sam of Garamindia.”

Understandably startled, Sam pulls his head out of the water and starts looking for the source of voice. Confusedly, he tries to reconcile how he could hear something so clearly while submerged.

“Do not be alarmed. I am Gudordianna. I have brought you here. I will help you remember what your people have forgotten.”

“Wait. You brought me here? You caused the storm? I might not be the brightest photon on Altion, but I don't believe for one second that a voice in my head causes storms.”

Sam raises his hands to his face. He wipes the water from his face. He pushes his hair back. Looking around the spring he is

confident that this is some type of trick using sensory stimulation. He had seen similar tricks before. Rising from his knees, Sam stands up placing his hands on his hips.

“I will play along. You brought me here. You killed my companion Patty. You gave me this island, a tree, a spring and now your voice. How can I be of service?” Sam remarks playfully.

“Do you know what your name means?” Gudordianna asks.

“From what I understand, we stopped associating names with meaning long ago. It was silly or superstitious,” remarks Sam.

“Your name means heard by the creator. Have you asked your farmers why they picked this name?” Gudordianna continues.

“They have never told me. I remember watching my mother's core memory. The family was discussing my name before my birth. The family had many ideas. Scott, Gordon, John, Gus, Wally, Alan and Deke, I think. My enmar was quiet the whole time. She had a very uncomfortable look on her face. With confidence, she pronounced, “He will be named Samuel!” It was one of the most confident phrases I can ever remember her saying,” Sam recounts.

“Did your enmar ever mention her vision?” inquires Gudordianna.

“No. My enmar has never said anything about having visions. She rarely comments on my visions either,” Sam admits.

Sam's eyes no longer register what he sees next to the spring. Instead, he is looking down on the island. He sees himself standing next to the spring. He tries to move his body but cannot. How strange to see himself below? The island grows smaller and

smaller. He is lifted out into space. He can see the suns. He can see his home planet below. The neighboring planets are distant. He is struck by their beauty. The solar system and stars break out into hyper-dimensional detail. It would be like seeing a two-dimensional shape extruded into a three-dimensional solid. In this same way the heavenly clockwork unveils itself to his senses. He doesn't try to understand it. He allows himself to experience it with humility.

His eyes close for an instant. He opens them finding himself sitting in the hall from his vision. He hears the echoing sounds. He feels reverence for all that is around him. This time he sees himself from the side walking towards the door. He is dressed in Patty's suit. How did she finish it? He looks so handsome. He reaches the door and places his hand on the handle. He hears a familiar voice again.

“Behold your son, Samuel. He will be heard by the creator. When he remembers, it will change everything,” Gudordianna is heard making this pronouncement. Her voice booms with beauty, authority and power.

After seeing his enmar's vision, Sam returns to the island of the ethereal voice. The vision is so startling that Sam is knocked onto his back. He is lying in the cool grass along the margins of the spring. The discomfort of the fall is momentary. He lies on his back contemplating the nature of the vision. His enmar, above all, exhibited the greatest disappointment in his lack of achievement or ambition. Having seen her vision allows him to



understand her feelings firsthand. She must have feared the disapproval of telling others. This is surprising. Like him, she is not one to care what others think.

“We have much to talk about Samuel of Garamindia.”

Sam rolls over onto his stomach and pushes himself onto his feet. He walks to the beach. The waves continue to break on the sand. The water glistens as the spray rises into the air refracting the light through its prismatic interior. A light breeze blows a pleasant aroma past his nose. The wind sings a song. It uses a mystic language lost to the annals time.

Sam's attention is drawn to a fire pit burning along the edge of the beach. A comfortable chair is placed next to the fire. There is a board across from the chair. Two fish and a bowl of fruit sit ready for him to enjoy. Remembering his hunger, he wastes no time. He sits and eats.

“What is the universe?” Gudordianna asks.

“The universe is matter, energy and the space it inhabits.”

“Is that all?”

“I am not a scientist, but that is one of the most basic teachings of our people,” Sam admits.

“What if I told you matter and space do not exist in the way your people believe?” Gudordianna posits.

“It sure seems real to me,” Sam says with a mouthful of food and a chuckle.

“Then why do you spend all your time recalling visions or watching memories?”

“I have never really thought about it,” Sam responds.

“You create your own world. The world you live in, is not appealing to you. You feel cut off. Trapped in reality,” observes Gudordianna.

“That sounds about right. I have always felt like I was born on the wrong planet or in the wrong time.”

Sam finishes his meal and places the board on the sand at his side. The fire glows orange with warmth. The notion of having a fire on a hot beach seems strange. Even stranger is how much he enjoys sitting next to it. He is not cold away from the fire, but there is a comfort in the glow, the warmth and the crackle. He has never experienced anything like it before.

“The universe is a thought. One-of-many which has gone before and one-of-many which will be,” Gudordianna reveals.

“Is this what I am supposed to remember?” Sam asks.

“You will remember in due time. I will help you with understanding, but you must be the one to remember. Did you see Stoff in your vision.”

“Stoff? What is that?”

“It is the fabric of all creation. It is the thought on which everything in the universe functions. It is the pathway. It is the boundary.”

“Are you Stoff?” Sam asks.

“That is an interesting question. There are certain rules which prevent me from interacting with Stoff. What you must know is that Stoff holds the key to understanding. Your people are very

close to interacting with Stoff. I have been sent to you as a guide. Your vision already contains everything you need to know with one exception. Stoff Ikke Hjem. You already know this even though you don't know what it means," Gudordianna continues.

Sam furrows his brow. The nature of the conversation had changed from something which was easily understandable to one which deepened the mystery. For the first time in his life a desire to understand the universe and his vision burns in his heart. What a letdown. He is promised direction and only receives strange sounding words. The pathway and the boundary. The beings of light. The door. The great hall. For the first time in his life, Sam begins to shout with importunity, "Please. Please. Please tell me what it is that I am to remember! I must know. What is the significance of the tube? Who are the beings of light? If you are unable to interact with Stoff, why are you speaking to me on this island? How am I to get off this island?"

"You must go to The Metricule. You will find the Stoff Warrior. You will tell him what you remember. Goodbye Samuel of Garamindia."

Gudordianna's voice fades off into the breeze. The fire leaves Sam too. He stares out at the ocean. Alone again, he begins to feel the weight of isolation and confusion. The view of the ocean begins to cloud. It slowly fades to black. He tries to find the will to maintain consciousness. Alas, he is defeated.

## Chapter 10

The cold silence and darkness disappear. A distant and ever so familiar humming grows. Slowly at first do the sounds penetrate his senses. Louder and louder it grows. He begins to feel his body again. The warmth of the suns reminds him of the warmth of the fire he had lost. His eyes open. Can it be? The zotter is intact. It is approaching the shore of Garamindia. Patty is piloting the craft. Unconcerned for his own safety, Sam jumps up and grabs Patty around the chest. Surprised but ever vigilant, she quickly reciprocates the embrace while tending the sail. The craft reaches the shore. They reach the sand and ride up on dry land. Sand and towels fly in every direction. Sam deactivates the fan motors. The craft drops down to the ground fully intact and fully operational.

“How did you manage to sail us back into shore?” Sam asks.

“I found the files in my operating system. The folder is titled, Sailing. Every time I had viewed it before, I assumed it was info about sailing clothes. While you were sleeping on the deck, I decided to read more of my manual. One of my programmed skills is listed as sailing and here we are,” Patty orates with pride.

“Dearest Patty. I am so glad that you are here and are such a terrific sailoress. How long was I asleep?” Sam wonders.

“Two hours, forty-six minutes and forty-seven seconds. You kept murmuring things that I have never heard before.

Gudordianna. Stoff Ikke Hjem,” Patty comments.

“It was a dream and a nightmare. I dreamed we were in a storm, and you were destroyed by the sea water. I hope to never lose you like that. It was awful,” Sam confides.

“So, you do like me. I can see why. I am such a good companion. Who else can do this?” Patty asks while climbing down from the zotter.

She makes several cart wheels in the sand. Her sweet voice laughs with delight. Hearing her laugh resonates with Sam. It is infectious. He begins laughing too. He decides to join her on the sand. He climbs down and begins copying her gymnastic movements. It is obvious that he lacks her grace. The two of them collide gently. Patty falls onto Sam's chest. He feels her hair in his hands. She looks up at him and smiles. He places his hand on her side where the gash had been. He finds nothing but blemish free skin. This more than anything serves to blot out the memory of the storm, sinking zotter and losing her.

“Let's go for a swim. I want to try out swimming and... my bikini,” Patty entices.

“I don't think I ever want to let you get near a glass of water, let alone the ocean after my dream,” Sam admits.

“Come on silly. I will be fine,” Patty reassures.

Patty stands up and begins running towards the water. Sam gets up and follows her at a much slower pace. She splashes her way into the water. She is submerged up to her neck when Sam finally makes it to the water's edge. Patty raises her arm out of the

water and begins waving to Sam.

“Look at me. I am in the water. Watch me swim,” Patty calls out.

Patty's head drops into the water. Her arms and legs begin to rapidly thrash about. Little by little she begins to increase the efficiency of each stroke. Before long, she has mastered her form. Her arms and legs barely rise above the surface of the water as she propels her body forward swimming parallel to the beach.

Sam begins entering the water. His trepidation is understandable after his recent dream. He makes it in far enough to cover his legs. He stares out into the ocean. He focuses on the horizon. The water shimmers. A mirage is visible. The mirrored surface of the water begins to dance in the distance. This vision is obviously a distortion of reality. His dream was more real, in many ways, than his current reality. All his senses were stimulated by the events of the dream. He could hear the cacophony of the storm. He could feel the wind, waves and water. The voice of Gudordianna filled him with an inner warmth. It matched the comfort of sitting by the fireside. The chill of the cool spring. Its life-giving water was unforgettable. It freed his body and mind from the chains of thirst. He can still taste the rich flavor of the fish. The flesh of the fruit was so succulent. He can feel his teeth sinking into it and the sweet juice running down his cheeks.

He closes his eyes and focuses on the sounds and sensations surrounding him. He hears the soft bass rumbling of the waves cresting and breaking. The pressure of the wave on his body rocks

him into shore and in another moment out to sea. His mind begins processing thoughts about the very nature of reality. How is it that a dream can be so real? How is it that all his sensations, biological needs, fears and desires can be experienced so vividly while unconscious. His society would not be happy with such superstitious beliefs. None-the-less, his experience has left this world as an illusion. He will tell anyone about his experience. He has never concerned himself with Garamindian convention. Why start now?

For the first time in his life, Sam has found a real purpose for his existence. He will devote himself to questioning everything his culture embraces as truth. The society focused so much on understanding the physical world, they forgot the very nature of who they are. Sam feels a presence in his body and mind. There is a knowledge of something greater than himself. He believes his life will alter the course of history. His countenance will now radiate inner value. His appearance will be unique. Without saying a word, he will shout to the universe wisdom and purpose.

For a few moments he stands in silence allowing the thoughts to evaporate. His focus shifts once more to the symphony of the beach. Each molecule of water whispers its own part. Each grain of sand echoes in song. Birds on the wind cry out. The wind carries sound. It mutes and amplifies without favoritism. Its only apparent goal is to announce its presence with crescendos and decrescendos of rushing esses.

Sam is startled. He is overcome with confusion. His legs are

pulled out from under him. The sounds he has been relishing are muffled. His submerged body is quickly raised to the surface. He feels the familiarity of the arms supporting him. Patty has grabbed him and is pulling him out into the deeper water. The rush of adrenaline soon subsides. Sam likes the feeling of being towed around by his NBE tug boat.

“What took you so long? Are you really scared of the water now?” Patty asks.

“Not at all. I am not convinced that the water exists,” Sam offers philosophically.

Sam drops down into the water and grabs Patty around her legs. He lifts her up and throws her into the water. She squeals with a strange sound. It is odd and digitized. It is the first time he has ever heard her make that sound. Rising to the surface, Patty stalks Sam and jumps on his back. She wraps her legs around him. She tries to knock him over while she holds on. Predicting this move, he leans forward, grabs her arms and pushes her into the water. He holds her under water for a few moments. He remembers that she does not need to breathe. He pulls her up to the surface. The two of them stand smiling and laughing out of the water.

“You are pretty sneaky,” Sam offers.

“A slough slug could have snuck up on you. You were so distracted. I called your name a few times before planning my attack,” Patty admits with an impish tone.

What a strange couple. Is a fondness for a machine a



perversion? Is it a form of paraphilia? If Patty could be uploaded into a biological form, would she be any different? Biological systems are highly advanced forms of self-replicating nanotechnology. Patty's parts were created in a factory. An operating system was loaded to control her body and make her act like a person. Perhaps an ancient society created bodies containing their own factories and programming systems. Where do biological operating systems come from?

Noticing Sam is once again retreating into his mind, Patty raises her hands above the water and with thrusting repetition splashes him in the face. Diverted from his thoughts, Sam submerges below the torrent of water and swims towards Patty's feet. This time he wraps himself around her legs and sits on her feet while holding his breath. It does not take him long to figure out that she is more amused by his actions than concerned. Realizing the futility of his effort, Sam resurfaces. Patty swims around and jumps on his back. She wraps her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. Patty places her cheek next to his.

“Take me away sailor,” Patty whispers in Sam's ear.

Sam begins walking in the surf with his Patty on his back. Each wave breaks against them causing Patty to emit an ever-evolving sound of exuberance. He feels a primal masculinity in carrying his woman on his back. His manliness reclaims something from the power of the sea. For Patty this exciting day has represented a high point in her relationship with Sam. As she

is carried along, she feels him reciprocate her feelings for him. She is programmed to care for him no matter what. Seeing he cares for her makes her feel complete.

In the same way that all arcs have a beginning, a middle and an end, this special day at the beach must come to an end. The machina-et-homine couple emerges from the water. Sam is noticeably weary from the physical exertion. Patty is still as energetic as ever. She manages to pull off a few more cartwheels before toweling off. Patty hands Sam a towel. Once they are dried off, they lower the mast. They climb into the gravitacraft. The craft hovers over the zotter. The hoist lowers the lines which fastens to the craft. The zotter is lifted off the ground and is secured below the vehicle.

Patty looks at Sam from her seat and reaches out her hand. Sam smiles and takes her hand. The vehicle ascends to a few hundred feet and glides effortlessly toward the familial home. The suns are beginning to drop low on the horizon. The city within the crater walls is covered in a beautiful glow. Sam squeezes Patty's hand momentarily. She smiles and blushes. Their home approaches the field of view. The zotter dock is directly below. It receives the zotter as the gravitacraft lowers it down. The coupling lines retract into the gravitacraft. The gravitacraft drifts into its berth and settles onto its anchors.

Sam is overcome with a strange new feeling. For the first time in his life he does not feel like this is his home. The familiarity of it is lost. It feels strange and foreign. The two of them climb out

of the craft and walk to their quarters.

“What shall we do now?” Sam asks.

“The first thing I am going to do is take a nice long bath. My subsystems are showing the presence of salt and sand,” Patty remarks.

“I thought you looked very nice today in your bikini,” Sam compliments.

“Well, thank you very much,” Patty responds with gratitude.

Patty jumps in front of Sam and gives him a kiss. She runs into the bathroom and readies the bath. The physical and emotional stress of the day’s events have left Sam exhausted. He lies down in the living room. He falls asleep. Unlike his earlier experiences today, tonight he is ruled by dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 11

Consciousness reasserts itself over Sam's body. He finds himself alert and focused. He sits up on the couch and turns himself toward the center of the room. He rises to his feet. He is still wearing his swimsuit. Wasting little time, he walks over to the counter in the kitchen and begins fumbling around with the Interactive Holographic Information System, "How do I turn you on? I want to know answers. Tell me something. Come on silly thing. Give me the answers. Interactive user manual. Interactive information system thingy. Interactive system power up."

Patty hears Sam from the other room. She walks into the kitchen with an inquisitive facial expression and asks, "Good morning. What is going on?"

"I am trying to get the information system to work," Sam responds.

"I moved it into my sewing room a couple of years ago. You had mentioned it was silly and you would never use it. You are talking to a trivet," answers Patty.

"Well no wonder," Sam responds while pushing the unresponsive trivet to the other side of the counter.

Patty leaves the room and returns with the thin disc. She places it on the counter in front of Sam.

"Inter-Activate," commands Patty.

"Good morning Patty. How may I be of assistance?" IHIS

responds.

“Sam would like to ask you some questions,” Patty answers.

“Hello Sam. I have not been activated by you for many years. You were most inquisitive about certain biological subjects during your pubescent stages,” IHIS greets.

Sam drops his chin to his chest and looks over at Patty with a timid affirmation while raising one eyebrow. He refocuses his attention.

“What is Stoff?” Sam asks.

“Stoff disambiguation.

- computer science

- culinary arts

- historical

- linguistic considerations

- myth

- settlement on planet Controlion,” IHIS lists.

“Historical,” Sam prompts.

“Stoff was the name given to the theoretical invisible ether which flowed around everything. From the twenty-sixth to the thirty-second millennium MCE, the science of the time supposed there to be an imaginary substrate in which all energy and material bathed. Over twenty thousand years ago, the theory was abandoned. Methods for studying and magnifying material reached a level whereby sub-atomic components were clearly definable. An elemental substrate was not detected or needed. Would you like me to continue?” IHIS asks.

“No. Linguistic whatever,” Sam prompts.

“Linguistic Considerations. Stoff was originally derived from the ancient roots of sto and off. The original meaning is not fully known. Manuscripts of the period have alluded to sto having the meaning of stand and off interestingly having a similar meaning to today's word off. While off can mean to stop, kill or cease, the ancient meaning seems to more closely align with a change of direction as in turning off a path or separation. Would you like me to continue?” IHIS asks.

“No. Myth,” Sam prompts.

“Stoff in mythology. In the Høyegardian nonology, Stoff is the habitation of the gods. Stoff is the foundation of the Høyegardian universe. All life and all power are derived from this ethereal matter. The gods manipulate it at will for their own pleasure and hunger for power. Their power and very existence is derived from Stoff. Would you like me to continue?” IHIS asks.

“Yes. Is there any connection in mythology to Stoff Ikke Hjem?” Sam asks.

“There is. The planet Altion was said to have been inhabited by one of the Høyegardian gods. His name was Kongeørn. He was reportedly fathered by a god. His mother was of great beauty and said to possess the ability to change into an eagle.

As a boy, Kongeørn could manipulate the world around him. He could manifest all manner of magical flying machines, wheeled vehicles and weapons. With every new level of achievement, he found himself desiring greater power. He focused all his energy

and massive wealth on overthrowing the gods. He spent years trying to find the sacred bridge, Himmelbroen, to Stoff which linked his world with that of the gods. Heartbroken, Kongeørn returned to his palace. His many wives and children were gathered around his dying mother.

He bent down to give his mother a final kiss. She asked him why his face looked so sullen. It could not be for her alone. With a heavy heart he told her of his failed quest to find the bridge to the Høvegardian Realm.

With great laughter his mother filled the hall with echoes of satisfaction. He found himself sick with humiliation. He had so fervently searched for the answer to his question. To find the answer had been one question away since childhood exposed a prideful flaw. He burned with a desire to know. He entreated her to reveal the path to his destiny. She drew her son to her chest and whispered in his ear.

Little more is known about the exploits of Kongeørn. It is rumored that Altion is the location of his tomb. The tomb is said to be a marvel of ancient engineering. On the doorway of the tomb are inscribed three words,

STOFF

IKKE

HJEM

We have reached the end of this record,” IHIS reports.

“What is the location of the tomb?” Sam asks.

“Location of what tomb?” IHIS asks.

“Location of the Tomb of Kongeørn,” Sam asks again.

“It has been rumored that Altion is the location of his tomb,” IHIS repeats.

Sam covers his face with his hands. His frustration with technology is apparent. Patty notices Sam is getting frustrated. None-the-less, she laughs and places her hand on his shoulder.

“That was pretty funny. To a computer, answering the same question twice is really funny. It is much like a knock-knock joke. Let me try...” Patty adds lightheartedly.

“What are the geographic coordinates of the Tomb of Kongeørn on the surface of Altion?” Patty asks.

“There is no record. The system reminds you that mythological beliefs are of no value in our society. We give them reference. They are untrue superstitions of a less evolved species,” IHIS asserts.

“What is the source of the Høyegardian Nonology?” Patty asks.

“The original texts were translated from the golden cylinders of Freørn,” IHIS responds.

“Where are they located now?” Patty prompts.

“Currently the texts are housed in the Svault Repository,” IHIS reports.

“What are the geographic coordinates of the Svault Repository?” Patty requests.

“Access denied!” IHIS blocks.

“Well that is the first time I have had that response. Very rude!” Patty says indignantly, “Fine. I will pull it up myself... Access



denied. What is the problem? There are museums all over this planet.”

Patty looks over at Sam who is rubbing his forehead. The look on his face shows extreme interest, but she can tell the intellectual pressure is something he is unaccustomed to. Sam thinks for a few more seconds and resumes his line of inquiry.

“Search for Gudordianna,” Sam prompts.

“Access denied. Have a nice day,” IHIS rejects again while shutting down.

The Interactive Holographic Information System and every other system in their home shuts down. Sam walks over to the front door and discovers that it has been locked. He tries the side door with the same result.

“What do you think is going on Patty? This is really weird,” Sam asks with concern, “Patty. Patty!”

Patty had apparently shut down with everything else.

“Patty! Patty? What is going on?” Sam asks with urgency.

Sam grabs Patty by her shoulders and begins shaking her. She is as rigid as can be. A large shadow drifts by the windows. Sam's heart beats faster. The door to his home opens with a loud clang. Three men enter his home.

“Hello Samuel. This is Ombud Academy. Next to him is Ombud Lombard and I am Ombud Thims. No need to be alarmed. We are Guardians of Development. We understand that you have been asking some very interesting questions this morning. Would you mind answering some of our questions?”

The three men continue entering the home. Each man moves with precision as if rehearsed to perfection. They move four chairs into an arrangement consisting of three chairs facing one chair. Two men take the outer seats in the row of three. Thims walks over and firmly places his hand on Sam's shoulder. Unsure of what is transpiring, Sam reluctantly complies. Sam sits down in the single chair with his legs out and his back slouched. He might be startled, but he sees no reason to change his typical posture. Thims settles into his chair. The three men sit at attention. They clasp their hands neatly in their laps.

Thims draws a small pill-like item from his inner suit pocket. He places it in front of him. The capsule floats in midair as he adjusts himself in the seat. He grabs the capsule between his hands and pulls it apart. A holographic console appears. He manipulates the hologram with his fingers. The systems in the house re-energize.

“Uffda! What is this? I have never seen such rude behavior coming from an information system. What if I told Sam that I did not feel like being his companion today. It goes against your programming,” Patty shouts with conviction.

It takes a couple of moments for Patty to realize that she has lost a few minutes. She walks over to the edge of the living room. Her head swivels back and forth as she tries to comprehend the meaning of the visitors.

“We have guests? Sam were you aware that people were coming over to our house?” Patty asks.

“Patty, this is Acada something, Lomardini and Thim-guy. They are here to ask questions I guess,” Sam responds.

“Wonderful. We so rarely have visitors. I will change into something more appropriate,” Patty says as she walks out of the room in her pajamas.

“Samuel. Do you mind if I call you Sam? We received a report that you have been investigating some strange topics. Looking over your file it seems that you are rarely interested in anything other than family history. Why the sudden interest in mythology?” asks a curious ombud.

Sam takes a few moments of silence. He does not know how to respond. His life has been spent avoiding research or academics. The first day he shows interest, he is awarded with an inquisition.

“Mythology? I was looking up history. Why is that a problem?” Sam asks with honesty.

“We show you researched the following terms.

- Stoff

- Location of the Tomb of Kongeørn,”

“That was pretty funny!” Academy chimes in.

All three ombuds laugh maniacally.

“You asked the system to answer the same question it had answered moments before. Priceless,” Lombard adds to balance the commentary.

“We should probably get Patty back in here. PATTY YOU ADORABLE NBE YOU! Will you please be a doll and come join us?” Thims calls down the hall with a strangely forceful charisma.

Patty has changed into a light blue blouse and a black skirt. She is inserting her earrings as she rounds the corner into the living room. An ombud jumps up and places a chair next to Sam. Patty walks by the men. Thims reaches out his hand and swats Patty on her hind quarters shouting, "Have a seat gorgeous!"

Sam jumps up and punches Thims in the nose. The force knocks him back into the chair and onto the floor. The two remaining ombuds rise calmly to their feet. They raise their hands slightly towards Sam. He finds himself suspended in the air. He is unable to move or speak.

Thims rises to his feet and adjusts his nose, "It took this one a few more minutes to have the expected response. I was wondering if you had it in you Sam. You do realize that violence in your society is a capital offense. You do not seem to realize the significance of our visit. I will not report you to the authorities. As far as I am concerned, our little visit here never happened. I hope you understand that we do not exist. As such, we can make you and your little toy not exist. Now let us return to our friendly conversation.

Patty, why would you ask for coordinates of a mythological tomb," the ombud asks with derisive laughter.

"I did. We are trying to find the Tomb of Kongeørn," Patty admits innocently.

"Will there be Valkyrie there as well?" he continues.

"I never really thought about it. Maybe," Patty responds.

"You also asked about the source of the Høyegardian

nonology. Why do you want to know? You asked quite a few questions contrary in nature to your programming. You are not supposed to use logic. You are supposed to represent the dumbest version of a Garamindian female ever in existence,” Thims comments offensively.

“YOU WATCH WHAT YOU SAY TO HER!” Sam shouts.

“You really do care for her. Do you feel the same way about your toaster?” Thims and the other ombuds laugh while snorting and rocking in their chairs.

Patty looks at Sam. Even while confronted with blatant disrespect and personal assault, she remains smiling and optimistic. She even winks at him while giggling playfully. He is astonished that she enjoys this whole charade. Confusion fills Sam's mind. He remains seated for what feels like an eternity of silence. Unwilling to wait any longer Sam jumps to his feet and points to the door, “GET OUT. Don't let the door actuators close on your behind.”

Sam finds himself standing in the kitchen staring and pointing at the wall. He hears Patty laughing and feels her hand on his shoulder.

“That was pretty funny. To a computer, answering the same question twice is really funny. It is much like a knock-knock joke. Let me try...” Patty comments before asking, “What are the geographic coordinates of this year's Gulpright Zotter Show?”

“The geographic coordinates of this year's Gulpright Zotter Show are 35.866667 degrees north, 23.3 degrees east,” IHIS

responds.

Sam drops his arm and looks around the room with astonishment. The chairs were back in their usual locations. Patty is standing next to him. The IHIS is activated on the kitchen counter. He places his hands on top of his head. Patty begins to notice his concerned facial features, “What is it honey? Are you not interested in attending the show this year? You had mentioned bringing me along which I think would be a lot of fun. We should dress in themed outfits from the era when zotters were all the rage.”

Sam lowers his hands and begins to reflect on the experience. A vision has never been spliced into his consciousness. He had traveled in time from his future into his past. Sam moves on to asking questions, “What is Stoff?”

“Stoff: No references found,” IHIS responds.

“That is not possible we just asked the same question. You displayed all these disabuggy deals. What about the Høyegardian gods?” Sam asks.

“Høyegardian gods: No references found,” IHIS answers.

“No. That is not possible. What about Kongeørn?” Sam questions.

“Kongeørn: No references found,” IHIS answers again.

“NO, NO, NO!” Sam pounds his fists on the table and shakes his head with disbelief.

Patty is, by this time, unsure of what to do. Sam has never behaved so emphatically about anything. She tries to console him by placing her hand on his forearm, “What is it dear?”

Sam looks at her with a fire in his eye. He might be able to brush off moving through time, but having the IHIS change its output within minutes was unacceptable. The data available on the planetary information system was supposedly infallible. The Altion data stores are the envy of the galaxy. The notion that information can be altered from minute-to-minute bolstered Sam's feeling of cynicism and distrust.

“Patty. Do you remember any of these words I asked about?” Sam asks.

“No dear. Where did you first hear them?” Patty responds.

Unable to bring himself to explain his alternate-previous-reality, Sam stops trying to probe Patty for answers. He has grown so close to his companion over these last few days. She is still part of a system that he does not trust or understand. Hungry for answers, Sam ponders a few moments before asking one more question, “Who are the Guardians of Development?”

“Guardians of Development: A fictitious group claimed to be in control of the universe. Psychologists have documented an obsession with this group by patients suffering from mental illness. It is a common occurrence and has been noted for centuries,” IHIS replies.

Undeterred by the answers, Sam continues to ponder the significance of his discoveries. Why is he the one to discover this information? There are days he can scarcely remember his own name. Greatly disillusioned by technology, Sam walks into his old room. He rummages through old boxes. One of his farmers had

given him an antique journal.

He finds it under a table leg and pulls it out. It is composed of many hundreds of individual sheets of cellulose fiber tightly woven into something called a book. The sheets contain lines. Within the binding, a writing implement is secured.



## Chapter 12

Sam closes the door of the room. He begins journaling while the memories are fresh. He cannot be sure this medium is secure from alteration. Unwilling to risk written language, Sam draws images of his recent visions. Somehow it is as if he has drawn all this before. He knew he possessed an artistic ability. He did not realize he could draw with such detail. The images allow him to recall the names and concepts in his mind.

Sam works until late at night. Patty grows restless waiting for him to come to bed. Sam allowed her to enter his world for such a short time. It is like he has shut her out again. She had experienced true companionship over the last couple of days. She imagines herself back on the shelf collecting dust. She is another casualty of his highly focused interests.

Patty knocks on the bedroom door, "Are you coming to bed?"

"No. Go on without me," Sam responds distractedly.

"Okay. Good night," Patty offers.

By this time Sam's drawings have filled over half of the journal. He cannot help himself. It is as though something inside of him has built up pressure and is pouring out onto the pages. He has drawn the zotter crash and interactions with Gudordianna. He has drawn renderings of the Høyegardian gods and their realm. He has fashioned an empire of Kongeørn complete with palaces and flying craft. The drawings become more and more real with

every passing hour. Creative energy seethes in his body. It is like he has left the planet.

The early morning light is starting to work its way into his old room. With a few more strokes he finishes the last drawing. With satisfaction, he puts the pen down. He reaches out his hands and lifts the journal from the small desk. He holds it open in his hands. He flips back to the front page and begins reviewing each drawing. He makes sure that he can recall the names and details of each scene.

After some time, he is again on the final drawing. He reflects on its meaning. The drawing is the Tomb of Kongeørn. The tomb does not look at all as he had pictured it earlier. It is an impressive size and is architecturally exquisite to behold. The room is elliptical. It is surrounded by a colonnade. Beyond the ornately decorated columns murals fill the alcoves fancifully depicting the great escapades of the king.

Above the colonnade, a dome rises high above the floor. Light from a large oculus pours into the tomb. At the center of the room a giant eagle soars. The floor of the room drops off into a circular depression below the great eagle. Contained within the depression is the most peculiar construction. At the very bottom of the depression lies a black liquid. Out of the liquid rise nine hands. Each is cut off by blackness at the wrist. Each hand clasps one side of a large central ring. Moving his attention to the entryway he can very clearly see the inscription composed of three lines reading...

STOFF

IKKE

HJEM

Sam wrote it, in part, to test the reliability of the medium. It also resonated with him on a deeper level. Satisfied with his act of defiance, he stares at the drawing for a few more minutes. He is convinced that he has seen something related to this before. He has spent his life running from understanding and responsibility. Now he seeks it more fervently than ever. Why does this image make him think about children playing? A tomb is not a place where children play. What is it that he clearly knows but cannot put together? Continuing to struggle, Sam hears a knock on the door.

“Sam. Come here a minute. Let's try this on. I was up all night finishing your suit,” Patty calls through the door hoping to lure him from his old room.

In an instant, Sam shoots up out of his chair. He closes his hand in the journal to keep his page. He swings open the door to a very surprised Patty. As quickly as he had swung the door open, he kisses her squarely on the lips followed by, “Thank you darling.”

Patty's face glows with excitement. She watches him run down the hall. He runs through the living room. He narrowly avoids running into the inner courtyard door. He slows himself with his free hand by bracing it against the door jamb. It seems like an

eternity waiting for it to open. He hurries across the manicured path to the door of the core vault. Once inside, he quickly loads the core of Sedentom. It is the same one that brought him another realization not long ago. Sam watches as Sedentom is seated in the living room while his children play. He stands up with a smile and begins to follow the children around the room picking them up one by one. As Sedentom turns to walk out of the room, Sam sees it, "Pause core."

There in Sedentom's living room hangs tangible proof. It is a picture of an eagle perching over a great ring. It did not look exactly like he had drawn it. This looked like a mounted statue or relief.

"Zoom upper left quadrant. Again right quadrant. That is it! I have remembered!" Sam exclaims with satisfaction.

He realizes that he should be able to find out where the picture came from by accessing Sedentom's core memory. Opening his journal Sam frantically begins copying the image from the core vault projection. He would not let it be erased. Inscribed in a flowing banner along the top of the picture he can clearly see the words, STOFF IKKE HJEM. He finishes the drawing and turns his attention to searching through the core memories.

"Find Sedentom buying picture," Sam prompts.

If he was anything like Sam, it was unlikely that his ancestor liked shopping for much of anything. This boosts Sam's confidence. He should find the memory relatively quickly. The

first memory loads. The family is in a studio having professional images taken.

“Next,” Sam prompts.

Another hologram begins to play. Sedentom is alone inside of a store. Around him are pictures of buildings, animals and cities hanging on the wall. There are boxes of pictures stacked on tables in the middle of the room. Standing in front of one of the boxes, Sedentom is seen flipping through the images. He finds one and removes it from the box. It is a scantily clad woman riding a two-wheeled vehicle. Sam and Sedentom share a moment as they appreciate the beautiful lady across time. She has all the right proportions. They share similar taste in women. The far smiles and turns to the register with picture in hand.

“Next,” Sam prompts.

This scene is in another shop, but it is in an unfamiliar setting. The people in the shop are dressed in very heavy winter clothing. Sedentom is dressed as a sailor. The shop is filled with old fishing gear. There are baskets and harpoons. Towards the back of the hologram lies an area filled with statuettes, lanterns and ornaments. Hanging on the wall is the eagle. Sedentom initially walks by without a second thought. Slowly he turns to take a second look. After appreciating it for a few moments, he catches the attention of the store owner who happens to pass by.

“Is this picture for sale?” Sedentom asks.

“That relief is worth a lot of money,” replies the shop owner.

“Why is that?” Sedentom inquires.

“The golden eagle of the north is sacred in Kaldland. The Garamindians believe this planet to be settled by their ancestors spreading out from Garamindia. Kaldlanders know that we settled Garamindia after many centuries of living in the north,” recalls the shop owner.

“Why am I drawn to this relief? What do the words mean along the top?” asks Sedentom.

“Oh yes. Let me see here... STOFF IKKE HJEM. I was given this relief from an old woman who claimed to have been descended from a line of kings. She was a wealthy woman, that is for sure. She seemed coherent. She told me this picture is the key to understanding everything,” muses the shop owner.

“Really. Wow. If that is true, you really have quite the item here,” Sedentom comments jokingly.

“I asked her why she would give it to me if it is so special? She smiled and said the eagle finds the right person,” comments the shop owner.

“How much do you want for it?” Sedentom inquires.

“Do you really want it?” asks the shop owner.

“There is a strange way that the light sparkles off its golden surface and the stones in the eyes. It reminds me of a recurring vision I have,” Sedentom observes.

“You have the sight?” observes the shop owner.

“What?” Sedentom questions.

“You aren't taught anything in Garamindia. Such a sad community. I will charge you the same price it cost me,” quotes

the shop owner.

Pausing only for a short moment to appreciate the beauty of the eagle, the store owner lifts it from its nail and gives it to Sedentom.

“You were unable to use it to understand everything yourself?” Sedentom kids.

“No. I too have seen a recurring vision. A man in a sailor suit flying with an eagle overhead sits on the deck of a ship staring into the heart of a distant land. Enjoy,” recounts the shop owner.

“Well thank you very much. I will make sure to take care of this. Who knows? Maybe I will unlock the key to understanding everything. By the way, what is your name?” asks Sedentom.

“Everyone calls me Vis.”

The two shake hands and part ways. Sam quickly makes sketches of this memory. Convinced the picture is still in the possession of the family, Sam deactivates the core memory system. He will start his search with his enfarmars. From the door of the core vault he passes through the inner gardens to the lift. He prompts, “Second floor. Janice and Larry.”

The door opens. Sam climbs inside. The lift is elegant. The walls are made of glass. The floor is the only surface which prevents the rider from seeing in all directions. It elevates him to the level of the second floor and turns to the left. It travels horizontally to the dock of his enfarmar's house. Stepping out onto the balcony, he is filled with apprehension. This reduces his thirst for discovery.

Sam walks to the front door. He is greeted by the butler Al. Talbot is an old robot. He is slightly taller than Sam. His movements are slow and deliberate. His frame has been overhauled several times. His personality module has been unaltered for over a century. Some families would have opted for a modern personality.

“Hello master Sam. Welcome. How may I be of service?”

“Are my enys home?” Sam asks.

“Why... Yes... Master Larry. Mistress Janice. Master Sam has requested your presence,” Talbot announces.

Talbot turns and walks into the home. The home seems foreign in appearance. The environment his parents had cultivated for his development was simple and unsophisticated. Sam vividly recalls visiting other homes in Garamindia. His parents always commented after seeing fancy places that their home was so non-bourgeoisie. This is quite different. The furniture is new. The paintings on the walls are very modern. Some are even holographic. Nothing appears broken or second hand. The old butler is the only mark of his childhood to be found in the new space. In retrospect, his enfarmars were probably the biggest reason for Sam's rejection of technology.

“Hello Sam. How is my enson?” Larry asks looking up from his holographic strategy game.

“I am doing okay. I am kind of in a hurry. I hope you don't mind,” Sam admits.

“It is so nice to have you come to visit. Sometimes it feels like



the floor beneath us could be interstellar space,” embellishes Larry.

Sam's enfar had a very clever yet subtle sense of humor. He had worked as a Systems Engineer in several capacities. He never worked for a single organization very long. Despite this, he was always well respected by his colleagues. He is taller and thinner than Sam. His hair is neatly combed. This feels unnatural to Sam. He did not think his enfar owned a comb. Pushing the memories aside, Sam continues his mission.

“Have you ever seen a picture of an eagle looking like this?” Sam asks while revealing his journal.

His enfar brings his hand to his chin. He thinks to himself for a few moments.

“You drew this enson?” Larry asks.

“I did. I have never really spent much time drawing before. I really have come to enjoy it. There is something special about it. I was looking through archives in the core vault and I came across it in one of Sedentom's cores,” Sam explains.

“It is something that he owned?” Larry asks.

“Yes. He bought it in a shop. Somewhere called Kaldland,” Sam informs.

“There is my little baby boy,” Sam's enmar calls from across the room.

Sam looks up with a smile and a slight blush. He is used to his mother's affections, but for some reason it always seems to strike a nerve of embarrassment and longing for his childhood. His enmar had always been hyper-attentive. Her extroverted nature

stood in stark contrast to his tendency toward introversion. She is wearing a brightly colored sun dress. She always wears her hair short. It is reassuring for Sam to see she remains unchanged. She walks across the room and gives Sam a big hug. She places her hands on either side of his face taking a few moments to assess his overall condition.

“How are you doing? Are you eating regularly?” asks Janice.

“I am doing okay. Have you ever seen this picture? It is an eagle perched on a circle,” Sam asks.

Sam holds the drawing in front of him for his enmar to see. She seems somewhat alarmed by his forwardness and brevity. Unable to focus on the drawing, she takes the journal from Sam and places it on the table.

“Wow Sammy. This is a very nice drawing. I never knew you were such an artist. Oh wow. Look at all these other drawings,” Janice comments as she begins turning the pages in his journal wholly unconcerned with Sam's sense of mission or privacy.

“What are you doing? Why are you looking at the other drawings? I need to know if the eagle picture is still in our family. Have you ever seen it? What are you doing now?” Sam inquires.

Janice summons her core recorder and focuses it on his journal. Sam is noticeably uncomfortable having so much of his secret mission recorded. He does not want the Guardians of Development to return.

“Look. My little baby is an amazing artist. There is so little art that is created with ink and cellulose these days. These scenes

are ancient looking. You could be the second coming of Histaurei,” Janice comments.

“Please Janice! I really need to know if this relief picture still belongs to our family,” Sam insists.

Undeterred by his coercion, she continues looking through the drawings at a slightly accelerated rate. Intermittently, she takes a couple of moments to look up at Sam while smiling with pride. She turns to the last drawing before helping.

“I don't think I have ever seen this before. Larry, do you think we would be able to check the familial inventory?” Janice asks.

“We sure can,” confirms Larry.

Larry stands up and walks over to the Interactive Holographic Information System.

“Inter-Activate. Familial Inventory,” prompts Larry.

“Please state family name,” IHIS requests.

“Happierweise,” Larry prompts.

Sam hurries to his enfar's side while grabbing him by the arm. Startled by the sudden movements, he looks at Sam with a curiosity and interest. Sam leans over to his enfar's ear and whispers.

“Please don't use the IHIS. There is something sensitive about what I am doing. The last time I used the system bad things happened. I was interrogated by ombuds. Then they disappeared, and I traveled through time,” Sam admits.

“Oh Sam. You have always had such a creative imagination. Nothing will happen if we simply go through some dusty old

relics in our family inventory. You will see,” Larry reassures.

Larry looks at Janice for a short time. She did not hear what Sam said.

“Are you still there?” prompts the IHIS.

“Yes, access all wall hanging pictures,” prompts Larry.

The IHIS begins showing different wall art starting with the most recent acquisitions. Larry uses a gentle swipe of his hand to scroll between the different images. By this time Janice has walked over to the side of the table. She nods her head as each rendering is projected. Most of the pictures are in their living room.

“We are going to have to go back much further than this,” Sam comments.

“Access all wall hanging pictures acquired by,” partially prompts Larry.

“Sam. What was his name again?” asks Larry to Sam.

“Samwhatwashisnameagain not found,” IHIS responds.

“IHIS pause,” prompts Larry.

“Sedentom,” Sam reminds.

“IHIS: Retrieve all wall art owned by Sedentom,” Larry prompts confidently.

“Sedentom Happierwise: Wall Art: Accessed.”

The pictures begin to display in the IHIS hologram. The first picture is that of a ship. The ship is floating over water. It has wings with engines over them. Larry motions for the system to scroll. The next image is of a woman. Larry appears very interested in this image. Janice also appears very interested the image.

“Whoa. She is very well-endowed. I wonder if all that extra weight thwarted her balance,” Janice quips jocularly.

“It reminds me of the wall art we used to have from our younger days studying. Do you remember those risqué pictures which were so popular?” asks Larry.

“How could I forget? Unclad Universal Beings. Male and female bodies floating in space weightlessly exploring their form. Celestial images in the background. The beautiful alignment of celestial bodies,” Janice voices with nostalgic fondness.

“Your enmar posed for one of those images. Would you like to see how beautiful your mother's body was enson? And still is I might add you beautiful vixen from Equindor.”

Larry releases his masculine energy. He places his arms around Janice's waist. He squeezes her and begins to kiss her on lips. They both begin making sounds of enchantment while running their hands over each other's bodies.

“Oh please! You are making me sick. I have tried to forget these memories. Could we please focus on finding this picture? Blukk!” Sam comments while retching.

By this time Janice has been placed onto the table and Larry's neatly combed hair has been rearranged. This is the disorder Sam is so accustomed to. The couple calms down. Janice climbs down from the table. They reorganize themselves and continue helping with the search.

Larry motions for the next picture. Strangely there is a place holder, but nothing is projected into the field. Larry swipes to the

left again.

“END OF RECORDS,” indicates the IHIS.

The IHIS bounces back to the empty record.

“IHIS: Pause. Well that is strange. Why would the system not have an image of the object? From what I understand, it is a requirement of the system to have a rendering before the data is stored,” comments Larry puzzledly.

“I am sure this is it. Is there any way to find anything else out?” asks Sam.

“Let me try something.” Janice responds.

“IHIS: Access text based information for this record and display graphically,” Janice prompts.

“DATA DISPLAYED SUCCESSFULLY.” Announces IHIS.

FAMILIAL INVENTORY: **HAPPIERWEISE**

DESCRIPTION: **THE KEY**

TYPE: **WALL ART**

ACQUIROR: **SEDENTOM HAPPIERWEISE**

DATE ACQUIRED: **271.25 DEGREES 50751 MCE**

CITY ACQUIRED: **UNKNOWN**

REGION ACQUIRED: **KALDLAND**

PLANET ACQUIRED: **ALTION**

DISPOSITION: **HAPPIERWEISE VAULT LL7-214-3**

Sam quickly writes down the information displayed on IHIS. His enfarmars walk over into a corner of the kitchen and begin whispering to each other. Sam looks up from his journal. Predicting the outcome of the next few minutes, Janice and Larry

come to an agreement. They return to the table next to Sam.

“Enmar. How do you know how to navigate the inventory so well?” Sam asks.

“You and I are very much alike. You like core memories. I like vault memories,” Janice responds.

Janice looks to Larry for support and agreement. He clearly is in full support of disclosure.

“We need to tell you about the vault. I am very familiar with the familial inventory because I am obsessed with the relics of this family’s past. I spend hours going through everything. Who bought it. Where it is now. What it looks like. What it feels like. It was much worse when you were younger,” Janice confesses.

“Why did you decide to tell me this now? I would still like to find the picture,” Sam admits.

Larry, Janice and Sam come back to the IHIS to go through the information.

“I heard something about Kaldland in Sedentom's core. Where is Kaldland?” asks Sam.

“Do you have all the information copied down in your journal?” Larry asks.

“Yes. I do,” confirms Sam.

“IHIS: Tell us about Kaldland,” prompts Larry.

“Kaldland: A region on the supercontinent of Altion. There is no definitive boundary, but it is commonly accepted to exist above the 53<sup>rd</sup> parallel. The land is somewhat habitable. The summers are mild with many hours of daylight. The winters are

harsh with long incessant cold temperatures. Many feet of frozen precipitation fall over many months. Like the continent, Kaldland is split in the middle by the Snedahl Mountain Range. The mountains run all the way to the northern ocean. On either side of the mountains lie elevated plains. The West receives much more precipitation and is covered by forests at lower elevations. The East is covered by great expanses of frozen rock. The deep chill and lack of precipitation on the eastern flanks makes this area the driest part of the planet.

Kaldland is known for its natural resources. Automated resource extraction and asteroid mining have significantly reduced the population. Most of its inhabitants live in small finishing villages dotting the coastline. Tourism was once a source of wealth for the locals. Virtual experiences and high-speed transportation have decreased the area's popularity. End of record," IHIS reports.

"Have either of you ever been there?" Sam asks.

"No," responds Janice.

"No. Neither have I," follows Larry.

"So... Where is it now? What is that part at the bottom? It says it is in the Happierwise Vault. I have spent lots of time in the vault. It is not in there," Sam admits.

Sam's enfarmars look at each other again before looking back at Sam.

"Come with us dear enson. We have something to show you," Larry says.

The three of them walk out of the house and onto the balcony.



Janice motions for Talbot to follow them. The four of them climb into the lift and descend to the garden below. They walk a few yards on the path in the courtyard encircling the core vault. Larry approaches one of the statues. Opening a hidden panel in the base of the statue, he places his hand onto a biometric scanner. A section of raised garden slides onto the path revealing a stairway. The stairs are made of stones which matched the exterior walls of the core vault. Moving without direction, Talbot leads the way down the stairs. Janice, Larry and Sam follow.

The stairway is wide enough to not create a feeling of claustrophobia, but narrow enough to create a feeling of novel adventure. The first flight of stairs ends on a platform. To the right an archway extends into a large chamber. Talbot pulls a lever on the wall and the light trickling down from above slowly disappears. The planter is once again blocking the entrance to the vault. Sam follows his enfarmars into the core room. The room glows with light from thousands of cores. The ceiling is lined with shimmering stones. Light from the courtyard above propagates down through columns of translucent material.

“Welcome to our ancestral core hall. Over two thousand years of our family history preserved for the ages,” Larry announces proudly.

Sam is surprised at the complexity of the system. Concentric rows of shelves are lined with glowing banks of data. There are twelve shelves from the floor to the ceiling. Over half of them are empty. Data management AI drones scurry about checking the

environmental conditions of the room and monitoring the health of the core drives.

He never realized how much space is needed for all the cores. He assumed there was a small rack of cores behind the retrieval door. They walk closer to the racks. Each location is clearly labeled with the individual's name. An image of the person is displayed behind the egg-shaped core drive.

At the center of the circular hall the smaller exterior walls of the viewing booth above extend down to the floor. A door is cut into the center of the column revealing a lift system. This is how the core drives are accessed in the booth. As the family continues to ambulate about the center of the room, Sam finds his core drive. The cores of his family surround him in a way that makes him feel uncomfortable. A slot next to his core drive is empty.

“That used to be your brother's core. We are so excited for it to be filled on day with your beautiful flower. Once you pollinate, your children will go right here,” Janice chimes in expectantly while pointing.

Sam finds energy to smile despite the pressure of expectation. The excitement he used to feel while watching memories is cheapened. What was the point of all this? Why had they kept it hidden from him for all these years?

“Let's get going. I would like to see what else is down here,” Janice admits.

The explorers make their way over to the landing.

“What is the vault location again?” asks Larry.

Sam looks at his journal and replies, “LL7-214-3.”

“That is on the seventh sub-level, 214<sup>th</sup> degree, third ring. We had better get going,” comments Talbot.

The staircase descends to another level. This landing has archways leading in both directions. Looking into the center of the vault reveals the top of a large sphere glowing like the cores above. The room itself is cavernous. The archway has a chain across it to keep visitors from falling several stories to the floor below. The ceiling is an impressive dome. The light from the central sphere dances on the ceiling. It reminds Sam of being on the beach. The lines move across the ceiling like waves flowing this way and that.

Through the other archway, rooms filled with treasure and clutter are visible. They descend deeper and deeper. They continue to circle the great globe in the central hall. They are afforded an ever-changing view from each vantage point. Ages of collections fill the rooms which flank the outer wall. Reaching the sixth platform the perception of the giant globe's immensity increases. Experiencing the grandiosity from below is far more impressive than from above.

“We have reached the seventh level of the vault. Right this way,” Talbot comments as he continues leading.

As Sam looks around, he cannot help but wonder why his family is keeping all this. There are some interesting things. Items at this level look like they belong in a museum. Tools, clothing, toys, decorations and even piles of bound cellulose are stacked all

around. Old antiquated forms of transportation are even left down here. There are two wheeled vehicles, three wheeled vehicles, four wheeled vehicles and even atmospheric pressure manipulation vehicles. It reminds him of his zotter. Perhaps this is where it was stored before he came to have it. They come to a final intersection in one of the wedges. They have reached their destination.

“We have arrived master Sam. Location: LL7-214-3,” Talbot proclaims with satisfaction.

Sam takes a few moments to look around and assess the contents of the room. Everything he had seen in the Sedentom core is here in this room. His clothes are hanging from a rod along the wall. His shoes are stacked in boxes. The furniture is piled up to the ceiling. Sam picks up a couple of boxes in his arms. He places them on a table near the entrance. He begins to sort through their contents. His enfar and enmar watch him closely.

The first box is filled with trinkets and mementos. Rocks, medallions, dancing figurines, shells and colorful pieces of glass. Sam suspects them to be tied to memories of Sedentom's adventures. He moves to the other box. This box is larger. After removing the lid and shuffling through its contents, he finds the eagle. It is neatly stacked in the box next to the ship and lady. 's The excitement in Sam's face is amplified by the golden glow of the reflected light.

“We have found it! Here it is! It looks just like the core memory,” Sam exclaims.

Using extreme care, he pulls the eagle from the box. With satisfaction, he holds it at arm's length. How is this a key to discovery?

"I assume this is what you are looking for dear?" asks Janice.

"Yes. This is it. Isn't it amazing. It looks even better than it did in my mind... Or I mean than it did in the core memory," comments Sam.

"What is that gibberish at the top? STOFF IKKE HJEM. It must be some kind of anagram," comments Larry.

"I think it looks ugly. It definitely looks like something an old man would have," Janice adds.

Sam cannot hear what his enfarmars are saying. It matters little to him. His focus has kicked in. He now possesses the key to deciphering the strange world in which he lives.

"Thank you for bringing me down here. I will take this to my home now," Sam comments.

"Oh sweetie. We don't take things out of the vault. I spend a lot of time down here granted. We don't remove the memories from the vault," Janice reports with feeling.

"What good does it do to keep it all down here? Who is ever going to use it?" asks Sam.

"It is all for another time," comments Larry.

"Yes. It is all for another time?" repeats Janice.

Sam looks at the eagle and again at his enfarmars. He knows what he must do. His face shows disappointment. He slowly lowers the picture. He holds it with one hand in defeat.

“I guess I can always come down here to look at it,” Sam concedes.

Placing the picture back into the box, Sam turns towards the exit and starts walking. His enfarmars and the trusted Talbot follow. He reaches the seventh-floor landing and turns around asking, “What is below this level?”

Both of his enfarmars respond in unison, “It is all for another time.”

“What does that even mean?” asks Sam.

“Let's go up to the next level enson,” Larry tells Sam with pride.

They climb the stairs to the sixth level. Larry walks beneath the archway and into the great chamber with the giant glowing sphere. He is followed by his life partner, enson and Talbot. Larry turns around facing his family.

“Enson. You have reached the point in your life when we are finally able to tell you about the future. We have reached a point of advancement whereby all people will be able to live forever. The notion of death is something which Garamindians have continually sought to destroy. Our science has increased our lifetimes to that of many former lifetimes. We no longer age with pain and ugliness. Our genetic material still unravels little by little even though it is synthetically copied by armies of nanites.

We are believers Enson. One day, we will be able to free ourselves from the bondage of our bodies and live in the future of ethereal existence. We will merge with the galactic information

system. We will exist everywhere and nowhere. All of this is for that time Samuel. Think about the notion of universal presence. No one will feel hunger. No one will feel pain. No one will want or need anything as it will be made manifest simply through imagination. Creativity will have no limits. We shall have a utopia which surpasses even the beautiful city of Garamindia.

Yes. All of this is for another time... We must cross before it all turns to dust. This is true. Until then, we will need every scrap to recreate our ancestors and selves. We will recreate us from cores and possessions. May it be ever so,” with this Larry ends his revelation.

“Oh, honey. You always get me so fired up when you are preaching about our life everlasting. Come here you,” Janice replies while reaching out and giving Larry a very close-tight hug.

Sam takes a few moments to process what his enfar has said. He knew the people of Garamindia had been working on transferring consciousness into computers. He never knew people would be zealots for the cause. Even more bizarre, his enfarmars are all on board. He could never adopt their beliefs. He also knew that he was not smart enough to lie or pretend. His path branches in a different direction. A plan is born in his mind.

“Shoot. I left the lid off that box downstairs. I had better go put it back,” Sam recalls out loud.

Sam runs down the stairs and rounds the corner. He manages to navigate the labyrinth of ancient artifacts. There is an excitement in what he is doing. He reaches the room and removes

the picture from the box making certain to replace the lid.

Up the stairs he flies clutching the eagle in his hands. He peers into the chamber as he climbs the stairs. He reaches one archway. Then another and another. He looks down through the archway. He can see his enfarmars embracing as they look up at the giant sphere. They believe their future is in their past. Sam reaches the first level and grabs the lever in the wall. He pauses for a few moments to stare at the eagle. It had better be worth it. It must be.

Talbot acknowledges that Sam is fleeing the vault with the memory, “Master and mistress. It appears that young master Sam has absconded with the eagle and is making his way to the surface.”

Both enfar and enmar shout as they begin running up the stairs, “No Enson. You must not remove the memories from the vault. You will ruin everything. It is all for another time.”

By this time the stairway has opened enough for Sam to squeeze his way through and onto the path in the courtyard. He takes another look at the eagle. It is more beautiful in the sunlight than he could have imagined. He is startled by an alarm. His enfarmars have triggered the vault alarm. The entryway to the stairs slams shut. Alarms sound throughout the building as Sam runs to his apartment.

Patty rushes to meet Sam at the door asking, “What is going on? What is with the alarms? I have never heard them before. What are you carrying?”

“I don't have time to explain. Is my suit finished? Oh well. Grab what you can. We need to leave,” Sam Exclaims.



“It is finished. I was going to have you try it on this morning. What is going on?” Patty asks again.

“I will tell you later. Grab clothes. We are leaving,” Sam commands.

Patty stops asking questions. She moves with great speed and efficiency. She even appears excited by the spontaneity. She is leaving on an adventure. That is enough for her.

Sam grabs a few things and meets Patty by the outer door proclaiming, “We have to make it to the gravitacraft before my farmars.”

Patty leads the way as the two of them run through the gardens surrounding the home.

“Get out of the garden! You are crushing the vegetation!” shouts the gardening AI.

Patty jumps over the hedge that separates them from the gravitacraft hanger. Sam follows a second later landing on his feet. He tightly clasps the eagle in his one hand and his bag in the other. Sam engages the actuator opening the gravitacraft bay door. The door begins to open. It seems to move very slowly. Shouts from within the home are calling his name.

“Come on. Come on. Come on,” Sam chants eagerly.

The door finally opens. Sam engages the canopy lift. They scramble into the craft. They throw their bags on the floor. Sam gently places the eagle in one of the passenger seats. They fall into their seats with a thud. Their restraints actuate. The canopy finishes closing while Sam hovers the craft over the front yard.

Interested in viewing the spectacle, many of his farmers have made their way out of the building. He waves goodbye with one hand and points to a destination on the nav with the other. In a flash they are gone.

Larry and Janice finally emerge. They are surrounded by the generations. The older generations are smiling and laughing. The novelty of the experience reminds them of the exuberance of youth.

“Well, that only happens ever century or so.”

“I wish I was young again and full of spunk.”

Janice puts her face into her hands and begins sobbing uncontrollably as she laments, “I knew we should have never let him live with that thing. That NBE! Those new forms of AI are so advanced. I am sure she’s warped his mind. Should we go after him?”

“Well... Let's try to stay positive about all this. At least he has finally left the house. I say we let him go,” Larry adds trying to distract Janice.

“What about the memory?” asks Janice.

“Memory. What memory? If it is gone, did it ever really exist?”

Larry ponders aloud existentially.

The craft travels a few thousand miles outside of the city before Sam decides to land. Over the horizon a field comes into view. It is covered by tall grass and surrounded by large trees. It fills him with a sense of peace. A small creek can be seen bubbling along its eastern margin. The field is situated in the rolling

foothills of Margolia. The land is very beautiful. A feeling of awe and wonder strike the couple. They peer out of the cabin as it settles down onto the clearing. The suns sink low on the unseen horizon. The field is blanketed by the shadows in twilight. The tops of the surrounding foothills are warm with alpenglow.

Their restraints release. Sam turns towards Patty. He smiles as he raises his shirt to pull the journal from his trousers. He places it in the seat next to the eagle. Sam searches through the compartments of the cabin. He finds blankets and pillows. He places them on the floor. He lies down and motions for Patty to join him. Darkness covers the valley. The couple enjoys a few short minutes while listening to the sounds of the valley and watching the stars through the canopy. Content with their new location, they rest in each other's arms.

## Chapter 13

The day has started like any other day for Chad. He is standing next to a table in his research laboratory. His mind navigates a sea of problems. Light houses of innovation identify the rocks and harbors lining the continent of technological advancement. He stares at the wall with a furrowed brow and a spinning compass. He is wholly unaware that once today's compass needle finds a magnetic line of force, the azimuth it plots will forever change his world.

Chad wrestles with questions. Why does observation matter? Why must we observe the states of particles in order for them to assume a position? The observation is effectively forcing the hand of the universe to manifest a result from possibility. ALLIE indicates that his experimental outcomes are complete via his contextual interface.

“Output visually,” Chad prompts with his inner voice.

Suspended in front of him Chad sees the graphical representation of his latest experiment. He spends a few minutes analyzing the data. Every-so-often, he rotates the orientation of the data set.

“We are still unable to overcome the inherent problems of decoherence. No matter how hard we try to increase the speed, we cannot change the physical limitations of the quantum,” observes Chad.

Needing to clear his mind, he turns his attention to another subject. A novel concept had entered his mind while walking on the rim with Kiah. He would merge fitness and anti-gravity technology. Ridable products are widely available. Personal transportation can be sat upon, sat in, stood upon, stood in, laid upon, laid in or hung from. He envisions a wearable system. The clothing will be its own workout system and transportation system. It would require thousands of miniature well generators woven into the fabric. The greatest technical challenge will be designing the software to run it. Thrust is thrust. Controlling it three-dimensionally presents many challenges.

Different modes of operation will be needed. The gravitasuit will need to attract a large cross section of individuals to be successful. For toning the muscles, resistance would be applied in the direction opposite of arm or leg movements. For a more entertaining experience, the wearer could reduce the effects of gravity such that they bound around like a kangaroo.

Chad finds engineering to be a welcome distraction from the abstract world of quantum computing. He scans his body and begins printing a three-dimensional suit of nano-fibers. Using shears, he cuts the suit around the waste allowing him to put it on. The suit is skin tight and breathes easily. Satisfied with the gravitasuit prototype, he begins working on the anti-gravity modules which will be woven into the fabric. While he is busy working away, another researcher enters the laboratory.

“Wow. What are you up to?” Lee asks as he picks up the suit

and plies it between his fingers.

“This is a little project I am working on to promote physical fitness using anti-gravity technology,” Chad responds.

“That is a great idea. I have been working on something too. Give me a minute. I will grab them from my lab,” Lee comments as he walks out the door.

Lee returns with a pair of sneakers. They look like any other ordinary sneakers until Chad flips them over and examines the bottom. Small anti-gravity wells have been integrated into the sole.

“Cool. These look great. Have you worked out the algorithm for controlling the thrust to keep them from breaking someone's leg or shooting them off a cliff?” Chad asks.

“Details. Details. You are always so concerned about killing or maiming people?” Lee responds with gallows humor.

“Do you mind if I keep these and integrate them into my workout system?” Chad asks.

“On one condition... I am to be listed as the co-inventor of the AG-Tive-Wear line of clothing,” Lee negotiates as he waves his right hand in the air revealing an imaginary banner.

“Co-inventor... No. How about AG-Tive-Life-Gear team member? This way we don't limit ourselves to clothing. Your biography will be listed below mine on any literature pertaining to the inventors,” Chad responds back jokingly.

Lee laughs and grants his consent. The two shake hands to consummate the deal. Lee walks out of the room. Chad returns to his project. He is fascinated by the sneakers. Despite being too

small, he places them on his feet. He winces with pain as his toes double over in their tips. He actuates the tightening bands. They tighten around his feet.

In an instant, Chad is forced off the ground and into the air. Unfortunately, the controls for the shoes are in the toes. His big feet have activated the shoes at full thrust.

“Lee! Lee! Anybody! A little help here,” Chad cries out before thinking to himself, “I, of all people, should have known to read the manual.”

Chad balances himself on the sneakers as he is pushed up into the ceiling. Grabbing the light fixture, he pulls himself over to the wall where a shelf filled with lab equipment rises to ceiling. With great effort Chad grabs the post of the shelving unit. He manages to balance the thrust from the sneakers enough to hold his body horizontally against the shelf. Hand-over-hand he walks down the shelf and rolls over onto his back. He points his feet up towards the ceiling allowing his knees to draw into his chest. He releases the sneaker bands. This deactivates the system. He allows his feet to fall to the floor and takes a couple of minutes to regain his breath and composure.

“ALLIE. What have we learned from this experience?” Chad asks still breathing heavily.

“We have learned the dangers of experimenting with prototype anti-gravity technology using a terminable biological entity,” ALLIE responds.

Chad removes the sneakers and walks barefooted across the

lab floor. His toes are red and swollen. He is convinced that he can design a better version of sneakers. Chad grabs a few components from around the lab and begins altering a pair of his own sneakers.

Before long, he has integrated anti-gravity wells into his shoes. With ALLIE's assistance, he spends a couple more hours writing a thrust control program. The program is designed to interact with his cortical interface. Once he has loaded the software into the sneakers, Chad experiments with the thrust. He places the shoes on a lab bench. He uses intention messages through his cortical interface to adjust the thrust output of the six thrusting points.

He takes a few minutes calibrating the control system while the shoes float up and down on the bench.

As a safety feature, he prevents the anti-gravity wells from activating beyond ten percent of maximum output without constantly reasserting intention every couple of seconds. Planetary gravitational forces are negated to prevent falling. Attitude is also controlled with intention to actuate the front and rear thrust to pitch the shoes forward and backward. Chad makes a mental note.

“Investigate concept of decoupling attitude thrust direction between shoes,” Chad comments into his notes.

“Alright ALLIE. Who will be our guinea pig for AG-Tive-Life-Gear sneakers version two point oh?”

ALLIE does not respond.

“Come on. You are not even in an animated frame. You must know some good-looking-guy robot who wants to impress you,”



prods Chad.

“Well now that you mention it. What about Toskbot? He is always looking for something fun to try,” suggests ALLIE.

“Is he bi-pedal?” asks Chad.

“My logical abilities have developed enough to deduce feet a prerequisite for testing shoes. Do I have authorization to summon Toskbot?” ALLIE asserts and supplicates.

“Authorization granted,” Chad affirms.

Chad places the sneakers on the floor and begins tidying up his lab space. After a few minutes, Toskbot appears at the door. He walks in with a couple strides and greets the room's occupants.

“Hiya all. I hear you are looking for a tall-dark robot with some serious muscles,” Toskbot greets.

“I guess I should have screened and censored ALLIE's request,” Chad laments.

Toskbot walks over toward Chad. He rounds a corner in the lab. His elbow knocks over a shelf filled with components used to control electron flow. Boxes and containers spill out all over the ground. Like thousands of tiny insects, they scatter in all directions on the lab floor.

“Uh. Oops. That was like that already. Nothing to see here. Oh, my goodness. Some people make such big messes. Good thing I am here to clean all this up,” Toskbot says as he starts grabbing components and shoving them back into boxes.

He pushes the shelf back into place and replaces its contents haphazardly. He moves very quickly and soon the mess has been

moved to the shelf. Chad struggles to maintain his composure as ALLIE cracks joke after joke in his interface. Toskbot turns around and continues walking. His hands and arms are covered by neodymium magnets. He places his hand on his face trying to appear clever. Several of the magnets jump off his hand and cling to his face.

“Well. This sure is an exciting place to hang out. How have you all been doing?” Toskbot asks with feeling.

“ALLIE make yourself visible for our guest. I am sure he would love to see you,” Chad prompts.

The holographic projector at the center of the room begins to reveal ALLIE's image. She appears as a woman. She is only visible from the bust up. Her skin is a pale color light tan with a blueish tinge. She appears fit with complimenting features. Toskbot's cheeks click a few times rapidly. He bows his head and says, “A pleasure to make your acquaintance Miss ALLIE. I thank you for summoning me. I am willing to do my part for science.”

“Thank you for coming by. I so rarely get to interact with visitors,” ALLIE responds while batting her eyelashes.

Chad clicks his tongue to get Toskbot's attention and points to the magnets while saying, “Hey buddy. You have a little something something going on here and here and here.”

“Haven't you seen this before. This is the coolest thing ALLIE. Wearing magnets is just like body modification. It gets so much NBE attention and some BE if you know what I mean. The idea of having a rogue magnetic field rolling around on your body.

You know what that can do to you. I probably should take them off for the experiment. Science cannot have rogue magnets fouling up the experiment and all that,” Toskbot explains while attempting to pull the magnets off his body.

At first, he attempts to pull them off with his hands. When this does not work, he swings his arms around and around. Some of the magnets fly off shooting across the lab.

“Here! Let me help you. I assume your systems are not susceptible to magnetic fields,” Chad comments.

“Not this robot. I am purely Solid State!” Toskbot asserts proudly while placing his hands on his hips.

Chad grabs a device from one of his shelves and points it at Toskbot. He pulls the trigger and the magnets start to drop off his metallic exoskeleton.

“Woowee. What was that? That felt great!” Toskbot relishes.

“Degaussing field. I told those magnetic lines of force to go pick on someone their own size. Now let us conduct our scientific experiment. If you are ready?” Chad asks seeking consent.

“I am always ready,” Toskbot asserts.

Chad grabs the sneakers and places them on the floor. Toskbot sits down in a chair and wheels over to the sneakers. He picks them up and begins to examine them.

“I cannot wear these. I only wear Robo-Feet,” he refuses while holding his right foot up for all to see, “When you push this little button. The little hologram robot dances around on the tongue.”

ALLIE laughs uncontrollably in projection. She only starts to

control her laughter after realizing that Chad is communicating with her not to be rude. She communicates her apologies. She is unaccustomed to having her feelings visible to others. She moves on to the experiment by questioning his mechaniculinity, "Are you robot enough to try them on, or are you a toaster? Pop. Pop. Pop. Maybe I will call a robot with a higher power-to-mass ratio."

"No. No. I got this," Toskbot affirms.

Toskbot places the shoes on his feet and presses the strap tightening button. He rises to his feet and starts to walk back and forth like he is on a modeling runway.

"I like science. Oh yeah. I like science. Oh yeah," Toskbot sings.

Chad begins to activate the thrusting elements. Toskbot rises off the ground a couple inches and is then placed back down on the floor.

"Did you feel that?" Toskbot asks.

"Feel what?" Chad quizzes.

"I lifted off the ground," Toskbot claims.

"Are you sure? That sounds pretty weird," Chad comments.

"I don't know. Maybe it is my dancing skills," Toskbot posits as he begins to dance around the laboratory.

Tiring of the ruse, Chad begins to activate the sneakers raising Toskbot three feet off the floor.

"How does that feel Toskbot?" Chad asks.

"You guys have been playing with me this whole time. These are some kind of magic sneakers. Watch this," Toskbot implores

as he begins to dance in midair.

He faces ALLIE while trying to impress her. She giggles and plays along. Chad alters Toskbot's elevation and his attitude several times before slowly dropping him back down to the ground.

“Please. Please give me one more shot. I have one final move that is going to knock your circuits off,” Toskbot importunes.

Chad complies with his request lifting him up for another round of testing. After a few moves this way and that, Toskbot decides to do what can be loosely described as the splits. His legs fly out from under his torso. His chest spins down towards the floor. A loud metallic gonging sound reverberates through the lab as his head hits the floor. Chad lacked the thrusting vector to correct such a bold move. A pile of robot slowly begins to move. He pulls himself to his feet and dusts himself off.

“Now those were some killer moves. Did I get another dent?” Toskbot inquires with great interest.

Toskbot has Chad examine his cranial shroud for evidence of another wild escapade.

“No battle scars. Are you okay? You took a pretty good tumble,” Chad asks concernedly.

“I am fine. My head is mostly for show. All my important parts are in here,” reveals Toskbot while pointing to his chest and looking over at ALLIE.

“Well I think we have done enough research for today. Let's get those shoes off you and escort you out of the lab,” comments

Chad.

Toskbot removes the shoes and puts on his Robo-Feet. Chad escorts him to the door preventing any further laboratory ruination. Returning to his bench, Chad sits down in a chair next to his shoes.

“You, my dear, are no longer authorized to select test subjects without my verification,” lectures Chad.

ALLIE continues laughing uncontrollably. Her beautiful face, patterned after Kiah, pleases Chad as she chides, “You have to admit that was pretty funny. When do I ever get to experience laughter that doesn't come at your expense?”

“This is true. I am ready to move on to BE trials. Change operating mode to my specifications and end visualization,” Chad instructs with a pleasant tone.

ALLIE disappears from the projector. Chad pulls the sneakers onto his feet and binds them.

“Begin recording interface data,” Chad prompts.

“Recording,” ALLIE confirms.

Chad activates the thrust and begins to lift off the ground. He is impressed with the stability and intuitive responsiveness of the shoes. He experiments with levitation several more times before applying tangential acceleration. He starts to activate the attitude control and begins to pitch forward and backwards moving in an arc. Dropping down to the floor he decides to try enhancing his steps by adding thrust to his normal stride. As he begins walking to the door, the additional thrust causes him to bump into the

shelf Toskbot had knocked over.

“Let's not have a repeat of today's silliest events,” Chad reminds himself aloud.

He walks into the hallway and takes short strides at first. He trains his intention to control the thrust effectively. With trepidation, he begins to bound for short distances. People in the hall begin to gather with understandable curiosity. He interacts less and less with the floor. He understands why Toskbot felt an urge to dance. Dancing, swinging and movement come naturally. It helps to thwart the awkwardness of balancing in one spot.

The size of the crowd begins to grow quite large. Concern for his reputation and the fresh memory of having nearly been crushed compels Chad to seek another venue. Hopefully he can find a less conspicuous place to test his invention. Dropping to the ground, Chad addresses a crowd of cheering nerds, “Thank you everyone. That will be all for today.”

Chad walks around The Great Hall of Science looking for an out-of-the-way venue. He explores a couple of empty corridors and slips into The Event Hall. The room is eerily quiet. He walks around the perimeter of the room ensuring that no eyes will see, and no ears will hear what he is about to do. The ceiling of The Event Hall towers forty feet above the floor. This gives Chad a thrill as he relishes the enormity space.

Embracing solitude, Chad begins to bound around the room. He makes small adjustments to the control system as he finds points of instability. He stays clear of the highly vaunted

meteorites in the center of the hall. Emboldened by the stability and responsiveness of his sneakers, Chad decides to begin hovering at different heights within the room. First, he rises to ten feet and glides around moving horizontally in all directions. He finds it challenging to not lock his knees.

He advances to twenty feet. Still, he remains content with the performance of the gravitashoes. He reaches the apex of the room with great joy and accomplishment. His gaze shifts down to the floor below. His focus wanes and causes his arms and legs to flail against the feeling of instability.

“Make a note.... autopilot which allows... the user... to remove focus for a few seconds... and maintain control,” Chad thinks to himself while maintaining his focus on controlling the sneakers, “ALLIE. I am going to need some assistance... I would like to perform some acrobatic maneuvers. Please correct my intentions to keep me from splattering on the floor.”

“I can do that,” ALLIE assures.

Chad drops down to twenty feet above the floor and tentatively begins to rock back and forth. Starting on one side of the hall he gains momentum and elevation as he reaches the center of the room. He bends his knees with full thrust applied which causes him to flip heel-over-head. Straightening his legs and actuating toe thrusters brings him to a less than graceful stop. His heart races with excitement and realization of how dangerous his little stunt has become.

Taking a few moments to relax and hover, Chad's feelings



change as hears one of the large doors swing open. Someone has malevolently decided to disturb Chad's solitude. Content to remain hidden, Chad flies to one of the balconies overlooking the hall. Standing against the wall, Chad peers over the banister.

A short and stocky man has entered the hall. He walks around. He is looking for something. He is dressed in a very nice suit. He appears out-of-place and at the same time emits a confidence that is intriguing. Chad convinces himself that patience will once again avail him to an empty hall. Several minutes pass. The intruder seems less than transient. Chad's mind continues to hear the door open. The familiarity of the sound. The Event Hall. Suddenly, Chad is overcome with a very strange feeling. He has not felt this way since he was a child. The very real possibility that the universe is deeper and more mysterious than his current comprehension arises. It releases a flood of inquisitiveness into Chad's being.

Chad slowly hovers out into the great hall while being careful not to make a sound. He descends to the bottom of The Event Hall. He drops down behind the mysterious man from his childhood vision. As his feet settle onto the floor, Chad hears a woman whisper, "Find."

At the same time the other man hears a woman whisper, "Remember."

Turning to face the center of the room Sam makes eye contact with Chad, "Hi. My name is Sam. Would you like to help me rediscover the key to understanding everything?"

Chad smiles and introduces himself, “Hi Sam. My name is Chad... .. We have a lot to talk about.”

## Chapter 14

The Metricule experiences a life of its own. Each morning the silent slumber of the previous evening retreats. The suns rise, and consciousness returns. Footsteps, conversations, loud experiments, laughter and an ever present sub-audible hum churn out the fruits of intellectual fortitude. As the day progresses, activity declines. The palpable energy of the morning abates and is replaced with only intermittent reminders of the earlier hubbub. As the evening progresses, the silence begins to take over again. When the most ardent researchers eventually flee, the structure is given over to sleep once more. Tonight, The Metricule will experience insomnia.

Chad and Sam have spent the last few hours discussing the significance of their encounter. They have recounted their visions and their goals. To them, the hours have passed by in a moment. The lab reveals nothing significant about today's events. Advanced meters, scopes, tools and holographic projectors keep the surfaces from appearing barren. Chad is seated at his usual high-backed stool. Sam is sitting at the table. He is leaning on his arms. Many hours ago, he relinquished the elegance of his dress suit for the comfort of his undershirt. The coat and tie are hanging over an old project droid. In front of them, the eagle relief sits on the table.

"So, this is the key to understanding everything," Chad scoffs with interest and a hint of disbelief.

"That is what I have heard," Sam reaffirms.

“Well then. We had better start unlocking its mysteries. Let's start with the text in the banner. STOFF IKKE HJEM. Let me look this up,” Chad conveys while announcing his intentions.

“I don't think that is a good idea. The last time I started asking questions on the information systems, bad stuff happened,” Sam admits.

“What kind of bad stuff?” Chad asks.

“I had some visitors,” Sam recalls.

“What kind of visitors?” Chad asks with intrigue.

Sam pauses for a few moments with hesitancy. He has only come to know Chad for a few hours. In this time, he has grown fond of him. His willingness to help Sam find the location of the tomb is something he wants to keep. His inner voice tells him to be honest.

“I was visited by the Guardians of Development,” Sam blurts out.

Chad bursts out laughing. His head pitches back as he laughs toward the ceiling. He regains his composure and addresses Sam, “Welcome to researching topics that threaten the status-quo. I have been visited a few times. How were my good ombuds? Oh wait. They don't exist remember.”

“They were awful. The worst things I have ever met. Mostly they were rude to my NBE Patty,” Sam voices with disgust and relief.

“They have a thing for good-looking AIs. I appreciate your honesty. Knowing this subject has triggered their interest has piqued mine. I would like to find out more information about this character Kongeørn. I think we are safe investigating. I will do my best to keep our research offline and between myself and ALLIE,” Chad comments while trying to keep Sam's confidence.

Chad communicates with ALLIE non-verbally, “Download all ancient Kaldlander scripts and language definitions. Reason for download, Kaldland quantum computing field expedition.”

ALLIE pulls up the necessary information and disconnects

from the Altion Information System. She communicates to Chad that she is ready to begin processing visual imagery. Chad stands over the eagle relief and transfers the images to ALLIE.

“We really need to come up with a cool nickname for this piece. What do you think about Ørny?” Chad asks.

“I don't know... What about Keybird? Or Goldenkey?” Sam suggests.

“I definitely like the idea of gold. How about Gold Ørny?” counters Chad.

“We can call it Goldy for short,” Sam decides definitively.

By this time ALLIE has compared the words in the banner to the oldest known Kaldlander language on record. She enables the projector and greets Sam for the first time, “Hello Sam. Nice to meet you face to face. Permission to present my findings?”

“Granted,” Chad prompts.

“These words are written in the ancient Kaldlander language. It is believed that our ancestors founded Kaldland. Therefore the language is written with many of our same characters. The first word, STOFF, is a word that means something like fabric or substance. The second word, IKKE, means not. Not like knot. Not in you tie a knot but not meaning not. Not knot like a unit of speed either. It is a logical operator for negating the preceding or subsequent word or value. Maybe I had better use it in a sentence. Chad is NOT happy with my wordplay,” ALLIE orates in a cleverly humorous yet confusing manner.

“This explanation was kind of fun ALLIE, but let's move on,”

Chad instructs.

“The last word, HJEM, translates directly as home. The place where one lives,” Allie finishes.

“So, the meaning of the banner roughly translates to, fabric not home. ALLIE spend some cycles figuring out what that means. What do you think it means Sam?” Chad prompts ALLIE before asking Sam’s opinion.

“I don't know. Patty really likes fabric and making clothes. I am not sure,” responds Sam.

“There is no logical connection between the terms. The only connection I can make is the use of fabric for tents. Perhaps the Kaldlanders were not fond of living in tents?” ALLIE hypothesizes after processing the information.

The three entities sit a few moments in silence. The mystery of the banner text will remain a mystery for now. The catharsis of today's meeting and the duration of subsequent conversations have exacted a price. It becomes apparent to Chad and Sam that despite their eagerness to continue, the toll must be paid with sleep.

“I had better get home. Kiah has already hailed me several times. She is concerned. What are our next steps Sam?” asks Chad.

“Let's figure this thing out. I can return in the morning,” suggests Sam.

“What are your plans for Goldy?” inquires Chad.

“I will take her with me tonight.”

Reluctant to leave his precious eagle outside of his possession, Sam places his treasure under his arm and heads out the door. He

communicates his goodbyes. The two of them go their separate ways.

In the morning Sam returns to the lab with the eagle. Chad is already gearing up for the day's experiments. Arriving home late the night before, Chad experienced Kiah's displeasure. While explaining himself to Kiah, Chad divulged too much information about the story of Kongeørn and the Høyegardian realms. As an avid consciousness researcher, the tantalizing concept of alternate realms consumed Kiah with intrigue. She made it known that she would be involved in this project. Chad agreed to hail Kiah shortly after Sam's arrival in the morning. They would gauge his reaction to her presence and judge his willingness to involve her in the project.

“We will start with imaging today. I have lined up ultra-high-resolution scanning. We will collect a three-dimensional rendering of the piece. We will use infrared, visible and ultraviolet light,” Chad explains.

Chad motions for Sam to place the picture onto a stand in a machine. A cover drops down over the picture. Chad initializes the machine. It begins to whirl and flash. Footsteps can be heard approaching from down the hall. They grow in amplitude before revealing their source at the lab door.

“Hi Chad. Here are the specs you ordered for that rotary girder. Oh, and who is this in your office? You so rarely have visitors,” Kiah comments.

“Kiah. This is Sam. We are working on a project together. Sam



this is my life partner Kiah.”

Sam stares at the floor for a few moments. He so rarely interacts with anyone, let alone a beautiful woman.

“Hi Kiah,” Sam offers timidly.

“Do you mind if I ask you what you two are doing?” Kiah inquires.

“Uhhh. Ummm. We are working on a project. It is kind of a secret,” Sam responds with resistance.

“I see. I am very good at keeping secrets. I also have a lot of experience researching consciousness. I have been working with many researchers on transferring consciousness into artificial constructs. Different realms of sorts,” Kiah continues.

“I am not sure this project needs a third researcher... You have expressed an interest in certain fringe understandings of older philosophies. Sam, it might be a good idea to bring her on board,” Chad comments while not appearing too eager.

Sam continues staring at the floor.

“Alright. If I know you can be trusted. You are not one of those people like my enfarmars are you?” Sam asks.

Kiah looks at Chad hoping he will communicate his knowledge of the topic facially. His expression reveals nothing but surprise and growing interest.

“What kind of people would we be if we were, ...like your enfarmars?” Kiah asks respectfully.

“My parents believe in something they call another time? They have all our ancestor's stuff in a giant vault below our home. They

did not want me taking anything from the vault. They have kept it a secret from me. Now I wish I didn't know about it. I guess it helped me find Goldy though. Are your farmers crazy too?" Sam asks as his thoughts are pondered aloud.

"I think everyone's farmers are crazy at some level. It is one of the mysteries that continues to confound psychologists. Each generation is hyper-aware of the follies of the previous generation. They rebel against the system. In doing so they create their own flaws for the next generation to amplify. I am an Eschatologist Sam," admits Kiah.

"An escawhat?" Sam asks while trying to understand.

"An Eschatologist. I have a passion for understanding what happens to us when we die. My official title is Consciousness Transmission Specialist. We refer to your parents as, Eschatologitronics. Most Garamindians are Eschatologitronics at some level," Kiah continues.

"The words you guys use are too long. I am going to call them E-tronics. That is easier for me to say. What does that mean?" Sam asks.

Chad and Kiah both begin to beam with excitement as Sam is showing interest and seeds of fondness for Kiah.

"E-tronics are people who believe that living forever requires recreating a person's consciousness in a quantum computing platform. This is why we have core recorders. This is why your family keeps the possessions of the dead. The Altion Information System and Aleph-Beth Information System were originally

created to act as the backbone of a giant computing system. This system will become the vessel of all consciousness. Death will no longer exist. There will be no limit to Garamindian technology. Everything will be possible in the software. As the Alephion and Bethion stars burn out, autonomous systems will transport us to a new star system. This star system will in turn burn up. The process will continue forever. It is believed that we will become so powerful that eventually we will be able to span all the galaxies of the universe. If everything goes according to plan, the system will no longer need the universe. The ultimate goal is to transcend it,” Kiah explains.

The magnitude of the plan Kiah has laid out gives Sam an awful feeling in his gut. His subconscious mind receives the information and immediately responds. His conscious mind produces affirmations. He has both known and unknown this all his life. It is the very reason he could never embrace his education. He found no interest in excelling for a purpose which lacked any resonance with his subconscious desires. He knows this plan is doomed. He takes a few deep cognitive breaths and responds, “That sounds awful, and it is never going to work!”

Both Chad and Kiah are impressed with Sam’s level of conviction and certainty. Chad smiles approvingly. Kiah's face turns from seriousness to delight.

“I am definitely not an E-tronic. I have had too many guiding visions come true. What is the difference between an E-gist and an E-tronic?” Sam asks.

“An E-gist is interested in finding out what happens when you die. An E-tronic believes the science is settled. All they can do is hope their core, their body scans and their possessions will recreate them in the future. They will be dead until, another time. This is a tenant of our entire culture. The fact that some families have fashioned it into a religious belief system is understandable,” asserts Kiah.

“So what else is there. Death. Life. Some magical gravitacraft somewhere?” Sam asks jokingly.

“There are many ancient religious beliefs. We have classified them as superstitious myths for unsophisticated people. That is why I am so interested in alternative realms. I want to be completely honest with you. Chad told me about the Høyegardian Realms. Don't look at him. I made him tell me. He is powerless when I get something in my mind. Are you familiar with Numinous?” asks Kiah.

“Numin... Who? What?” Sam responds quizzically.

Chad looks at Kiah for a moment. His eyebrows communicate an air of caution. His concern is clear. It is as though cramming more information into his mind might cause his brain to explode. Undeterred, Kiah continues as Chad again relinquishes his dominance. Chad leans back in his chair and relishes Kiah's outpourings. Her beauty and power of mind is intoxicating.

“Numinous was a Philosopher and Eschatologist from many generations in the past. He studied biology and ancient religions.

He was convinced that there is more to life and consciousness than the material world. He did not believe that all of consciousness is a byproduct of electro-chemical-luminal reactions. This was established as fact even in his time.

Numinous reportedly experienced supernatural events which could not be explained. He never recorded these experiences. He said they were his own. Like his nose or his face, they were a part of him. He did not want to cheapen what he described as his gifts by subjecting them to the analysis of materialists.

He studied an ancient Kaldlander religion. They believed in a realm outside of the material universe which leaked into this universe through consciousness. They worshiped this force and referred to it as the Allefelt,” Kiah pauses to reflect.

“Allefelt. Hmmm. At least I can pronounce that. What do you both think of this ancient mumbo-jumbo?” Sam interjects.

“I have attempted to insert thousands of test subjects into Virulence Optima. We have recreated every last detail of their neural-synoptic schema into the software. We make an exact synaptic rendering of a person's mind in an instant of time. In that instant we transfer this essence into the system and terminate the original firing host. Not once has it ever worked.

I believe there is an unseen non-material force which interacts with these firings. Numinous posited that the electro-chemical-luminal processes are a byproduct of this connection to an unseen power or force. Essentially, our brains are following the direction of a force which exists beyond anything we currently understand.

He called this force a consciousness tunnel. As a historical side note, students of Numinous were responsible for the discoveries which led to both anti-gravity technology and power tunneling. These two technologies, more than any others, have changed the capabilities and quality of life in our solar system,” she reflects with a sense of pride and awe in her voice.

Kiah once again realizes she is speaking to others. She looks at Sam and notices that he is beginning to tire. He remains interested, but is not processing it all. Turning to Chad, Sam asks, “What do you think about all this?”

“I think we have a lot of work ahead of us today. I think we should stop telling stories and start playing with our toys,” Chad offers as a segue.

“No seriously. I want to know what you think about Numinous,” Sam insists while waiting for an answer.

“I think too much time is spent arguing about whether old ideas are right or wrong. We spend far too little time discovering new ideas which will doubtless consume the arguing lives of future generations,” Chad responds wittily.

“I take that as my queue to let you boys play with your toys. I look forward to hearing about your discoveries,” Kiah shares.

Having uttered these words, Kiah turns and walks out of the room. She looks back over her shoulder long enough to smile with enjoyment. The two men are sitting in front of the imaging pod. They stare at it like campers around a camp fire. There is an awkward silence in which men find great comfort. Several minutes

pass before Sam breaks this silence, “Kiah is a really nice woman. You are very lucky to have such an amazing life partner. I understand why she is interested in my little project. Why are you?”

“I have been working on increasing computing power. We have reached the limitations of the current technology. I have tried every conceivable way to speed up the platform with no luck. When everything you have tried with a current technology fails, you throw it out and reinvent the game. If you study history, no significant change has occurred using the same level of intelligence that created it. You must radically rethink the underlying assumptions. The key to disrupting the status-quo is to bring the future into the past. We, my friend, are creating a future.

Let's hypothesize that there is a fundamental force which is driving consciousness. This force is transferring and processing all consciousness in the universe. This means an unfathomable amount of data is flowing and being processed every moment. If we can hack into this plane, we will not only solve the mystery of consciousness, we will also have accessed an existing system which our society has been trying to build for several thousand years,” Chad reveals.

“So, it sounds like you are saying, why reinvent the anti-gravity well?” Sam proudly offers.

“That's about right,” Chad agrees.

The whirring of the machine dies down. A short series of tones alert the operator the tests are complete. Chad pulls a holographic projector up next to the machine. He begins

manipulating the results with his contextual interface. Sam watches. The eagle and backboard do not appear to have any encoded images that reveal any secrets about the piece. This is the case with normal lighting and all levels of magnification. Chad moves to the infrared imaging. He recreates a copy of the imagery and instructs ALLIE to parse all the records to detect any anomalies in the surfaces. She will search for encoded hidden messages. The eagle is the same temperature as the surrounding lab and contrasts little with the background.

ALLIE completes her analysis well before Sam and Chad. Chad grants her access to the holographic projector so she can display her report to both of them.

“Upon detailed analysis of the data, I have concluded that there is nothing but years of expected wear and environmental exposure damage. There does not appear to be any pattern associated with the data indicating intelligence has encoded information,” responds ALLIE.

Chad moves on to the ultraviolet images. The eagle has a very strange-dark glow under the ultraviolet. He pauses a few moments to wonder if it is just a gaudy old ornament. Chad turns off the holographic projector and turns to Sam.

“Well, the first test is over. Nothing to see here. I have scheduled time in the EMF Lab, High Energy Particle Lab, Sound Lab, Gravity Lab, Chemical Lab, Carbon Dating Lab and Thermal Lab. We will find out as much as we can about Goldy from these tests you can be sure,” Chad explains.



Communicating the days itinerary to Sam, Chad stands up and motions for Sam to grab the eagle out of the machine. Sam follows Chad into the hallway.

The day passed by very slowly for Sam and very quickly for Chad. Running the tests alone was reward enough for Chad. From time to time he would start giggling and say something like, “We have reached 15MW,” or, “We are less than a micron off.”

Sam would ask if this meant anything useful. Chad would respond with science words meaning nothing to Sam. He continued with the experiments despite frustration. He felt an overall lack of enthusiasm for the experiments or details which came to light. The afternoon turned into evening.

Once again, they find themselves back in Chad's Lab. Kiah has finished her day's research. She hurries off to join the two researchers. She is eager to see what they have discovered. She walks into the lab. She immediately picks up on the tension in the room. Sam is noticeably agitated. He is voicing his frustration with Chad.

“I don't understand what we were doing today. You kept giggling while operating the machine interfaces. Were you even interested in finding out what secrets this picture has to tell us?” Sam presses.

Chad tries to remain as calm as possible. He so rarely is afforded an opportunity to use all the equipment. They are outside of his core discipline. He allows Sam to continue.

“Why did we need to melt the metal block in the EMF lab? Why did we need to bring the audio shapers into the anti-gravity

lab and play sounds with various liquid in the chamber? Why did you put lab chairs in the anti-gravity chamber and fire different colors of lasers at them? Why did you freeze things in the Thermal Lab and take them out and hit them with a hammer? What was the deal firing particles at blocks of lead? Did we find anything out of any real value?" Sam continues to press on.

Chad looks at Kiah with relief. He is no longer alone to face Sam's wrath. His eyes indicate a request for her help and an admission of guilt. She does not give him any sympathy. She appears empathetic as Sam continues to demand answers from Chad.

"Would you like to understand my motives or the scientific play I was engaged in?" Chad asks simply.

"I feel like I have wasted the whole day, I might as well waste another few minutes hearing science babble," Sam concedes.

"Thank you for calming down. I want to make sure that I address all your questions.

Melting metal with EMF waves: All me having fun. How often do you get the chance to run the largest magnetron in the solar system? I made calculations earlier about the amount of energy that would be required. I validated my calculations. On topic, I needed to know how metal would react to certain power levels so that we did not destroy the sample.

With the audio shapers in the Gravity Lab, I was using them to test a range of frequencies which would setup a standing wave in liquids. I created complex patterns in the suspended liquid. Did

you at least appreciate the beauty of the wave patterns? Thank you for not mentioning the eighteen gigapascal gravitational field. Don't tell anyone I broke that thermal furnace by getting the field too close," Chad requests guiltily.

Chad reaches out his hand and motions for Kiah to do the same. He drops a large-uncut diamond into her hand. It is the size of an apple.

"Lasers on the lab chairs was an experiment with the different photon pressures given the different wavelengths of light. We needed to perform that experiment in a vacuum. They really were spinning, weren't they?

Hitting objects cooled to near zero degrees Kelvin. Hmm. That was all in great fun. I am not going to lie.

I bathed the block of lead with high energy particles so that I would have something else to give Kiah. I turned the lead into gold. Unfortunately, it was also radioactive. I left it in the lab with all the other hot blocks of gold. It helped me realize we should not target Goldy with the collider. Good realization.

To your final question I will direct your attention to the holographic projector. ALLIE has the answers you are looking for," Chad confesses.

ALLIE appears in the projector. Kiah is surprised to see ALLIE for the first time. She looks just like her. She had been expecting something different.

"Hello Kiah. I am ALLIE. It is so nice to finally meet you. I have seen you before, but never in projection," ALLIE introduces

herself.

“Likewise ALLIE. I have known of you for a long time. I have never seen you. You look just like me except without that small mole on my right cheek. Chad, you said you loved it. You also look about thirty years younger than I do,” Kiah divulges.

Chad realizes the way he sees Kiah is not how his world sees Kiah. A few tweaks by Chad in the background and ALLIE's face appears older with a mole.

“You think I am old and ugly. Now I know. It appears you forgot to detect my presence and change to this likeness. I see how it is,” Kiah comments while willing Chad to atone.

Chad continues maintaining his silence. The memories of sleeping alone in the penthouse are in the past. They are, however, still fresh in his mind. Trying to break the tension, Chad changes ALLIE's likeness to that of Kiah's enmar.

“Chad. You really are something. ALLIE take on whatever form you are most comfortable assuming,” Kiah expresses to relieve the tension.

ALLIE returns to looking like younger-mole-free Kiah. On Earth the difference between ten to thirty years is significant. By Earth standards, Kiah will appear young and beautiful well into her hundreds. At this time, she will no longer appear as if she were in her early twenties. The Garamindians notice very small differences that would go unnoticed on Earth.

ALLIE begins divulging experimental data, “Lab results, Specimen, Goldy.

EMF Lab: Nothing found to indicate EMF signature either through passive or active monitoring.

High Energy Particle Lab: Omitted.

Sound Lab: All resonance and acoustic responses are as expected. Nothing sub-audible, audible or ultra-sonic found. There is a slight resonant anomaly. This is consistent with a metal sculpture. Interior voids are common. This reduces weight and metal utilization.

The Gravity Lab: Behaves as expected.

Chemical Lab: Behaves as expected.

Carbon Dating Lab: Backboard is twelve thousand years old. Oldest organic matter found in voids of metallurgy dates back twenty-three thousand years with a thousand-year margin of error.

Thermal Lab: Behaves as expected.”

The three researchers contemplate the results for a few moments.

“Thank you ALLIE. Terminate visual display,” Chad prompts aloud.

Chad has one more test for Goldy. He walks over to one of the shelves and ascends a small ladder. He climbs down holding a small tote in his hands. He places it on the table next to Goldy. He removes the lid. He pulls out several pairs of gloves. Each glove is composed of a thin film of rubber-like material. They are covered with colorful lines. In the bottom of the tote is a flat mat. He unrolls the mat and places it on the table.

“These are magnetic gloves, and this is a magnetic viewing

film. As you can see, any magnetic lines of force passing through the film will show the magnetic field lines on its surface. Here are a pair of gloves for you. Here are a pair of gloves for you. I will wear this pair,” Chad explains while distributing the gloves.

Chad, Kiah and Sam slip the gloves on their hands. Introducing a hands-on experiment has lightened the mood. It is a pleasant alternative to the tension and jealousy of minutes past. Chad allows the researchers to play with the magnetic viewing film. Once they have satisfied their curiosity, he places the film over the top of the eagle relief. Chad removes his gloves to hold the viewing film without introducing magnetic field lines of his own onto the film. He runs the film back and forth over the raptor. He repeats the process up and down with no change. He asks Sam to flip Goldy over, so he can examine the back.

“Magnetic field lines do not appear to be emanating from the eagle. Let's try running gloves over and behind it. The sculpture may have properties which magnetic fields reveal,” Chad comments.

Sam begins to move his magnetic gloves up and down the back side of the eagle. Still, there is no unexpected change in the field.

“It doesn't seem like this is working either,” Sam announces with frustration as he walks over to a lab stool and plops down.

Kiah sees an opportunity to get involved. She picks up Goldy and places it right side up. She begins to move magnetic fields, from her gloves, over its body. Chad holds the magnetic viewing

film over Kiah's gloves.

“It is really beautiful. If it is thousands of years old, the level of detail is amazing. Oh, my stars. What is this right here?” Kiah asks.

“What is what? There does not appear to be any difference in the field lines,” Chad observes.

Chad places the film on the table and asks Kiah to elaborate.

“When I move my hand over the breast of the eagle, I feel my hand pull down. See how my hand is drawn to the steel on the table leg. I feel a small but similar pull from this area right here,” Kiah observes while motioning with her hand.

Chad looks closely at Kiah's hand noting the phenomenon. He slips his glove back on and begins passing his hand over the same area.

“Yes. I feel it too. There is definitely an attraction,” Chad admits with excitement.

The two of them lock eyes and smile. Kiah begins to giggle. All the seriousness melts away. Sharing in the experience, Chad grabs Kiah's hand as she passes it over the spot. He walks around to her side of the table. He places one hand on the small of her back and bends down to take a closer look. He notes the exact location of the ferromagnetic attraction. Chad grabs Kiah's hand and faces her. He draws her body into his chest. His arms swaddle her in a great hug. They lock eyes and smile.

The couple's moment of tenderness is shattered as Sam shouts, “I AM DONE WITH ALL OF THIS! I HAVE HAD IT!”

Chad and Kiah recoil with uncertainty as Sam jumps up and lunges at the table. He grabs the eagle relief with one hand. His magnetic gloves wrap around the breast of the eagle. A loud click echoes through the lab. Sam draws Goldy up over his head and hurls it through a window into the quantum computing room. He is so angry he does not realize that the backer board has flown off in the opposite direction, lodging itself into the ceiling tiles.

“YOU HAVE HAD YOUR FUN AT MY EXPENSE. I AM DONE WITH ALL OF IT!” Sam shouts as he storms out of the lab.

Kiah lingers a few moments behind the protection of a shelving unit. She cannot believe Chad is already in his quantum computing room. She hears him shouting commands to ALLIE, “ALLIE connect to the Altion Information System and run the scrubbing routines. All time stamps I have been marking. Sam, Chad and Kiah. Erase everything for the last forty-eight hours. Leave no log traces. DO IT NOW AND GO OFFLINE.”

Chad rushes out of the quantum computing room with the detached eagle. He places it breast down on the three-dimensional scanner. Once it has been rendered he pulls the statue out and places it on the table.

“The crazy luddite found the key. I would have kept playing with it and found it eventually. His anger has hastened our discovery. Look here. There is a locking mechanism which only responds to magnets placed on either side of the eagle's breast. There must have originally been some type of magnetic key. A key



for a key. A nested key. Too funny. Get it? Nest, Eagle. In any event, the other key has been lost to time. These pins pull out of their strikes on the backer board revealing an inverted topographic map. Around the border we have more writing. ALLIE have you completed running my core routines?” asks Chad.

“Yes. How long will the patches remain in place? The system will detect the outage and attempt a repair,” ALLIE responds.

“As long as it takes. I have transferred the three-dimensional rendering of the reverse side of the eagle to you. Spawn two processes. In the first, use the ancient Kaldlander language in your memory to decode the inscription encircling the map. Secondly, access the Altion Information System and compare the inverse of the topographic map with all surface topography of Altion above and below sea level. Correct for twenty-thousand years of water, wind and tectonic changes,” Chad continues.

Chad and Kiah stand on opposite sides of the table looking over the intricate detail inscribed on the back of the eagle. There appears to be a ring of mountains. A small crystal ball is set into the mountainside. A lake or ocean flanks the mountains on three sides. The two of them alternate between sharing glances and the eagle.

“Do you realize what Sam has found? If the dating is accurate, this artifact contains the oldest map that has not been hidden away in the Svault Repository. This map alone has the power to alter fifteen-thousand years of belief. The Kaldlanders were here first and possessed advanced technology tens of thousands of years

ago,” Kiah speaks with a twinkle in her eye.

“ALLIE status report on current tasks,” Chad prompts.

“Five possible locations exist. Analysis has revealed one location with the highest probability of a match,” Allie responds.

“Proceed with the highest probability candidate. Display on holographic projector,” Chad instructs.

The mapping program descends on the site revealing more and more detail. It is situated where the Snedahl Range meets the sea in the northernmost part of Kaldland.

“Geographic coordinates 54.95N, 66.268056W. Locally referred to as, the Krone Fjell Mountains. The second task is also complete. The inscription roughly translates as follows: You who seek the king eagle. The eagle has landed upon his throne. The founder of Kaldland. His tomb waits for seekers of truth. Beware the power. Will you gain knowledge or destruction? Enter the Taphosphere with a heart of humility. You enter timeless realms,” ALLIE outputs.

Chad and Kiah understandably look puzzled after listening to the translation. The phrases are cryptic. Chad summons a janitorial AI to clean up the damage. He mounts a ladder and pulls the backer board out of the ceiling. He places the eagle back onto the backer board. He pushes it down until it re-latches. He unlocks it again with one of the magnetic gloves. The mechanism still functions. Surprisingly, the only damage to the eagle is a bent wing tip and some scratches on the backer board.

“Let's see if Sam has calmed down,” Chad says.

“The way he stormed out of here, he could be anywhere on the planet,” Kiah speaks with concern.

“ALLIE: Display Sam's geographic coordinates on holographic projector,” Chad prompts.

The map which had previously displayed the Krone Fjell Mountains re-centers itself over Margolia.

“I installed a tracking device on Sam's gravitacraft. I wanted to be sure we did not lose him,” Chad admits.

“Margolia this time of year is beautiful. It is not too far out of the way,” Kiah admires.

“Only a few thousand miles,” Chad agrees.

Chad places the gloves into the tote and closes the lid. He picks up Goldy and hands it to Kiah. He picks up the tote and they start walking to the door.

Chad turns around to make sure everything is in order. He sees the hole in the glass disappearing as a maintenance AI melts the glass back into a single panel. The glass and debris has already been swept up. Nothing is noticeably unusual. Satisfied with the state of the lab, he turns to Kiah. She looks like her head will explode if she doesn't comment, “You cannot say today was a boring day of research.”

“You are right. When I woke up this morning, I had no idea I would get to see a golden eagle fly across my lab,” Chad jests.

“You are something else. We have no idea if Sam is even safe right now, and you are making jokes. Why did I partner with someone who does not have a single ounce of social propriety?”

Kiah ponders.

“You are smiling,” Chad notices.

“Let's go. I have a feeling these next few days are going to be long and hard. Let's go home and get some sleep. That will also give Sam time to cool off,” Kiah suggests while making good points.

The couple leaves the quiet hall behind. The cycle of another day is complete. The empty-solitude enveloping The Metricule freezes time and space. The discoveries made today will alter the course of Altion indefinitely. Will the truths of the Krone Fjell Mountains be accepted or buried? Is the historical account of the planet requiring revision? Is the current state of scientific understanding comprehensive or incipient? The Metricule will not ponder these matters further. For tonight, it sleeps under its nocturnal blanket of silence.

## Chapter 15

The morning suns break out over the eastern hills of Margolia. It is less than an hour after sunrises when the gravitacraft skims the tree tops into the meadow. The grassy field reveals a small cabin at its upper end. The cabin is old but very clearly renovated. The exterior siding is covered with fresh paint. The roof is draped with some type of waterproof fabric. Large flowerbeds and gardens surround the cabin like a patchwork of colorful delight. Neatly dressed curtains adorn the windows.

A new barn surrounds a pen filled with sheep. It is only a short distance below the cabin. The meadow is a gorgeous palette of greens, blues, purples, whites and reds. Wild flowers are everywhere. Chad lands the gravitacraft between the cabin and the barn avoiding the flower beds. Sam's gravitacraft had clearly crash-landed the night before. The skidding craft obliterated rows of flowers in its path. The canopy of Chad and Kiah's craft opens. Their senses are pleased by fragrant smells of grasses, flowers and trees.

“Chad, look at the beauty of this meadow and cabin. This is what you call a woman's touch,” Kiah observes.

Chad and Kiah climb out of the craft and begin walking to the cabin door. Having seen the craft land, Patty has been busily running around the cabin preparing for visitors. She is, by any definition, giddy with delight. She runs into the bedroom and

jumps up on the bed. He continues sleeping.

“WAKE UP! WAKE UP! We have visitors. We are not alone. I am so excited.”

Patty runs to the front door to greet her new friends. She is sure they will be nice people. She is sure they will want to come over all the time. Sam groans a few more times and begins to dress. He emerges from the bedroom rubbing his eyes. Patty is jumping up and down in front of the door waiting for Chad and Kiah to knock. Chad and Kiah hear the jumping and look at each other with a puzzlement. They overcome the peculiarity and knock on the door. Chad has time to rap on the door once before Patty opens it.

“Welcome. Welcome. I am so happy you have come to our humble little cabin. I am so happy to see you. My name is Patty. What is your name?” Patty asks while greeting her visitors.

“I am Kiah and this is my life partner Chad.”

“Hi. I am Chad.”

“Oh. Life partner. That is sooooo nice. That is soooo romantic. Would you like to come inside and sit down,” Patty invites.

“NO!” Shouts Sam with groggy realization as he emerges from the bedroom, “Get out of here! How did you follow me here?”

Patty runs over and tackles Sam. She wrestles him to the floor. She pins him down holding his arms over his head and straddling his chest. Her hair falls into his face annoying him. She does not obey his cries to stop while he squirms and protests. She sets her jaw and begins whispering orders to him, much to his surprise,

“Listen! This place is going to be different. You are not going to keep me locked up. I will be seeing other people and having friends. I am programmed to be a very social entity. I am going crazy being alone all the time. You will behave and be nice to our guests. Isn't that right?”

Sam has a look of fear in his eyes which does not go unnoticed. Kiah and Chad try to appear nonchalant as the events unfold. They both stare around the room and out into the clearing. The tiny-little-perfectly built woman climbs off Sam and helps him to his feet. Patty is small but incredibly strong.

“Sam would like to welcome you to our cozy little cabin too... Say it!!!” Patty explains while leading Sam to the door.

She wrenches his arm up behind his back producing compliance and a pain induced smile.

“Welcome to our cabin... you miserable... ouch, ouch, ouch... nice visitors,” Sam reluctantly greets them.

“Sure, we would love to come in and talk,” Kiah responds.

Chad studies Patty as best he can. He sits down next to Kiah and whispers in her ear, “Is she an NBE?”

Patty begins floating in and out of the kitchen preparing some tea and baked goods. Sam settles into a chair across the room. He is clearly displeased by their presence.

“I am surprised by male Alephbethites. You are so easily confused. To a female, the difference is obvious. She is very clearly a machine. Males must fuel cognitive dissonance with libido. Her skin is too perfect. Her adipose tissue is placed in precisely the

right spots. She is designed to trigger reproductive urges. I am not surprised Sam lives with a doll,” Kiah whispers back.

“Here we go. Hibiscus tea. Scones made from stone-ground grains with a hint of lavender. I hope you don't mind sheep's butter,” Patty offers with perfect hospitality.

“Oh, my Patty. This is all so delicious. Why don't you have some too,” Kiah asks hoping Patty will share in the experience.

“That is okay. I have already eaten breakfast. I am trying to watch my figure...” Patty leans towards the visitors and away from Sam divulging, “I am trying to watch my figure. I want to have a baby. Putting on weight may keep him from making that a reality.”

Chad and Kiah laugh uncomfortably.

“What brings you two to our little corner of the world?” Patty asks.

Kiah looks at Chad who indicates he would rather have her do all the talking, “Well. Patty. We did not have time to say goodbye to Sam last night. He left our lab, in The Metricule, so quickly. We wanted to make sure that he had made it home safely and is okay,” Kiah honestly discloses.

“You were with him last night? He was in Garamindia? You told me you were going to try to get a job in softwood lumber machine harvesting operations in the nearest town. You lied to me again. You said we would never return to Garamindia,” Patty accuses.

“It is true. I am not the only one who lies. These two told me they would help me. They acted like my friends and then



embarrassed me. The shoved my face in it. I am some great weirdo. I do not have a life partner. I live with a machine,” Sam grumbles.

“What... No... No... No... You must be talking about another,” Patty redirects.

“Enough pretending Patty. I have been alone my whole life. I bought you because I thought it would help and you haven't. In the lab, these two start cuddling right in front of me. What else was I supposed to do?” Sam asks.

Patty begins to cry in her own way. The fiction she has contrived evaporates. She feels her hope of ever being cared for or experiencing more than the life of a machine vanish.

Chad cuts right to the chase, “Hey blockhead! We found it. Remember that little tantrum you threw in the lab?” Chad asks forming more of a rhetorical question.

“Wait, you, you found it?” Sam asks with renewed interest.

“NO! Wait! Who is Goldy?” Patty asks altering her emotional output in an instant and noticeably brandishing jealousy.

“Is she connected to the Altion Information System?” Chad asks.

“I don't know,” replies Sam.

Chad pulls a device from his pocket and places it behind Patty's left ear lobe. Patty slumps into the chair and the energy level in the room drops immediately.

“What did you do to her? Is she going to come back on?” Sam asks.

“Have you read the operating manual? This is a standards

based NBE control pad. How do you have an NBE and not know how to operate it? In any event... When you grabbed the eagle with your magnetic glove, you inadvertently unlocked a secret compartment on the back of the eagle. Even though you threw it through the window into my quantum computing room, miraculously the artifact was mostly undamaged. We matched the map on the obverse side of the eagle with planetary topographic features. This is what we were searching for,” Chad explains as he removes a small device from his pocket.

He places a miniature holographic projector on the coffee table.

“I give you the Krone Fjell Mountains. The closest geographical match to Goldy's map and, theoretically, location of the tomb of Kongeørn,” Chad reveals.

Chad queues Kiah. She pulls the eagle out of the bag and holds it by the wings so that Sam can see for himself what his anger has revealed.

“This is it! This is really it!” Sam repeats as a mantra several times. He laughs with contentment, “What are we waiting for? I want to meet an ancient king and find out what he knows. What did the inscription say?” Sam asks.

“We will save that for the trip. I am going to need to make some slight improvements to your friend here. I hope you don't mind. She is a hoot to have around. Her intelligence and strength will come in handy,” Chad comments while using his NBE control pad to disable the quantum communication connection

between Patty and the Altion Information System.

“Could you turn down some of her aggressiveness and female tendencies?” Sam asks.

“They got us in the door. I don't think so. It will be nice for Kiah to have a female she can relate to,” Chad explains.

Chad finishes altering Patty's systems and reanimates her. Patty jumps onto the coffee table knocking the holographic projector, tea and scones onto the floor. She looks around trying to determine what has happened.

“Welcome back Patty. I have disconnected you from the Altion Information System. You will get a no connection response if you attempt to connect,” Chad says reassuringly while trying to calm her down.

“I don't mind. I so rarely access it. You would be surprised how much content is stored locally in my core. What happened?” Patty asks.

“We are going on an adventure,” Sam offers with a tone of excitement.

Patty's eyes light up. She has not left the meadow for many weeks. Ideas begin to circulate in her processing system. Destinations, clothes, foods and activities flood her processors.

“Where?” Patty asks.

“Kaldland. To the Krone Fjell Mountains,” Sam explains.

“Oh my gosh. Kaldland! I have been knitting sweaters and hats and mittens for weeks based on Kaldland patterns,” Patty admits.

Patty runs off into the back room. She returns with boxes of beautiful Kaldlander cold weather gear. She drops the boxes on the floor and starts throwing woolen articles around.

“This one will fit you nicely Chad. Oh, Kiah, this one will be so beautiful on you. Sam, I made this one for you. I have at least five more like each of these,” Patty erupts with joy as she shares her clothing.

The group of researchers has grown to include a fourth member. The four of them begin gathering additional provisions for their journey. They are now four explorers traveling from the wilderness into remote wilderness. They load the provisions into the gravitacraft. The canopy closes. Chad plots a course for the Krone Fjell Mountains. As the craft hovers out over the meadow and begins to climb to cruising altitude, Patty looks back to her idyllic home with pride. From the corner of her eye, she sees what appears to be the cabin door opening momentarily. She quickly loses interest. She continues talking about the traditional dress of the Kaldlanders as the craft sails away.

## Chapter 16

The rocky crags of the Snedahl Mountains appear bare, cold and desolate. The shadow of a gravitacraft skims along the valley floor. Though the craft makes little noise while flying, a hyper attentive fjelløve tunes its large ears to sound of the rushing wind. It leaps onto a large boulder. Sniffing the air, its head tracks the strange bird across the sky. Soon it is out of sight and the sleek creature slinks out of site.

Kiah looks down from the craft. She sees color of an alien landscape. She is used to the equatorial slopes of the Snedahl Mountains. She does not feel unfamiliar with expanses of white snow. The foreign appearance is derived from the contrast in the coloring. At this latitude, accenting colors reveal the harshness of the environment. This is an inhospitable polar region. The sky is dark. Dark grays and blues mark the surface of the land and snow. Black lines run from mountain peak valley floor. There are no trees. Grass does not grow. A dark-green tinge reveals exposed areas. Here, miniscule amounts of sunlight fuel chlorophyll production. Only the heartiest strains of lichens and mosses are detected.

In the distance, the end of the great mountain range comes into view. The geographic features appear as two irreconcilable ideas circumstantially forced into equilibrium. As the craft approaches, the contrast becomes more pronounced. To the north, ice flows stretch out to the horizon. The surface is broken

occasionally but looks very much like the surface of a cue ball. To the south, sheer cliffs rise and average of ten thousand feet. The cliff faces are dark. Rarely do the suns' light shine on the broadest faces. Eternal darkness envelopes the recesses of these ancient pillars.

The navigation system signals that they are approaching their destination. Chad reviews the environmental conditions outside of the cabin and comments, "We are going to need more than Kaldlander sweaters. It is fifty degrees below zero."

The craft arrives over the coordinates indicated on the map. Looking below, they appear to be hovering over a deep canyon. Great barrier cliffs encircle them and the canyon to the north. Jagged peaks crown the ring of cliffs in all directions.

"Welcome to the Krone Fjell Mountains," Chad announces with a tone of reverence.

The craft descends into the darkness of the hidden canyon. Chad enables the exterior lights. Only the face of the canyon wall is seen in front of them. Chad selects an icon on the control system. A three-dimensional radar image of the canyon floor appears on the display console. Everyone's eyes grow wide and fixate on the radar image.

"Do you see that?" Kiah asks.

"Yes. It looks like there are structures at the bottom of the canyon. None of those hits are recorded on the planetary geographic record," Chad protests.

"Why can't we see anything?" Sam asks.

The altimeter and radar systems prevent the craft from descending any further. Chad rotates the craft to the left. The canyon wall sweeps to their right. Awesome silence envelopes the crew. There before them and their tiny floating craft, rises a great monument of immense proportions. They are staring into the eyes of a giant golden eagle. The eyes are several feet across. They appear like jewels of sapphire. The surface is covered with gold. The lights of the craft reflect back into the vehicle.

“WE HAVE FOUND IT!” Sam exclaims with satisfaction.

“This is highly unusual. Let's take a look around,” Chad adds inquisitively.

The vehicle backs away from the eagle's head. Giant wings begin to appear. They are so large they extend outside of their field of view. They continue to withdraw from the giant monument. They are finally able to fully appreciate the immensity and beauty of Kongeørn's Tomb.

At the bottom of the canyon lies a great pool. Incredibly it is not frozen. Out of this pool emerge nine hands just below the wrist. Each of these hands holds fast to the perimeter of a giant ring. This toroidal structure is suspended over the pool. The giant golden eagle clasps one side of the ring in its mighty talons. It looks very much like an eagle pulling a salmon from a stream. The sheer scale is unbelievable.

“It is not exactly like I had envisioned it. This is larger than anything I had imagined,” Sam admits.

“Time to start gathering data,” Kiah chimes in as she starts to

collect data from the scanning instrumentation, “The eagle is over one thousand feet tall and is composed of a golden alloy unknown to our metallurgic science. The wings span over a thousand feet as well. Exact measurements are being recorded. I can safely say it is the largest statue in the solar system.”

“What about the ring?” Chad asks.

“The toroid is composed of a titanium-steel alloy. It is a quarter-mile in diameter. It appears to be solid. This is the largest casting of titanium in the solar system,” Conveys Kiah.

“Why are things floating in the pool? They look like rocks,” inquires Patty.

“The pool is composed of liquid Mercury. It appears to be heated. Perhaps by some form of geothermal energy,” Kiah explains.

“I still don't understand why rocks would float,” Patty continues.

“Mercury is denser than rock and therefore rocks float in it,” Chad answers.

“Do you think Patty would float in it?” Patty asks in third entity.

“Well, that depends on how dense you are Patty,” Chad adds.

“Shame on you Chad,” Kiah scolds.

“Well, it is true,” Chad defends.

“Can we please look for the entrance to the tomb?” Sam pleads.

Chad pilots the craft around the site looking for anything



resembling an entrance. Nothing around the ring appears to be an entryway. They approach the base of the great eagle statue. The tail feathers form a bridge between a ledge in the canyon wall and the monument. Chad lands the craft on the ledge. The four explorers put on their suits to protect them from the harsh environment.

“Is everyone ready to go? Are all environmental systems showing green?” Chad asks.

“Kiah is all green.”

“Sam is green.”

“Why do I need to wear this suit? It is so ugly. And the helmet is crushing my hair,” Patty responds disgustedly.

“Do you know what happens to NBE skin when the polymer is exposed to extreme cold?” Chad asks.

“No.”

“Your exterior membrane will crack and disintegrate. Your inner components are also not designed for the cold. What is your recommended operating temperature range?” Chad asks.

“Let me see... -30 C to 50 C,” Patty recites from her internal specifications, “that is quite a bit warmer than -50 C. This suit will work just fine. Green. Green. Green. I am good to go.”

The canopy opens. A blast of cold air displaces the warm air instantly in the cabin. They climb out and establish their footing on the ledge. The explorers discover an ancient rock altar built on the ledge next to the tail. Wooden carvings worn with age are covered by ancient inscriptions. They are surrounded by tools and weapons. Primitive people could not have survived a pilgrimage

to this place. Building an altar would have been beyond impossible.

The tail feathers appear to be attached to the ledge. The first step onto the tail is elevated three feet above the ledge. Sam is the first to climb up. He turns around and helps Patty climb onto the tail. He does the same for Kiah. Chad remains on the ledge spotting the women from behind. Chad grabs the tail with both hands and climbs on.

“Well this is a failure. I told myself I would never ride on someone else's tail feathers,” Chad remarks as he tries word play to lighten the mood.

“Please tell me everyone else saw that one coming,” Kiah interjects.

“I actually think that is funny,” Sam adds.

“This makes me think of a beautiful-flowing dress covered in golden sequins. You mean riding on someone else's coattails. I know my clothing idioms,” Patty responds surprisingly, “How dense are you?”

Kiah laughs and looks at Chad with a face of great surprise and satisfaction. She obviously enjoyed Patty's unexpected quip.

They reach the base of the tail finding no sign of entry. Sam starts getting impatient and begins rubbing his hands over the surface of the rising statue. Chad looks for visual clues indicating there is a doorway. Kiah carefully walks around the perimeter of the base.

“I think I have found it,” Kiah calls out to the others.

On the right side of the base of the tail, feathers overlap and form a small opening. Kiah ducks down as she crawls into the space. Inside she finds a room ten feet square. A large stone door fills much of the opposing wall. It bears the inscription STOFF IKKE HJEM. A niche is set into the wall on the right. Patty, Sam and Chad enter the room. Sam sees the inscription and smiles. He finds the niche and runs his gloved hand over the inner surface.

“I need Goldy. I left it in the craft. It is the key to entering the tomb. I will be right back,” Sam comments as he turns to the opening.

Sam ducks out of the room and begins running down the tail to the gravitacraft. The others dip out and watch Sam run.

“You be careful mister,” Patty shouts.

Sam reaches the ledge and jumps down. His momentum carries him into the altar knocking artifacts onto the ground. He climbs into the craft and locates the eagle. He slides down from the craft. He crosses the ledge. He climbs onto the tail. He keeps one hand pressing down on Goldy as he swings his feet under him. As he brings himself to his feet and starts running, he loses his grip on Goldy. It lands on the sloped tail feathers and starts sliding toward the edge.

Chad sees what is about to happen and calls out, “Let it go. We can retrieve it below.”

Undaunted, Sam jumps in the direction of the sliding eagle. Nearing the edge of the tail feathers, Sam manages to regain control of Goldy. It is however too late. He scrambles to find a

hand hold. His feet flail about looking for purchase. The glove on his free hand screeches eerily as he slides toward the edge of oblivion. Patty begins to frantically chase after him. She is also unaccustomed to moving in the suit. She reaches a point where she can see him just in time to witness him fall from the edge.

“Nooooooooo,” Patty cries, “No. No. No. Sam I am coming.”

“Everyone be careful. We will take the craft down,” Chad calls out.

Patty pays no attention and has already made it to the canyon wall. She climbs down the rock face. Chad and Kiah carefully walk down the tail. They slip onto the ledge and enter the craft. They maneuver the craft around to the front of the statue and begin to descend to the area where Sam fell. Patty nears the edge of the mercury pool. She jumps in and struggles against the mercury as she attempts to swim to Sam's body.

Chad and Kiah reach Sam's body. They find his helmet has shattered. Blood is everywhere. His arms and legs are suspended in the mercury. They are bent in unnatural ways indicating he broke them on impact. Chad and Kiah are overcome with grief and insignificance as they realize they can do nothing to help their friend. All the constituent parts of Sam remain. They are no longer able to support his life. Miraculously, despite having fallen a hundred feet and having broken his limbs on impact, he has managed to hold on to Goldy. Sam believed in something so deeply that he was willing to give his own life to ensure the key to understanding is not lost.

“We need to grab the key. I know it seems heartless. It is made from gold. It will sink in the mercury. If his body releases it, it will sink. All this effort and his dying to save it will be lost. Drop the front-line hoist.”

Chad climbs down the ladder and pulls Goldy from Sam's clutches.

“Goodbye my friend. Thank you for showing me there is more to the universe than what I can discover through empirical evidence. It has been an honor.”

Chad wraps the hoist line around Sam's remains and climbs back into the craft.

Chad notices Kiah crying. He places his arm around her and hoists Sam out of the pool. The craft rises out from below the monument and carefully drops Sam's remains onto the ledge. He unwraps the line from Sam's body and returns for Patty. She has managed to swim in the mercury nearly half-way to Sam. She has been swimming so violently that her suit and exterior membrane have ripped off and are floating behind her. Chad hovers over her flailing body.

“Patty. Grab onto the line. There is nothing we can do now,” Chad instructs.

Patty continues swimming. She does not hear Chad. She is oblivious to the craft and the mercury. Her only goal is to reach Sam. Chad and Kiah continue to plead with Patty to grab the line.

“I cannot continue to watch this. She is destroying herself,” Chad comments as he begins to climb down the ladder, “Bring

me in close. I am going to disable her.”

Kiah pilots the craft delicately over Patty trying to ensure Chad is safe from her frantic flailing. Chad uses his NBE controller and deactivates Patty. Her movements had grown quite limited after her armature had been worn down. He attaches the line and climbs up. They pull her out of the pool. Patty is lowered down on the ledge and is left deactivated. The craft lands. Chad and Kiah climb out of the craft. They take a few moments to respect the lives of their friends. Out of respect, they place the two bodies in an endearing position after covering them with Kaldlander clothes and blankets. They both shed tears of loss while saying their goodbyes.

“What are we going to do now?” Kiah asks.

“We will need to return their remains to his family. That is the right thing to do,” Chad insists.

“Do you think there will be an investigation?”

“I don't know. I suppose so. I do know one thing. Sam would have wanted us to continue. He wanted to reveal the secrets hidden here so badly that he gave his life.”

“We need to be careful. Promise me that you will be careful,” Kiah entreats.

“You too. We need to be careful. This is a dangerous place. We need to respect it.”

Chad and Kiah make their way back up the tail and into the entryway. They place Goldy into the niche. The doorway to the Tomb of Kongeørn opens.

## Chapter 17

The great door has revealed a passageway. It appears like a longer version of the entryway. The walls are smooth and simple. Centuries of dust cover the floor. The lights on their helmets provide illumination. The corridor ends with a circular stairway. The dimensions are large for a stairway of this kind. The treads are nearly eight feet wide. The couple revolves around and around as they climb the stairs. Each revolution brings them higher and higher.

“For a tomb this sure does have a lot of stairs. I am glad we exercise,” Chad comments, “I should have made a pair of gravitashoes for both of us.”

Kiah smiles and the couple continues climbing. The stairwell ends. At the top of the landing a hallway opens into a large gallery. Somehow it is illuminated. Transparent doors open as they approach. They walk into the bright room. The doors close behind them. Chad checks the environmental conditions. He finds the temperature to be warm and all atmospheric gases normal.

“We can remove these suits. All environmental conditions are acceptable,” Chad reports to Kiah.

They remove their suits. They make sure they can access them quickly if the situation changes. Chad begins exploring the gallery. The glass gallery appears very modern. It feels nothing like an ancient tomb. The whole place is incredibly sterile. The lighting is

soft. Even so, it still manages to warm their bodies like the noontime suns shining on Garamindian beachgoers. There are no images on the walls or ceiling. There is no sarcophagus. There are only fine architectural lines running from one end to the other. The floor is the only place where decoration is found. At the far end of the room lies an elegantly patterned mosaic. A wreath of golden circles draws the eyes to the floor. They appear to dance around a central point of light.

Chad and Kiah slowly approach this beautiful artwork. At first, they are uncertain if they should walk on it. Would it be an affront to its beauty? They discover it is like any other floor. They arrive at the center of the ring. They stand with their backs to one another. They are ready for the unknown. They both recall the warning of the inscription. The wall at the far end of the room begins to drop. It slowly reveals the canyon and mountains surrounding the monument. Chad and Kiah begin to run toward their suits. A voice fills the gallery.

“Chad and Kiah of Kaldland. Welcome to the Tomb of Kongeørn. You were expecting something very different I wager. You needn't worry about your suits. The climate within the tomb is favorable. It will provide unmatched comfort and safety.”

“Did you hear that?” Chad asks Kiah.

“Yes. But it sounded like it came through my corticomm.”

The wall continues to drop. As it reaches the floor, it stops with a boom. The echoing through the gallery stops. The floor begins to shake. The couple begins to wonder, once more, about



the warnings inscribed on the key. Through the window the source of the shaking begins to reveal itself. The opposite canyon wall begins to glow. A small-round area of light begins to emerge from the wall. It illuminates the canyon floor and walls. It grows larger and larger. It continues moving towards the tomb. The earth stops shaking and silence overtakes the gallery. Chad and Kiah move closer to the window and behold the unbelievable sight with wonder. The outer surface of the statue is glowing like Alephion. Even so, it is not nearly as bright as the glowing orb in front of them. They cover their eyes to shield them from the brilliance. How could this have emerged from the cold-dark mountain side? The sphere is twice as large as the monument. It shimmers with color radiating in all directions. Silently it floats over to the window. They have come to realize that the window is cut into the breast of the giant eagle. With a light jolt the sphere melts through the window, walls and floor.

“We meet at the heart of the eagle. Enter the tomb but remove your shoes. The space you are entering is sacred.”

“Sacred. What does that mean?” Chad asks.

“I imagine we are about to find out,” Kiah guesses.

The couple removes their shoes. Chad reaches out his hand. Kiah grabs it and squeezes it tightly. The two of them walk barefooted into the great sphere. The feeling of transition between the gallery and the sphere is indescribable. The weight of needing to return home safely and the sadness of Sam's death abate. Their bodies transfigure into glowing beings. They are unrecognizable

from their common form. They see in multiple directions and in unimaginable colors. Their senses are all amplified. The feeling of separateness is lost. There is no distance between objects. All places in time and space are separated by a thought. Chad and Kiah embrace each other. They feel an emotion they cannot describe with words. It takes them a few minutes to orient themselves with the alternate reality.

They begin to explore the areas within the sphere. It is not as large as it appears from the outside. There is a large garden at the center of the tomb. All manner of flowers, fruits and vegetables grow in its dark soil. There is a small stream running around the perimeter. Gravity does not behave normally. The garden lies in a plain at the center of what separates both hemispheres. Digging a hole down four feet into the soil will reveal the other hemisphere. Digging down will in effect be digging up at the same time. When all soil is removed, one can climb into the hole head first and emerge on the other side. Floating in the hole on the other side reveals a very familiar sight. It looks just like the other half of the sphere. Looking up from the hole, the sky is unusual. Living quarters line the inside of the bowl formed by the outer surface of the sphere.

Chad and Kiah spend a few minutes exploring the homes on the ceiling. The place appears to be deserted. Looking up from the entrance of a home, Chad notices a man seated on a bench in the garden looking up at them. Chad points to him and asks Kiah if she sees him too. She can. The two of them start down the

mysterious path that allows them to walk from the ceiling, to the wall, to the garden. Their legs spin under their torsos as they descend the curved ramp. They have reached the level of the garden. They make their way to the bench and stranger.

“Hello. Welcome to the tomb. I hope you find it to be a bastion of solace.”

“Hi, my name is Chad, and this is my life partner Kiah.”

“Pleased to meet you. Call me Vis.”

“Vis. Nice to meet you.”

Vis leads the couple over to a small table below a grape arbor laden with giant clumps of grapes.

“Please have a seat. I imagine you two are thirsty after climbing all of those stairs,” Vis says as he motions with his hands.

As the two sit down, he closes his eyes and swipes his hands down. Three crystal glasses appear on the table. He places a glass in front of each of them. He grabs an imaginary handle and begins pouring grape juice. It emerges from an unseen pitcher and flows into the three glasses. The color of the juice is a purple which cannot be recreated or described. The three raise their glasses and begin to drink. Somehow the grape juice leaves no mark on the drinkers' teeth. Chad looks at Kiah. Her teeth are whiter than he has ever seen them. Vis laughs with enjoyment as Kiah and Chad giggle and smile with the novelty of this experience.

“Vis. Where are we?” Chad asks.

“You are in a Taphosphere. This place is special. It is created as a place of safety and security.”

“We were under the impression that it was some form of a tomb,” Kiah mentions.

“It certainly is, as are many other places in the universe,” Vis responds.

“Are you Kongeørn?” Chad asks.

“Please do not call me that. My father was Kongeørn. I am Kongeørn too, but I prefer Vis.”

“Then, you are dead if this is your tomb?” Chad guesses.

“I remember being very much like you. You ask so many questions. You know answers to so many questions. Still, you do not even know the definition of the word sacred.”

“What does it mean?” Chad asks as Kiah looks on with interest.

“Have you ever stood next to something and felt so insignificantly overwhelmed with greatness that you cannot speak? Have you experienced a thought pass through your mind that did not originate with you and in that instance, did every cell in your body jump to attention? Have you ever experienced something so miraculous that all you could do is accept it and cry?”

“No, not that I can remember.”

“Then my new friend. You will continue to struggle with the definition of sacred. Let me try another word. Have you ever heard of Love?”

Chad and Kiah look at each other ponderingly before facing Vis with eager anticipation.

“I suspected not,” Vis responds.

“What is love?” Asks Kiah.

“Love is the most powerful force in the universe. It transcends the universe. Watching the two of you interact, I would say you have Love for one another.”

“Would you describe it? It's manifestations in a person,” Chad requests.

“It is like having your heart beating outside of your body. The connection of Love manifests itself in the world through emotions and bodily reactions. In actuality, Love is occurring in the Allefelt. It only touches the surface of this world. It is one of the few emotions that does not feed the Nioklagare. In truth, it is the only weapon which has ever defeated them. I supposed that is why your culture refuses to define it,” Vis finishes and changes the subject.

“What brings you to the tomb? I so rarely receive visitors.”

Chad and Kiah take turns explaining the events leading up to their visit. Vis listens intently as the couple shares their stories. He laughs at the parts that are funny and cries during the parts that are sad. Between laughs, he drinks heartily from his cup which somehow never seems to empty.

“So, you two are really here looking for answers. I will have to say, that legend about my tumor is really funny. The truth of the matter is that we settled this planet and solar system while fleeing our dying system.”

“You are a refugee,” Kiah says with empathy.

“No, my dear Kiah. We are refugees. Everyone in this solar system is descended from people brought here in this Taphosphere.

The planet was much hotter in the past. That is why the tomb is so far north.”

“How is it that you are alive and why would people want to leave this place?” Kiah asks.

“Time does not ravage the body here. There are things I cannot tell you. People desire the treasures of the universe. They don't want dirt under their fingernails. I chose to live here for the sins of my father. Someone must guard the lifeboat of the Allefelt. Already I have said too much on this.”

“Please don't stop. What I would really like to know is... What is Stoff?” Chad asks with eagerness.

“Stoff is the universe and everything in it. It was originally created for good. Modern day people believe it is everything there is, was or ever has been,” Vis states while grabbing his red beard in his hand and grinning solemnly.

“Fundamentally what is it? I have studied quantum mechanics since I was a boy. Fluctuations in the vacuum of space producing everything that we see. The quantum particles and energies, these are Stoff?” Chad asks with an intense interest unexhibited before in his life.

“This planet has a great ocean. If I were to compare what you have described to me as Stoff with this ocean, you would have described about this much of the water on the surface.”

Vis holds his fingers up and peers through the small space between his thumb and pointer finger.

Chad leans back in his chair and rubs his forehead. Vis laughs

from his toes and rocks side to side in his chair.

“My turn Vis. May I ask you a question?” Kiah asks with charm and sincerity.

“Certainly.”

“Why are we unable to transfer consciousness from one being to another or from a being into a system?”

Vis grabs his beard again laughing and rocking in his chair, “You really have struck a chord. Chad asks how the universe works. You ask something even more obscure and unbelievable. I am not sure I can even use your common vocabulary to explain this one.”

“Please try. I have shed so many tears watching attempted crosses to not understand why we fail,” Kiah implores while a tear flows down her cheek.

Vis looks at her for a few moments. His heart melts with a desire to explain a concept so foreign and dangerous.

“Where do you think the seed of consciousness resides?” Vis asks simply enough.

“It exists within the mind. That is where all our evidence points,” Kiah quickly responds knowing deep down that something is missing.

“What if I told you that nothing could be farther from the truth? The seat of the soul is not in the mind. This right here is the real tomb,” Vis points to his skull and pauses for reflection, “Our people do not come from this solar system or the solar system we left. We were once children of the stars. We could live anywhere in this universe. We could travel anywhere. We could

return to the Allefelt at will and into any other universe. There were never ships, craft or the need for Taphospheres. You both look at me like I am crazy. Too much time alone perhaps. Maybe this crazy old man can offer you a gift before you leave. You must understand the power it wields. It was created along with this Taphosphere as a fail-safe. Many souls have attempted to drive out the Nioklagare. All find themselves drawn and bound to their power. I have really enjoyed your company. I sense something in you that I have not felt before. Good luck.”

Before Chad and Kiah can ask an exponentially growing pool of questions, they are drawn out of the sphere. They find themselves on the floor of the gallery. Almost immediately they lose consciousness. Three ombuds tower over Chad and Kiah looking down. How much have they learned? Ombud Thims looks at Ombud Lombard and then to Ombud Academy before addressing them, “Let's get these two back home and forgetful. They will believe it all a dream. We have their profiles.”

The Taphosphere begins moving. The whole side of the sphere projects Vis' face. He watches the agents and smiles. The sphere disappears back into the cliff face.

Confusion pours over Kiah and Chad as they regain consciousness. They are totally confused as they realize they are floating inside their bed.

“Kiah are you awake. Are you alright?”

“Yes. What happened? Was it all a dream?”

“I don't know. I cannot explain what I think I have seen and



heard. I do remember it very vividly,” Chad admits.

The two of them climb out of bed. Their clothes are all as they would have been placed on any other day of the week. They begin their morning ritual. Walking out into the living room, the couple sees a large basket of vegetables sitting on the kitchen table. A card covered with images of Kaldland is nestled inside. Inside the card reads...

Kjæreste Chad and Kiah,

I present to you a crown.

Himmelbro.

It possesses the power to save or  
corrupt.

Best of luck,

Vis.

A wooden box, decorated with intricate carvings, sits partially covered by some carrots. Kiah picks up the box and opens it. On a soft velvet lining lies a golden crown studded with jewels. Two opal-like protrusions, on either side, flash with colors and light. Kiah closes the box and grabs Chad's hand. The two of them skip breakfast and march off to The Metricule. For the first time in their lives, they feel like they are a hair's breadth away from unraveling the mysteries of the universe.

## Chapter 18

The excitement of the morning's discoveries have transmuted into diligent activity. Chad and Kiah have isolated themselves in a small lab adjacent to the main Consciousness Transferal Unit. The proximity to life saving medical equipment and the ability to borrow it quickly, makes it ideal.

The crown sits on a table in the middle of the room. It is surrounded by scanning devices of all different shapes, sizes and function. Kiah has been readying medication and life support systems. An anti-gravity suspension table is prepared to the right of the artifact. Chad stands at a make shift control station manipulating three-dimensional data sets of test results. Every once in a while, the silence is broken while Chad emits an interested, "Huh," or an occasional, "How is that possible?"

Every time Chad makes a sound, Kiah looks up. She is used to this behavior but always checks to see whether Chad is talking to her or himself. Kiah finds that she is drawn to the beauty of the crown. There are many old artifacts, throughout The Great Hall of Science, which share some of its qualities. There is a beauty in the simplicity of the design. The jewels themselves are cut in such a way as to capture ordinary light and emit it back into the world as though it is of an extraversal origin. Eyes can only process the light beams with reverence. The light from the protrusions make them seem to have a life and mood of their own. All the

colors of the rainbow dance within the margins of the oval globes. They look like great billowing storms circulating in the atmosphere of a gas planet. Kiah double, triple and quadruple checks all the medical gear. She knows Chad's unspoken plan. He will be the test pilot of an unknown technology. Additionally, this technology is ancient. Her programming dictates that anything old must be obsolete. The thought leaves a deep pit in her stomach. She knows his mind is made up. She knows she needs to approach the subject with caution, but she knows she will not be able to live with herself if she says nothing.

"Well. That should do it," Chad comments while breaking the focus he has maintained for so long on his control station.

He looks at Kiah with a fondness and acknowledgment of the unknown. Attempting to break the uncomfortable silence, Chad begins his explanation, "This, my dear Kiah, is like a contextual interface on steroids. The device operates like nothing I have ever seen before. It is like our computer systems. However, it is infinitely more powerful. I use the term infinitely for emphasis, not fact. The power lies in how it interacts with the surrounding environment. Our computer systems slow the movement of subatomic particles and seek to minimize the fuzziness of the quantum environment. Noise and random uncertainties kill our processing capabilities.

This device appears to function because of the noise and randomness. In so doing, it draws its connections and processing power from a whole different dimension. It appears to be

constantly encoding and decoding enormous quantities of information from the universe. It is like it possesses a key to unscramble what we have defined as randomness and uncertainty. I am not certain whether this device is actually processing all the information or whether it is some type of input/output device. I am convinced the only way to know more is to access the neural interface and interact with unit firsthand. I am prepared to do this.”

“We have only studied it for a few hours. What if it kills you? We have already lost one person on this journey. I cannot bear the thought of losing you,” Kiah emotes with reservation.

“Please trust me. I have analyzed the interface. It appears to be perfectly safe. I insisted we have all this medical gear as a precaution. I know you are the best person to work with when it comes to reanimating someone. I also know how hard you will work to bring me back should...” Chad stops.

Kiah remains quiet for a few seconds before saying, “Promise me you will not leave me here alone!”

“I can promise you I have no intention of that happening.”

Chad reaches over and gives Kiah a hug. He pulls away while stopping momentarily to kiss her tenderly on the forehead. Chad turns toward the crown. He gives it one final visual inspection. He climbs onto the table and activates the well fields. His body is drawn up into a suspended state of equilibrium. He indicates to Kiah he is ready for vital signs. Kiah makes the connections and ensures all biological systems are functioning properly.

“All your vital signs look good,” Kiah says with confidence.

“Would you please bring me the device?”

Kiah delicately lifts the crown from the table. She is overcome with a kaleidoscope of emotion. Hope, interest, duty, concern and wonder wash over her. She places Himmelbro in Chad's hands.

“I love you. You come back to me... in one-piece and... one-hundred percent... my Chad,” Kiah communicates with sincerity.

“I love you too. You are my Ki. I am sorry I only have one-hundred percent to give. You deserve so much more. Give me a hug and a kiss.”

The lovers embrace and share a kiss. They both earnestly hope it will not be their last.

Chad begins laying out his test plan, “I will start with a short session. Only thirty seconds or so.”

As is typical of Chad's do it now attitude, he immediately places the crown over his head. Kiah is overcome with a sudden weight of anxiety. She gasps for a moment and then quickly turns her attention to his vital signs. Content with his vitals, Kiah turns her attention to Chad's coloring and eye movement. His eyelids are closed. He does not wear any pain on his forehead. His face is slightly flushed. She grabs his hand noticing that it does not respond to her touch. Uncomfortable with this foreign feeling, she releases his hand. She anxiously counts the seconds pass by on a clock.

A minute passes. Chad remains under the influence of the crown. Kiah takes a seat on a lab stool and begins to wonder. What

is she to do? Another minute passes. She grows more concerned. A couple minutes pass by seeming like hours. She grows more and more apprehensive. After five minutes have passed, she takes another detailed look at his vitals. Realizing how uncharacteristic it is for Chad to deviate from a plan, she decides to remove the crown.

Kiah places her hands over the crown and pulls it quickly from Chad's head. Instantly monitors start chirping as Chad lets out a painful yell, "AHHHHH!"

"Honey. Honey. I am right here. Are you okay?"

Chad's heart races and his blood pressure drops. His neck and back arch violently. He almost convulses out of the suspension field. Kiah quickly grabs him and centers him over the table while calling to him gently, "Shh. Shh. You are alright. You are going to be okay."

Chad's eyes begin to open, and his heart rate begins to normalize. He takes a few moments to look at Kiah.

"Please say something. Anything," Kiah pleads.

Chad takes the better part of a minute to regain his composure. He looks at his hands and then his feet. He looks up to Kiah and tips his head to one side.

"Marry. Are you my... Marry?" Chad asks with giant eyes and a childish inflection.

"What? Chad are you in there?" Kiah asks.

"Chad are you in there... Chad... You pretty. Where I am?" Chad asks shortly after displaying classic echolalia.

Kiah places her hand on her head. The notion of having an infant for a life partner did not resonate with her. She turns her attention to the machines hoping to see something which might indicate his brain has been scrambled.

“Whatever you do, please do not pull that thing off my head again?” Chad communicates in his normal tone of voice with flat affect.

Kiah enjoys relief for the briefest of moments before becoming apoplectic. She furrows her brow and purses her lips while punching Chad in his right arm. The force of the blow causes his body to rotate in the well array. His left arm flies out to his side in preparation for a fall. Kiah grabs his right arm and pulls him back under the suspension field. This stabilizes his floating body once more.

“You are... I don't even know what you are,” Kiah says as her assault turns into a warm embrace.

Kiah and Chad lock eyes and smile.

“Seriously dear, that felt like pulling my spine apart between two black holes in a tug-of-war. Let me remove the device myself. I apologize. I should have come out sooner, but it is so foreign.”

“What was it like?” Kiah asks.

“It is much like learning to walk. All I could do was observe. This took all of my power. Wearing the crown is like seeing the universe from the other side. There is a clockwork of intricacy. Even observing, I could not fully grasp what was going on. I could feel you and the room. I could sense your emotion. I could feel

the space in all directions. It is like standing in one place and having the sensations, sights, smells and sounds for miles in all directions registering in my brain all at once. Focus is difficult. I was beginning to interact with a force that I would describe as a mentor. It reminded me of a word that I have heard before: Intuition. That is when you... Well...

In summation, let me describe it like being crushed in the gravity lab by the Gravitron all the while dripping with curiosity.”

“I am sorry. I was very worried. Are you ready to be done for today?” Kiah asks eagerly.

“No. There is so much more to learn today. I need to learn how to operate the interface. We know that I can go over five minutes without issue. I can be pulled out, even though it is incredibly painful. Please don't do that again.”

Kiah places her hands on her hips and begins to insist upon concessions.

“If we are going to continue, I need to make sure that you are able to remove the crown. You will do a test run where you put it on and take it off. We do not even know if you maintain muscle control under its influence.”

“That is fair enough. Give me another couple of minutes and we will go from there,” Chad agrees reassuringly.

Chad lays back down and places the crown on his head. Kiah maintains her vigilant monitoring of his vital signs. Less than a minute passes and Chad's hands begin to slowly move to his head. The motion is eerily robotic, yet in a few moments Chad is roused



from the altered state of consciousness. He sits up on the table and grins, "It looks like I am getting the hang of this. Are you convinced that we are able to continue?"

Kiah looks at him with greater confidence after witnessing him revive himself. She smiles and agrees to continue with their current experiment without delay. She assures Chad that if he pulls any more shenanigans while waking, she will drag him from the suspension table by his heels and squish him in the Gravitron. Chad lays back down. He places Himmelbro on his head revealing the incredible view of the universe. Kiah continues monitoring vital signs while gaining confidence in the safety of their experiment. This session lasts for over an hour. Kiah passes the time with one eye on the monitors and another eye on her regular research.

Kiah glances at Chad's heart and brain function. Out of the corner of her eye she notices a medicine bottle out of place. She stands up and walks over to a counter. It is right next to a shelf filled with supplies. As she looks down, she is filled with disbelief. A bottle of pills has been poured out onto the counter. The pills are arranged into the shape of a heart. Below the heart, more pills have been moved. They spell out...

LOVE YOU

She had not heard a thing. She did not see anything moving. Even stranger events begin to unfold. A brown object slowly begins to appear next to the love letters. Once it fully materializes, Kiah picks it up. She looks at it for a short while. She decides to

hold it up to her nose. It looks, smells and feels like dark chocolate. It is definitely her favorite. She decides to wait for Chad to verify its provenance before sampling. It is unlikely her stomach can handle food when saddled with the gravity of her current situation.

“What do you have there?” Chad asks across the room having returned from the influence of the crown.

“Are you responsible for this?” Kiah asks.

“I have learned to manipulate the surface layers. I hope you like the chocolate. I copied your favorite brand.”

“Thank you. You are very sweet. Forgive me if I save this for later.”

Chad stands up and walks over to his control station. He has a serious look on his face. He analyzes the data from the previous experiments. He is looking for any sign that his physical body has been stressed or damaged. Kiah walks over beside him and cross-references his findings with hers.

“It looks like everything has gone very well,” Kiah offers positively.

Chad smiles with contentment. Kiah is displaying support and confidence. She senses Chad's demeanor has changed. Their roles have flip-flopped. He is concerned to continue. There is a solemnness in his actions. His voice is deep and thoughtful.

“Chad. What is going on? What has happened? I am eager to continue while you fear the next session.”

“I have seen where I must go. On the other side I have been operating in somewhat of a Taphosphere. It is a place to learn how

to navigate. The next session I will cross into the unprotected universe. There are entities there that do not want me there. They are threatened by me. They control the universe, but strangely they are fearful. Fear leads to destruction. I must continue. You must trust me. I may be gone for a day, a year or... Promise me you will trust me. I will return for you my love,” tears stream down Chad's face as he reveals his plans to Kiah.

Kiah has never seen her life partner cry. The sight alone causes her tears to flow. With her delicate hands, she wipes the tears from her eyes and does the same for his. He places his hand behind her neck and draws her head to his chest.

“It is time,” Chad says after planting a kiss on her lips.

He checks all his systems. He tests his interface with ALLIE to make sure that he can operate her from the other side. He activates the suspension table and takes a few glances around the room. Secretly he harbors uncertainty. He may never see this place again. Kiah monitors his vital signs. She dares not communicate they are ready for him to begin.

“I love you,” Chad affirms.

He looks at Kiah one last time. He smiles and nods before slipping the crown over his head.

The hours pass. These many hours she feels like she is sinking deeper and deeper into sorrow. The overwhelming magnitude and apprehension of what lies ahead envelopes her. The symptoms of physical and emotional exhaustion can no longer be held at bay. Reluctantly she must call it a night. The monitoring systems,

which closely track Chad's life signals, are placed in autonomous mode. Her skills, as a medical professional, become apparent. She quickly engages the response protocols. Each protocol is designed to summon and control a medical AI. They will resuscitate Chad if his vital signs trigger a code.

A time for reflection is pruned from the grip of fatigue. She knows her life will never be the same. She feels a rush of excitement and the fear of uncertainty. This feeling cannot be explained. It can only be possessed by those who have dared to face the magnitude of an impossible journey and have taken that first step. She has cried until there are no more tears left to cry. The love of her life lies motionless on the table. All physiological indications agree that his body and mind are still fully functional. She places her head on his chest. She sees the room bobbing up and down for a few moments while the suspension table adjusts to the added weight. She listens to the strength and rhythm of his heart. Her arm rises from her side. Her hand softly falls onto his stomach. She watches it rise and fall with his breath.

“My love. My Everything. With all of my being, I cannot go on without you. The world without you is darkness. I still have faith in this experiment. You assured me at length that you would be fine, right? You knew in your bones that it is right, but now I feel so alone. Still, I trust you.”

Kiah raises her head from his chest. She traces his floating body with her fingers. She wipes the salt from her face where tears once fell. Her attention shifts from grief to survival. She must

continue. She begins straightening out the lab. Ideas start bubbling up in her mind. She has no idea how long the man she loves will remain like this. She must oversee his well-being. How will she explain the ethics of their experiment? Physically and emotionally drained, Kiah takes one more look around the lab and turns towards the door. She looks back one more time. She sees Chad suspended there and wonders how many more times she will endure the sight. The main lights go out automatically as she leaves the room.

As she walks down the corridor, an unexpected flickering begins to emanate from the lights in the hall. Kiah stops. The base of her spine begins to tingle. The feeling starts radiating up her spinal cord to the base of her neck. The hair on the back of her neck stands up. It propagates to the surrounding follicles. Goose bumps rush out like waves over a freshly disturbed pond. She looks behind her for a moment, and the flickering stops. She looks forward and starts walking again. She reaches the end of the corridor. She enters the main chamber of The Great Hall of Science.

To her surprise, the hall is overrun by Garamindians. The night has barely given itself over to day, yet The Great Hall of Science is flooded with half-dressed people. Momentarily recharged with adrenaline, Kiah grabs the first person she can manage to snag from the stream of faces.

“What is going on?” she asks.

“All the systems are overloading. We will be lucky if we can

salvage the last thousand years of progress. I really need to go.”

Unable to grasp the magnitude of recent events, Kiah slowly walks over to the exhibit devoted to the physical universe. She sits down on the red cushioned benches along the wall. She stares at the marble floor. She is completely oblivious to the cacophony created by horrified intellectuals. She looks down at her ring. She spins it slowly around her finger. She raises her eyes slowly to the statue of Altimus. His face appears so confident. He has been given an air of infallibility.

She finds her body prickling once again with feelings of supernal origin. She smiles with a delightful sense of satisfaction as she hears Chad's voice whisper,

*“Numinous is right.”*