

Unknown North

by Jack Beltane

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When four new stars suddenly appear in the night sky, mainstream science does what mainstream science has always done: It denies the evidence that doesn't fit the theory. So why then is it that a private space administration is rounding up the best and brightest for a manned mission to Mars?

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archive **October 8, 2004 to December 6, 2005**

1. Four More Stars in a Starry Sky [[top](#)]

No one really paid any attention to the stars that appeared one morning, where no stars previously had been. Which is to say, the mystics and stargazers noticed and found it odd, even disturbing, and they created web pages and spent hours dialing into radio talkshows, searching for an explanation. Dr. Angelo Moore finally emerged, three days after the first appearance of the stars, and told the public that there was nothing to worry about. That if any "new" stars had suddenly appeared, he or one of his colleagues would certainly have noticed. And none of them saw anything amiss. That was exactly what the media wanted to hear, and that's what was fed to the public, and—it turns out—that was what the public wanted to hear, so that they could go to work and to the mall and to soccer practice and to sleep without having to consider that their world was no longer what it used to be.

Three days after Dr. Moore's assessment, the stars—which had hung bright as planets in an arc around the left side of the moon, no matter where the moon was in the sky—disappeared as suddenly as they had come. The kids continued to play soccer, moms continued to sprint through malls and fast-food drive-throughs, and dads went dutifully to work. Perfect America was still intact, it's shiny surface freshly buffed and polished with a new coat of whitewash. But the scientists who knew—the ones whose

names never appeared in the papers and whose voices never spouted facts on talk radio—toiled far below the blinding white surface of reality, scouring thousands of images captured by telescopes and satellites in the days before, during, and after what became known as the Star Event. And they, like the mystics, were unnerved. Because the one thing Dr. Moore had got absolutely correct was that the stars were not asteroids heading for an Earth impact.

No, they weren't that at all.

2. A Spider in a Wheel [\[top\]](#)

Bransen really didn't like the looks of the bar, yet he had no choice but to enter. His was the only four-wheeled vehicle in the lot, and he veritably tip-toed past the lineup of hogs and choppers lest his footfalls tip them like dominoes. A couple of bikers had just arrived and glanced at him suspiciously as he walked toward the doors. He'd opted to fit in as little as possible, going on the assumption that a nervous man in a golf shirt and khakis would pose no threat as either interloper or poser and thus would be left alone. The bouncer at the door—paid, no doubt, in beer—raised his eyebrows in mild surprise as Bransen approached and asked (with an air of genuine concern), "Are you looking for someone in there?" The unasked follow-up to which was, *Because if you aren't, why not head to the wine bar down the street?*

"Yes," Bransen said, his voice strong. Nervous as he was, the outward sign of such was something he had long ago learned to quell. Nerves looked bad when you were applying for grants and loans to fund a private scientific research facility that steadfastly refused government money. "I'm looking for Mouse."

The bouncer's eyebrows raised a bit higher, then he nodded. "He'll be at the bar, most likely doodling on a napkin." He opened the door for Bransen and ushered him in. Bransen didn't see it, but he was sure a silent signal had been given to the bartender to *watch this guy*. The barkeep shouted, "What'll ya have?" before he'd even taken three steps into the place.

Fortunately, most of the bikers were huddled around the pool tables or loitering on the dance floor. The haze of smoke was like walking through a forest fire, but at least there was no music blaring, for the moment. All the noise was mumbling voices punctuated with loud laughs and swearing. Bottles clinked into trashcans and the low rumble of glasses moving from table to lips and back seemed like distant thunder in the clouds of cigarette smoke. Bransen headed for the only guy at the bar who seemed hunched over and possibly doodling. The barkeep paced him and met him at the bar, so Bransen ordered a beer ("anything that's wet") and glanced at the man to his right. He was

large from a diet of hamburgers and beer, and his hands and face had the grime of engine repair on them. His beard was long and unkempt, though, like his lengthy hair, not dirty. In the dim lighting, Bransen couldn't tell if he was a dark blonde or a graying brunette.

"You Mouse?" he asked. The man—who was indeed doodling on a napkin—stopped what he was doing and straightened up before looking at him. He met his eyes and nodded once.

"My name's Bransen. I run PISA. I have only two questions for you." The barkeep plopped his beer in front of him and looked suspiciously at Mouse. Mouse shook his head almost imperceptibly: No, he wasn't being bothered.

"Go ahead," Mouse replied.

"What were you figuring out just now?" Mouse looked at his napkin and chuckled, then held it up for Bransen. There was a rather artfully rendered doodle of a spider in the center of a wagon wheel.

"I was thinking how much better off a spider in a wheel would be if it used the spokes to reinforce its web. Could probably catch grasshoppers. Thing is, spiders are too small to see the big picture, and they make the same old weak web between the spokes."

Bransen smiled widely. This was indeed his man. The mythical biker named Mouse. The man who could fix—and improve upon—any motorcycle on the road. The man who should hold the patent for the next generation of Tesla power coil, if not for the fact that the patent office thought him crazy.

"Then my other question is simply this," Bransen said softly. He glanced around just to make sure no one would hear him. "Would you like to go to Mars?"

3. The Not Knowing [\[top\]](#)

Henry adjusted the focus on his Bransen Labs Deep X Telescope ("bigger, better, cheaper") and tried in vain to relocate the four stars of the Star Event. He'd got the telescope last year for his tenth birthday, and was only dimly aware that his mother had forgone replacing the dishwasher in order to afford it. In fact, she was even now at the kitchen sink, washing the dishes by hand.

"Henry!" she called. "The silverware's ready to be dried!" Henry swung the telescope wildly until the temporary blindness of the moon filtered through the lens. He recoiled a

tad at the brightness, then swung the telescope back to the left. He was definitely aiming at the right spot in the sky. He stood up straight, hands on hips, and sighed heavily. The four stars were gone and he, for one, did not believe Dr. Angelo Moore's spin that anyone who had seen four anomalous stars didn't know what they were looking at. Because Henry knew damn well what he'd been looking at. "Henry!" his mother called again.

"Coming..." he grudgingly replied, deep in thought as he wandered into the kitchen and picked up the dish towel. His mother smiled at him and wiped some splashed bubbles off her cheek with her shoulder.

"It'll only take a minute."

"I know, Ma. It's okay," he answered, sighing again.

"Still can't find those stars, eh?" Henry nodded, his young brow furrowing. His mother chuckled lightly. "Well, Sophie will be here soon. Maybe she can help."

"Yeah..." Henry agreed. Sophie was the ten-year-old daughter of his mother's employer, and though Henry didn't fully understand the camaraderie two single, working moms had, he knew that his mom looked forward to "no work Friday nights" and he did all he could to make it easy on them. His grand act of compromise had, however, turned into a real friendship with Sophie—though he didn't want to let on too much that he'd been counting the days all week to show her the stars through his telescope. And now they were gone.

"What do you think they were?" she asked. Henry shrugged.

"I can't find anything like it in any of my books. It was like they'd gone into orbit around the moon, then just froze. Then vanished. And that Dr. Moore's an idiot..."

"Well now, he probably just doesn't understand either, and he doesn't want to scare people."

"Are *you* scared, Mom?"

She smiled and stripped off her kitchen gloves, placing them behind the faucet and taking the towel from Henry so she could wipe up the splashed water. "No. But then I file paperwork for a freelance microbiological consultant. I know there's a rational explanation, Henry, they just haven't found it yet."

Henry grunted dismally then marched back to his telescope. Dr. Angelo Moore might be satisfied pretending something he didn't understand would just go away, but Henry was

not.

4. The Quintessence of Light [\[top\]](#)

Dr. Fobell had been asked to work on the Star Event because of his views that natural light might actually be conscious. It was an odd take, to be sure—and one that would never reach as close to the surface as even the scholarly mainstream science journals—but here, in the shadows where science still asked the left-field questions, Dr. Fobell was highly respected. In his model, the Sun was more like a massive dandelion, with light like seed pods constantly streaming from the surface on the solar wind. And UFOs, by his estimation, may indeed be nothing more than balls of light—albeit balls of light with intellect.

"The Star Event is definitely consciously controlled," Dr. Fobell told the smattering of shadow scientists in the well-lit room around him. Were it not for the lab coats, one might have assumed the meeting, replete with paperwork on the table and bar graphs on the overhead, to be some conference of a board of directors. "The stars appear to have positioned themselves before turning on, as it were, and then maintained their relative positions, using our moon as a guide, before they again turned off."

"Why our moon?" an innocuous young man asked.

"Quite simply, Dr. Brown, they wanted to be seen." The thought set up quite a loud murmur among the eight or so other men and women in the room, and Dr. Fobell had to clear his throat twice before continuing. "Think of it like a child, hiding behind a hedge, but who wants to be chased. The child will peek out—even step into full view—until Mommy or Daddy sees him. Then he runs away, and Mommy and Daddy follow."

"All right, Howard, I'll buy it," the woman at the head of the table said. "Then where are they leading us?"

Dr. Fobell smiled privately to himself, then scanned the faces in the room, all turned to him expectantly. "What none of us noticed—or, rather, ignored because we knew what it was (myself included until yesterday)—is that there were actually *five* stars in the Star Event. Four anomalous and one a planet. While keeping their basic arc the same, and compensating for the movement of the moon and the planet, they managed to hide in plain sight what I think was their destination. We all thought they were frozen in the space above the moon, but we need to consider perspective. The lights were nowhere near the moon. The Star Event was all about that fifth star—the planet. The lights, I believe, were heading for Mars."

5. A Ladder With Nine Rungs [\[top\]](#)

Bransen knew this would be the hardest sell, but he didn't know it would be so difficult simply to gain an audience. His "simple hike" through the woods had elicited ripped jeans, the loss of his left shoe, and a thorn-born scratch on his left breast. Still and all, when he finally reached the clearing and saw the homespun cabin of Dr. Carlos Resua (anachronistically wired with solar panels, a 21st-century windmill, and three satellite dishes), his mood instantly lifted.

"Dr. Resua?" he called out, hoping to high hell he'd pronounced his name correctly. There was nothing like a bad first impression. Hearing no reply, he walked up to the hut and climbed the nine-rung ladder to the deck that surrounded the hut. The stilts, Bransen realized with a twinge of vertigo, were necessary to correct for quite a slope to the land. He stood in front of the door and looked up, the roofline of the cabin looking like the peaks of a crown from this angle, and took in a deep breath until the nausea passed.

"Dr. Resua?" he said again, in a normal voice, then knocked firmly on the door. He glanced to his left and right in search of a doorbell, and saw instead a piece of heavy paper flapping in the breeze. It was a handwritten note that said, in a tidy script, "Back in a second, Mr. Bransen. Please go in, if you want."

Bransen looked all around at the woods but saw no signs of life. No one except his assistant knew he was coming here. And Dr. Carlos Resua, apparently. The idea made Bransen grin gleefully. His research had indeed been right on the mark. But rather than impose on Dr. Resua's hospitality, Bransen decided to sit on one of the chairs on the deck and wait for him there, bathed in the dappled light of the sun.

6. The Hollow Oak [\[top\]](#)

"Let's go to oak," a voice said, jarring Bransen back to wakefulness. He opened his eyes and shielded them from the bright sunlight. The man standing over him moved so that he was shading him, and Bransen looked into the bearded face and curiously wild eyes of Dr. Carlos Resua.

"Dr. Resua?" he asked rhetorically, jumping to his feet and extending his hand.

"Please call me Carlos, Mr. Bransen," the doctor replied as they shook hands. "You made it here faster than most people. Glad I left a note."

"Yeah," Bransen said thoughtfully, glancing at the piece of paper. "About that..."

Carlos grinned knowingly and tapped his right temple with his index finger. "That's why you're here, is it not, Mr. Bransen?"

"Please... Everyone just calls me Bransen. Or Bran."

"Bran?" Carlos chuckled at a joke only he understood, then turned and indicated the woods indiscriminately. "We should go the oak for a drink, *Bran*. You must be parched."

"Yes..." Bransen agreed, following him back down the ladder.

"That stream there?" Carlos explained, indicating a thin ribbon of water gurgling behind the house. "The spring is just up the slope right at the base of an old, hollow oak. I thought it made the area a good place to settle down."

"I'll say," Bransen gasped, puffing up the hill behind his host. "It's beautiful."

Carlos smiled but didn't reply and the two walked in silence to the oak, which was obvious among the other deciduous trees for its girth that belied great age. There were still leaves fresh and green on almost every branch, but the inside was hollowed out with a gap in the bark just about big enough for a grown man to squeeze through. As they approached, Bransen saw a small gurgling flow of water, like an ark from a broken drinking fountain, that looked to be emerging right out of the tree. As they rounded on it, however, he saw that the spring was actually a few feet away from it.

"I imagine the oak's roots released the water," Carlos said as he sat on a mossy rock, indicating Bransen to do the same. Bransen sat down across from him and smiled. "They have a way of divining. So what can I do for you, Bransen?" Carlos asked.

"How did you know I was coming?" he replied, using the question as an excuse to catch his breath. He motioned to the water and Carlos assured him it was clean, so Bransen leaned over the stream and drank from his hands. The water was indeed sweet and crisp.

"Every morning I meditate and remote view that little parking area I built. Luckily, I caught you getting out of your car and I recognized you. I assume you want me to remote view the Star Event? Tell you what it was?"

Bransen chuckled and sat back down on his rock, drawing himself up with sincerity. "Close, Carlos. I need to go to Mars and I need your technical skills—as well as your remote viewing—for the trip."

Carlos sat silently for a moment, then started to laugh. "Now *that* I didn't see coming."

7. Def Con 4 [\[top\]](#)

Howard Fobell couldn't be entirely sure he wasn't under arrest. The room was stark and furnished only with a plain table and two chairs, there was a tape recorder on the table, and the overhead lighting was dim and flickering. It also didn't help that behind him paced Admiral Thomas and sitting across from him was General Rauchbach. Both men were cordial enough, but Dr. Fobell still had the willies.

"So you don't believe the Star Event was made up of crafts piloted by intelligent creatures?" the General asked again. "But were themselves intelligent balls of light?"

"Honestly, I don't know," Dr. Fobell admitted. "As I said, based on our observations and photographs, there is nothing to indicate a structure to the lights. Given my own theories of terrestrial UFOs, this leads me to conclude that light may be all there is to the Star Event."

"But *intelligent* light," Admiral Thomas pointed out. "*Conscious* light. Light that gets up in the morning, brushes its teeth, and gets itself a bowl of cereal. Light that is alive and cognizant, correct?"

"In a manner of speaking, though I think its form of intelli—"

"That's what I don't get," the Admiral cut in. "I don't get how light can think."

Howard sighed heavily and asked what he thought was an obvious question: "Admiral Thomas, have you read my papers on the subject?" He heard the Admiral stop pacing and could tell by the General's face that he was moving over to the table. Admiral Thomas leaned in close to Howard's right ear and whispered with amusement, "I was hoping you could give us the Cliff's Notes version, Dr. Fobell." The General snickered and winked at Howard.

"We don't read more than we have to," he tried to explain. "And honestly, your work is a bit outside our purview, I'm afraid."

"All we need to know, for now, is one thing," the Admiral added, scooting around and perching on the table so he could look at Dr. Fobell. "We need to know if the Star Event is dangerous. Frankly, I don't really care if a ball of light has a brain or if My Favorite Martian is real—I just want to know what I need to do about this. You see intelligence... We see the unknown. We see a threat. Do you see?"

"Yes," Howard replied, lowering his eyes. "And I'm afraid, gentlemen, that I can't really say." He looked up and held each man's gaze for a second, then continued, "I am certain whatever they were, they wanted to be seen and they wanted us to follow them. Logically, then, I would say they are not coming here and thus would not appear to be any threat."

"But what happens if we follow?" General Rauchbach asked kindly. "Is this an interstellar ambush?" Howard sat silent, his mouth slightly open, and shook his head slowly. His lack of words spoke volumes to the two men.

8. Bransen's First Dream [\[top\]](#)

Bransen stayed as a guest of Carlos that night, after a long afternoon of hiking and talking. In hindsight, he was sure Carlos would've gone to Mars without all the talking and hiking, but Bransen didn't regret the time spent with the computer programming mystic.

"There are a few people in the military who will have to be told," Carlos said, when he finally (officially) agreed to go. "But other than that, I have no ties. Does it bother you that the military will know of this expedition?"

Bransen had laughed. "I would seriously doubt the military's ability to defend the country if they *didn't* know, after the press I intend to drum up." They'd both laughed at that, albeit suspiciously. Bransen knew no more than Carlos as to how the press—or military—would receive a manned expedition to Mars made up of the crew Bransen was assembling.

But that night, Bransen had a dream. A deep, lucid dream—the first such he could ever recall having. A dream in which everything was ethereal, but entirely in his control. A dream in which he found himself in woodland glen, sunlight sparkling in a light mist. "What is it?" he asked a woman hunched over something at the edge of the glen. "I'd say a mushroom," she replied, turning to him as he approached. "Except that we're on Mars."

Bransen awoke with a start, the dream as fresh as a memory, with only one thought in his head: Doctor Luci von Embers, microbiologist. He scrawled down the name on the pad of paper Carlos had left with him ("Just in case you dream"), then lay back down, wide-eyed, unable to sleep for a driving sense of urgency, awe, and wonder.

9. Wooing Luci [\[top\]](#)

"I just don't understand why you'd want *me* to go to Mars," Luci said for the umpteenth time. Bransen couldn't really answer ("Because of a dream I had" didn't seem too

compelling), but had hoped that dinner on him in the city's finest restaurant would earn him a few points. Perhaps it had—she'd stayed for dessert, after all.

"I need a microbiologist," he replied again. "Surely you don't mean to say you can't understand why I need that?"

"I can understand that, Mr. Bransen," she agreed, smiling demurely and sipping her coffee. "But everyone else you've outlined for the trip so far has no ties. Yes, I'm a freelance worker, too, but I have a daughter. Can't you find some young, single, hotshot grad student to go?"

"Is it the trip itself or leaving your daughter that's bothering you?"

Luci froze, cake-encumbered fork midway to her mouth, and slowly lowered her arm. Truth be told, Luci had always fantasized about being on a manned mission to another planet—it was the sort of feather in her cap that would earn her renown on its face, but also offer unimaginable potential for microbial discoveries. Of course, this was all before she'd had Sophie. Everything changed when you had someone more important than yourself to worry about.

"Both, I guess," she mumbled. "Leaving my daughter is one thing, but possibly leaving her forever is something else entirely."

Bransen nodded compassionately. In fairness, he had made it very clear to each of them he'd asked that there was the possibility they'd never see Earth again. Not that he thought it at all likely, but he had to admit the danger.

"What if she came with you?" Bransen finally replied. "This isn't going to be some government-run space program in tin cans controlled by punchcard computers—this is going to be a Bransen Labs Cadillac. You won't even know we're in space, unless you look out the window."

"What about school?"

"We can take her textbooks for the year with us. The crew is quite smart," he added with a smirk. Luci laughed with something like relief and finished her last two bites of cake, washing it down with the last of her coffee.

"Well, I'll have to ask her, Mr. Bransen. If she doesn't want to go, I don't want to go."

"And if she does?" Bransen asked with a grin.

Luci paused, then replied, "Then I guess we'll go."

10. Sanity Check [\[top\]](#)

The sticking point was the "mental health and well-being" of a child in a spaceship for a year, with no playmates. The solution offered was that Luci's assistant, Lorna Jacobs, also would join the crew, as official recorder ("She's a damn good writer, and would love to keep our labs in order, besides"). This would solve the question of 11-year-old Sophie von Embers because, naturally, Lorna's 12-year-old son, Henry, also would have to join the crew. Bransen loved kids, but at first this proposition struck him as dangerous. If anything catastrophic were to happen, the public would be able to excuse the loss of consenting adults—but the loss of two children?

"Of course, if anything like that happened, you wouldn't be around to care," Mouse offered blithely. Bransen gazed at him for several seconds, unable to argue, and Carlos finally responded: "He's right. Just make sure your paperwork is in order, legally, to at least give your legacy a fighting chance." He leaned in and added in low voice, "But we both know how important Luci von Embers is to this mission, eh?"

"I'd love to have kids aboard," Mouse said, looking uncertainly at the two other men. For his money, a microbiologist was a microbiologist, but if they wanted this particular one, far be it from him to argue. He would gladly admit that while he could build and repair just about any machine, he wasn't much on the finer points of public relations. Except with kids.

"I'll have my lawyers look at the question," Bransen finally said. "But if the kids do go, we have to add every safety measure and safety check imaginable—and then add more that are *unimaginable*. Right?"

It was the first time the two men had heard Bransen be so curt and official. Mouse found it comforting. Carlos grinned mysteriously. And both agreed with him wholeheartedly.

11. Pale Pink Flashes of Light [\[top\]](#)

It was so subtle, not even those watching noticed it. The ruddy pink surface of Mars shimmered to a paler pink in four specific spots for only a second. Somewhere, in some laboratory, a computer clicked and chattered, recording the change in the surface features of the planet. But the detection, though logged, would not be seen as anomalous. After all, the shifting dust on the planet's surface often revealed and covered shining spots of the rocky crust. No one noticed because science, with its massive

telescopes and most powerful microscopes, is only able to register what it has seen and can reproduce. And the pale pink flashes would not happen again and would not be seen. And the Earthbound scientists would not be able to reproduce them. Ergo, they never happened.

Another subtle occurrence associated with the pale pink flashes of light was the simultaneous dreams of two men and a boy. In each dream, it was the same: A rusty, rocky expanse of land stretching to an horizon unearthly in its stillness. The rocks strewn along the expanse began to quiver, jiggling like jello cubes on a plate. There was a low thrum, like the sound of a heartbeat with your ear pressed to someone's back. And then there were the flashes—much brighter and quite distinct from this vantage point—and the resultant depressions left in the surface.

One man and the boy interpreted the depressions as impact points, and the flashes as explosions. But the other man knew impacts and knew the pattern of debris showed not something hitting the surface, but punching through it, from beneath. Something solid that looked like a pale pink flash of light.

Something—or rather, *four* somethings—that appeared to know exactly what they were doing.

12. RadialShade [\[top\]](#)

Ana-loop received the light messages loud and clear: Two straight, quick bursts of visible energy from Earth that held patterns of information denoting intelligence. The problem with math, however, was that it only worked if you understood the characters and symbols. Ana-loop decided to send back an information-soaked packet of visible energy and see what would happen.

* * *

```
ERROR: syntaxerror  
OFF. COMMAND: --nostringval--
```

```
STACK:
```

```
/RadialShade  
false
```

"What the hell does that mean?" Admiral Thomas growled. He and General Rauchbach leaned in to the screen, peering over Dr. Fobell's shoulders. Howard fumbled nervously

with the keys, trying to remember how to call up the necessary log files. The two computer operators in the room pushed back on wheeled office chairs, trying to get their own peek at the monitor.

"I don't know..." Howard mumbled distractedly.

"It came from outside the network," one of the operators piped up quietly. Both the General and Admiral stood straight and turned to face her.

"Meaning what, exactly?" Admiral Thomas said with restraint. The woman shrugged timidly.

"Meaning the data it tried to parse came from *out there*, not in here."

Howard Fobell stopped typing and turned to face her.

* * *

"It's got to be an image," Carlos Resua said. "We just have to figure out what analogy to binary code they're using."

"Can you do that?" Bransen asked inoffensively.

"I can do it," Carlos agreed. "Maybe it's not *binary*, though. Base-15 is the most sacred system..."

Bransen and Mouse left him mumbling and walked into the other room. "Are you sure we need a *microbiologist*?" Mouse joked nervously. Bransen grinned, but didn't answer.

13. The Nature of Life and Synchronization [\[top\]](#)

While Carlos hammered away at the computer, trying to program it to decode what turned out to be (he thought) a standard base-16 coding pattern, Bransen was in the unexpected position of making the morning news circuit to counter Dr. Angelo Moore's view that if there was extraterrestrial life (which he made clear there was not), it would, by nature, resemble us. This, he claimed, was evolution in action. To which Bransen expanded upon his favorite non-human-life theory, posited by Dr. Howard Fobell, that light itself—which looked nothing like a human—may be intelligent. Unbeknownst to him, at the very moment Bransen thought he should have tracked down Dr. Fobell before agreeing to appear on the shows, Dr. Fobell was thinking that he should track down Mr. Bransen. Not because Bransen was butchering his theories on national TV, but because

he'd had no idea that the head of the Private International Space Administration was on his side.

Which was more than he could say for the representatives of the United States military, who had looked at the output of the message he had decoded—a plain white image that shaded out to an almost imperceptible pink along the edges—and had called for someone else to "find something meaningful in that transmission." Even less did they appreciate Dr. Fobell's defense that, should an intelligent creature made up only of visible light send a picture of itself, it could look just like his decoded image.

Even more synchronous was that just as Dr. Fobell began to search through his scientific directories for Mr. Bransen's direct (or most direct) line, his own direct line rang. The caller introduced himself as a Dr. Carlos Resua, working on behalf of PISA, and he wanted to talk to Dr. Fobell about how he thought intelligent light might represent itself.

Two hours later, Dr. Howard Fobell was working on his letter of resignation.

14. The Thought That Counts [\[top\]](#)

The decision to go to Mars was not so easy for Luci von Embers. The PISA legal team had looked into the issue and reported back favorably that, as long as the parents went and consented and the children did not appear to be in distress, there was no real reason they couldn't go. Yet they also pointed out that popular opinion may differ with them.

Lorna Jacobs, for her part, had made it clear (repeatedly) that she had no problem going and taking Henry with her. In fact, if one were introduced to them only that day, it would be thought that Lorna wanted to go to Mars more than Luci, which really did not fully reveal the long-standing fantasy of Luci von Embers to become an astronaut. The kids both had been asked indirectly ("So, Henry, if you ever had the chance to go to Mars, would you go?") and both had answered positively, without hesitation.

"But what if something *does* happen?" Luci asked again. "I owe it to her father not to get her killed." Between the lines was woven a story of tragedy and triumph in which Sophie, age seven, had been rescued from a precipitous mountain overhang by her father, only to watch her father overbalance and plummet to his death. For her part, Lorna sometimes wished this had happened to *her* ex-husband, but alas, he was still living large somewhere in New Mexico, deftly avoiding child support.

"I know, Luci," Lorna comforted, pretending not to notice the tears Luci was trying to hide. "And while I'm nowhere near as qualified as you to say, I did know Nate for several years. If he were still alive, would he want you to go?"

"Yes, certainly," she replied without hesitation. "But he wouldn't want Sophie to go."

"Really?" Lorna asked kindly. "Even if that was the only option?" She paused for several seconds, then added, "Of course, maybe you shouldn't try and think for him. Just think for yourself..."

Luci was still thinking when Lorna rounded up Henry a little after nine and went home.

15. Caduceus and Fear [\[top\]](#)

Luci finally decided that the opportunity to go to Mars was too great to pass up because of fear. She also decided that, rather than it offering an outside chance that something would happen to Sophie, it actually offered an opportunity to share something with her daughter so meaningful that even if they only survived for five minutes, it would be worth it. Assuming, of course, they made it *to* Mars for those five minutes.

It was good that she came to this conclusion on her own and in her own terms because once she'd made up her mind, she didn't go back and second-guess her decision. Second guessing was for people whose minds had been made up for them by someone else they simply couldn't argue with. That someone, for Luci, was usually a man she readily admitted was a father figure to her. They rarely ever met on anything other than a professional level, and when they did go out for dinner or lunch, they usually discussed each other's work. But she had the deepest respect for his opinions and often asked his advice.

Had Bransen known Dr. Howard Fobell was such a peer of Luci von Embers, he would've asked the doctor to call her. But as it was, Luci made up her own mind first, and learning of Dr. Fobell's involvement in the project just solidified her feeling that she'd made the right choice. It was the kind of thing that made Carlos Resua smile knowingly. Sophie, Henry, and Lorna were overjoyed (though now that it was "real," Lorna privately was quite scared). Bransen was thrilled to have everyone he needed for the team—plus the formidable Dr. Fobell.

The media, on the other hand, once again corralled Dr. Moore after the announcement of the mission, and the collective fears of a misinformed nation began to gather over Bransen Labs and the Private International Space Administration. And that made Admiral Thomas and General Rauchbach very happy—it was always better to let the people sway themselves without the overt input of the government.

16. Unconscious Light [\[top\]](#)

Ana-loop was distraught. The stories appeared to be true: The ones who could make light didn't understand its properties. There was no meaningful contact. Their light was always inanimate. They weren't even aware of their own eventual return to Radiance. They couldn't translate simple messages, even with the key. They didn't understand RadialShade—the undulating language of light that flickered along the spectrum from visible to invisible in meaningful ways. A language of light defined by dark pockets. Perhaps it was too much to ask. Simply because you could communicate in *their* language did not guarantee the opposite.

Then Ana-loop saw something as they emerged from the planet: Three figures standing on the surface, watching them. Three of those who made light, one of which was consciously aware. One of three who knew where it was and what it was doing. Then they wavered and flickered out, traveling back along whatever path of inanimate light they had used, their Radiance to be reabsorbed by their flesh.

Three had come; one had known it had come. The others didn't believe Ana-loop. They again mocked the decision to journey to the planet, saying they had only proved that everyone else was right: These beings around this sun knew not what they were, nor how to communicate. Consciousness was not the issue; the question was wisdom.

Ana-loop turned back, saying one of them should wait. The others laughed and went home.

But Ana-loop waited for some other response.

17. Child's Play [\[top\]](#)

The kids were amazing. Not only did they think being hooked up to monitors was "cool," Dr. Resua found that their acceptance of—and ability to accomplish—remote viewing was unparalleled among the hundreds of people who had attended his workshops. Even admitting that most of his workshop attendees were confused housewives or single men looking to give their lives some meaning, the kids still were head-and-shoulders above the most serious of his students—the ones paid by Uncle Sam and told to keep quiet about the whole thing.

They also were indirectly responsible for the rapid lack of interest from the media and public about the whole affair. At first, pictures of children hooked up to monitors—that measured brain activity, heart rate, and (unbeknownst to the media) their electromagnetic fields—looked shocking, but once the media was given total access to them, and they began talking about "feeling like I was flying through the universe or something," the

public snickering began. "Bransen Labs' Trip to Mars a Child's Dream," summed up one headline, and from there on out, the "trip to Mars" was posited as nothing more than a crackpot—though harmless—study of dream states.

They thought this because they had never heard of remote viewing and never bothered to ask for clarification when the phrase was used by any of the doctors assembled. And no one asked to see Mouse, the biker who stayed in the background, slowly devising mechanical whirlygigs based on the output of the monitors.

And when Henry answered one of the reporter's questions by saying, "I met someone named Ana-loop. I think it was a lady. I mean, she didn't have a body, she was just like a bright light or something, but her name is Ana something, right, and that's a girl's name..." only Dr. Resua's heart rate increased.

And only Bransen saw his reaction to Henry's story and knew that something big had just happened.

18. Ladder Logic [\[top\]](#)

This entry is indebted to the Sludgeman who, without his knowing it, explained to me a way to communicate without a distinct language or set of characters. Why anyone would be sitting in a bar at midnight explaining Ladder Logic to an English major is beyond me, but I guess that's why I hang out with the guy. Thanks, Sludge. —JB

"When I first transcoded it, I got this," explained Carlos to Howard, opening an image of a white screen run through with very subtle darker areas (some almost black) emanating from the center, like spokes on a wheel. "The word 'radial' naturally popped into my head."

"Of course," Howard agreed, beginning to grin already.

"Then I realized why 'radial'—and not, say, 'spokes'—popped into my head. Because the error from the Mars message said 'RadialShade'—and that's exactly what we have here: Shaded swaths radiating from the center." Carlos slumped back in his chair and threw up his hands. "But that's it. I'm certain I transcoded the right image, but I'm stumped."

Howard was now grinning almost maniacally. "But how do you suppose a light being would communicate?" Carlos sat forward expectantly, waiting for Howard to answer his own question. "How are we communicating right now? At its root, we're using sound—short bursts of sound interspersed with silence, thereby creating syllables and

words."

"Okay," Carlos agreed. "I'm with you."

"And when we write, it's really just a string of ink and no-ink, right? But do light beings see or hear? Do they have physical senses? All we can say for sure is that they are light. And so they might communicate with light—which is to say, bursts of light separated by darkness. Or shade." He sat back smiling broadly, not because of pride in his own theory, but because he—like Carlos—knew they had figured it out.

Carlos was already three steps ahead, however. "And how would we translate *that*? Do we have some other, non-lingual way of transmitting information? Something that's black or white, on or off, by degrees?"

Howard nodded slowly, agreeing to what Carlos was thinking. "Of course we do. Binary code. 1s and 0s. Even a simple form of Ladder Logic, in a way..."

"Exactly. So you can look at a string of ones and zeros—even create an image similar to this, if you use the right algorithms to create the shading," Carlos concluded, sitting forward and opening his code editor. "And that string might be an image, but it might also be audio or video or even an executable, if you parse it correctly..."

Howard really didn't think he'd been this excited in his entire life.

19. Cimmerian Light [\[top\]](#)

Carlos sat in a meditative state, feeling light. Henry and Sophie lay on yoga mats near him, napping. Howard fidgeted across from him, unable to get comfortable. He found that one too many hotdogs had taken their toll and his legs were unable to cross.

"Do you need a chair?" Carlos finally whispered, grinning. "Just go and get one." Howard did not reply, but slowly got himself back on his feet and retrieved one of the plain chairs from the hallway. He saw Luci as he grabbed it and smiled at her. She smiled back warmly, and it suddenly occurred to him that her face had changed since she'd been on the project. She looked calm. There was something else she reminded him of, but he quickly ducked back into the room before he could remember.

General Rauchbach was quite proud of the message they intended to send back. You couldn't assume any amount of intelligence, and so pictures were certainly the way to go.

He wasn't entirely convinced that whoever received it would be able to use the circle and representative equation to establish that they, the Earthlings, understood pi, nor that they could use the same equation to establish the average height of a human being, but Dr. Angelo Moore had assured him it was the best way, and it certainly made more sense to General Rauchbach than the near-lunatic ravings of Dr. Fobell.

"That's the problem with genius," he'd commiserated with Admiral Thomas when they'd read the letter of resignation. "They're one tiny stumble away from insanity." He didn't think Dr. Moore was smarter than Dr. Fobell, but at least he was stable.

"Will anyone believe him if he talks about this place?" Admiral Thomas had fretted, but General Rauchbach laughed incredulously.

"Just the same kooks who believe Dr. Resua." And they both laughed loudly to hide their nerves.

Ana-loop received the picture, decoded it, and remained in dumbfounded horror at what it told her: These beings assumed every other thing was as stupid as they were themselves. It didn't give her much hope. If this was all they had, she, too, would have to return home, to the derision of her colleagues for giving the physical ones another chance.

Then she received another message, sent on a concentrated beam of unconscious light. The RadialShade pattern of it was immediately discernable, though what message it contained was not. The use of the language was flawed and almost inarticulate, but there was a distinct pattern to the misuse of the language. All that needed to be done was to break the unintended code in which the message had been sent and then decipher what they were saying—and what they thought had been said to them.

20. Crackpot Intelligence [\[top\]](#)

Despite outward appearances, General Rauchbach was quite disturbed by Dr. Fobell's resignation. Not because he worried the government would be outed—the nice thing about the euphemistically "crackpot" projects was that no one who blabbed ever fared well under public scrutiny—but because he realized that Howard Fobell had no intention of going to the media with what he knew. Instead, the scientist who believed in intelligent light had gone to the competition, and in this case, that was worse than even going to another country's government—Fobell had entered the private sector and was continuing his studies unabated. General Rauchbach's very real fear was that now, unhampered,

Fobell was getting somewhere, and the fruits of his labors would be enjoyed not by Uncle Sam but by Bransen Labs and their "Pathetic Ignorant Space Administration" (as those on the crackpot projects called it). With Fobell *and* Resua, General Rauchbach knew it was quite close to being neither pathetic nor ignorant. In fact, it was quite close to turning the tables and make Uncle Sam look bad. Worse still, if they came back from Mars with signs of non-human intelligence, suddenly the crackpots would be the prophets of a new era, and the prophets of the old era would quickly be swept away.

"Why haven't they replied yet?" the General growled at Dr. Moore, who swallowed timidly and adjusted his glasses. He glanced to Admiral Thomas, but found no solace.

"I... I... I don't know..."

"We know they sent another message, but it didn't come to us, did it?"

"No... sir."

Admiral Thomas leaned in very close to Dr. Moore's face and whispered harshly, "Why not?" And Dr. Moore wished very much that he'd stuck to the national talk-show debunking circuit.

21. Nightride [\[top\]](#)

Luci never did anything dangerous. She didn't skydive or even go overnight hiking in the woods—anything that could take her away from Sophie was strictly verboten. But accepting a position on the Mars mission seemed to have allayed some of her fears, and soon enough she found herself zipping down a state route on the back of Mouse's chopper—without a helmet—her thick black hair ribboning out behind her on curtains of wind. And she found that it felt good. Very good.

Mouse was certainly a genius with machinery (that had become abundantly evident by his creating every whirlygig sketch thrown to him by Carlos and Howard), but he also had found ample time to commiserate with Luci on how ineffective they currently felt. To this point, the mission seemed to be little more than a series of computer messages sent via custom-made contraptions. Mouse even admitted once that he still wasn't entirely convinced they weren't just talking to some complex satellite glitch. Indeed, the communications thusfar had been quite simple and little more than echoes of each other, like responding "Tell me your name" when asked "What's your name?"

Mouse also liked kids, and the kids were always near Luci and Lorna, so even when they were off the clock, Mouse found himself spending most of his time with Dr. von Embers.

He chuckled to himself from the front of the motorcycle—and which of his friends would ever believe that he had given a nightride to a beautiful *doctor*?

"Do you want to go for a drink?" he called over his shoulder, his voice barely finding purchase on the wind. Luci's immediate thought was, honestly, "Hell yes," but then (as always) she reconsidered.

"I don't think I should," she said loudly into Mouse's ear, temporarily resting her chin on his shoulder. "Sophie will worry if I don't come back soon."

Mouse nodded. "Fair enough—I'll turn back just up here." He'd heard the disappointment in her voice, and for now, that was worth at least two drinks with her.

22. A Diagram of Light [\[top\]](#)

Ana-loop managed to crack the code (as it were) of the message sent to her and encoded her reply in the same way, so she could be sure they would understand what she was saying. There would be time enough later to teach them the finer points of RadialShade. The others, who had sent a packet of meaningless shapes and forms, that meant as much to Ana-loop as do the wild gesticulations of a monkey to those who sent it, she would not attempt to contact again. No point wasting resources.

She worried now, at the lack of response, that she'd said too much, been too complex with her wording, or else had completely missed the form of RadialShade they had been using. Most important to her was a face-to-face meeting with these beings, and to that end, she'd explained how other non-light entities traveled to distant places, using unconscious light. (Some, it was said, enslaved conscious light for such deeds, but she'd never seen the practice in action and was sure, anyway, that most sentient beings would not enslave others.)

What Ana-loop couldn't know is that her message had been received, deciphered, and processed exactly as she had intended, but while the language made sense and the diagrams and equations could be written, Carlos and Howard were frankly miffed as to what to do with it. Which is when they called in Mouse to look at a bizarre blueprint and see if he could make sense of it.

Mouse furrowed his brow and twiddled his beard, grunting every now and again as his eyes scanned every detail of the diagram. "This isn't a schematic for electricity, is it?" he asked rhetorically. "No—probably light," Howard answered anyway. Mouse nodded. "Any clues as to its purpose?" Carlos sighed heavily and said, "The sender claims that other non-light beings use such a device to travel to them, the light beings." Mouse whipped

the diagram away from his face and stood somewhat to attention, making the others (Bransen always hovered near the back in these conversations) jump slightly. His face broke into a wide smile, "No problem. I'll work on it." And before they could reply, he spun on his heel and marched off into his workshop, whistling a nondescript tune.

23. Normal Lives [\[top\]](#)

For the kids, life was definitely better. Neither of them had shed many tears at being transferred to a new school, closer to Bransen Labs, and both had fit in there right away by *not* fitting in, as usual. At their old school they had hung out with each other and had weathered the jeering kissing noises coming from their tormentors' desks, and at the new school they heard the whisperes and saw the sidelong gazes which would, undoubtedly, turn into jeers and kissing noises soon enough. But Henry was overjoyed to find a healthy Computer & Science Club (propped up by donations from nearby Bransen Labs, of course) and Sophie was amazed to find a middle-school Philosophy Club, which suited her just fine. For the first time in years—since elementary-school friends had faded or moved away—they both made new friends. Luci and Lorna noticed the change in their moods—how they talked more about school and laughed more and seemed generally more engaged—and this alone erased any fears either of them had had about moving and, by extension, the trip to Mars. Secretly, Luci realized she had been afraid to leave her old house, but now she saw that the ghosts and dust of years past had been slowly choking them.

After two solid weeks, the members of Bransen's project were given a week reprieve, to go back to their "normal" lives and reassess their involvement in the project. Bransen was nothing if not a stickler for everyone being onboard of their own accord. Mouse decided to stay, however, pointing out that tinkering in a garage to build a unique machine *was* pretty much his normal life—though he added that he might go out for beers more often and may sleep in a bit longer, while they were officially off the clock. And no one had a problem with that.

Luci also opted to stay, not wanting to take the kids out of school for a week. And, in fact, she and Lorna decided that Bransen Labs would now be their normal lives—Lorna was dispatched to return to their old town and see about getting their houses on the market, while Luci would make the necessary calls to relinquish her lab space and have Lorna collect her things from it.

Howard Fobell had grinned sheepishly and said that he'd rather not go back to his apartment, to which Carlos—having learned a lot about his colleague over the last two weeks—read between the lines and suggested Howard go and pick up his son from his mother's and spend the week out at Carlos's cabin. Howard's face lit up and had anyone

been between him and the phone, they would've been unceremoniously bowled over as he dashed to it.

For his part, Bransen quietly took it all in and noted the supreme magic of synchronicity that had awarded him not only the brightest minds in science and mechanics, but also an entire team that really had no other life beyond science and mechanics. Exactly what they were doing is what was normal to them, and Bransen started to consider what would come next for the team, once the mission to Mars was over. He was now certain that disbanding it was not an option.

24. Bransen's Second Dream [\[top\]](#)

Bransen was in the woods again. It looked like the forest around Carlos' cabin, but felt entirely different. The wind was high, whooshing forcefully between the trunks and combing through the fingers of the canopy. The trees bowed and creaked, and Bransen was suddenly terrified a large limb would snap off and fall on top of him. He whipped his head in all directions, seeing only massive, bending treetops, and felt completely helpless: He knew he had to run, but he had nowhere to go.

"Bransen!" a child's voice called. He looked in its direction and saw Sophie von Embers, blonde hair trailing behind her in the wind, waving and smiling at him. "Over here, Bransen! You'll be safest under the mushrooms!" Then Carlos stepped from behind a tree and took Sophie's hand, urging her to follow him. He cast a glance at Bransen, recognized him, but maintained his dire expression. Bransen did not feel welcome, though Sophie smiled and waved at him again as Carlos pulled her out of sight.

"We're all here!" he heard a woman's voice call—Luci von Embers, he thought. "It's safe in here, Bransen! Mushrooms hold light under their caps!"

Bransen awoke with a start, breathing heavily. He fumbled for the pad of paper and pen he now kept on his beside table and scrawled sleepily, "Mushrooms hold light under their caps."

25. The Smart Creatures of the Wood [\[top\]](#)

Henry and Sophie, like all kids of their age largely surrounded by adults, felt the need to keep their own secrets. It was nothing conscious. There was no children's summit at which it was decided certain things would not be shared with their parents or their parents friends, but every night when they were supposed to be in bed, they'd meet in their shared bathroom and plan what they were going to do. Because every night since they'd come to Bransen Labs they'd had dreams—distinctive dreams that, at first, Henry had

found vivid and entertaining, but not real. Then he discovered that Sophie also was having vivid and entertaining dreams, and that her dreams were the same as his.

They were in a forest, in each dream a bit further along a path, surrounded by the sounds of wildlife, though none of the noises were recognizable. Around them, in the humid mist, they could see tiny lights, like sprinkles of diamond dust catching the sunlight. Sophie called them Tinkerbells, but Henry, with a less philosophical outlook, preferred to think of them simply as the Smart Creatures of the Wood. Until he had more evidence as to the form of the lights, he was not ready to attribute a physical identity to them.

At first, in the dreams, they just walked, taking in a lush tropical forest that was more red and pink than green. Then, slowly, over successive nights, they found the lights around them getting greater and greater in number, and the forest thinning as the path they walked widened. "Who would need a path here but us?" Henry asked Sophie once—one of the few times either had spoken in the dreams. Sophie had shrugged but had not slowed her pace.

"I think we're going to find a temple," she later said in the bathroom, one night after Lorna had gone back to settle affairs and Sophie's mom had gone out with Mouse, leaving the kids under the watchful eye of Bransen.

"Why a temple?" Henry asked, wrinkling his nose. "Why not an apartment building?" Sophie just shrugged again, smiled, and said, "I don't think whoever built the path wanted to *live* with the Tinkerbells. I think they went there to *be* with them, if you know what I mean."

Henry understood, but now it was his turn to shrug. "Who knows? Let's just go to sleep and find out, okay?" And without another word it was lights out and pillows for the children in Bransen Labs.

26. Beneath the Veil of Light [\[top\]](#)

Once Carlos realized that when he remote viewed the surface of Mars he actually was viewing a camouflage array of light that created the illusion of a lifeless planet, his journies became much more fruitful. Beneath the veil of light was a forest: a wide, vibrant forest that appeared to be teeming with life—and light. Lots of tiny drops of light that seemed everpresent in the air. He had been clued in to the true nature of the surface because, as he viewed the planet to find a good place for the mission to land, he could hear and smell things that he couldn't see. Given the nature of light, he assumed that as he—a being with a physical body—would use physical cover to hide himself, so might light beings use a form of themselves as cover.

His discovery was a twofold breakthrough: Not only did his realization allow him to "see" beyond the veil of light, it also described a fact he hadn't thought of before: Remote viewing would appear to project the person in some manner that maintained a form of physical interaction. Where before Carlos had imagined the remote viewer as some sort of ghost, he now had to consider that, while he was "away," he could be hurt. If his eyes could be deceived, why not his body harmed? Of course, Carlos also thought it could well be that he didn't understand much at all about his astral self, and this is the assessment Ana-loop would have agreed with, because Carlos had no idea how beings of light interacted with the physical world. In fact, he had little inkling of the true, particulate nature of light in the first place. And, by extension, the nature of his Radiance.

Carlos opened his eyes and sat with a knowing smile. He could hear Howard and his son in the kitchen, talking and making lunch (he assumed). Now Carlos knew why the government agencies kept losing probes and rovers: They didn't really know what they were trying to land on. He figured in his next session he would try and locate some of the wreckage, undoubtedly dangling from trees that looked like rocks and dust from Earth.

27. Deep-Space Ops [\[top\]](#)

General Rauchbach found himself in a sticky national-security issue. Quite simply, he was beginning to think that Admiral Thomas was (in a word) nuts and that Dr. Moore would say "yes" to anyone he thought would promote his career, whether or not he agreed with them. Things didn't truly come to a head, however, until the general witnessed an exceedingly heated argument between the admiral and the doctor over the reality of ion / plasma / nearly-the-speed-of-light propulsion. In short, Dr. Moore had actually found a voice with which to say "no," only because he had no idea how to deliver—or fudge—what the admiral had asked of him. And the admiral was nuts because he was not only discussing "deep-space ops" (so named, because they were blacker than black ops, and coincidentally tied to space exploration) with a person with a very low-level top-secret clearance, he was arguing vehemently and offering to show the doctor "some of the fucking UFOs we trot out nightly to fuck with the citizens of this God damn country."

"Admiral?" General Rauchbach cut in. Admiral Thomas used his finger to wipe the spit from his lips as he straightened and turned to the general. Dr. Moore's face was flushed, and he still couldn't believe the admiral wanted him to (A) develop a way to communicate with light beings and (B) develop it by the next morning because a military rocket would be on the surface Mars 24 hours from now.

"Maybe we should iron out the details later, eh?" the general said, glaring at Dr. Moore.

The doctor's face went from flushed to pale within seconds. "I think it's obvious that the problem here is not how fast we can get to Mars, but that our dear doctor has no concept of communication with light beings because he doesn't believe they exist. Right, doctor?"

"I wouldn't say that's true," Dr. Moore squeaked, standing up more quickly than he should have. He bowed his head to clear the dizziness, supporting himself on the table.

"Oh?" the general asked quietly (for once). "I think you're stalling. You thought you'd come here, give us a few answers that we wanted to hear, and have another notch for your resume, didn't you?"

Dr. Moore didn't answer and found it difficult to hold the general's gaze. Admiral Thomas was glaring at him, too, his eyes narrowed and malicious.

"Dr. Moore, your services are no longer needed," the general said definitively. "Your clearance will be revoked in an hour, so I suggest you gather your things and leave, or else be arrested for trespassing at a secret military installation."

Dr. Moore opened his mouth to protest, saw that the general was quite serious, and so instead took his advice and skuttled from the room posthaste. Then General Thomas wheeled on the admiral. "And you need to do two things. You need to review your obligation to this project until you understand the consequences of discussing deep-space ops with the likes of *him*. And you need to get me Howard Fobell. Fail on either account, and I *will* report your outburst. Understood?"

The admiral was still in the room glowering long after General Rauchbach had left.

28. Prisms [\[top\]](#)

John Fobell (who was to have been Johannes Fobell, after Kepler, save that his mother thought it sounded "too Dutch or something," one of the many points in their marriage Howard had not argued) was worried. His father had gone for a walk in the woods before breakfast, but had not returned. It was not unusual for him to take long walks, even doze off under some shade tree or other, but this morning he had explicitly said he was just taking a quick stroll to the creek and back, because he and John were going to take a lengthy hike after breakfast. And now Howard's breakfast was stone cold and John was left playing with the remnants of scrambled egg and home fries on his plate, worried about his father.

It had been only 18 months since the divorce. Why it had taken his mother over 17 years to decide she couldn't put up with her husband's work schedule confounded John, but his

dad, as usual, had seemed to understand. Privately, he had let slip a few tears and said, "I'm sorry, son, that I let our perfect life slip away." John, then 16, hadn't the slightest idea as to how he was supposed to react. For his mom's part, John came to understand that his father's work was really just the candy-coated excuse —what she actually had come to despise was his long walks, constant talk of dreams, and his "attempts to communicate with that God damn lightbulb in the garage." In short, she felt he was going slowly mad and she didn't want to be around when he snapped. But that, John felt, was just another candy-coated truth, perhaps closer to the heart, though still not the killshot.

It was his work, and it was that his work seemed mad to outsiders, and it was that, now John was grown, he'd begun to concentrate more on the work (or the madness) than his family. His mother's divorce papers had been a cry for attention, and though his dad had heard it, he couldn't help himself. That's when the tears had come, and the strange comment, followed by the equally strange promise, "I'm almost there, Johnny. As soon as I can breakthrough, everything will be alright again."

Fortunately John knew his dad wasn't talking to any God damn lightbulb. It was better described as a prism, that whirred and flickered as his father meditated. He wasn't mad, he was living proof of why hermits are, by necessity, solitary people. And when his wandering in the desert was over and the hermitage closed, John was sure their perfect lives could resume. Sometimes, that was all that kept him going, at least.

"Where is he?" Carlos suddenly cried, storming into the kitchen and scaring John out of his reverie. "Your dad—where is he?"

John leapt to his feet, his face blanched. "He went for a walk... I... I don't know." Carlos glanced at the untouched breakfast plate on the table across from John, then stared thoughtfully at the frightened young man.

"I just had a vision," Carlos whispered. "I think he's been kidnapped."

"What?" John started for the door, but Carlos grabbed his arm and turned him back.

"No use running randomly out there, John. Besides, I know who took him and where they're going. Don't worry—he's perfectly fine. They need him alive and at the top of his intellectual game."

"Who does?" John breathed.

Carlos' lips twitched around a smirk, "Uncle Sam..."

29. Mouse's Machine [\[top\]](#)

Mouse was getting restless on planet Earth. He'd been hired to get a mission to Mars, and he couldn't wait to go. His only problem was that the machine he'd been cobbling together (via a running tab at a junkyard 35 miles away) didn't seem like it would do much in that capacity. At least, not in any traditional sense. He supposed he'd been expecting a sci-fi rocketship of some kind, but when he stood back beside Luci and Bransen and looked at his machine, he knew damn well it wouldn't budge an inch under its own propulsion—if it had any means to.

"It's not right," he decided. Bransen shrugged and tried to look optimistic. "Well, it's certainly not from the pages of *Amazing Stories*," he agreed.

Mouse shook his head and scratched his beard. "But those diagrams were really just circuits. I mean, I could make this thing prettier, I'm sure, but all I did was build the circuits then connect them together, and this is what sort of grew around them..."

Bransen shuffled his feet and shrugged again, winking at Luci, who smiled kindly. "So, Mouse, let's just turn it on, eh? See what happens? I mean, you're sure it won't, well, blow up, right?"

Mouse sighed heavily and pulled a well-worn sheaf of diagrams out of his back pocket. He flipped through them until he found a page near the end, which he handed dismissively to Luci. "This is labeled as the power source, but I'll be damned if I can build it. It's not *any* kind of schematic I've ever seen or dreamed of."

His choice of words privately intrigued Bransen, and the mission's founder moved in to look over Luci's shoulder at the paper. Luci's brow was wrinkled in mild disbelief and confusion, which caused Mouse to scoot in, too.

"What is it?" he asked. "Do you know what that is?"

Luci looked up at the machine, her mouth agape, then back at Mouse, and said in a hushed voice, "Yes. But it's... It's chemical. It's psilocybin."

"What's that?" Mouse asked, glancing at Bransen, who was nodding slowly, his own mouth now agape.

"Liberty Caps," Luci breathed. "Magic mushrooms..."

"I'll call my lawyers," Bransen declared and hurried from the room.

30. Wine and 'Shrooms [\[top\]](#)

Mouse would never have guessed that he would like wine, much less that the word could ever appear in a phrase with "bar," but then he'd never guessed he'd ever have a date with someone as intelligent and beautiful as Luci von Embers, who would take him to a wine bar. In fact, after "cleaning up a bit," the only thing that felt like his domain to Mouse was the fact that he was discussing 'shrooms in said bar, beverage-of-choice aside.

"So yeah," Mouse concluded, "and that's also the *last* time I ate a 'shroom."

Luci grinned over her wine glass, glad for once that she didn't have to act all parental. "Well, you know, Bransen lawyer's did a bang-up job of getting clearance from the FDA to use them for scientific purposes."

"Yeah—what about that? I mean, I've never met a government agency that worked that quickly. He must be using 'shrooms somewhere else in his labs, ya think?"

Luci shrugged, not as used to conspiracy theories as was Mouse, who, even now, worked into the wee hours of morning and tuned in AM talkshows. What neither of them knew is that Carlos had suggested, after Bransen's first mushroom dream, that he get the wheels in motion for such experiments. That, and Bransen Labs had managed to make a few friends over the years, which helped speed up the process a bit. And Bransen's lawyers had informed him, when he called, that—coincidentally—the clearance to test the chemical properties of naturally-occurring psilocybin had just come through.

"So what do you think it can do for the machine?" Luci wondered. "I'm not really a chemical engineer..."

Mouse grinned and took a huge gulp of wine, wiping his lips on the back of his hand. "I have no idea, Luce, but now I know what it is and where to put it, I say with go with Bransen's idea and turn it on, to see what happens."

"And what if it *does* blow up? I mean, if you have no idea what it's for, how do you know what it'll do?"

Mouse shook his head reassuringly. "Nah—the rest of the diagram is all about circuits, trading and building energy. The output looks like a laser setup to me."

"Trading and building energy to output a laser? *That* sounds pretty explosive."

"Well, we'll use a quarter of whatever the diagram calls for in the psilocybin department. I don't think that Ana-whomever would make us blow ourselves up, do you?"

Luci didn't answer, but smiled warmly instead. The wine was starting to go to her head and she suddenly didn't feel like discussing work. "This is fun, isn't it?" she veritably purred. Mouse felt his heart begin to pound in his throat, but managed to squeak, "Yes, it is," before downing the rest of his wine and signalling for another glass.

31. Semantics [\[top\]](#)

Carlos used the word "kidnapped" to inspire a sense of decisive action, but in reality, Howard had been met in the woods by two men who had alerted him of a Very Important Meeting at his old lab, as well as a carefully worded loophole in the contract he thought he had voided, and consequently, Howard followed them of his own free will. He was even allowed to use the phone in the car on the way to the airport to call his son and explain this to him. John wasn't particularly happy (having looked forward to a long walk in the woods with his dad), but knew that, for the time, this was par for the course, and he had to support him.

"Why don't you meet me back at Bransen Labs tomorrow?" his dad's voice digitally wavered over the phone. "You can head back in with Carlos."

"But won't that just be me sitting around in a strange place, waiting for you to get off work?" John wondered.

"No, no—it's a very open environment. Two of the other members of the team have their kids there, and neither of them are even teenagers yet. It'll be nice to have you around and watch me work."

When John hung up and excitedly relayed this to Carlos, he, too, thought it was a smashing idea, and apologized for scaring the youth, explaining that in his vision, he simply had seen Howard getting into a car with an expression of duress on his face. John understood, but something in the back of his subconscious made a note about the incident. Perhaps it was the sharp stillness of Carlos's eyes, or the way his jaw held firm as he made his explanation, or perhaps it was the way he held his hands—all subconscious cues to something for which John couldn't find the words.

And as they drove back to Bransen Labs, John found himself going through the motions of escape should Carlos end up being the true kidnapper.

32. The Problem With Keeping Secrets [\[top\]](#)

Howard looked happy enough when he entered Bransen Labs the next morning, but something in the flush of his face belied what Carlos would have called "duress." Everyone on the team dropped what they were doing to greet him—shake his hand; pat him on the shoulder; make sure it was really him—and his son veritably flung himself at his father, hugging him tightly.

"Whoah!" Howard cried, stumbling a bit and dropping his briefcase. "Was I gone that long?" He laughed thinly and adjusted his glasses on his nose, then nodded at the smiling faces around him. "Yes, well, my former employers seemed to think I had forgotten my obligations to them. It was a bit scary in that I know how people can—shall we say?—*disappear*, but all-in-all, it didn't take me more than three hours to convince them they were wrong."

"What did they want?" Carlos demanded, backing down again as soon as he realized how forceful he'd been.

"Don't worry, Carlos—I don't think they're coming for you next," Howard chuckled. "They wanted to know how to communicate with conscious light."

"So they're onto us?" Mouse wondered. He was still fiddling with some machine part or other, slowly wiping oil from it.

"Oh, sure," Howard replied dismissively. "Or rather, we're onto *them*, and they know it."

"So what did you tell them?" Carlos asked. Howard shrugged and picked up his briefcase.

"Nothing much. They wanted to know how to talk to conscious light, so I asked if they had now accepted my theories, to which they answered that I didn't have the clearance to be told. So then I pointed out that if they didn't tell me what they wanted, I couldn't help. We went around like that for a couple of hours, and I finally told them that to communicate with light they should probably use light, and that my disclosure agreement with Bransen labs didn't allow me to say more."

"Hm," Bransen grunted. "But now they may pull 'National Security' and take our work..." But Carlos and Howard both were shaking their heads, denying any such thought.

"No way," Howard summarized. "They pull that and we go public, warrant or whatever in hand. That would force them admit the reality of UFOs and extraterrestrial intelligence, which they aren't about to do."

"Couldn't they silence us, though?" Mouse suggested. "I mean, if they claim national security, couldn't they also make it illegal for us to talk?"

"These are people who don't like paper trails," Carlos replied, nodding at Howard. "So I really wouldn't worry about that. What I *would* worry about is a break-in." He turned to Bransen and narrowed his eyes, "How tight is the security at this place?"

33. The Temple of Radiance [\[top\]](#)

Ana-loop wanted to meet the small ones she had seen in the forest. The tall one, which called himself "Carlos," was engaging enough, but Ana-loop could sense a stronger Radiance in the other two, as they stood dumbfounded at the edge of the wood, gazing at the massive Temple before them.

If Ana-loop counted things such as years, she would have told Carlos that it had been thousands of them since any of the material beings from Earth had visited the shrine. So long, in fact, that many of her kith and kin no longer believed that beings from Earth had ever been there, despite the evidence. "They are far too interested in war and wealth," the philosophers among her kind pointed out. "They have not yet evolved to the point of meaningful contact." As to who had built the Temple of Radiance on Mars—well, that was shrouded in a mystery as thick and illusive as the web of light they spun to cover it.

But that was the key: *Meaningful* contact. Carlos, like so many before him, had made contact, but not on an equal (and thus meaningful) level. He was in awe. He was thunderstruck. He was too quick to a sense of worship for mutual education. But the small ones—they, too, were in awe, though in a different way. Their awe was joy. Their awe was possibility. They were ready to learn—and teach.

Henry and Sophie unconsciously held hands as they stepped into the open. The Martian sun was bright and warm and, in fact, neither child equated their dream with Mars. The sky was blue, brushed with thin wisps of cloud, and beneath it the Temple glistened like snow—or like the Tinkerbells, Sophie thought. Henry recognized it as a step pyramid (he couldn't remember the fancy word for it), the likes of which were dotted throughout South America and the world.

"Nine steps..." he whispered.

"What?" Sophie asked, tugging lightly on his hand.

"Nine steps. Three times three—it's math, right?"

Sophie wrinkled her brow and shook her head slowly, "I don't think so. Three, five, seven, nine—that's philosophy."

Suddenly a very bright light—like a hundred Tinkerbells—appeared at the top of the pyramid. The children shielded their eyes and stepped back, but something in the white pinkness calmed them, and they didn't run. The light floated slowly down and came over to them, hovering not ten feet away. It was bright, and they tried not to look at it, but couldn't help themselves. Sophie could see a face in it—a kind, feminine face, smiling at them. Henry saw numbers, floating and spiraling away in random order. Both smiled back at the light.

"Hello, little ones," a voice seemed to say, from everywhere and nowhere. The children glanced at each other to make sure they'd both heard it, then looked back at the light.

"Who are you?" Sophie asked, at the same instant that Henry gasped, "What are you?"

And Ana-loop was pleased with their questions.

34. **Circadia X** [\[top\]](#)

John Fobell, it turned out, knew breathing systems—another synchronicity that made Bransen smile, which had been uncovered after Bransen's insistence that they "bring the rat back alive." John, in the scant time since his father's departure from the family, had discovered scuba diving—initially to explore the shipwrecks that dotted the Great Lakes like grapeshot—and with it the concepts of rebreathing and various other forms of artificial air. In fact, he had designed his own rebreather, devoid of moving parts and half the weight of its nearest competitor. Howard had glowed with both pride and astonishment.

And so, between John and Mouse, they had built a rat-sized pod that could keep its occupant alive for up to six hours, and Howard and Carlos had added the necessary components for remote-control between Earth and Mars. According to the design model (and a brief test of the machine, which Mouse had inexplicably dubbed Circadia X), they would simply drive the pod into the beam of light emanating from the machine and—assuming they pointed it correctly—end up on Mars. This, Ana-loop had assured them, would be accomplished in "too little time for you to measure." Nobody really knew how this was possible, or even what the pool of extracted psilocybin was for (though it did appear to glow as the beam of light passed through it, and certainly evaporated due to the same), but Ana-loop assured them it would work. Her cryptic reply had been "one way for your body, the other for your Radiance." To say the PISA Mars Team was

nervous about the experiment would be a vast understatement.

Still, in the name of science, they said a small prayer for a lab rat scratching away in a small pod, turned on Circadia X, watched the psilocybin glow, and drove the pod into the beam of light. The moment pod met light, it simply vanished.

"My God, it's gone!" Howard shrieked, coining what was to become the most-quoted phrase of the PISA Mars Team. But in the heat of the moment, Howard dashed over to his computer and tapped away, searching for the signal from the pod. Just over 25 minutes later, the unthinkable happened: Howard received the uniquely-devised pod signal from the surface of Mars.

"Jesus, the rat's alive!" he uttered, which surely would have become as popular as his previous statement, had anyone heard it. "It's alive!" he cried out loud instead. "It's alive and it's on Mars!"

Bransen was smiling ear to ear, but stepped calmly before his cheering team, held up his hands, and said quietly, "That's absolutely fucking wonderful, guys. But now let's bring it home."

It took the team over three hours to remotely navigate the pod back to the on-again / off-again beam of light. For a harrowing half hour it appeared the separate spins of the planets were going to go against them, but then the scratchy, almost-worthless camera they had hastily installed managed to help the pod lock onto the beam and auto-pilot to it. But before they received radio confirmation of this, the pod was back in Bransen Labs, instantly reappearing with a small thud.

And Jesus, the rat was alive.

But while the PISA Mars Team broke out the champagne and toasted a rat, General Rauchbach and Admiral Thomas were trying to make sense of an eight-foot-wide beam of light that had, for the past four hours, intermittently burst from the vicinity of Bransen Labs. The media, too, had noticed, and the bristling crowd of cameras and microphones at the gates of Bransen Labs soon required a small deployment of police and Bransen Security to control.

35. Mouse on Mars [\[top\]](#)

The media didn't get truly excited until two things happened: 1) Bransen labs sent a monkey to Mars and back—alive; and 2) NASA admitted that PISA appeared to have beat them at their own game. Bransen shielded the team from most all media inquiries,

so they could work on bigger and better pods, and remained suitably vague on the intricacies of Circadia X (especially the "secret" ingredient of psilocybin, which, in the name of science, they confirmed the need of to ensure that something alive and testably sentient (like, say, a dog from death row at the pound) made it to and from Mars alive—or at least *whole*, as it may be better to say).

And the media didn't have a true feeding frenzy until three weeks later, when Mouse proudly stepped into the pod he and John had assembled, locked and sealed his spacesuit and seat belts, gave the team the thumbs up, and smiled nervously. He had been selected—or rather, he'd volunteered—to go because, as he put it, "I have nothing here to lose," a comment which earned him a stern and slightly miffed look from Luci, which was explained better to the team moments later when she received a goodbye kiss. On the lips. (Causing Sophie and Henry to cheer and giggle.)

Unbeknownst to the media, Carlos Resua was absent from the farewell because he was already on the surface of Mars—at least in spirit. It was one of the "intricacies" the media didn't know about, being an experiment to find out if a remote viewer could be physically seen. It also helped that he could verify where they had sent their LETs (laser-emitting targets), in order to ensure the beam of light brought Mouse out at a suitable location, and also gave them something to aim for when they brought him back.

The last piece of the puzzle that had to be in place before sending a man to Mars had been a RadialShade Communication Device (RS-CD), which Carlos and Howard had built and tested (and retested and double-checked and tested again) for use in both the LETs and the pods. The RS-CD allowed for real-time communications with Earth, which was imperative to a successful mission, according to the PISA Mars Team (and another of its intricacies Bransen refused to expand upon).

And so the time came, and in front of a phalanx of media cameras, Circadia 1 was driven by Mouse into an eight-foot diameter beam of light, and vanished instantly. Exactly 15 seconds later, the Resua-Fobell RS-CD brought the crystal clear words of the first man on Mars to Earth: "Holy fucking hell." This was all the media needed—and the duly censored words were almost as quickly whipping around the planet—but NASA had required that Mouse bring back a lump of "verifiable Mars rock" to prove he had been there, which is why they latched onto Mouse's follow-up comment: "Christ, Howard, I don't see any fucking rocks."

At which point Howard slipped on his headset and began to speak privately with Mouse.

36. First Impressions [\[top\]](#)

Within an hour of being the first man on Mars, Mouse was back at Bransen labs, a large chunk of Martian rock in a lunchbox-sized, airtight container and a huge smile plastered across his face as he gazed at the media throng on the other side of the decontamination chamber. (The chamber itself had been constructed at the last minute when one of Bransen's attorneys, on a tour of the labs before admitting the media, pointed out that bringing back a Martian virus wouldn't sit well with the public or the courts.)

And by that night, Dr. Angelo Moore was back on the debunking circuit, peppering his talk with phrases like "absolutely impossible" and "flies in the face of" and "just can't be true." He also threw out the commentary that he suspected PISA had "assembled nothing more than a team of Antarctic explorers who had retrieved a Martian meteor from the ice, and a team of actors and set designers to produce a play for the media." The scientific credentials of these "actors" he ignored, as did he the official certification from NASA that the Federal government (at least) believed PISA had sent a man to Mars and was now "working closely with Bransen labs to see how their technology may be of use to NASA"—a statement that was not yet true.

In his interview, Mouse described the journey as "completely uneventful," noting that once he'd driven over the event horizon of the beam (a phrase he'd learned from Howard Fobell), he saw a bright flash of white light, but by the time he'd raised his arm to cover his face, he was on the surface of Mars. Dr. Fobell, who also was present for the interviews, interjected that it appeared Circadia X acted like a massive "conveyer belt of light," and that they simply drove onto it and were whisked along to their destination at the speed of light. Sadly, this raised more questions than answers, and Dr. Fobell was frankly unable to explain "how the craft comes to a stop at the other end without crashing" or why the "apparent laws of physics appear to be wrong" (speaking of Einstein's relativity, that called for anything moving at (or near) the speed of light to be infinitely massive and thus require infinite force to move).

"All I can say," Howard concluded humbly, "is that I have long held the idea that any equation based on a measure of Time is inherently flawed, since Time does not exist, only our *measure* of Time exists." He said this, ironically, was explained by the theory of relativity, but added that $E=mc^2$ still had to be flawed, since, according to the theory, "light itself, being a particle, could not move at the speed of light."

Dr. Angelo Moore dismissed the whole thing as the "ravings of a bunch of crackpots and snake-oil salesmen."

General Rauchbach and Admiral Thomas listened intently and bickered often.

37. Debriefing Dreams [\[top\]](#)

"Jesus, it was beautiful, Luce," Mouse said later to Luci, during the team's private debriefing. Of all of them assembled, Henry and Sophie seemed the most enrapt, though none but them knew why. "I was in, like, a *jungle* or something. Swear to God, man—huge trees and all these ferns and lots of strange noises. I assume they were animals..." He shrugged and trailed off; Howard adjusted his glasses and lent in.

"Are you sure you were on Mars?" he asked quietly.

Mouse shrugged again, "That's where you sent me, right?"

"He was on Mars," Carlos spoke up. "I didn't mention this before because it seemed, well, impossible, but early into my Mars sessions I discovered that what we think we see when we look at Mars from Earth—or even probes—is really like a complex holographic image, created by the conscious light."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Bransen demanded, a soft edge to his voice.

Carlos glanced away, looking wistfully at Circadia X. "I just wanted that physical confirmation." He looked back at the team and smiled sheepishly. "I suppose I was afraid of discovering my remote viewing was... *off*."

"But you spoke to her," Sophie said, then clapped her hand over her mouth and looked at Henry apologetically.

"Pardon?" Carlos asked. Bransen, too, turned in his seat and looked at Sophie. The girl looked to her mother, who nodded supportively, so Sophie lowered her hand and took a deep breath.

"She told us you spoke to her and that you were off exploring, looking for wreckage or something. So you knew where you were..."

"Us?" Bransen checked, glancing at Henry. "And *who* told you?"

"Yeah—me and Henry. Ana-loop met us at the temple..."

Luci's face blanched at the thought of her child playing with Circadia X when they all were asleep; Lorna's face, too, had gone white, her note-taking pen poised above paper, but not moving.

"We go there in dreams," Henry supplied timidly, reading their faces. "We don't use the

machine."

"Mouse?" Bransen said rhetorically. "Sorry to change tacks here, but I think this meeting has somehow become even more interesting."

"Yes," Mouse whispered. "It certainly has."

Sitting silently in the corner, John Fobell narrowed his eyes and tried to read the expression on the face of Carlos Resua.

38. Light in Dark Corners [\[top\]](#)

Security was indeed tightened at Bransen Labs, and the patent for the Circadia X was secured. There was even talk about an emergency session of Congress to pass legislation regarding the use of any such device—a move for which Uncle Sam could not be blamed. In fact, had not the result of the experiment been so fruitful, historical, and globally important, the whispered chatter contended that PISA would've been shut down and the Mars team arrested. After all, had some unfortunate airliner passed through the beam and instantly been whisked to a barren, airless planet, there would've been trouble. Big trouble.

But as it was, PISA negotiated a sort of plea bargain, in that, while Bransen Labs owned the patent, NASA also would be given equal access to the design and other trade secrets. Bransen's attorneys assured him that accepting the offer was his only real option, and so with a heavy heart, Bransen put on his best smile and announced at a press conference the joint NASA-PISA venture to explore Mars. Contracts were signed, loopholes were closed, and in the end the world suddenly had two fully-functioning Circadia Xes and two wholly independent teams intent on exploring the red planet. There was, however, no agreement that NASA and PISA would share their findings with each other, which made it a joint venture in essence only. Bransen came to refer to it as "fucking SPA"—the Save PISA's Ass agreement.

So of course, PISA never shared its ongoing communication with beings made of conscious light, nor the location of the temple on Mars. They also failed to disclose how two children had been traveling to the planet astrally for as long as PISA had been investigating a trip to Mars, and failed to send out a press release about securing self-styled "astral physicist" Hiram McKenzie as a consultant. All of this did not slip the notice of Deep-Space Ops, however. In fact, one sunny Thursday afternoon, security tracked down Bransen and advised him that "General Rauchbach of the army or something is at the gate and wants to meet with you."

Bransen knew the name, asked that he be ushered to the PISA conference room, and quickly went in search of Howard Fobell and Carlos Resua.

39. A Traveler Arrives [\[top\]](#)

They all cropped up so quickly that none of the other team members knew that the *other* team members were in meetings. Within minutes of Carlos, Howard, and Bransen settling down to trade plausible denials with General Rauchbach, Luci and Mouse were in an unscheduled, closed-door meeting with John Fobell, and Lorna Jacobs found herself giving newly-arrived team member Hiram McKenzie a tour of his new digs, Sophie and Henry in tow ("Mommy, there's a monk at the door," Henry had said, and now was following him closely, mouth slightly agape).

When Hiram arrived, Lorna had been talking to the kids about their dream experiences on Mars, all the while taking notes and having them sketch with colored pencils what they'd seen. Until now, her notebook had contained lots of memorable quotes, but all of a science-minded nature (except the occasional philosophical tack of Carlos), and the sketches and drawings all had been provided by Mouse and Howard, and so had that dry, textbook sort of feel (though Mouse's tended to look a bit mad scientist, with arrows labeling things as "dope pool" and the like). But now they were getting into the meat of it—the preliminaries were over and Lorna was beginning to feel like *her* worth to the team was beginning to make itself known. Now she was recording explorations of an alien world.

Hiram had appeared silently, dressed in a black ankle-length robe and carrying a well-worn compact black leather suitcase. His hair was long, unkempt, and dark, and his beard full and rugged. Around his neck was a simple leather cord, from which hung a silver pendant that depicted a beehive resting upon a crescent with a blazing sun surmounting it. According to the IRS, he was a 40-year-old "caretaker and general contractor" who lived in a small vacation community near Green Lake, though under "other income" he had to report the royalties from the sales of the books that had made him famous: *Unknown North* (an esoteric treatise posing as a journal of his hikes in the woods he owned) and *The Singing Hand* (subtitled "travels at the end of the silver cord"). His simple and meditative lifestyle made Carlos Resua's "cabin" look like a Manhattan apartment—Hiram had no electricity or running water and tended or hunted his land for food. His life was indeed that of an ancient monk (and their clothing, he discovered, was really best suited for such work), but Hiram McKenzie was not a hermit. And in the occult circles which he served—and beyond, to those who had heard of him—he was greatly respected, which sometimes translated as "feared" and other times as "loved."

Lorna, with her back to the door, did not see him appear, but when Henry suddenly

looked up and sat straight with a start, she jolted to attention. "Mommy, there's a monk at the door," he whispered. Lorna quickly stood up and turned to face the man, smiling nervously. "Hi?" she said questioningly. "Can I...?"

"I'm Hiram McKenzie," he replied in a smooth voice, extending his hand and smiling warmly as he took a step toward her. "Mr. Bransen is expecting me...?"

40. Body of Light [\[top\]](#)

Hiram McKenzie was nervous. R'dau had told him that Ana-loop was making real contact with several people from his plane, but he'd had no idea the contact was connected to a project so scientific and high profile as PISA. His only condolence was that Howard Fobell was with the project, though R'dau did not think Howard had yet made the connection between Mars and his own astral dreams. In her opinion, in fact, Howard had yet to realize the true nature of his dreams in the first place. But what unnerved Hiram the most was that, while he was sure Bransen had read his books, he feared that he, and the team he had assembled, were blissfully unaware as to their Radiance. And if one didn't understand their Radiance, one should not dangle at the end of their silver cord. And Hiram knew, even if he spelled everything out in plain English, they would go ahead with their journey anyway, because people often mistake comprehension for understanding.

"Tell me again what you mean," Carlos Resua asked sharply. It was their daily end-of-day team debriefing, which today doubled as the introduction of Hiram McKenzie.

"I mean no offense," Hiram said quietly, his voice even and his eyes steady. "I just mean to make clear the distinction between remote viewing and astral projection. What you and the children have been doing is *not* remote viewing. It is much more involved—and *dangerous*—than that. It is astral projection." He took in a deep breath, glanced at the ceiling, and finally decided on plain English. "It is your soul leaving your body—what they, the light beings, would call a return to your Radiance." He could see they still weren't quite getting it (though the word "Radiance" did appear to resonate with them on some level), but were waiting for him to conclude his thought, which he did as simply as he could: "It is death, or as near as you can get and continue living."

"Jesus..." Mouse breathed, his tone very much the one of a man who, only in hindsight, sees the peril he had been in. "So those kids...?"

"That's why I suggested they not be here today," Hiram said in the same even voice. He glanced at all the faces watching him, noting with interest the almost imperceptible jealous rage written across the face of Carlos Resua. "This is something they appear able to do naturally and I'm afraid them *knowing* what they are doing would make them

nervous, and thus more liable to... trip up."

"And then what?" Luci breathed. Lorna reached over slowly and squeezed her hand. Hiram smiled, fascinated as he was by his constant need to help others balance respect—otherwise called "fear"—with ability.

"Most likely nothing. Just because you walk a tightrope without a safety net does not mean you will fall. But sometimes knowing the consequences if you *did* fall makes people more apt to misstep. These children—and Carlos—are naturals, however, so you have nothing to worry about."

Carlos sat back in his chair with a huff and crossed his arms. "This still doesn't explain why it's not remote viewing."

"Remote viewing is better described as remote *perception*—you gain images and insight, but by *feel*, not experience. Astral projection is *experience*. You are actually there."

"There in Radiance?" Bransen asked rhetorically, and Hiram nodded. "But Circadia X—Ana-loop mentioned it moved both body *and* this Radiance. So it is not an astral projection machine?" Hiram shook his head, no. "Then what is it?"

"I don't know," Hiram admitted. I've never studied this... *physical* side of astral projection before. But from what you've told me, I imagine that just as Radiance can leave a body, so can a body leave its Radiance. But a body without its Radiance is just a lump of meat, which would be useless for exploring Mars."

"So Circadia X keeps up intact?" Mouse checked, not sure he liked the thought of having built something so important. This wasn't just a light-speed car, then. This also was a soul machine.

"Yes," Hiram agreed. "But what gives me pause is that I'd never before thought about the opposite of astral projection. I mean, if we can send our Radiance out of body, then can something that *is* Radiance project themselves here *physically* and be, sort of, out of Radiance?"

They all sat silent, so Hiram summed up his thought: "We know that body can make light. But can *light* make *body*?"

41. Darkness at the Edge of Light [\[top\]](#)

"Hey—do you have a sec?" Hiram looked up at the sound of the voice and saw Carlos

standing in the doorway to his apartment. Their living quarters had been designed to be both comfortable and close, to simulate, at a sort of introductory level, the very close quarters they all assumed they'd be in during the trip to Mars.

"Sure," Hiram replied. He'd been unpacking his scant belongings, but put down what he was doing and moved over to his kitchenette table and motioned for Carlos to sit across from him. Carlos walked in his direction, but didn't immediately sit.

"Hey, you know, I just wanted to apologize if I came off a bit... *jealous* at the meeting," Carlos said. "I mean, I guess I *am* a bit jealous."

Hiram chuckled lightly, "Well, it's certainly all right—but why would you be jealous of me?"

Carlos shrugged and sat down, lacing his fingers on the table before him. "It's funny," he admitted. "I knew my role on this team would be very technical, but I always kind of saw myself as the team's spiritual guide, too, if you know what I mean." Hiram nodded slowly.

"Anyway, when you got here, I guess it became obvious that any role along those lines I may have had was now yours." Carlos sat for a second, collecting his words, then looked up and met Hiram's gaze. "And at first I think I balked because I know you are certainly the better man for the job..."

Hiram grinned warmly and shook his head. "That's the trouble with people like us, eh? We know ourselves too well." Carlos laughed and sat back, visibly relaxing. Hiram leaned in and continued, "Bransen came to me for advice on ensuring the safety of the children, once it became clear what they had been doing. When I told him that he had nothing to worry about—that Ana-loop was a good being and would watch over them—he became all the more intrigued. He didn't know I knew about her, or them."

"Yes," Carlos agreed. "He said as much to me when he got back. Do the others know?"

Hiram shrugged, "If they've read *The Singing Hand* they might. I name them all."

Carlos nodded thoughtfully. "I think we all better read it then, eh?"

"It's not required," Hiram said, smiling. "It's just my own personal journey. I believe Lorna is composing the team's book?"

Carlos nodded vaguely, but suddenly seemed preoccupied, leaning over the table again and twiddling his thumbs, his knees bouncing nervously. Hiram said nothing, but waited for the man to speak again.

"There is one other thing."

"Yes?"

"God, I don't know why I'm telling you this." Carlos stopped again, wrestling with himself over whether or not to complete his thought. "Jesus, Hiram, I'm still working for Uncle Sam."

"What do you mean?"

"They have a program they call Deep-Space Ops headed by a General Rauchbach. He came here the other day, and I think Bransen might suspect something now. But everything I've remote viewed—" he glanced at Hiram "—I mean, astral projected, I've shared with them, too."

Hiram nodded, his expression still complacent. Carlos' own expression suddenly shifted from one of guilt to something much darker. His brow furrowed and he shook his head slowly.

"But they're most concerned about Howard Fobell and his son, John. I am, too. That's why I can act as a sort of double agent. General Rauchbach understands; Bransen does not."

"Knows about what?" Hiram asked calmly. Carlos took a deep breath and looked him right in the eyes.

"Rauchbach and I know that Howard has long been in contact with... *them*. Only Howard has been making inroads with the wrong side, and John is innocently following suit. Howard has one of the Crystal Prisms, and he uses it to speak with the Goghantry."

Hiram's expression finally dropped and his face went pale; for a moment, he stopped breathing, his mouth dumbfoundedly agape.

42. Inside the Crystal Prism [\[top\]](#)

"What do you mean, a double agent?" Mouse asked, his voice rimmed with hysteria. His eyes shot all around the wine bar, glancing at every patron as if they were government spies.

"They *told* me—Carlos still talks to some military people," John repeated. "Tells them

everything."

"But they have their own Circadia X," Luci said, trying to calm everyone's nerves. "So, I mean, it's not like we have a lot to hide." Never having been prone to conspiracy theories, Luci was hard pressed to see the real drama here. They all knew both Carlos and Howard had once been employed by the government, both in hush-hush positions. And to her recollection, she couldn't honestly say she *knew* either of them had fully quit. In fact, had she been pressed, Luci would have opined that no one could *really* just stop working for Uncle Sam. He wasn't an employer who operated like that. He was more like the mafia.

"Wait—*who* told you?" Mouse checked.

But John's expression suddenly dropped and his eyes began to look everywhere but at his confidants. He was nervous, anyway, being in a bar (of any ilk), but now he realized he may have said too much. He should have spoken to his father first, but his father seemed too close to Carlos for his warning to make any difference.

"I think he tried to scare me away," John finally said, changing tactics. "That whole kidnapping thing—I think he made it up. I think he called the government spooks on my dad then told me he'd been kidnapped to try and scare me away or make me go back home and wait or something."

"Why?" Luci asked soothingly. "Why would he do that?"

John sighed heavily and sat silent, his eyes scanning the bar again. Luci and Mouse exchanged a concerned glance, but neither said anything.

"He did it because he knows *I* know about *them*. And he knows they've told me about *him*." John looked at them and could see he was making little sense. He began to over think things, then stopped and just barreled ahead: "My father has this thing he calls a Crystal Prism. He's been using it for years—as long as I can remember—to meditate. When he and my mom split up, for some reason he left the prism behind, probably because he didn't have anywhere safer to keep it in his new apartment. Anyway, I was afraid my mom would smash it, and I didn't know what it could do, but I knew it was really something to my dad, so I went and got it and kept it hidden in my room."

He stopped long enough to take a few gulps of water, then kept going. Now it was coming out, it felt good.

"Well, eventually, of course, I began to take it out and look at it, usually when I was

missing my dad, as if it would somehow link me to him. And then I began to notice colors in it, spiraling around and seeming to come out of it. At first, it terrified me, but then I began to get used to it, and I stared into it longer and longer, until one day, I looked up and I wasn't in my room any more. I was somewhere *else*."

"Where?" Mouse breathed. "Don't tell me you were on Mars?"

"Not *on* Mars, no," John agreed. "But I'm wondering now—maybe I was *in* Mars, or at least a cave on Mars. Where I was, it was definitely underground. But there were these huge... *things* there. Headless things that looked like walking trees, only covered with leather instead of bark. Their voices were high and strange and not English, but somehow I could understand them. And they told me lots of things—like how to build my rebreather—and sometimes... sometimes my dad would show up, too, and we would talk, and then when we'd talk on the phone later, he'd confirm that it was real."

"So what *are* these things?" Luci asked. "Are they like Ana-loop?" Six months ago, she would've had the boy committed, but her short stint on the Mars team had pretty well overturned every preconceived notion she'd had about the nature of the world and reality. Had not the team been there to go through it with her, *she* would have needed to be committed. They all would have.

"They're called the Gogantry," John replied, his brow furrowed in frustration. "And they've mentioned Ana-loop and someone named R'dau and others, but I'm not sure if they're related or what. But I *do* know they think Carlos and the government is trying to, well, get *rid* of them."

"I think we need to talk to Bransen," Mouse decided. "Sounds to me like Carlos may be using *us* to accomplish the government's dirty work."

John shook his head slowly, meeting their gazes. "I think we need to talk to *Hiram*."

43. The Science of Faith [\[top\]](#)

"What the *hell* are you going on about?" Bransen demanded in an uncharacteristically foul tone of voice. He stood over the table, perched and ready to pounce on Mouse and Luci, who both were having similar thoughts concerning the wisdom of going to Bransen, after all. "Gollums and crystals? We are a *scientific* team, are we not? We shouldn't be wasting our time on ... on ... *fantasy*." He huffed out a deep breath, shook his head dismally, and finally lowered himself into his seat, where he buried his face in his hands.

"Well, it's just..." Mouse began nervously. He didn't know much about science, despite

what he was doing.

"It's just that *you* brought Hiram McKenzie into this," Luci said for them both. "And *he's* not a scientist—"

"Carlos asked me to bring Hiram McKenzie into this," Bransen growled from behind his hands, re-emerging in order to cut them both another glare.

"*Carlos* did?" Mouse blurted, sucking in an apologetic breath.

"Yes," Bransen replied, either ignoring or missing the skepticism in Mouse's voice. "He's worried about the kids and I wanted to keep his mind on task."

"So Carlos knew they were astral projecting?" Luci wondered. Bransen sighed heavily and met her gaze.

"Those kids are *dreaming*. And while I admit they seem to have a certain degree of psychic ability, I do *not* think they are doing anything different from what Carlos does—which is, mind you, scientifically *proven*. The soul, and its ability to leave the body is not, however."

"How can you say that?" Mouse asked. "After what we've discovered? After what I saw? How can you just ... just ... be so *dismissive*? This is where science and religion *fuse*, Bransen—"

"Look, we're not here to start a new religion or wage some presumed battle against good and evil. If General Rauchbach and his goons want to waste their time tilting at Martian windmills, so be it. *We* are here to collect data and *make contact*."

"But this *is* contact," Luci argued. "What form did you think that would take? Did you think we'd walk into some Bransen-Labs-like facility on Mars and be ushered into a conference room to go over pie charts and medical diagrams? What we're dealing with is another *world*, Bransen, as different as it is similar to our own. And just as *we* are physical beings here on Earth, apparently not all life on Mars is like Ana-loop. And just because the only people to make contact thusfar have been the poets, mystics, and dreamers does *not* mean that is the only way in which contact can be made."

She stopped and gazed out the picture window at Lorna, who was pacing around Circadia X, taking notes and making sketches. When Bransen didn't reply, Mouse took up the cause.

"If you want to be scientific about this, then you need to acknowledge that Hiram McKenzie *and* Howard Fobell have been writing about the same beings—using the *same names*—for over a decade. You act as if I didn't journey to Mars and back at the speed of light—as if you still expect to *fly* there in a conventional spaceship—"

Bransen stood up without a word, or even a glare, and quietly left the room. Luci and Mouse shared a sympathetic glance, and it was Luci who finally smiled and said, "I don't think we'll be fired—don't worry." Mouse squeezed her hand and tried to chuckle.

And in the morning, each member of the team found a copy of Hiram McKenzie's *Unknown North* outside the doors of their rooms. Each member except Hiram, and he found a copy of Howard Fobell's *Alchemy of Light: The Science of Faith and Circumstance*, the very book Hiram had planned to procure for himself that very day.

44. Skeptical Games [\[top\]](#)

"Dr. Moore? I didn't expect to find you here." He turned at the sound of the voice and unconsciously tried to hide his whiskey on the rocks, despite the fact that he was in a bar after midnight with bleary eyes. It took him a second to focus, but finally he recognized the face of General Rauchbach. Had he not been drunk, he most likely would've jumped away from the man, as if burned.

"You knew I'd be here," he said instead, his tone aggressive. "You've been tapping my lines and reading my mail since you fired me."

"You were never fired, Dr. Moore. We don't fire people, people simply ... *leave*."

Dr. Moore spat out a derisive grunt and finished off his whiskey, slamming the glass down on the bar. The entire edifice he had created on debunkery had come crashing down with the unveiling of Circadia X. Or, more specifically, with the government's acknowledgement that the machine worked and—worse still—NASA wanted a piece of the pie. Suddenly Bransen Labs and PISA were the experts and Dr. Angelo Moore was nothing but a dunce with the proverbial egg on his face. His nearly continuous talkshow circuit had come to an abrupt end, and Dr. Moore had retreated to the seclusion of the local bar, where the patrons only watched TV if it involved guns or cars (and, preferably, both).

"So what the hell do you want, Rauchbach? Did I forget to sign some papers?"

"Not at all." The general sat down on the stool next to Angelo and motioned for the bartender. "I'll have the best beer you have on tap," he ordered, then turned to the doctor.

"What I want, Dr. Moore, is you to go with us to Mars."

Angelo stopped smirking, the offer coming through clear even in his stupor. "What the hell for? I get it. I was *wrong*, okay? Travel at the speed of light is clearly possible—"

"Dr. Moore, we need you to go because we need your ... ummm ... *insight*. We need someone of a traditional—and may I say, rational—scientific mind to come along. Keep us all in line. Make sure we're not ... *imagining* things."

Angelo narrowed his eyes and stared at the general as he paid the bartender and took a long draught of his beer. The general nodded appreciatively at what the bartender had served him, then turned again to the doctor, who still had eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Why? What the hell do you think's up there?" Angelo whispered.

"We don't know," the general admitted, sucking in a deep sigh. "What we *do* know is that PISA has now secured the services of Hiram McKenzie—"

"Jesus! Not *that* flake?"

"—and we sort of want to create the anti-PISA team, if you will. A *truly* scientific team. We want to assess real threats, not tilt at Martian windmills."

"Threats?" Angelo queried, then the liquor spoke up. "Sure. Fuck it. I'll go. Let's beat those PISA fucks at their own fucking game."

"Actually, Dr. Moore," General Rauchbach said evenly, taking another long sip of beer, "this is *our* game."

45. On the Road [\[top\]](#)

Ironically, the mass scrutiny of the media in the days after PISA announced putting the first man on Mars, coupled with the increased scrutiny after NASA confirmed the claim and "acquired" the plans for its own Circadia X, served only to diminish the story by the time the first full crew went to Mars three weeks later, again from Bransen Labs. It all seemed old hat to the media, which dutifully moved on to—even more ironically—covering the "news" of rapes, murders, celebrity entanglements, and political scandals. But this was fine with Bransen and the PISA Mars Team, because they were (in yet another irony) trying to keep a low profile. After all, high-stakes scientific endeavors didn't usually put their work in the hands of children.

But with the help of Hiram and Carlos, Henry and Sophie had managed to establish where on Mars the Temple of Radiance was, as this was the target Hiram, Carlos, *and* Howard had suggested they visit first.

"Shit, if we find a *building* up there, that'll blow my mind," Mouse had said, catching the distasteful gaze of Bransen who, despite the circulation of reading materials, still wasn't completely onboard with the whole science-nee-religion thing. Yet even Bransen had agreed that such a find would be, in a word, amazing.

"I don't think we can land right in front of the Temple," Henry had offered at the pre-flight meeting. "We're going to have to walk down the trail to get there."

"Why?" Hiram asked gently, but Henry could only shrug. Sophie, however, nodded in agreement with Henry's assessment, because while Henry still saw Ana-loop as numbers, she saw her as a living being. And living beings tending the protect their Temples.

"For the same reason my mom can't drive her car right up to the altar in a church," Sophie suggested. Carlos and Hiram exchanged a surprised glance for the depth of her analogy; Bransen rolled his eyes.

"Whatever," he said. "Look, we send Mouse and Carlos up first to make sure the area's clean—or whatever—and set up and test the positioning LETs. The rest of us don't follow until Howard has a lock on the LETs and RS-CD contact with Mouse and Carlos. Hiram—you just stand by and help Howard."

Everyone agreed—it was, after all, the very same plan they had concocted two days before. The pre-flight meeting was little more than a last confirmation that everyone was indeed on the same page. An hour later and the formalities were over: Mouse and Carlos were on Mars, contact had been established, and the area set for the arrival of the rest of the crew, including its grade-school guides.

Some national media outlet did happen to check in with Bransen Labs that afternoon, but the news the next day appeared on page five of the science section, and the only person who really cared was General Rauchbach.

46. High Flyers [\[top\]](#)

"Wow, it's completely different in person," Carlos said, looking as far around the canopy of trees (somewhere high in a thin mist) as his rebreather suit would allow.

"How so?" asked Mouse, his voice softer and crackly from the motorcyclists' radio gear they'd rigged into the suits for communications on Mars.

"I don't know," Carlos admitted, furrowing his brow. "The trees seem much larger in person. *Much* larger. I guess the astral body doesn't quite accurately translate its physical surroundings to the brain." He glanced at Mouse, who stood mouth slightly agape, holding one of the LETs, and added, "Or something."

"Well, I don't know, man, but this is where I was before. Nobody could forget those fucking trees." Mouse gazed up into the twilight sky, brushed with crimson and purple, and tried to see the tops. "How tall do you think they are? And why are they sorta pink?"

"Oh, they're not pink," Carlos replied with certainty. "No, that's one thing I get, now I'm actually here. I always wondered why it was always twilight when I projected up here, but it's not. I think the sky is an artifact of the light camouflage. And I think the pinkish color is, too. Look at one of those leaves closely—looks green, doesn't it?"

Mouse moved over to the nearest tree—a sapling, he would've called it back on Earth—and took one of the leaves in his gloved hand. Up close, it had no pink in it, but was a rich, deep green. He nodded thoughtfully and took another long look around, and he could see what Carlos meant: The pinkish hue seemed to hang in the air, coloring everything and nothing. As he gazed into the distance, he could see shadowy shapes moving, almost like apes in the trees—though these apes, by their motions, undoubtedly had wings.

"You think we're safe here?" Mouse wondered, trying to sound casual. "There's obviously life in this forest. And not no light beings either."

"Yeah—I saw them, too," Carlos said. "We'll just have to keep an eye out. And speaking of escaping, we should turn the pod around so we can just drive straight into the tunnel home, should the need arise."

"Good idea," Mouse agreed, handing his LET to Carlos and heading back to the pod. While Mouse turned it around so it faced where the entrance of the light tunnel should appear, Carlos lined up the LETs and filled in Howard and the rest of the team on their progress. Soon enough—too soon, for people who had been anticipating a several-month trip to Mars—the stage was set and the main ship was ready to go. Howard and Hiram fired up Circadia X, checked all the diagnostics, confirmed everything (twice) with Bransen in the main ship, alerted the ad hoc authority set up by the government that they were opening a beam, and then it was time for launch.

And like that, it was time to shut off the beam after RS-CD contact with the main ship on Mars had been established. For the first time, Howard was actually afraid. This wasn't a lab rat he was leaving on Mars, or one brave and pioneering man who had no family. This was the entire PISA Mars Team, and three of them were kids. And one of *them* was his own.

It was this hesitation—or perhaps, Hiram would say, this necessary synchronicity—that allowed a hapless flock of geese to cross innocently into the beam. Moments after the main ship had landed safely on the surface of Mars, and just after the rest of the team had got out of the ship, there was a sudden burst of cacophonous noise and the fluttering of wings as 13 migrating geese shot out of the tunnel and into the twilit sky. Lorna screamed and passed out (revealing the tender edge of her nerves, despite her brave face), Henry and Sophie leaped behind the ship and cowered, Mouse and Bransen whirled to meet the aggressor, and everyone else froze in place.

"What the *fuck*?" Mouse cried out. The beam disappeared and then Howard's voice piped into each of their headsets: "What the hell's going on? Is everyone okay? Lorna's diagnostics—"

"It's okay, I think," Bransen said slowly. "Some geese must've crossed into the beam. Lorna fainted, but she's coming around now and sitting up."

"Christ," Howard said softly. "So everyone's okay?"

"Yes."

"Except the geese? Jesus. What happened to them? Did they explode or something?"

"No," Bransen said, still speaking slowly as he tried to process what had happened to the birds. "They were shaken, but they all flew off. I can see them now—they've regrouped and are circling in the trees."

For several seconds there was no response, then Howard finally replied, "They're *alive*? Without spacesuits?"

"Yes, very much alive."

"But that's impossible!"

Bransen smiled as he watched the geese circling further and further away, very much alive and active and showing no signs of being under different atmospheric conditions. "I

know," he agreed.

47. Bransen's Third Dream [\[top\]](#)

The first two-hour team mission to Mars ended up being little more than a long hike into the forest and back, following a flock of 13 geese. The flight patterns of the birds were erratic, as whatever landmarks and leylines they used were suddenly gone, but they otherwise seemed to fare no differently than they would have on Earth. There was brief discussion of catching the birds and returning them to Earth, but as the flock moved higher and more distant, such discussion was short.

Upon safely returning to Earth themselves—exactly as they had practiced with Mouse over the last few weeks (Mouse wanted to change his name to Yo-Yo after a grueling week of going to Mars, and returning within 5 minutes, 12 times)—the team met to discuss more rationally the Goose Effect.

"It means the air and pressure and all that is just like Earth, right?" Mouse suggested. It wasn't conscious, but since he'd been to Mars countless times now, he felt somewhat of an expert on the planet's surface.

"It *suggests* that," Howard agreed scientifically. "Unfortunately, that doesn't gibe with the readings of our instruments."

"Maybe the light veil, however it's made, disrupts the instruments?" Carlos suggested. "Or maybe it interferes with them in a purposeful way...?"

The question was left hanging—"If something messes up our readings, then why doesn't it mess up the pods?"—and they all turned in for an early night. Bransen, for one, was asleep almost before he got into bed.

He dreamed of three white wolves in a forest—a forest he now recognized as Mars. They seemed quite tame, and as they approached him he felt comforted by his spacesuit, irrationally thinking it would protect him if they attacked. As they got close enough, he reached out to pet the nearest one, but the animal recoiled and snapped at his fingers. Without thinking, he fumbled with the glove, unscrewing the seal and removing it from the suit, baring his hand—and entire body—to the Martian air. But in the dream, all that mattered was petting the wolf—and now the wolf moved closer and tentatively licked his exposed fingers.

They wanted him out of the spacesuit.

The next day Mouse—after a long, and sometimes heated discussion as to whether he or Bransen should go—sat in the two-man pod without a spacesuit and contemplated the tunnel of light ahead. He trusted Bransen and he trusted what his own eyes had seen with the geese, but for the first time in many weeks he was scared.

"This is nuts," Luci whispered, torn between turning away and getting what could be her last look at Mouse. He smiled at her and gave a thumbs up, and then she blinked and the pod was gone. The team shared a guilty, hopeful glance, and Bransen stood biting his lip. The seconds bled in memory to minutes, even hours, but eventually the RadialShade flickered onto the monitor, instantly decoded to voice and fed out through the soundcard and speakers.

"It's alive!" Mouse cried, the joy in his voice unmistakable as he made reference to Howard's own joyful cry when they first had sent a rat to Mars. "It's alive and it's on Mars!"

"This changes everything," Bransen mumbled and motioned for Carlos and Howard to join him at the proverbial drawing board.

48. All Things Considered [\[top\]](#)

"What was it Ana-loop said about the psilocybin?" Hiram asked, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. "One way for your body, the other for your Radiance?"

"Yeah, something like that," Howard agreed. He turned a few knobs and dials and jotted down a few notes, his eyes scanning from monitor to monitor. The discovery that they could breathe and move around on Mars just as they would on Earth had indeed changed everything. For one thing, the missions were much longer now, and for another, the spacesuits had been modified to little more than jogging suits rigged out with vital-signs monitors that constantly beamed back stats to the machines on Earth. Everything seemed to be fine, and Howard turned his full attention back to Hiram. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh ... nothing, really," Hiram replied. "I've just long wondered about the role of drugs in the astral realm, as many of the experiences of addicts mimic my own. The most crucial difference being that, as I'm sober, I can readily distinguish between astral reality and what we're living now."

"That'd be helpful," Howard acknowledged.

"But the mission here doesn't seem to show any of the side effects of taking an

hallucinogen."

"Well, they haven't, have they? The beam passes through the psilocybin, but no one ingests it."

"Yes, I suppose." Hiram shifted in his chair and watched the undulations of the heart monitor output, deep in thought. "It's almost as if the use of such narcotics has become highly distorted. You can almost imagine, at some point in the very distant past, when the last true mystical priest died, and their followers knew what to use, but not what to *do* with it."

"Like a cargo cult," Howard said. Hiram looked at him quizzically, so he explained, "In World War Two, when we were island hopping in the Pacific, the troops would go in and basically take over an island for a few days, then take off just as suddenly, leaving behind broken machinery and radios and so forth—cargo—and the natives on the island—who'd never seen anything like it before—assumed the soldiers to be gods. When we went back decades later, to make war movies on location, the film crews were greeted as returning deities, and they found shrines made up of the garbage the soldiers had left behind. Literal shrines. The natives' religions had completely changed. They called them cargo cults."

Hiram nodded. "They had the goods but not the knowledge. Interesting. I've used music and tantric chants to facilitate astral projection, but drugs always seemed to me too dangerous, which I still believe. If you don't maintain your lucid consciousness, then you aren't really astral projecting, you're just drifting at the tenuous end of the silver cord."

"That part in your book scared me," Howard admitted. "The silver cord? These kids were tethered to life only by some etheric, conscious will to live?"

Hiram considering the phrasing and shrugged. "In a way, though it was never that dire. They were never in any danger of losing a sense of themselves and their lives, which is the key—and which is why drugs so often lead to death. Drugs make you dangle too close to the end, and without that sense of self, the cord can be broken very easily."

"And when it breaks, you die?"

"In a word..."

"Well, I think we're all okay," Howard said, smiling and tapping the heart rate monitor. "No one's under any kind of stress."

"Oh, no, they wouldn't be," Hiram chuckled. "Perendjo is a very peaceful place."

Howard smirked and cut Hiram a sidelong glance. "Perendjo? What I know as the Lands Above? Did you ever think it was Mars?"

"Never, in all my travels," Hiram replied, smiling widely himself. "Wonderful, isn't it?"

49. Gun Runners [\[top\]](#)

The NASA team took guns to Mars. Oh, the public wasn't made aware of this ("scientific instruments" can look like just about anything), but Dr. Angelo Moore was well aware and a bit unnerved. The guns meant either NASA was nuts, because they expected to meet something unsavory, or not nuts, meaning they *would* meet something unsavory. Going to Mars under either conditions did not help Dr. Moore sleep well.

"Angelo!" General Rauchbach barked, nudging the doctor, whose head had slipping onto the General's shoulder. Everyone else in the bus jumped, and the five soldiers unconsciously readied their guns. "I didn't pay you to come to Mars and sleep!"

Dr. Moore came slowly awake and looked out the windows of the bus (which the military personnel called the "tiki," since it was most rightly a TK-13 vehicle). He had said the word "impossible" 26 times since they had arrived on Mars, and eventually his brain had shutdown, putting him into a deep sleep where he could pretend they were rumbling cross-country, not across some alien world.

The Mars Dr. Moore and the NASA team arrived at was more in keeping with what they had expected: Dry, desolate, desert-like, and completely devoid of life. But little did they know that the area they had chosen to land at was the exact area which the veil of light had been modeled upon—a planet-wide disguise based on the most univiting landscape on Mars. The only plus to landing there was that there was no interference with their instruments, and the NASA team had quickly established that the air and pressure readings were the same as Earth (with just a tad less oxygen, though no different from being in Colorado)—a fact they failed to report to either PISA or the public. It had, however, elicited the first six impossibles from Dr. Moore.

"Where are we heading?" Angelo asked groggily. "Haven't we been driving forever?"

"We've been driving for an hour, Dr. Moore, and we're heading to what appears to be a signature of plant life."

"That's impossible—"

"So you say." General Rauchbach cut him a look and Dr. Moore snapped his mouth closed. "We're almost there," the General added. And no sooner had he spoken than the driver of the tiki cried, "Jesus!" and brought the vehicle to a sudden halt.

"What?" the General demanded, jumping up and taking three steps to the front of the bus. He gazed out the window and saw that the parched, cracked land ended abruptly not 30 yards in front of the vehicle, and in the chasm that opened up and stretched further than the eye could see, there could be seen the very top of the lush canopy of a vast forest.

"I thought it was a mirage," the driver whispered, "so I just kept driving."

"That, Dr. Moore, is impossible," the General said, turning and facing his team in the bus.

50. Ulterior Motives [\[top\]](#)

John Fobell hung back with Luci, Lorna, and Mouse while the kids led them all through the forest to the Temple of Radiance. Bransen and Carlos were having a heated conversation just in front of them—it seemed Carlos was suggesting that there were areas of the planet best left unexplored—which suited John fine, as their attention was diverted.

"I don't know," he whispered. "You can hear him—I think he knows something about what's up here that he wants to keep it hidden. And I think the government knows about it, too."

"You still think he's a double agent?" asked Mouse. This was a theory Mouse had much more readily accepted than had Luci. For her part, Luci still figured they should trust Uncle Sam if he said not to go somewhere. Lorna, who had only heard about John's suspicions secondhand from Luci, kept quiet.

"Look, I just don't think he wants us to find that cave or whatever where the golgantry are. I think he's afraid we'll have more in common with them than with this Ana-loop."

"Well, you said these golgantry are physical, right?" Luci opined. "So I suppose we would have more in common with them—but perhaps we don't want contact with beings we have a lot in common with, because we wouldn't learn much that we don't already know."

The foursome was silent for a few minutes, lost in private thoughts. Ahead, Henry and Sophie were laughing and skipping, jumping at the pinpricks of light that had been following the group since they had entered the path to the Temple. The little lights were certainly playing with the children, and the children knew it, but Luci got the sense that the lights were also there to watch them; to make sure they stayed on the right path.

"Did you guys read Hiram's book?" Lorna finally asked sheepishly. The others exchanged a guilty glance, and Mouse finally answered for them: "No. I guess we all figured we already believe him, so we didn't need to read his book."

"Well," Lorna continued, her voice a bit more confident. "He mentions these golangtry, John. He mentioned the Lands Below—a vast area of complete darkness where only the golangtry live, save for a woman who tends a lighthouse. Hiram said if you ever find yourself in the Lands Below, you should just follow the light to the ocean, where this woman would help you get back to the Lands Above, which is here—this forest."

"What else did he say about them?" John asked. He felt sure Hiram McKenzie would be on his side.

"He said they were evil, John," Lorna said in an apologetic tone. "He said they are purely physical beings with no inner light who were banished to the Lands Below."

John shook his head. "I don't believe—"

"And he said they want nothing more than to get out, and away from the light beings. He said they want to claim Earth as their own, just as the light beings had taken what we now know is Mars."

No one said anything until John finally huffed and shook his head again, mumbling, "That's ridiculous. They're *helpful*..." as he increased his pace enough to move away from them, past Carlos and Bransen, so he could walk alone, just behind the children.

"Is that true?" Mouse asked Lorna. "That sounds awfully Biblical, y'know?"

"Does that make it unbelievable?" Lorna shot back, perhaps more vehemently than she had intended. "I mean, those stories came from somewhere, Mouse."

And with nothing else to say, the three of them kept walking in silence.

AN1. Author's Notes on Inspirations [\[top\]](#)

This is long overdue, but I really can't take the story any further forward until it's off my chest: This Mars is not mine. Perendjo was invented by [David Christopher](#), fleshed out slowly by him over the course of many stories, the first published of which was "The Cottage of Misplaced Time" (*Lost Worlds*, 1997). Since then, he has produced five other short stories and two novels that are set, at least in part, in Perendjo. Most of these manuscripts remain unpublished, though a few are available through his [Graveworm Press](#) imprint, but it is my good fortune to know David personally and thus have read every one of them.

It was not my intent to filch the idea of Perendjo, but as is the way with this flog experiment, the stories tend to end up going their own directions, my input be damned. I did consciously insert the character of Howard Fobell as a nod to David (who in 2000 used the last of his petty cash to print and bind my novella "[Am I the Matter?](#)"). Howard was first introduced in David's short story "A Whisper in the Wire," and I thought the character summed up best how I feel about David's parallel worlds hypothesis: It's a fine theory, as long as it can be tested. In "A Whisper in the Wire," Howard does just that, putting an artifact from Perendjo through scientific scrutiny.

Somewhere along the line, however, it became increasingly apparent to me that, through Bransen's dreams, I was envisioning a full-on Perendjo-like world on Mars, cleverly disguised by those light beings who would rather keep humans in the dark. And so there came a point where I had to be accused of derivation (if not plagiarism) or just accept that, like followers of Lovecraft, I was basing an original work on someone else's ideas. David had no problem with my borrowing his world and admitted that it might be good for him, as he felt his own visions of Perendjo had stalled of late and it would be good "to get a realist's take on such fantasy." His only caveat was that I include Hiram McKenzie in my story, because he wanted to see how I would handle a "truly and completely mystical character." (Hiram had been introduced in David's 2002 story "Hiram McKenzie's Grave.") I agreed, and I hope everything is coming out to his liking.

Lastly, I must note that many of my concepts about Perendjo are from an unfinished Perendjo novel by David called, fittingly, "The Untold Story." I had the honor of reading his first draft of the tale, and I can attest that it's a whopper (though David thinks "the whole second half needs to be completely rewritten"). Finally, my landing site for the NASA team is none other than Oizus, and while I may never call it that in "Unknown North," rest assured

that it is a way for me to pay homage to what is still my favorite (if peripheral) Perendjo tale, which you can read at [David's Perendjo site](#).

There. Now I don't feel like such a thief. I just hope David can use any of the original ideas in "Unknown North" to his own equal benefit. —Jack Beltane (Feb. 21, 2005)

51. Credible Impossibilities [\[top\]](#)

There was little to do while they waited for the recon missions to return, and Dr. Moore found himself watching General Rauchbach while the general watched Mars. They were sitting at the top of the cliff over the forest, cross-legged on the cracked and thirsty land, the main tiki a shadowed hump in the setting sun. On the other side of the vehicle the rest of the science team were busy taking samples of the same dirt over and over again. And if Dr. Moore squinted really hard, he found he could just make out the plumes of dust kicked up by the recently-arrived two-man recon vehicles ("recoes").

"I hope it doesn't go sub-zero when the sun sets," the general said, more to himself than anything. "We'll have to go home if that happens." His eyes scanned the forest, the purple twilight sky over which hadn't seemed affected by the dying sunlight. It seemed to glow with its own luminescence.

"What happened to Admiral Thomas?" Dr. Moore suddenly blurted, as if the general's comment had been an invite to speak openly. General Rauchbach turned his stern gaze to the doctor, his expression saying everything by saying nothing.

"Admiral Thomas was removed from this project."

"Oh." Angelo ran his finger nervously through the dust in front of him. "Can I ask why?"

General Rauchbach sighed heavily. "He had too many preconceived notions about what we'd find and he was too intent on proving himself right." Dr. Moore glanced up at the general and got the distinct impression that he was talking more about someone else; a warning veiled as a story, it seemed.

"Then why am I here?" Dr. Moore asked, trying not to look nervous. He had to play the game, but he wasn't sure he knew the rules. "I mean, we all know / had what I thought was a clear idea of what we'd find."

"But Admiral Thomas let the pressure of being *right* affect his work. He could no longer function adequately on this project, and so he was removed. It happens quite often in Deep-Space Ops."

"I see."

"We have learned to save extreme bias for war, not exploration," the general concluded, his body language denoting that the conversation was over. Dr. Moore decided not to push the issue. After all, he was sitting with the general because his own preconceived notions about Mars had been shattered to the point that he couldn't rightly function with the rest of the science team, simply because he was afraid of what he would uncover.

"You are our spy," the general added quietly. "In order to debunk the other side you have to know the other side, without *becoming* it. The admiral had become his own worst enemy."

"But I was wrong," the doctor replied sheepishly. "Look around, general. This isn't what I expected. A *forest* on Mars, for Christ's sake?"

General Rauchbach smiled widely at Angelo. "Exactly, Dr. Moore. The fact that you can't believe your eyes says you still believe it to be impossible. We need that grounding, as I told you when I first asked you to join us. Only by being grounded can we be sure that what we're seeing is true. If you can't believe it and you still see it, then it must be there."

Angelo Moore wasn't entirely convinced, but the explanation did hold a certain level of credence such that he could let it go. For now.

"As an example, Dr. Moore, can you explain why the light over the forest isn't changing, even as the rest of the sky we see is growing darker?"

"No, sir, I can't."

"And yet you agree that its relative illumination has remained constant since we first noticed it at dusk?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose it must be real, and wouldn't you like to find out why?"

"Very much, sir."

The general grinned widely again and stood up, brushing the dust from his pants. "I better call the recoes and see what's up."

52. Hiram's Dream [\[top\]](#)

Hiram was aware of the dream, as well as the sounds and figures around him. He'd been here before, though he knew this more with a sense of *deja vu* than memory. Howard glanced over at Hiram's cot—both men effectively living in the control center for fear of missing an alarm, should something go wrong on Mars—and saw the man wriggling in his sleep. He smiled wistfully and went back to reading his book.

The figures circled Hiram. They were good, but they were angry. He could sense that they felt he had gone too far; allowed too many people in (as it were).

"This is why there is an initiation," he heard a voice say. As with the location, he recognized the voice, but only obliquely. "We can't just open the doors and let them all through. It could kill them."

"I haven't let anyone through," Hiram replied weakly. "I described what I've seen, but not how to get there. It was Ana-Loop who gave them the designs—"

"We have Ana-Loop," the voice said dismally. "She says you urged her to make ourselves known. You told her they were ready."

"Some are," Hiram said, the sound of defeat rimming his tone. "*Some* are..."

"We will have to leave them here now," the voice said. "We thought you should know."

"*Leave* them—?"

"We must close the portal, Hiram. We can't let anyone else in until they are aware of their Radiance."

"But how will we get them back?"

"You won't, Hiram. We will have to leave them here."

Hiram did not wake with a start; his eyes simply flicked open. He glanced to his right and saw Howard reading intently. Hiram waited. Seconds ticked by, and then the alarm

came—a slow, droning whine that indicated the RS-CD stream had been disrupted.

"Shit!" Howard said, jumping to his feet. Hiram sat up slowly.

"The communications are down!" Howard cried frantically with the intent of waking Hiram.

"Not down," Hiram replied soberly, approaching Howard. "They're gone, Howard. They've closed the portal."

53. Panic [\[top\]](#)

Hiram stood in the darkened control center and shone a flashlight into the conference room.

"See the way the light shines into the room?" he asked the small crowd assembled. There were murmurs of ascent, and the nervous sound of dawning realization as several in the group knew where Hiram was going with his example.

"Okay, Howard—close the door." The door to the conference room slowly snicked shut, cutting of the flashlight's beam at a wide circle on the wood-grain surface. "Can you see the light in there, Howard?"

"No," Howard called back dismally. "Can I come back out now?"

"Sure ... and someone get the lights, please." The fluorescent bars flickered back on above them and the assembled crowd—made up of PISA and NASA scientists—mumbled and murmured and compared notes.

"This is what they've done," Hiram concluded. "They've closed the door."

"But if they're on Mars, we can just go and get them, right?" Admiral Thomas stepped forward from the crowd, his face appearing more panicked than the rest, but also more aware. Hiram didn't know why, but he liked the Admiral and was glad he'd been reassigned to the project.

"Sadly, no. I had always wondered why I never knew the place I call Perendjo was on Mars. Well, now I understand: It's *not* on Mars."

"But—?"

"The *door* was on Mars, Admiral. Perendjo was effectively in the conference room. I think they were trying to teach us something about the nature of light."

"But Carlos said the planet was covered with a veil of light..." The admiral trailed off, aware of the curious looks from the PISA staff, including Hiram and, more intensely, Howard. Hiram, of course, knew that Carlos was still sharing information with Uncle Sam, but he hadn't expected even so indirect an admission of this. Howard, for his part, was stunned by the slip, but also aware that it didn't really matter now. Like it or not, they were in this together.

"What we see is a very dodgy thing, Admiral," Howard piped up, as if talking could help ease the blow. "We aren't actually seeing anything physically, we're seeing a form created by our eyes interpreting a reflection of light—or lack thereof."

"It's easy to trick our eyes, in other words," Hiram added.

"So this ... this *land* you keep speaking of—you've been there, Mr. McKenzie?"

Hiram nodded, bracing for the volley of incredulous questions. But none came. Instead, the admiral spoke for the assembled group by asking, simply, "And you can take us there now?"

Which was the one question Hiram didn't know how to answer.

54. The Epiphany Directive [\[top\]](#)

Admiral Thomas sat with a straight face and told them everything about his involvement with the Mars project thus far, his relationship with Carlos, and the reasons for his removal from the project by General Rauchbach.

"I had an epiphany," he said of the last, though was obvious the admiral still wasn't comfortable with using that word to describe his experience. "I was looking into the crystal prism Carlos had and then—I don't know—things wavered. My vision failed. I think I passed out, but I can't be sure. And then, in the dream, I was standing at the top of a lighthouse with a beautiful woman with full, red hair, and she said to me, 'They are both our prisoners and our guardians, and you cannot win in a fight with them.' I knew she meant the golgantry... When I woke up, I was filled with a certainty I've never felt before, so I told Rauchbach and advised him to rethink his invasion plans. And he had me removed from the project."

"You have a crystal prism?" Howard asked, latching onto what he deemed most important. Hiram cut him a mildly disbelieving look, then spoke to the admiral before he could answer Howard: "So General Rauchbach intends to—what?—destroy the golgantry?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"Our previous research, with Carlos, led us to the inevitable conclusion that they want nothing more than to reclaim what they believe to be theirs: Earth. But until this PISA experiment, we'd not been able to send troops en masse to prevent that."

"But they aren't going to invade!" Howard blurted. His face held an expression rimming somewhere along the edge of sanity, as he tried to process the knowledge that his formerly-secret findings were actually so well known, as well as the fact that he'd been speaking of such things—if obliquely—for years in Deep-Space Ops, always to be laughed at. He looked both exonerated and hurt.

"I know that now," the admiral admitted. "But they *do* want to ... *settle* here. And like mice left to run in a house, soon they would take over, no?"

"Would that be so bad?" Howard mumbled, thinking of all the knowledge they had given him about Light and the nature of Light. He mumbled because now he was not so sure: The knowledge he'd received suddenly seemed incomplete.

"The problem now, Howard, is that for whatever reason, the golgantry are preparing for war, and the NASA-PISA presence on Mars has only exacerbated it."

The silence was not uncomfortable, but it was long and pervading. Hiram shuffled nervously, feeling the ball was in Howard's court. Hiram had long held the opinion that the golgantry were fine—as long as they stayed where they were. Howard, he could tell, feared that he had been used to help them gain entrance.

"That's why they closed the portal," Howard finally concluded. "I wonder if we could even get in now?"

Hiram stepped forward again, taking charge by his tone: "That's what we have to find out, but only the three of us can go. Contact was initiated with us first, so I have to believe we are invited."

"Do you have a crystal prism, too?" Howard wondered.

Hiram smiled widely, "No. But I do know the place where we can just walk right in..."

55. The Long Watch [\[top\]](#)

The sun rose red through clouds over Green Lake, and three men stood in the woods watching their breath puff into clouds before them. Howard looked nervous—he knew well what secrets forests held, and he was afraid. Admiral Thomas had his arms crossed against the chill, but his face bright and alive—he, like a child waiting for a toy store to open, was full of excitement, knowing he would today witness something new. And Hiram, for his part, took equal parts of both moods, and stood in awed expectation, enjoying the thrill of sharing something he had so long held secret, yet also afraid that this portal, too, would be closed forever.

* * *

At the Temple of Radiance the party stood speechless, Carlos and Bransen the only two yet aware that they were no longer in contact with Earth. But there was something about the framework of brick steps that seemed to undulate in the purple twilight before them; something that silenced them and left them unafraid. John felt now no malign slight from Luci and Mouse—nothing so trite could have withstood the vision before him, the cascade of light like a waterfall in the sun releasing his mind of care. And the children, young Sophie and Henry, they smiled like the rest of them, but their smiles belied understanding and the glee that comes with sharing something sacred.

* * *

The military recons had found no way of descending the cliff over the forest, though they had found what appeared to be a train station without a track where previously there had been only dry, cracked Earth. A sign above the ramshackle, one-platform station said "Oizus," and General Rauchbach stood staring at it as if the word itself could make its meaning explicit. Contact had been lost completely—the whole team had known the very moment it happened—and the general had turned his fear to anger, like a good soldier should. The scientists were huddled near Dr. Moore, waiting for answers, but he could only shiver like a babe without a blanket. And, like the rest, wait to see if anyone was going to come to get them.

56. Light Conversation [\[top\]](#)

Sophie knew and she told Henry and Henry told his mother, who shared the information with Luci and Mouse, which John overheard, leaving Bransen and Carlos trying to divert attention from the cover-up they had effected.

"Who told you we can't go back?" Bransen asked Sophie gently.

"Ana-Loop."

"I thought you said she was in jail?" Carlos chimed in. He wasn't really comfortable with the word "jail," as he couldn't rightly imagine anything that could imprison light.

"That doesn't stop *me* from visiting *her*," Sophie replied succinctly.

"So where is she now?" Carlos wondered. "And what did she do that was so apparently wrong?"

"She's in a box in the darkness below us..." Sophie's brow furrowed and she glanced at Henry for his help, so he spoke up: "The box is like the pictures I've seen of the Ark of the Covenant—rectangular and resting on two poles, so it can be carried. It's surrounded by the golgantry."

The adults mumbled and spoke softly to each other, sharing glances and uncertainties. Despite the overwhelming proof that the children could astral project as well as any other person could walk to the corner market, they were still children, and the suspicion of exaggeration always loomed.

"So what did she do wrong?" Carlos asked again. If he felt guilt at his own complicity in her incarceration, he showed no signs of it.

"She let all of them in before they were ready." She tilted her head as she spoke, roughly indicating everyone but Carlos. "They never asked any questions and they can't communicate, except with that machine."

"Okay," Carlos accepted. "So she's in jail—or whatever—and we're trapped. Now what?"

Sophie shrugged, and Henry spoke up again. "We have to stay here. I asked one of the guards. It said we're stuck until we've found our Radiance, because then we'd understand."

There was silence, and the adults all looked to Carlos for a translation.

"Our light bodies," he explained. "I suppose we're here until we learn the true nature of humans: that we are body *and* light."

"Well there—we've just learned it!" Mouse said defensively. "We're body and light, just like in the Bible."

"No," Henry cut in sharply. "Not like in the Bible."

"Then what?" Mouse asked. He sounded angry, but it was only to cover his fear. Luci reached out and put her hand on his arm, and his posture softened. "Doesn't it say in the Bible something about Jesus being the body and the light...?"

"He was the resurrection and the light," Lorna replied softly. "And he wasn't that until after he'd died."

They all looked at Henry, and he nodded slowly, his face serene and knowing.

57. Wood and Stone [\[top\]](#)

Hiram sat on the moss-covered rock, hunched over with his head on his arms. He had done this hundreds of times before, always following the same trail of crescent moons he had carved into the trees, placed in a fashion he created so he was sure he fully understood. But the portal wasn't there.

"Should we try a crystal prism?" Howard offered meekly, sharing a sympathetic look with the admiral. Howard now fully believed the military man when he said he'd had an epiphany: His demeanor had indeed changed; his face had softened; his voice held more emotion.

"It's not your fault, Hiram," Admiral Thomas said, crouching before the hunched man. "There has to be a way..." He trailed off, his eyes trained on something over Hiram's right shoulder. As he stood, his eyes never leaving the spot, Howard moved closer to see if he could see what had taken his attention. The change in the air stirred Hiram, and he looked up to learn what was going on, turning around to see for himself what the admiral was watching.

"There's a girl waving at me over there," the admiral whispered. "But she doesn't look real. She looks like a ... *ghost*."

Hiram leapt to his feet and stood in front of the admiral, so he could match his angle and sight lines through the bushes and trees. Almost instantly, his face broke into a wide smile.

"Sophie!" he exclaimed and dashed straight ahead, his robe flapping around his feet. "It's Sophie!" he called again, to no one in particular, and the other two men quickly followed him. When they reached him, he was talking to her, only she looked, as the admiral had said, unreal. Her image wavered slightly, as if rippling in a breeze, and she seemed to be more light than body.

"It's here," she was saying as they joined Hiram. "You'll have to come in through the Lands Below, like the first time."

"Then will the old portal reopen?" Hiram asked. She shrugged.

"I don't know—but you'll have to meet with R'dau before you can go anywhere else."

"I understand," Hiram replied.

"Is she real?" the admiral whispered to Hiram, eyeing the girl suspiciously.

"Yes, but what you're seeing is her astral body," Hiram said, his voice full of pride and joy. Though he hadn't said so, he'd expected it to be the children who saved them.

"Go on," Sophie said with urgency, waving into the shadows between two large boulders. "I have to get back." And her image quivered like a mirage, then faded altogether. Hiram wasted no time and stepped toward the arch made by the boulders, which stood three times as high as a man and exuded a sense of intelligence. Hiram knew that feeling; he knew that Sophie was right.

"Come on," he ordered softly, glancing at the men behind him. Both looked equally unsure, as they, like anyone, could clearly see through to the other side of the rocks, and it looked like nothing but a continuation of the forest they were in, with Green Lake sparkling softly in the distance. Hiram stepped through, and as his black robes merged with the shadows, he appeared to disappear. It was not a lack of belief that held the two men back, it was fear.

"Well, we have to go now," Howard said, as if a sense of obligation was all that could get him to step through the portal. Admiral Thomas nodded and sighed heavily, then stepped firmly under the boulders.

58. A Hidden Sentry [\[top\]](#)

"I like Hiram," Sophie said unsurely. She glanced over at Henry and watched him scribe designs in the dust with his finger. "I think he's okay ... Dr. Fobell's sort of an idiot, but I don't think it's his fault."

Henry shrugged. "They moved the door for a reason, Soph."

"But Axlow told me where it was, didn't he?"

Henry looked around quickly, then glowered at Sophie. "Keep your voice down! Do you want them to hear?" He motioned with his head toward the rest of the PISA team, who were having their own conference. The thing that offended Henry most was that they'd been told to "play over there," as if they didn't have anything important to add. And so if they didn't want to hear what he and Sophie had learned, Henry decided he could very easily go along with that.

"What about Carlos?" Sophie asked. "I think he's the one who really caused this, because he helped *them* in."

"Who?"

"The soldiers."

Henry sighed and looked up at a tree stump behind Sophie. It looked to have fallen at some point, though the rest of the tree wasn't anywhere nearby, and now had been weather worn into a vaguely human shape. "What do you think?" he said, and the tree stump moved in response.

"These soldiers won't understand, but Hiram and his friends will, that's why we allowed it," a high voice said. It sounded almost like wind through chimes gurgling over rocks in a stream; there was something in the cadence that revealed that the voice had not been made by human means. "This illusion belongs to the light, but the earth is as real as you or me."

"What would this look like if we didn't have eyes?" Sophie asked. "What does it look like to you?"

"The golgantry see things in our way," the treelike creature replied. "The light sees things in theirs. And you—you can see both. So you already know the answer to that question."

The sentry suddenly froze again, into the twisted and malformed shape of a fallen tree, and Luci appeared before the children, smiling warmly.

"They want to go through the waterfall or lightfall or whatever it is," she said, crouching down. She glanced nervously at the tree stump behind Sophie, but thought nothing of it. "What do you guys think of that idea?"

Sophie looked to Henry to let him answer, but as he opened his mouth to protest, Sophie interrupted him: "I think that's fine. I think that's what they want."

Luci smiled and stood up. "Come on, then." Sophie didn't look at Henry as they walked off; they both knew the right decision had been made.

59. Langer in the Air [\[top\]](#)

"So what the fuck do you suggest?" General Rauchbach shouted, his nose inches from Dr. Moore's. It had been a long time since he'd found the need to tear someone a new asshole, and he was milking this chance for all it was worth. The blood coursing through his veins and pounding in his skull exhilarated him in a way only a war hawk could understand. "Should we just wait for a fucking *train*, doctor? Something that doesn't need a *God damn* track to run? Or do you suggest we simply set up camp and stay a while and have dust-fucking-pies for dinner every night?"

"I suggest you calm down first," Dr. Moore mumbled, backing away a few steps as he did so. "And I'll remind you that I never trusted the science that got us here in the first place. I'm only here because you asked me to come."

"God damn it!" he shrieked, kicking dust at the doctor and not realizing how well he was impersonating a baseball manager's tantrum at his batter being hit.

"Sir," a very frightened soldier suddenly cried, running up to them. He glanced at Dr. Moore then stood to attention.

"What is it, private?" the general growled. "And it better be good."

The soldier gulped and shuffled his feet. "Sir, we were trying to find a way down the cliff, like you said, and Private Langer fell—"

"Jesus *Christ!*"

"But sir," he continued, speaking a bit more forcefully. "Sir, he didn't *fall*. He *floated*."

"What the *fuck* are you talking about, private? I don't have time—"

"Sir, he floated. He floated all the way down to forest floor and landed without a scratch. So I threw a rock over the cliff, and the same thing happened. It floated the whole way down. Ask Langer yourself ... " And he thrust his walkie-talkie at the general. General Rauchbach snatched it from him and cut Dr. Moore a sour look, his lips trembling in anticipation of another chance to yell.

"You're going over next," he snarled at the doctor, then depressed the toggle on the walkie-talkie and got the full report from Private Langer.

60. Wonder Awakening [\[top\]](#)

Dr. Angelo Moore was not, in fact, the next over the cliff. He had plenty of time to reflect on the plummet as he watched all but two of the soldiers, plus the general, go before him. The first few took tentative leaps, but as one after another drifted safely down on a cushion of air, they began to get more and more sure of themselves and began to dive as if into water, effecting summersaults and other daredevil falls.

The small team of scientists, knowing this to be physically impossible (and having the math to prove it), were not impressed by the display, nor the continued reports via walkie-talkie that another soldier had landed safely. They all looked to Dr. Moore with nervous eyes and he knew that he would have to be the first to jump.

"Well, *doctor*," General Rauchbach growled quietly with glee. "Looks like it's your turn. We'll bring up the rear."

Angelo knew this was no time to be afraid, so he tried instead to sound logical—the same tactic he had unconsciously used time and again when debunking something that, deep down, he believed, but which frightened him terribly.

"Shouldn't we make sure we can get back up before we all go down? And what about the tikis? Shouldn't we drive one or two of those off—?"

"No," the general cut in simply. "You heard my soldiers—there's nowhere down there to drive a damn tiki. It's a grass-covered jungle. And as to your other lame excuse, we're not splitting up and, on top of that, I'm not sure we *are* coming back up."

A surprised mumble rippled through the scientists. This was a most irrational (and illogical) decision. They had come in at the top of the cliff, so if a rescue party came looking for them, they should leave someone here to explain what was going on.

"But surely we need someone here?" Dr. Moore spoke for them all. "What if a search party comes looking for us?"

"I'll leave a note," General Rauchbach snarled, smiling sweetly. "Now jump over the fucking cliff, unless you'd rather starve up here, alone. See, we have quietly moved from military reconnaissance to survival, which means you don't sit around waiting to be saved. You follow the food and water, and that path leads over that cliff."

Angelo shuffled closed to the cliff's edge and looked down. By his visual estimation, and based on the amount of time it took the soldiers to radio back that they'd landed, he put the distance at a mind-boggling mile, at least. Which made the trees he looked out upon each a mile high. Which was, in a word, impossible. At those distances, it was no surprise that he couldn't see any people below, waving at him. He turned and looked at his peers, all nervously shuffling their feet in the dust and trying to look away, while the general and his last two soldiers stood grinning, with arms crossed. In a flash, Angelo felt his pride swell, and he wanted nothing more than to wipe the grin off the general's face. So he took another step, winked, and jumped.

He had closed his eyes tight at first, but as he gently descended—so smoothly he was hardly aware of anything more than a slight breeze—he found the will to open his eyes irresistible. The world was now green, a dark twilight green that seemed full of moisture. The air was still and lush; he felt cleaner just by breathing it, and his mind cleared. He smiled as the sun glinted off dewdrops on the leaves, splashing the canopy with tiny sparkles of light like fireworks. And even when he thought he saw dark, winged shapes moving through the trees, he felt no fear. He felt comfort and joy and peace. He felt all the things known only to a four-year-old child, snuggled warmly in bed between its parents, only now he was aware of its value. And he realized his whole life since then had been a series of little disappointments, each one chipping away at the facade of childhood innocence, leaving him a bitter man intent on proving that such emotional wholeness was not possible; was nothing more than imagination or drug-induced euphoria.

But now he knew the mystics were right: Each tiny disappointment could be recaptured by these moments of clarity until time had been turned back to a point of sublime completeness. The anger, the shame, the remorse—all could be washed away by embracing the wonders of the universe and curling up, safe and warm, in the bosom of infinity.

His feet came to rest on the grassy floor of the forest with no more pressure than standing up out of bed. He was smiling ear to ear, and the soldiers around him were smiling too, but they had their guns drawn and they kept glancing around with purposeful eyes.

"Did you feel the mystery?" he asked them in a whisper.

The soldier nearest him gave him a disgusted look. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

And he knew they had not. But instead of feeling anger at their mocking glares, he felt pity for them, and the pity gave him peace. They were the real skeptics because they lacked the ability to even consider the reality of something they couldn't kill. Which meant there was hope for him, because to him the wonder was still open.

61. The Way the Light Bends and the Darkness Falls [\[top\]](#)

Sophie just walked right through it as the rest of them stood discussing who should go first. They heard her squeal and giggle like a child at play in a warm bath, then her voice floated ethereally to them: "It tickles!"

"Sophie!" Luci cried, panicked despite what she'd heard. Mouse grabbed her arm to stop her from bursting headlong into the lightfall, but she pulled free and took another step, stopping only when Carlos quietly said, "I don't like the way the light bends."

"What?" she asked curtly.

"Come on, Mom!" Sophie called from the other side. "This is so *wonderful!*"

"Sophie? Sophie, where are you?" Luci walked right up to the lightfall and reached out a tentative finger. It was bright like the sun, but it didn't hurt her eyes, and she watched as her fingertip disappeared into the cascade.

"Maybe the light is yellow," she said dreamily, her finger now thrumming like a tuning fork that had set her whole body aglow. Somewhere she heard someone call her name—was it Mouse? maybe even Lorna?—but it meant nothing to her now.

"It's all colors," Sophie said. Luci could see her face now, smiling a few feet from her, and though she spoke, her lips weren't moving. "Come all the way in, Mommy!"

Luci stepped forward, into the light. The rest of the PISA stepped toward her en masse, as if to catch her when she fell, but she didn't fall. Luci never fell at all; she moved slowly and wisely into the light, and for the first time in her life, she understood. It felt like an epiphany, only as if the revelation was something she had learned long ago, but had forgotten.

"Your father's okay," she said to Sophie, relieved tears welling in her eyes as final resolution took hold. "He's okay..."

"I know, Mommy," Sophie replied, moving over and hugging her as she crouched down. "I told you he was okay."

"I know you did. You always did." They hugged silently, and Luci could hear again the disembodied voices behind her, calling her name without effect. "We have to bring them the light," she whispered. Sophie hugged her more tightly.

"Luci!" Mouse barked again, impatiently. "At least answer us!" He looked wildly over at Bransen and seemed about to accuse him of being at fault for everything that had gone—or could go—wrong, but before he could, Bransen stepped into the lightfall, followed silently by John Fobell. Henry took Lorna's hand and pulled her with him quickly, like diving into an ice-cold swimming pool. Mouse looked to Carlos, who stood firm.

"I don't like the way the light bends," Carlos whispered, his eyes wide and darting. "Light shouldn't fall like that. It shouldn't bend. Not like that."

"Come on, you two!" Bransen cried out gleefully from the lightfall. "My God...!"

"We can't stand here forever," Mouse finally said to Carlos. "They all sound okay. And I think it's getting darker."

"It's your eyes. They've adjusted to the light. Darkness doesn't fall here, not in that way."

Mouse shrugged and stepped into the light. Carlos could do nothing else but follow.

62. People, Places, and Things [\[top\]](#)

"So what *is* your name, Admiral?" Hiram asked as they hiked through the verdant grasses that made up the forest floor of Perendjo. Everything was green, even in the soft twilight, and Hiram's companions still looked a bit awestruck by the massive trees poking

out of vast, wavering fields of green grass. Hillocks spotted the landscape, as did giant boulders that looked more placed than formed.

"Admiral Thomas just seems too formal," Hiram added, stopping and turning to him.

"Jude," the admiral said, and something in his posture belied the fact that, by using his given name, he was admitting he was no longer a military man.

"Very good." Hiram smiled warmly and clapped him on the back, walking again as he talked. "Names are important. They help define our sense of self."

"I never liked my name," he admitted. "Most people call me Thomas."

"But / will call you Jude," Hiram stated kindly. "It suits you."

Suddenly feeling left out, Howard jogged a few steps and caught up with them, puffing along beside Jude. "So, Hiram, where are we going? I mean, I've never seen this place before..." He gazed around wide-eyed and almost visibly winced at the crashing noises above them and the occasional glimpses of massive winged creatures in the dizzyingly far off canopy.

"We are heading toward Green Lake, and from there, we will find the city of Lithari."

"City?" Howard squeaked. Jude, on the other hand, looked thrilled at the idea—Howard clearly envisioning a swarming metropolis of golantry, while Jude was overjoyed to think of finding some people to talk with.

"It seems that everyone here ends up at Lithari sooner or later, and barring any further communication from Sophie or any of the usual denizens of Perendjo, I think it a safe bet that we should find them there."

"What about Rauchbach and his men?" Jude wondered. Hiram chuckled lightly.

"If they last that long, Jude, then I imagine they'll end up there, too."

63. Ana-loop and Axlow [\[top\]](#)

"You should have followed our advice," Axlow said dimly to Ana-loop. "We told you they weren't ready to come to us."

"Some are," she defended. "The small ones are ready—"

"The small ones are not yet ready to survive in their own world, without the big ones."

"Physically, Axlw. They aren't capable *physically*, but they are much more advanced in Radiance than the big ones."

"But they must be both—that's who they are. The one you call Hiram is ready, we don't disagree. And the other, Howard, appears to be ready. R'dau has met with Jude and feels he is nearly ready, too—she has sent them to Ilmenecier for his examination. But the others...? Not a one is ready, and you let them all in."

"They made contact. That was the rule: If they make contact, we can let them in."

"If they survive Lithari with their Radiance, we can let them stay," Axlw corrected. "But the others, the ones Jude warned R'dau about—those we cannot allow to stay."

"But there's only one way to send them back..."

"That's right, Ana-loop, and you should have thought of that before you invited them in."

"But it was the others who let *them* in—Carlos is his name."

"You invited Carlos, Carlos invited them—it's still your fault, Ana-loop. Your blind attempts to reopen direct communion with them have severely threatened all of Perendjo. If we don't stop this, they will come in droves—"

"This isn't about the golgantry," Ana-loop suddenly realized. "You're not afraid the golgantry will escape and conquer their world. You're afraid *they* will come *here*..."

"They are body *and* light, Ana-loop, and once they know this, they will be so much more powerful than us—and it's not power they are yet ready to wield. Until they find balance between their Radiance and their flesh..." Axlw trailed off thoughtfully and tried to sum up another way: "They are far too mired in the material planes. Most don't even know other planes exist. Would you want someone like that to be responsible for Perendjo?"

"No," Ana-loop admitted sadly. "But we've been trying to teach them for so long. No one in his world listens to Hiram—"

"Which is how we know they aren't ready. They have no idea of what they are."

Axlow rose slowly from the box and the golgantry encircling it moved in, sliding the cover back into place over Ana-loop.

64. A Ghost in the Forest [\[top\]](#)

General Rauchbach did not adjust easily to the ghostly apparition of Carlos Resua that swayed before them. The General's blinding disbelief at the reality of the unreal situation was equaled in intensity only by the relieved acceptance of Dr. Angelo Moore, who had since taken his small band of scientists and left the NASA party in search of "the city each of us has seen in our dreams." General Rauchbach had replied curtly that "soldiers don't fucking dream" and advised them—at gun point—that they would do quite well to go searching for "fantasyland." Looking over the faces of the soldiers, Dr. Moore understood that little had changed for them as they floated down the cliff from Oizus. Contrarily, the science team all had murmured their assent at Angelo's plan and were only too glad to get far away from the guns.

And that had allowed General Rauchbach to regain a modicum of control over the strange campaign—until Carlos Resua had emerged in a luminescent, opaque shimmer.

"What, exactly, is going on here?" was all the general could think to say. Carlos smiled smugly.

"So it takes being lost in the woods for you to talk to ghosts, eh?" he asked.

"Fuck off, Resua. Just tell me where we are and how to get out of here."

"Where is Dr. Moore?"

"He ran off on some goose chase after a city he dreamed about, and the rest of those supposed science morons went with him."

Carlos smiled again and shook his head lightly. "But General, that's where you'll end up, too. That's where we are. We stepped through a light—" he saw a dark cloud sweep across the general's face, and decided to mute the explanation. "We stepped through a *waterfall* and ended up at a city."

"Fine—so where on Earth is this fucking city?"

Carlos actually laughed. "It's not on Earth, General."

"Christ, Resua! Stop fucking with us! Where on *Mars* is this fucking city?"

"It's not on Mars either." The general could tell by his expression that Carlos was enjoying this very much.

"Then how about you tell me—real simple like, for idiots like Langer—what the hell is going *on*, exactly? You said we were on Mars. That all this forest was just an illusion made by God damn *aliens*—"

"Not exactly," Carlos denied. "We are in a place where the light can bend and be colored at the whims of its inhabitants, just as we bend and color our world to our whims. This is another dimension, General, and while it does have physical properties such as we know, it's mostly light. I think."

"Sounds like bullshit to me," Rauchbach replied suspiciously. "My men have kicked real rocks and shot at real fucking birds—"

"You shouldn't have done that."

General Rauchbach sighed, finally tired of the conversation. "Look, Resua, what do you want? To prove your crackpot ideas were right? To taunt us?"

"No, General. I came to tell you that our little party is being followed by the golgantry. I imagine you are also being tailed, but what's more is that the children with us—Henry and Sophie—have been meeting regularly with the golgantry."

"Who else knows this?"

"No one."

General Rauchbach digested the information, sighing and glancing at the soldiers around him. They were going to crack, he knew, if he didn't get them busy on some mission soon—something tangible to set their minds to work so they didn't think too much about what was happening. He needed to make them good, purpose-driven soldiers again.

"All right, we'll head to your damn city. Where ... is it?"

"Just keep walking, General. You'll get there eventually."

65. Bransen's Fourth Dream [\[top\]](#)

Things were not going at all according to plan. Bransen had been very quiet since they had become trapped in Perendjo, and even his moments of elation as he walked through the lightfall had worn off. His sleep was thus disturbed by twisting shapes and anomalous colors that flitted along the edge of reason. He always awoke feeling he should understand more, but never did. Science, after all, could explain everything. Mouse operated more by feel than theory—and Hiram operated in a world seemingly divorced from both—but to Bransen, science still held the crown and scepter. Science could not fail him. Except that science insisted they were on the surface of Mars—and disguised though that surface had been, by the veil of light Carlos described, it was still a tangible planet.

Only now, he wasn't so sure.

Carlos had revised his opinion and now categorized the veil of light not as a disguise, but as a doorway—a massive, planet-sized doorway. He claimed that he had seen parts of Mars that were just as science would expect, but also admitted that there had been a purple glow and a cliff, and that under the glow, at the bottom of the cliff, was Perendjo.

Carlos said now that Perendjo was another dimension. "This would explain traveling faster than the speed of light," he added, trying to impose some science on his theory. "Only we didn't, really—we hopped dimensions."

"No—we sent the LETs to Mars," Bransen had argued. "And RS-CDs. We set the coordinates, we sent them to the surface of Mars, and we followed them."

"You're not thinking multi-dimensionally," Carlos admonished. "Right now, right here, just beside me, is Mars. The real Mars. The Mars you know. Only it vibrates at another frequency from Perendjo, which is the *unreality* we're in. The dimension you and I call reality is there, and if we could match the frequency, we'd be on Mars. Or if we could step through a dimensional doorway ... Didn't you ever wonder why our light communications devices only took about 15 seconds to relay messages, when light itself takes almost 4 minutes to get to us from Mars?"

"You're giving me a headache," Bransen admitted.

"Don't you see?" Carlos tried again. "The camouflage—the veil of light—was the surface of Mars. But these Light Beings, they opened a two-dimensional portal that stretched the length and width of Mars. So when we set foot on Mars, we actually set foot into another dimension. Thus, the illusion. And the RS-CDs—and Circadia X—somehow move across dimensions *faster* than the speed of light. It's not physical space-time, but *dimensional*

space-time."

Bransen let it sink in, then asked, "So then why didn't the light escape this other dimension, so we could see where we were *actually* going?"

Carlos shrugged. "No clue. I guess we just don't understand the true nature of light and dimensions. I think you can only see the dimension you're in."

Bransen thought for a second, then said in conclusion, "I still have a headache," so Carlos let the subject drop. And when he next slept, Bransen dreamed of house in a city where the colors and shapes made forms he recognized, and when he awoke this time, he was sure. He got up and walked over to where Carlos, Luci, and Mouse were again examining the pristine white wall they had found on the other side of the lightfall. The surface was smooth and cool and—they assumed—marble. It was too tall for them to see over, but now Bransen knew what to do.

"We walk that way," he said, pointing. "There's a gate by a lake and there's a city on the other side of this wall. We have to go in."

No one attempted to argue.

PS: Here's an article that seems relevant to this chapter: [Inconstant Constants](#).

Some things never change. Physicists call them the constants of nature. Such quantities as the velocity of light, c , Newton's constant of gravitation, G , and the mass of the electron, m_e , are assumed to be the same at all places and times in the universe. ... In recent years, however, the status of the constants has grown more muddled, not less. Researchers have found that the best candidate for a theory of everything, the variant of string theory called M-theory, is self-consistent only if the universe has more than four dimensions of space and time--as many as seven more. One implication is that the constants we observe may not, in fact, be the truly fundamental ones. Those live in the full higher-dimensional space, and we see only their three-dimensional "shadows." [Scientific American, June 2005]

—JB

66. Admissions [\[top\]](#)

Lorna was sketching the others standing at the wall when John Fobell walked up to her. He smiled warmly, but his eyes still held the same stunned gaze they'd had since they'd first learned of being trapped—and that Carlos and Bransen had known it, but had failed to tell them.

"Bransen thinks we should all walk that way, to the right, along the wall," he said.

"Oh... we're packing up then?" Lorna started to collect up her pencils and charcoals. "I was basically done with this anyway. Just wasting time. What do Henry and Sophie think about Bransen's idea?"

John shrugged. "They're pretty quiet. Henry likes to talk to me about gadgets, like my breathing suit, but he doesn't open up to me like that. And I don't think Sophie trusts me."

"You're still a stranger," Lorna smiled wryly, packing her things into her backpack and standing up. "No one should trust a stranger."

"Does it bother you that Henry—?"

"Oh, no—I didn't mean that. God, no! Sophie's what you politely call 'shy,' which is what a mother rightly calls, 'understandably wary'."

John laughed lightly and looked at his feet, digging at the grass with his toe. He had taken off his shoes after stepping through the lightfall and now walked barefoot. Lorna started to ask him about it, but at the same moment, he said he wished they would be "understandably wary" of Carlos.

"Pardon?" Lorna asked.

"No—you go ahead."

"Oh, it was small talk. But you still don't trust Carlos?"

John turned to walk away, waving his hand dismissively, but Lorna caught his arm and turned him back to her. "No, John. Tell me what's bothering you. You didn't come over here just to say hi to an old housewife."

"You're not old," John replied, then sighed and nodded. "But you're right. I don't know—I think Mouse believes me, but he's always with Luci, and she doesn't—"

"Luci doesn't ever believe conspiracy theories. In her line of work, she was often the 'shadowy scientist' at the core of conspiracies, so she knows it's mostly B.S."

"Luci worked for the government?" John blurted, clearly shocked by the implications. "Jesus...!"

"No, no—not really. She's an independent researcher, and in the course of her career, she's had government contracts. But that's not the point ... What about Carlos?"

John glanced around to make sure they were all still well out of earshot—Bransen was making large hand gestures, perhaps in an effort to describe his dream to the others, or perhaps just telling a story to the kids—then turned to Lorna and motioned for her to sit back down with him.

"Look, when we came out of the lightfall, we all took a nap, right? Some of us longer than others. I woke up before everyone else—except Sophie and Henry—and saw that Carlos was not lying down sleeping, like the rest of us, but was sitting up. It's the same posture my dad had when he meditated with his crystal prism. Carlos was astral projecting."

"Where to?"

"I don't know, but the point is, he's obviously still going somewhere and not telling us about it."

"Well, maybe he didn't need the rest, and figured he'd explore—"

"But there's more. I also saw Henry and Sophie talking to three golgantry—"

"What?" Lorna gasped.

"Trust me, Lorna—ask the kids—the golgantry are not evil. But Carlos woke up right about then, and *he* saw them, too—and then he got settled again and went back into his meditative state. It's as if he was making a report—"

"I don't know if that conclusion follows. But why are my kids talking with the golgantry?"

"I think the golgantry are protecting them. Look around—since we went through the lightfall at the temple, we haven't seen *any* of the light beings. I think this is all so much

more complex than a good old fashioned good-versus-bad movie."

"Protecting them from who?"

"Whoever Carlos keeps going and talking to?"

"And who is that?"

John sighed heavily and looked around again, then spoke very softly. "Fine. I'll admit it. The golgantry have been talking to me, too, and they said those army guys got trapped here as well—and they said that Carlos keeps going and talking to them. And that link between us and them—Carlos—is confusing the golgantry about *our* intentions here."

"So why protect the kids?" Lorna wondered.

John shrugged. "No idea. But the scientists from the NASA team? They all broke away from the army guys and went off on their own—and the golgantry *aren't* following them."

"We have to tell someone—"

"Why?"

"At least Mouse and Luci—Sophie *is* her daughter."

John stood up, his face betraying anger. "Just don't tell Carlos or Bransen," he growled, then walked off.

67. Wolves in the Wood [\[top\]](#)

The scientists followed Dr. Angelo Moore, who was following a pack of five white wolves. At first, the logic of following a pack of wild carnivores didn't sit well with the scientific minds amassed around Angelo—despite the superstitious resonance of the color white—and they nervously grumbled about there being exactly one wolf to each of them. It didn't take a brain surgeon to see they didn't stand a chance in a fair fight. But Angelo convinced them, as he had convinced them to leave the soldiers, by talking about dreams in a way that seemed wholly scientific.

"You have to recompile the code," he had offered. "If the program returns a runtime error, what do we do? We nag the developers to fix the code. Well, everything you're experiencing is, in our minds, a massive runtime error. It doesn't compute. We have to

recompile our code to process the input correctly. And our input now is beyond the senses, it is feelings and visions and dreams. That's how we survived the jump. That's why we didn't fall."

And so they followed the wolf pack, one of which was clearly leading them all, and kept glancing back like the family dog, to make sure he was being followed. The other four wolves dropped into a loose formation around the scientists, circling the wagons, as it were, so they could walk through the forest unmolested.

Or perhaps, thought Angelo, so we don't leave the path.

They walked through the undulating hillocks and wavering grasses like troops under redeployment. But when one of them complained of being thirsty, the wolves lead them to water. And if one complained of being weary, the wolves came around and formed a wall and wouldn't let them move until they had sat down and rested.

In this way, they reached the gates of a city—massive iron grillwork that mirrored the network of branches above and grasses below and bore the single word "Lithari" in an arch across the top. The walls to which the gates were attached gleamed with their own luminescence. They were smooth and cool, with the feel of marble but the look of glistening sand. Upon arriving, the lead wolf barked happily and wagged his tail, then turned and wandered back into the forest, the other wolves close behind, leaving the scientists alone before the gates.

"Now what?" one of them asked Angelo. It was a serious inquiry; they now looked to him for answers.

"We wait," Angelo said apologetically. "We wait until they open the gates."

And no one asked who, exactly, "they" were.

68. The Rosaria [\[top\]](#)

"I don't understand," Hiram said, scanning the forest for landmarks. "Green Lake should be right around here somewhere..."

Jude and Howard shared a concerned glance, and Howard replied, "Well, the portal wasn't where you thought it was, either. Perhaps the lake has moved?" Hiram cut him a sour glance, but Howard knew his annoyance was at the situation, not him.

"No offense, but I've been mapping Perendjo for years. Nothing ever moves—"

"All things move, from time to time," a resonant voice cut in. Each of the men looked to the other to see who had spoken, but none of them had. "Or, more rightly, the way you see things changes over time," the voice continued. "We tire of what is known, so we make things move to keep our interest. If you had all the answers, you'd no longer have questions."

While the voice spoke, Hiram motioned for the others to follow him, in its general direction. They ducked beneath some low branches and through thick bushes that grew close beside large, round rocks. As the voice grew louder, they also heard the sound of running water. Hiram smiled and whispered, "That must be the river that flows from Green Lake..."

They emerged from the tunnel cut by the bushes into a breathtaking rose garden. The flowers were in full, crimson bloom and interspersed with open irises that held the same brushed purple on their petals as did the sky. There were standing stones in a circle among them, and here the sun cut sharply, like morning light.

"You have come," the voice said. "I think you will all survive Lithari."

They scanned the rose garden for the source of the voice, and finally the stout trunk of a wall of trees moved as a tall man pushed back his camouflage cloak and stepped toward them. He lowered his hood and smiled. His face looked like smooth, cured leather—weathered with age and life into deep wrinkles that appeared and disappeared as he spoke.

"Good evening, Hiram," the man said. "Who are your friends?"

"Ilmenecier?" Hiram squeaked in awe. The man smiled and offered a light bow of agreement, then motioned again to the other two men.

"Oh ... uhhh ... this is Howard and Jude. They were invited."

"I know," Ilmenecier replied soothingly, his tone suggesting that he also had known their names and merely was being polite. "There are 72 roses in my rosaria," he said unexpectedly, sweeping his arms open to display his garden. "They are punctuated by 30 irises."

"Yes...?" Hiram whispered.

"You are here because you think the golgantry to be evil." He looked at Hiram and Jude, but not at Howard. "And Howard, you are here because you think them good. But it's all a matter of how we see things, isn't it? And things move, from time to time."

The three men stood enrapt, Hiram knowing more than the others how rare was a meeting with Ilmenecier.

"They want nothing more than to co-exist with you, as they do here, with the Light. They tire of these surroundings they cannot see and have become bored with the Lands Below. They seek the company of other physical beings. But your kind—Light though you be—see such advances as invasions. The golgantry know this. And they know much more, as well. They are masters of the physical realm, as are the Lights masters of theirs."

He gazed off into the trees behind them, where the slow scramble of claws on branches could be heard. The three men knew if they looked, they would see winged golgantry far up in the canopy, pruning dead branches from illusory trees. But they did not look up because they knew Ilmenecier was not done.

"You will follow the river to Lithari and perhaps you both will learn." He moved subtly and his cloak fell back around him, his hands imperceptibly raising his hood, and Ilmenecier vanished before their eyes. They saw no more movement, but when Hiram stepped forward and reached out to touch him, he grasped only air.

"That was a great honor," he said to Howard and Jude. "And we must do exactly what he said."

"And what ... *did* he say, exactly?" Howard wondered. Jude also looked guilty of having missed the point.

"We must follow the river to Lithari and meet with the golgantry."

Hiram stepped out across the rosaria and his companions followed.

69. Reunion [\[top\]](#)

They weren't really aware of the wall's curve until they saw a group of people coming into view around it. Bransen quickly pressed himself against the wall and motioned for the others to do the same, but young Sophie instead broke into a run and screamed, "It's Hiram!"

"She has to stop doing that," Bransen said to Luci with a sigh, but he was smiling widely.

"I know," she agreed. "Sophie! Sophie! Wait for us!" Sophie stopped and turned back to them, jiggling excitedly in place. By now the group of people had seen them and had started to break up to greet them. Hiram MacKenzie—in his long, black robe—was immediately evident among them. John spotted his dad, too, and began to race forward, dashing past Sophie, who turned and cut her mother a dirty look for making her stand still.

"Can we go, Mom?" Henry asked, knowing if his mother gave the okay, Sophie's mom would quickly agree as well. Lorna said sure, and he dashed off, grabbing Sophie's hand on his way past her, leaving Luci no choice but to call out, "Sure, go on ahead."

By the time the rest of the PISA team made it to the group, John and Howard were in deep (whispered) conversation, and Sophie and Henry had taken Hiram aside to describe to him their encounters. Bransen approached Dr. Angelo Moore carefully.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he barked. Carlos visibly tried not to get involved or even notice the doctor.

"Now, now, Bransen. Don't be mean. We've all been changed by this experience, no?"

"No," Bransen replied curtly. "And I hear it's all your fault—you and your soldiers—that we're even stuck here."

Dr. Moore smiled warmly, which confused Bransen. "Oh, we scientists broke with the rest of the team—the soldiers—some time ago. The woods are so much more beautiful without guns."

"He's okay, Mr. Bransen," Henry suddenly said, tugging on Bransen's shirt to get his attention. "Hiram says so, too."

Bransen looked up at Hiram suspiciously as he and Sophie joined the others. The seer was nodding and smiling, but Carlos said quietly, "I'm not sure about this."

"Funny that *you'd* be suspicious," John Fobell spoke up, confronting Carlos. Lorna dodged to John's side and touched his arm nervously.

"John..."

But then the air was filled with a low hum that circled them. A low hum and a high buzz, in harmony, getting louder, coming from above and from the sides and from the other side of the wall. Everyone looked around nervously, and each saw the same thing in their own ways: The tree branches were coming to life all around them. They were growing wings and descending or breaking off large sections of their trunks that formed arms and legs and stepped forward. The group instinctively crowded together, the living trees descending from the air, surrounding them. Seven-foot tall figures that look liked trees with arms and legs, but no heads. Terrifying entities whose wings hummed and buzzed with a cadence unknown on Earth. Ten, twenty, thirty—they emerged from the skies and the wood.

In this way, the golgantry trapped the group of people before the gates of Lithari.

And when their wings stopped beating, one of them stepped forward.

70. Action / Reaction [\[top\]](#)

General Rauchbach would have told you he was less than a klick away from the gates of Lithari, except that he wasn't talking. Instead, he was motioning frantically with his left hand while peering through the scope of his gun and holding the trigger steady in his right hand.

"What are those things, sir?" the solider beside him asked.

"Shut the fuck up," Rauchbach growled, his eye never leaving his scope. He could hear the last few soldiers moving into position and lying belly-down around him; the sound of guns being locked and loaded made him feel better. He'd seen a lot of action in his day—almost none of which was reported in the papers—but this was the most taxing situation he'd ever been in. Were they not American citizens—and children—surrounded by those beasts, he'd have been tempted to leave them be. And he knew the only reason his men were still with him was because they hadn't heard Carlos advise him that "no amount of fire power can defeat the golgantry."

Carlos had suggested laying down their weapons. Rauchbach had laughed as if he'd been joking—because he thought he had been. "Who's laughing now, you new-age freak?" Rauchbach mumbled to himself as he watched one of the golgantry step in front of Carlos, to block his escape from the circle.

"Hold your fire, men," Rauchbach said in a low growl. "I'm going to take out the ringleader—let's hope that makes the others stop and think."

He lined up his sights and shuffled his elbows into position, aiming for what he assumed to be the thing's head. He also assumed its front was now facing Hiram, since they seemed to be talking. At the instant he began to squeeze the trigger he heard a stifled shriek to his right and a random scrambling of soldiers on the move. His attention diverted for a split second, he fired and moved his gun a hair at the same instant, then looked over to his right.

Each of his men was being held—wriggling and struggling in vain—at arm's length above the head of a golgantry. He glanced to his left and saw the same fate had befallen his other flank, and then he felt himself rising into the air. He held fast to his weapon, but it was easily batted from his hand by what looked like a tree branch.

"You are lost," he heard a strange, tinkling voice below him say. When he looked down, he saw that the ground was quickly moving away from him as he and the other soldiers were taken up, into the canopy.

71. An Open Gate [\[top\]](#)

Before they'd even registered the gun shot for what it was, the golgantry had whipped into a buzzing blur of brown, punctuated by high, trilling sounds that were at once plaintively beautiful and unendurably painful. Then the blur solidified, and the two science teams were left gazing at a solid wall of wood encircling them and trapping them against the cold stone of Lithari's city wall.

"Wha—?" Bransen started, moving forward as if to beat the wall, but Hiram hooked his elbow and swung him back, pointing at the gates to the city, just beyond which the wall of wood met marble.

"Let them take care of this," he said sternly. "We need to get Sophie inside."

It was only then that Luci looked over at her daughter. Everything had happened so fast, that only a few seconds had ticked past since the gun shot, but now she saw that Sophie was lying, unmoving, in the grass beside the tall golgantry with which Hiram had been speaking.

"No!" she shrieked, almost diving to her daughter's side. She appeared to be sleeping peacefully, except for the angry red stain near her left shoulder that was slowly growing around a deep crimson hole. "Oh God, Sophie ... Sophie ... Sophie..."

"Take her inside," the golgantry trilled, and while the voice sounded as oddly metallic as ever, Luci thought she sensed compassion in the tone—and regret, and apology. She looked up at the golgantry, her expression a mix of blame and trust.

"How could you let this happen?" she whispered, scooping up her daughter and standing.

"Sometimes seconds act like minutes," it replied cryptically. "Find the Mistmaker. He will help."

"The who?" Luci shouted angrily, starting to cry. "She gets shot and you offer me riddles?"

"Luci..." Hiram said gently, taking her elbow. His voice calmed her, and then she saw Mouse, his large face pale and stunned behind his beard. Mouse nodded and motioned toward the gate, which now stood wide open and inviting. She moved stiltedly toward it, supported now by both men.

"I want to take her home," Luci implored. "I just want to take her home."

"We don't have enough time right now," Hiram reasoned. "The door is a long walk through the woods. She needs help as soon as possible."

And so they moved silently into Lithari.

72. The Streets of Lithari [\[top\]](#)

Not all of them could pass, despite the open gates. There didn't appear to be any physical barrier, but most of the members of the assembled teams fell victim to an overwhelming nausea as they approached the aperture. Some described it as feeling ill, others experienced a deep sadness or growing apprehension that ballooned to unendurable proportions. Only Hiram, Henry, Mouse, Luci, Jude, Howard, and, of course, Sophie felt no presence of such a barrier, and moved through the gates easily—though Howard, upon seeing his son buckle under the weight of some malaise, refused to continue with them, and instead returned to the forest so that he could stay with his son. But Henry's mother motioned vaguely to her son that he should go on with those within.

Inside, Lithari was nowhere near as radiant as the walls belied. Gone was the glimmering marble and pure sheen of light-as-stone. Here, within, the streets were cobblestoned and crowded and brown with dirt and age. There was moisture in the air, as if it had recently rained, but now the sun shone brightly over the rooftops of buildings packed close to the

streets. What they assumed to be the main road stretched down a two-storey tunnel of storefronts and apartments, ending in the distance at a grassy opening with a fountain in the center. To their left and right, the cobblestone road extended out of view, following the wall around Lithari.

"It looks like a page out of some medieval history," Henry whispered, his reverence evident.

"Yeah ... " Mouse breathed. "And how the hell do we find this Mistmaker? Will he have a fucking store—" He cut himself off and glanced down at Henry, then around at the others. "Sorry."

"I think we go forward," Hiram said. "This is actually new for me."

"Yes," Jude agreed softly, pointing down the street to the fountain. "There's a man down there waving at us—I say we go to him."

Luci didn't have to be asked twice. Her face was set and she'd looked to be barely paying attention to what they were saying, so intent was she on finding this mysterious Mistmaker. As she walked, the grit on the cobblestones ground under her shoes, and their footfalls echoed dully around them. Mouse was right—the buildings looked to be ripped from the pages of a fantasy book. The traditional timber-and-plaster construction made famous in Tudor England was everywhere here, though the white plaster had either faded with time or been intentionally made browned, more like sand than sugar.

They passed storefronts with signs they couldn't fathom, made up as they were mostly of symbols, with only a few scant elements here and there that had the appearance of written language. Had they more time, Hiram would have loved to have stopped in each one, to see what it contained; he could see shadows behind the windows as they passed by, forms that were conducting business, and he could hear muffled voices and laughter.

"It's just a regular city," he said to no one. "But where is it?"

"I don't think that's the question," Jude replied. "I think you mean, *when?*"

"Can we just walk faster?" Luci suddenly barked, picking up her own pace. She tried hard not to glance down at her daughter's wan face, but on the off chance she was bouncing back, she did look. Sophie had gone from pale to gray and Luci felt hot new tears in her eyes. She broke into a trot, now certain that the man at the fountain waving to her was the Mistmaker. He was a kindly-looking black man, tall and thin, and his eyes looked calm and wise. If she had been asked then what a magus looked like, she would have

motioned to the man she was running toward.

"Are you the Mistmaker?" she cried as she neared him. He took a step toward her, which she assumed to be assent. Luci stopped a few feet from him and held out her daughter. "They said you could help her. *Please* ... help her. I can't lose them both."

He closed the gap between them and put his hand on Sophie's forehead. She stirred, almost as if to speak, and Luci gasped out more tears. It was the most Sophie had moved since she'd been shot.

"Lithari is long, but not wide," the man said, speaking more to Sophie than Luci. "I live just across the way. Can you make it?"

Luci glanced at her daughter. Sophie stirred again and sighed heavily. The man looked at Luci and smiled. "She can make it." Then he turned and walked off, across the small park with the fountain they had seen from the gates.

Luci was aware that the others had caught up to her, but without asking or even glancing at them, she moved forward to follow.

73. At the End of the Silver Cord [\[top\]](#)

The other side of Lithari was different again, from either forest or city. This looked like farmland, and the Mistmaker—who insisted on being called Giles—explained that if you walked along the wall *outside* Lithari, you would never reach this place.

"Only by traversing Lithari can you reach the Lands Beyond," he explained to Hiram, as if this made all the sense in the world. And to judge by Hiram's face, it did. The two men had been speaking in hushed tones for the whole 10-minute walk, not out of secrecy, but out of deference to Luci, who was still hurrying several yards ahead of them, stretching now to reach the farmhouse that Giles had pointed out to her. Henry jogged beside her, holding Sophie's hand, and Mouse was several steps ahead of them, apparently clearing a path through the short wheat in the field they now were in.

"You seem awfully calm about poor Luci's situation," Mouse had berated them at one point. Hiram felt a surge of guilt, but Giles answered for them: "There is nothing we can do now but walk. Nothing truly bad ever happens here." Mouse, with a huff, had simply turned and jogged back up to Luci's side.

As they reached the edge of the field, a woman came out of the farmhouse to greet

Mouse and Luci. She tousled Henry's hair and smiled as if greeting family who had just arrived from far out of town. She didn't seem the least bit distressed at Sophie's condition. Jude caught up with Hiram and Giles and motioned to her. "Who's the woman?" he asked. She was dressed in black, like Hiram, and had short black hair in a 1920s bob; even from a distance, she exuded confidence and control.

"Anabel St. Ambrose," Giles said lovingly, then added with a wink, "My wife."

By the time they caught up to the others, Anabel had laid Sophie down in a patch of clover, amid humming, fat bees that nestled the blooms for nectar. She took a small phial from a hidden pocket in her dress, and they all watched silently as she removed the cork and used an attached stick to inscribe a figure 8 sideways across the girl's forehead. She then inscribed some shape around the angry wound in Sophie's chest, then appeared to bow in prayer. Mouse hugged Luci to him; she covered her mouth with her hands as if trying to stem her tears. They all waited, holding their breath, while Giles smiled mysteriously.

"She is at the end of her silver cord," Anabel finally whispered reverently. Luci's tears increased and she began to shake. Anabel stood and smiled sweetly, reaching out and touching Luci's arm.

"Please don't fret. Your girl is in the time between, a space of seconds that stretches for hours, like the hinterland between days at midnight. She is exploring. The choice is now hers whether or not to release her silver cord—she can live as she did or she can live as we all will, one day. But this wound—this wound will not kill her. Only she can decide that."

Luci knelt down beside her daughter and gently touched her cheek. "Sophie, honey, Mommy needs you," she managed to stammer, then she sat back heavily and took Sophie's small hand in her own. She could see her daughter's eyelids fluttering and knew that her eyes were moving behind them. And somehow, this evidence that Sophie was dreaming filled Luci with serenity, and she actually smiled.

74. Perspectives [\[top\]](#)

"I don't like this place," said Bransen with finality. "What good has come of all this?"

Howard laughed lightly and winked at his son, who sat glowering with his arms crossed. Carlos sat across from John, the four men forming a small square on the grass in front of the wall.

"I think if you opened your mind to this place, instead of closing it after your expectations fall short, you'd start to get a lot more out of it," Howard said.

Bransen glanced over to where Lorna sat sketching two golgantry she had talked into staying behind long enough for her to record them. She laughed every now and again, and Bransen assumed the golgantry must be amusing her in some way, though he couldn't fathom how.

"It will be interesting to see what Lorna's report looks like, after all this," he agreed. "I can't see those golgantry coming out too kind—"

"How so?" John cut in angrily, glaring more at Carlos than Bransen. "Because they carried off a bunch of thugs with guns who shot a little girl? Because they formed a protective wall around us when it appeared we were under attack? Frankly, if anyone will come out badly, I think it'll be the double-crossing—"

"Okay, okay, John," Howard said gently. John closed his mouth bitterly and shook his head, avoiding all their eyes.

"This is a complex world, Bransen," Howard tried to explain. "Can you imagine having to explain how the countries of Earth get along—politically or socially—if you had no real frame of reference for how we do things? There is no good or evil, just perspectives."

"That may be true," Carlos finally spoke. "But we do have to consider things from *our* perspective first, do we not? And while the golgantry may save our lives here, who's to say what they would do if we let them onto Earth? And," he added definitively, to stop any arguments, "who are *we* to decide for all of *Earth* that they can visit? *That's* why the army came—to stop an uninvited presence that would certainly have destabilized the globe, perhaps with disastrous consequences. And also to serve as emissaries in order to return and propose what kind of invite *we—Earth—*wanted to extend."

John laughed derisively. "Sounds good, Carlos. You mean to tell me the government would have admitted all this?"

"They wouldn't have had a choice, would they?" he replied. "The PISA team also came here—"

"And the army was trying to wipe us out, by my reckoning," Howard concluded softly. "We can't talk if we don't make it back."

"This is pointless," Carlos decided, standing suddenly and shaking off Bransen's attempt to hold him back. "If they like them so much, let them stay behind."

Bransen eyed the Fobell's sheepishly, then slowly stood up and brushed off his pants. "I'm going to take Lorna and go for a walk," he decided. "I think you're right: I need to experience some of this for myself, alone. But I do want Lorna there to quantify what I find."

Howard chuckled amiably and stood also, extending his hand for Bransen to shake. "Spoke like a true scientist," he said. "Good luck, Bransen. Try not to expect too much."

75. The Tower and the Light [\[top\]](#)

Sophie was aware of a bright light in darkness, and she knew the golgantry were close. She could sense other creatures, too, beyond her vision—creatures that snarled loosely and seemed to jump at her, only to be stopped in their tracks by the padded thud of a golgantry landing before them. She knew all this with certainty, though she could see none of it. All she could see was the rough dirt of the ground before her, bathed in an unearthly white. As she moved, the light moved, and in this way, she moved on.

Sophie was not afraid. Her mood belied a peaceful walk in the woods on a summer afternoon with her mother. She smiled at the memory and felt warm comfort—it seemed her mother was near, but again, this was only a sensation.

Eventually the stifling black wall around her began to lighten, and she became aware of sea and sky. She began to hear the waves and taste salt in the air. And she heard the snarling, jumping sounds diminish and felt the presence of the golgantry go with them, until finally, she found herself standing on a beach near sunrise on an overcast day. The light, she realized, had not come from some distant sun, but from a lighthouse that guarded the shoreline. When she looked up at it, she saw the light now swiveled in an endless rotation, searching for ships or, more likely, others wandering through the darkness.

Sophie turned and looked back the way she had come and gasped in awe: Where the beach ended there was no slowly fading land that eventually melted into the darkness she had traversed. There, at the end of the beach where dune grasses swayed, the darkness came down fully and completely, like a velvet curtain pulled across a stage.

She looked again at the lighthouse—the only structure she could see in either direction—and moved toward it. On the far side she found a small red door, and standing

in the doorway she found a smiling woman with lush red hair that fell to her waist in even waves. She was dressed in a simple hooded robe that seemed white, yet shimmered with every color of the rainbow, like the satin belly of a fish.

"I'm glad you came to see me, Sophie," the woman said, extending her hand to the girl. "You have a big decision to make. My name is R'dau—would you like a warm mug of milk and honey?"

"I ... I shouldn't," Sophie replied thoughtfully. "My mother wouldn't ... Can you just tell me how to get back?"

"Sophie!" a voice suddenly called from above. Sophie looked up and saw her mother at the railing at the top of the tower, waving at her and smiling widely. "Come on up, honey! It's okay!"

Sophie smiled and felt her heart swell with joy. She stepped forward and took R'dau's hand.

76. The Deepest White [\[top\]](#)

"Is that ... darkness out there where they're keeping Ana-loop?" Sophie wondered.

"Yes," R'dau replied simply. She watched as the girl cradled her mug of milk and honey. Luci watched them both nervously; this was all about Sophie, she knew, and she wasn't sure how she had come to be in this place.

"I think I passed out," she'd said to R'dau before Sophie had arrived.

"That's right," R'dau had replied with a smile. All of her answers were simple, apparently.

Sophie sighed. "But when you locked her up, they all went away. You scared them away from us."

"I am one of them," R'dau said evenly. "You are one of them, too—or you *can* be."

For no good reason, Luci bristled at the comment and straightened up. She didn't speak, but she became very aware. Something about R'dau frightened her, and what scared her more was that R'dau knew she was frightened, but did nothing to comfort her.

"My Radiance?" Sophie asked suspiciously. R'dau nodded encouragingly. "Henry says

I'm just confusing that with my belief in a soul. He says when we die, our energy just gets put back into the universe. Or something."

"It does," R'dau agreed. "Soul, light body, Radiance—whatever you want to call it. That spark which makes you something other than physical matter has to go somewhere."

Sophie scrunched up her brow, trying to understand.

"If you could see Perendjo with physical eyes, it would simply be the deepest white," R'dau explained. "Just as the physical world, when seen through the eyes of your Radiance, is the deepest black."

"The darkness ... " Sophie whispered; R'dau nodded and smiled.

"Your eyes are both," R'dau said softly, leaning in secretively. "Your eyes give light to the darkness. But here, you are only light, and so you see only light. Perendjo, through the eyes of your Radiance, is the most beautiful place you can imagine."

"Is that why Henry saw numbers, when you came to visit?" R'dau nodded. "So you don't really have red hair?"

"What do you see?"

"Red hair ... " Sophie glanced at her mother; Luci nodded in agreement. She, too, saw red hair, and she didn't understand.

"Then I must have red hair," R'dau decided. "Now Sophie, when your physical body dies, your light body must go somewhere. It cannot happily exist in the physical world. Here is where you come—a land made of nothing but light."

"And people can still visit me?"

"Yes, of course—if they have Radiance and know what it means."

"But the golgantry? Are they light?"

"They are purely physical. Our deeply allied opposites. You are both, but now you have to decide which you want to be."

Luci jumped to her feet with a flash of understanding, to move to her daughter's side, to beg her to stay as body and light, but the floor faltered and the walls around her wavered.

Her legs weakened and she stumbled, and when she fell, she fell for a very long time, swirling with her eyes shut and her mind reeling. When the motion stopped and she opened her eyes she found Jude and Mouse looking over her; behind them stood Hiram speaking with Giles and Anabel.

"You passed out," Mouse said. "You okay?"

"Sophie?" Luci asked weakly.

77. Sustenance [\[top\]](#)

"You know the strangest thing?" Bransen said, glancing at Lorna. "I didn't suggest we take a break because I'm tired. I'm not tired. And I'm not hungry. And none of us has eaten or drunk anything since we got here."

It was a statement of fact, but Lorna knew there were questions buried within. They'd been wandering relatively aimlessly in the forest for a couple of hours, stopping for a few minutes here and there so Lorna could jot down impressions or scribble out a quick sketch.

"Have you read Hiram's book?" she asked. Bransen laughed lightly and looked away.

"Ironically, no."

"You really should, Bransen. He talks about that. I don't think we're here in the way you think we're here."

"Christ—are you going to start speaking in tongues now, too?" He was smiling as he said it, but she could tell he was somewhat serious. Bransen badly wanted to understand where they were and what was going on, but the place defied analysis, and without analysis, Bransen was confused.

Lorna sighed, feeling a bit unqualified to administer the lessons of Hiram's work, but she tried anyway. "We're not here in body, Bransen. You're not hungry or thirsty or tired because you don't have a body that needs to be sustained. We're here as light—what they call Radiance."

Bransen shook his head slowly. "So then, where's my body?"

This time Lorna laughed. "I have no idea. I really don't. Hiram tells this story in one of his

books—I can't remember which one—about traveling to Perendjo through a gate on his property. When he came back, he just woke up, as if from a deep sleep, like always. Only this time, he found himself surrounded by a cop, a paramedic, and a frightened hiker. To cut a long story short, the hiker had found a dead body in the woods and called the cops. The paramedic confirmed that he'd been dead—but he woke up. That was when he realized that entering Perendjo separated body from soul, if you will."

"But if he was dead, his pulse would have stopped," Bransen argued. "A few minutes of that, and he'd be brain damaged—which some critics would contend was true," he added with a chuckle.

"I'm not saying I understand it," Lorna admitted. "And neither is he. I think it's the difference between being at the *end* of your silver cord, and completely snapping it. His body was in stasis ... "

"Assuming that's true, it really doesn't answer my question: Where is my body now? We came here on a physical ship—where is *that*?"

Lorna shook her head dismally. "Sorry, Bransen, I just don't know. Maybe our bodies are back on the ship. Maybe we're all lying, dead, on the surface of the real Mars. If Hiram's right, when we finally head back to the ship, at some point we'll unknowingly fall asleep, and when we wake up, we'll be home."

"Okay," Bransen said, standing and taking in a deep breath. "I came out here for clarity—" He suddenly stopped talking and hunched down slightly, squinting his eyes.

"What?" Lorna asked, nervously standing. "What do you see?"

"A white wolf," Bransen breathed. "Just like in my dream ... "

78. Bees in the Forest [\[top\]](#)

Dr. Angelo Moore and Carlos had reached an oddly unbalanced truce. One had never before believed, had been a stooge for the government, but now had seen the proverbial light. The other had always believed, had been a stooge for the government, and now was completely unsure of what he'd seen, because deep down, Carlos was afraid he'd been played for a fool.

"Do you think they're really capable of that?" he asked Angelo.

"Oh sure," the doctor replied without hesitation. "No doubt in my mind—they would have killed us all, cobbled together some story about tragedy and accidents and the dangers of space travel, and have effectively shutdown private space exploration *and* all questions about alien life in one fell swoop. We are, after all, the only witnesses to history—"

"So if you want to write it one way, you silence the other," Carlos finished dourly. He glanced over at John and Howard and felt a nauseating wave of guilt. Ten years ago he had been an idealist, and had moved to woods to live like Thoreau (only with electricity). He'd been wildly successful, and for some reason, his studies and successes had drawn the attention—and money—of Uncle Sam.

"I feel like Judas," he mumbled.

"What's that?" Dr. Moore asked.

"Nevermind," Carlos replied, standing and sucking in a purposeful breath. "I think I owe them an apology."

John didn't return his greeting when he walked up to them, but Howard gave him the same optimistic smile he always wore.

"Look," Carlos said. "I just wanted to say that I think you guys may be right." John glanced at his father suspiciously, but Carlos continued. "I think the golangtry, if anything, are more like us than I'd like to admit. But most important, I do believe now that one of the missions of the military was to prevent any news from PISA returning to Earth."

They were all silent for several uncomfortable seconds, then John finally said, "I'm sorry if we don't immediately believe you. It's quite possible you're lying to gain some end from us. We saw you talking with Dr. Moore, after all—a man who has spent his career trying to destroy my father's."

"Right," Carlos agreed humbly. "I see your point." He waved unconsciously at a bee that was circling his head. "But would you not agree that a true scientist holds onto his opinion until overwhelming evidence proves differently? Otherwise we'd all just jump from theory to whim, never proving anything."

"And you're saying that the last few hours has provided this overwhelming evidence for you?"

"Yes," he said simply. "Breakthroughs usually come quite suddenly, in the grand scheme—wouldn't you say, Howard?" He wagged his hand at the bee again, hitting it

with his pinky. The insect flew a few feet away, then looped back and charged toward him, landing on his forehead and stinging him before he could react.

"Son of a *bitch!*" Carlos shrieked.

"Are you allergic?" Howard gasped.

"No, no, not really—but get me some grass or leaves or something—anything to cover the sting. If other bees smell the sting, they'll swarm."

Howard and John both bent down and tore out handfuls of grass, which Carlos instantly applied to his forehead, rubbing it vigorously to cover the wound with a grassy smell.

"Jesus, it hurts," he admitted. He looked at the other two, and was vaguely aware of a small dot circling John's head. He opened his mouth to warn him when John suddenly shrieked and flung his hands to his head.

"*Christ!* That *hurt*," he growled. "Right on the top of my fucking head!" He bent down and scooped up more grass, rubbing it on the crown of his head. He looked over at Carlos and said, "I don't think this is working."

Carlos looked around, mumbling, "we need lavender," and his eyes fell on the gates of Lithari, which now stood wide open. Having long been used to taking signs for omens when he saw them, he merely pointed and said, "The gates are open now. I think we should go in."

"What's going on?" Dr. Moore asked, jogging up to them. "What's all the screaming?"

"John and I are going into Lithari," Carlos replied softly. "I think the bees just invited us to enter."

79. Beekeeper and Mistmaker [\[top\]](#)

Luci stirred and moved a sluggish hand to her forehead. She was aware of people around her moving and talking, and she could feel warm grass beneath her head, tickling her neck.

"Luci?" Mouse asked timidly, touching her arm.

"Yeah ..." she whispered. "What happened? How's Sophie?" She opened her eyes and

looked up at Mouse, his cheeks stained with tears that disappeared into his beard. "Mouse?" She sat up quickly, fighting the nausea. Beside her Sophie lay unnaturally still, with Anabel St. Ambrose gently dabbing honey on the girl's wound with a stick. She looked up and caught Luci's gaze and smiled.

"You're awake," she said, putting down her stick and pot. "Good. We can let the body go now—I knew you'd want to be here."

"Let it go? What do you mean!" She shook free of Mouse's hand and knelt over her daughter. Sophie's face was white and her body rigid, but she looked happy. Luci began to cry and put her hand to her mouth. Mouse tried to comfort her, but not until Anabel moved around the body and took her in her arms did Luci move.

"Luci ..." Anabel whispered. "Fair Luci ... Did you meet your daughter in your sleep?"

"Yes."

"And did you fall?"

"Yes ... I remember falling."

"That's because you were somewhere you weren't supposed to be."

"What happened?"

"You smiled, then you passed out."

"Yes ... But ... "

"Sophie is what she needs to be now. She made the right choice."

"But I never got to say goodbye," Luci cried. Her voice sounded stung; betrayed.

"Luci," Anabel whispered secretively, right in her ear. "Luci, there is no goodbye." She broke their embrace and looked down at Sophie's body. Luci thought she'd never looked so small and helpless before. Not at all like her father. Her father had died with a sense of purpose, and his body had looked angry, but fulfilled. Sophie just seemed to be asleep. Mouse stepped over and took Luci's hand, squeezing it. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and tried to smile at him, then heard someone suck in a rapid breath. She looked back down at Sophie and watched as her body seemed to shimmer and fade, like light reflected in fog.

"Sophie?" Luci tried to bend to her, but Anabel held her tight.

"Sometimes it's more than mist," Anabel said, nodding at Giles, who stood at a discreet distance watching them. He smiled and winked when Luci looked at him.

Luci watched as her daughter's visage faded into the grass and became like a wisp of smoke curling between the blades. She saw the mist swirl and take a new form, a tiny form, the form of a solitary bee that appeared to labor heavily on its tiny wings. Slowly, the bee rose and drifted away, almost out of view, then meandered back to them. Anabel was grinning happily with the knowledge of past experience; she knew the bee would return. It moved closer, then with a puff it blossomed like a tiny firework into countless white sparkles that drifted to the grass, leaving glistening trails behind them. The avenues of light pulsed and sparkled, glittering into the outline of a small girl.

Luci understood and began to cry again, but her eyes were alive and happy as she watched the light weave Sophie anew before her eyes.

"Hi, Mommy," Sophie said when the last twinkles had winked out. "See? Now I don't need my body."

"Can ... Can I hug you?" She didn't wait for an answer but quickly closed the gap to her daughter, then took her in her arms and held her tight. As she hugged her daughter—even smelled her hair—she had a thought, and stood and turned to Anabel.

"I think I understand," she said. "This is the nature of light ... But, then, where is my husband?"

"He's here," Giles replied instead, walking to Anabel's side. "You just have to find him."

80. Crown and Eye [\[top\]](#)

"You got stung right on the crown chakra, and I got it right in my third eye," Carlos said as he and John walked down another deserted street. Everything behind the walls of Lithari did not glitter so much as the walls themselves. The town seemed forgotten; rundown; empty. But Carlos had a notion this was all he and John could expect, at least for the time being.

"I still don't see how that means we need to wander around some bedraggled—"

"The crown is Kether," Carlos cut in. "It represents the unmanifest being opened to the conscious. It's the end of the mystical journey, a union with the force that is creating the universe, allowing *you*, the journeyman, to become not just created, but also creator. It is the end of the physical and the beginning of the divine quest."

"Sure," John snarked at him. "So if I'm one with God, how come I still think you're a rat bastard who'd sooner stab me in the back as help me on a quest?"

Carlos chose to ignore him, his own revelations having had much effect on his thinking. "Now the third eye is the eye that can see beyond the physical, and is traditionally thought to be in the center of the forehead. I'm wondering now about a connection between the golgantry and the Cyclops—perhaps the golgantry, who have no eyes, see with only the third eye, which our ancient mystical brothers represented as a literal eye in the middle of their heads."

"That's pretty interesting," John had to admit. "I did always wonder ... In the Lands Below, they walk around in absolute darkness as well as they do in the light."

"Exactly." Carlos knew he had the kid hooked, and his excitement swelled. "So now, the third eye is associated medically with the pineal gland—the so-called Seat of Soul—which is thought to regulate circadian rhythms. Which is to say, it regulates time with no visual stimulus—it is *beyond* the physical, even though it *is* physical."

John didn't react, but cast Carlos a sly glance when he stopped talking. Carlos smiled and clapped John on the back.

"Don't you see?"

"I guess not," John said quietly.

"I can now see beyond the physical, which is to say, into the unmanifest. And you are now ready to *experience* the unmanifest and unite with the creative force that governs the universe. But without me, you can't see, and without you, I experience nothing."

John stopped short and turned to look Carlos in the eyes. "So you're telling me this place is forcing us together?"

Carlos shrugged and pointed over John's shoulder. John turned and saw a stereotypic medieval pub sign swaying gently on squeaky chains. Behind the windows, he could see shadwos and shapes moving, and could hear voices and laughter.

"Looks like the Emerald Crown is open," Carlos smiled. "Maybe we should stop in for a drink?"

81. Dala [\[top\]](#)

The wolf turned out to be a ruse, always dashing off just ahead of them, weaving between moss-covered boulders and trees with an uncanny agility. Finally, they lost sight of him, leaving Lorna and Bransen to scan the woods for any signs of life. Above them, they could hear the soft noise of things high in the canopy, but that was all.

"There are no birds," Bransen said. "Jot that down, Lorna—I think that's important somehow."

"Well, there aren't many earthlike creatures at all, are there?" Lorna asked, digging in her satchel for her pencil and book. "That wolf was the closest I've seen, and I'm not even convinced that was real."

"No?" Bransen asked distractedly. He scampered to the top of the nearest boulder and scanned the horizon, a smile finally settling onto his lips as he spied something large and white not too far away. "I say we find out about that. Come on!"

He slid back down the boulder and started to run off again. Lorna sighed and put her book and pencil away—again—then started after him. She couldn't help but feel Bransen's joy, however—his eyes just now had contained an excitement she had not seen since they had first tested Circadia X and received the homing beacon, loud and clear, from the surface of Mars.

She caught up to Bransen just as he rounded the trunk of a massive tree and came upon the white shape, which, he quickly realized, was not a wolf. He stopped short and considered the matte surface of the three-foot tall form before them.

"What is it?" Lorna asked, digging in her bag instead of waiting for him to ask her to take out her book and "jot this down."

"It's like a massive mushroom," Bransen said incredulously. "You know, before it's umbrella has opened, like when it first pops out of the ground?"

"Are you going to touch it?" Lorna wondered, trying unsuccessfully to hide her nerves.

Bransen didn't answer, but moved forward with his hand outstretched. As if on cue, the

shape moved and seemed to unfold. Bransen jumped back and Lorna hugged her book, slowly stepping away from the shape. They both watched as a person stood up in front of them, using its arms to push its cloak back over its head as it did so. As the fabric cleared its head, and the figure stood full, they saw it was a woman dressed in a white bodice, with a cloak that fell down her back and spread around her, its true side a deep red studded with oddly-shaped white patches placed in random fashion. Her hair was brown and her skin smooth and olive colored; her eyes sparkled and she smiled with full lips.

"My name is Dala," she said warmly. "You seek me, do you not?"

Bransen wracked his brain for the memory of a dream, or something else he could now correctly interpret as being a command to find a woman named Dala, but he could think of nothing. When he glanced at Lorna, however, he saw her face awed with recognition.

"Yes," she said and stepped toward her.

82. Edict of Secrecy [\[top\]](#)

Lorna hadn't thought of the dream for years, but she recognized Dala instantly. She was the woman from that dream—the one dream she'd had that frightened her the most, not because it was a dark nightmare, but because it was too real. Lorna could remember her mother's face when she told her about it. At the time, her mother's expression had confused her, but now she understood, because it must be the same expression she now wore—it was the realization that something you'd thought to be a very personal vision was, in fact, a very real entity that also interacted with other people. There was a sense of betrayal, but also satisfaction.

"That dream was real?" Lorna asked Dala. She was peripherally aware that Bransen had stepped aside, but was watching them intently.

"Of course it was, Lorna," Dala replied kindly.

"Then my whole life," she thought out loud, paraphrasing something Hiram had written. "Every moment, every experience, was leading to this point?"

"Don't give me too much credit," Dala said, chuckling lightly. "No, I am not the point of your life, Lorna—though I may be a milestone. And who's your friend?"

Lorna looked about to say, "What friend?" when her eyes lighted on Bransen and she snapped out of her reverie. He moved forward again and Lorna touched his arm, still a bit

perplexed.

"Oh ... this is Bransen. He brought us all here."

"Well, not really," Bransen chimed in, sounding flustered. There was something about the woman that inspired a great deal of respect. "I mean, we followed—well, you know, Ana-loop. I mean, she told us how to come here, so we came, but I didn't really—not really, you know, I mean, it wasn't my idea, per se—"

"I know about Ana-loop." Dala laughed a bit harder this time, bemused by Bransen's bumbling. "Axlow told me everything. Don't worry—we don't hold it against you. Ana-loop acted against better council. But you are here now, and we'll help you stay out of trouble."

"That's what you said to me in the dream," Lorna whispered, her eyes bright with recognition. "You told me you had come to help me stay out of trouble. I can't remember anything else about that dream, except a strong sense of protection, and what you looked like. But that phrase ..." Lorna trailed off and her countenance clouded. "Is this just the same dream again?" she asked softly.

"No," Dala replied simply. "This time, *you* have come to *me*."

"Are you my guardian angel?" Lorna wondered. She shifted her weight, as if preparing to fall to her knees, but Dala reached out and put a hand under Lorna's elbow, straightening her back up.

"No. We just knew you'd make it here one day, so I stepped in from time to time to help you see the right track. The choice was yours whether to take it or not—I'm glad you chose to the correct path. Your kind is very powerful—more powerful than you know—so we have to make sure those who visit do so with pure intentions. I'm very happy we are able to meet like this."

Dala then suddenly turned her attention to Bransen, her eyes set on his. He felt her power emanate over him almost palpably. "And Bransen, we have actually met before, though for the moment I didn't recognize you. As you know, you have to make sure we cast all of this in the right light. You can't just allow anyone in. Like it or not, you and friends are now gatekeepers. What you say and how you act will weigh heavily on you in the future."

"What are you saying?" Bransen asked reverentially. "Whatever you ask, I'll make sure we do—you have my word."

"Good," Dala replied. "Then you must keep Perendjo secret, Bransen. None of you has the authority to let anyone else in."

She smiled very kindly at them both, but the purpose in her eyes made questioning the edict impossible.

83. The Union of Science and Faith [\[top\]](#)

Howard was a man who liked perspectives, if nothing else. He considered it scientific inquiry, but when he was confronted with a problem, he liked to hear all sides of it before settling on a solution. This led him to mingle with the NASA scientists—who stood huddled like sheep, a safe distance from the gates of Lithari—so that he could glean more about the true character of Dr. Angelo Moore. What he discovered was the great failing of modern thinking: Scientific fear.

The NASA team was scared beyond words, to the point that rational thinking had, for some of them, begun to break down. Every member of the team had spent their careers regurgitating the discoveries of those who had come before them, all the while believing they were making progress. Thus, when faced with evidence of a truly scientific nature, they had no idea what to do. The textbooks, after all, said plenty about the theoretical existence of parallel worlds, but absolutely nothing about the reality of them, simply because no scientist who wrote for textbooks believed they actually existed. So there were no theories or formulae for what they now could see, taste, and feel. It was the kind of thing that separated the faithful from the scientist, and those who had banked their lives on faith—whether in God or in the halls of learning—now were struggling along the edges of sanity.

The only thing that had kept them together this long, Howard learned, was the leadership of Dr. Angelo Moore, a man who had previously made his career herding the faithful into the safest, most heavily trodden areas of scientific inquiry, and making sure they stayed put.

"You know, you can dump those spacesuits," Howard said after estimating the temper of the group. "You don't need them. I mean, you're not wearing the helmets any more, but you still have on the gloves. That doesn't even make sense."

He thought if he appealed to their logic, it would help them gain control of the situation. One or two of them seemed to snap out of it, glancing at each other, then smiling and shaking their heads as they undid their suits. The others shuffled nervously, as if waiting for their counterparts to explode. When nothing happened, they timidly tried their own

fastenings—and came to believe they had made progress.

"You're Dr. Fobell," one of them said, almost as an accusation. "No wonder you want to know so much about Dr. Moore."

"Yes," Howard admitted.

"Looks like you were right," a woman chimed in. "That whole quintessence of light thing you wrote about is true."

And that was the lynchpin—Howard almost heard it fall into place. Suddenly the scientists had before them an expert—a trusted man of science, however previously maligned—who had written extensively on the subject they were now encountering. A man who had theories and formulae about actual parallel worlds and—best of all—intelligent beings made of pure light. With an expert to guide them, the sheep woke up.

"Dr. Moore!" Howard shouted, waving at Angelo when he looked over. "I think we've made a breakthrough!"

"How's that?" Angelo asked, jogging up to them. "I was just studying the grass—I don't think it's like our grass at all."

"It isn't," Howard said simply. "This grass is light. It only has physical characteristics because that's what we expect. This, ladies and gentlemen, is quantum superposition in action. We are literally creating our physical reality by observing it, and what we're observing is nothing more nor less than what we expect to see."

"I didn't expect to see those ... *things*," the same woman as before said. The others mumbled their assent.

"Ah, but there's the rub," Howard replied happily, slipping into a professorial mode he hadn't enjoyed for years. He began to pace in front of them, as if before a chalkboard. "Those things—the golangtry—*do* exist. They have *only* a physical reality. They are immune, I suppose, to the whims of quantum mechanics."

"That's impossible!" someone cried—but the tone of voice was enlivened by what now appeared to be honest, scientific conversation.

"It is, isn't it?" Dr. Howard Fobell said quietly, grinning like a child. "And that's what we need to try and explain, though I fear we never will."

"So are we here physically?" Angelo asked, himself gladly accepting the role of student.

"We are both, Dr. Moore. *That* is why I think we're here, to understand that we, human beings, are both body *and* light. We are like the golgantry *and* the light beings in one ... ummm ... *container*, if you will."

"Body and soul ... " Angelo whispered.

"Something like that," Howard agreed, smiling proudly.

84. The Emerald Crown [\[top\]](#)

The pub was stuffed with all sorts of people—not only those John and Carlos would have expected to see in a place out of a Hollywood period piece, but also people like them, which is to say, more modern.

"What is this place?" John wondered.

"No clue," Carlos admitted. In all his travels, he'd never been to Lithari before. He had an inkling that the city was some kind of proving ground—a place where new arrivals could test their mettle. Perhaps, in fact, were *required* to test their mettle. Even so, this didn't explain how he and Hiram—and Howard and John—had been coming here for so long without first visiting Lithari.

"Maybe it's a testing area for those who need to be tested?" he asked John. "You know, most people who come here wander around the forest in a dream, but when they're ready for the full experience, they have to come to Lithari first."

John scanned the crowd before them, sitting at course wooden tables or standing dismally or propped at a well-worn bar that had been rubbed free of splinters by decades of use. Most everyone in the room looked to have had a bit too much to drink, and not one of them seemed to be particularly aware of anyone else. It was just like any college bar John had been in on a Saturday night, populated with self-conscious people who wanted to go out, but remain anonymous, for the most part.

"I don't see anyone I'd call spiritually advanced," John admitted. "Not to be mean ... But you said we might find out about all these chakras and unmanifest destinies and things, and I just don't see that happening here."

"Yes?" a man suddenly asked. Had he been able to stand straight, he would've been their height, but as it was, he stood hunched gazing up at them with one clear eye, the other masked by a gluey cataract. "The choice is yours—you can stay for a drink or you can move on, but you can't stand there and stare."

"Do you own this place?" Carlos asked, trying to gauge the workings of an other-dimensional city.

"We all own this place," the man croaked back, coughing into his hand. "At least, we all have a stake in it. You two don't belong here, do you?"

"I don't think so," John replied hastily, eyeing Carlos.

"So why were we shown it?" Carlos asked the man. "If we don't belong, why are we here?"

The man started to laugh but it quickly disintegrated into a coughing fit, which wracked his shoulders. "You have a choice, as I said. We have the finest absinthe—you're welcome to try it."

"I don't think so," John said again, surreptitiously taking Carlos by the elbow and turning him back to the door. "Thank you, though—but I think we'll be going."

"Yes, of course," the man agreed, waving them off and disappearing back into the throng. Outside, Carlos looked at John for an explanation.

"How were you so sure?" he wondered.

"Well, not to be elitist, but just look at them—they're not our type, are they?" Carlos still looked unconvinced, so John added, "Besides, I saw a fountain in the old man's cataract. It was beautiful—I intend to find it, and I need you along for the ride, right?"

"Right," Carlos agreed purposefully. "Where to?"

85. History [\[top\]](#)

Mouse liked Anabel and Giles well enough, so he decided to stay with them and wait for Luci to return. He'd wanted to accompany her as she went off to find her husband, but she'd asked him not to.

"You know ... " she'd offered. "I mean, he was my husband."

Sophie had gone with her, of course, and Henry had gone with Sophie. Jude and Hiram both decided they'd done all they could (the original mission being to save Sophie) and had also left, heading back to the gates and the others, to see about a rendezvous and returning to Earth. This was all fine with Mouse, but it had left him feeling lonely and a bit useless.

"Maybe I should just leave, too," he said. He was sitting on the porch of the farmhouse, the slow tick and creak of Giles' rocking chair soothing him. Giles smiled at him and shrugged.

"Welcome to stay," he replied.

"What's this whole 'mistmaker' thing, anyway?" Mouse wondered. He'd never been particularly adroit at starting conversations, but if he'd come off brusque, Giles didn't let on.

"It's my name, passed down from my couple-times-great grandfather, who was a slave in Tennessee. They say he had it better than most slaves—if that's possible—because he was owned by a small-time farmer, not one of the massive plantations in the deep South. Anyway, he did enjoy a modicum of time to himself, since the farmer had decided that if it was too dark or too foggy to work in the fields, they didn't have to work. Well," Giles continued, leaning in to a well-worn tale. "Grandpa couldn't do much about the darkness, but legend has it he learned to call the fog. He never admitted it, of course, but if one of the other slaves was hurting or sick, they'd go to him, and sure enough, next day it'd be so foggy they couldn't get into the fields until well after sun up." He laughed lightly and sat back in his chair again. "So they called him the Mistmaker."

"Wow," Mouse said, not knowing what else to say. "Cool. I'm not sure where my family came from. I mean, Europe, obviously, but we don't have records. My dad was in jail until the day he died."

"Do you miss him?"

"My dad?" Mouse asked incredulously, spitting air between his lips. "Never knew him as more than a voice at the end of a phone and a face behind glass. I have exactly one memory: I must've been like four, and he built me a go kart for my birthday. I think I knew even then that he must've stolen most of the parts and pieces from the junkyard down the road, but I didn't care." Mouse lowered his head and laughed lightly. "Next day they came and took him away, and I never saw him again on the same side of the glass as me."

"But you do miss the man who built you that go kart?"

"I guess," Mouse agreed, his head still lowered. "Yeah, I guess. He took part in a robbery that went badly, and somehow he took the fall for three murders."

"But he didn't do it?"

"Yeah, he did the robbery, but I don't think he shot anyone. But he never ratted on his friends, either, and I don't think I ever understood that. For a while, when I was about 14, I figured he wanted to stay in jail because he didn't want to be around me."

"I doubt that, Mouse," Giles said soothingly, then his tone shifted and he became more direct, leaning forward secretively. "You know, Mouse—he's out there, too. You said he died in jail, so he's out there."

Mouse looked over at Giles and narrowed his eyes. "In the city?"

Giles nodded and sat back, smiling cryptically. "Maybe you should go and ask him why he chose jail."

86. Entanglement [\[top\]](#)

"Don't you think we should explore the city a bit before we head out?" Jude asked. He and Hiram had been making a fast-paced bee-line for the gates since deciding to gather up the others for the return home, but now Jude's pace slowed forcing Hiram to stop and turn back to him.

"We'll be back," Hiram said, smiling secretively. "Don't you think?"

"But Ilmenecier—he told us to come here. It sounded important."

"Our lesson here was that the golgantry were not evil, which we saw when they put themselves between us and the gunfire. He never said anything about going *into* Lithari, just that we should head here to learn about the golgantry."

Jude considered this for a moment. "Yeah, I guess you're right. But it seems so ... well ... I'm just afraid that if we leave, we won't be able to get back in later."

"Once in, always in," a bemused voice said. Both men turned toward the sound and saw

a tall, lank man emerge from the shadows between two buildings. The street was quiet except for the sound of his shoes grinding grit on the cobblestones as he stepped toward them.

"Nick..." both men gasped, then turned to each other in confusion and said at once, "You know him?"

"Basic training," Jude said. Hiram nodded and replied, "A year in seminary."

They both turned back to the man before them, who was smiling with much amusement. His stringy blonde hair was long and unkempt and his face looked aged with wisdom. "What do each of you remember about me?" he asked.

"You were the best counselor there," Hiram said without hesitation. "And I was always sorry I never took a year under you." The man turned his eyes to Jude, who unconsciously straightened to attention.

"Sir, I remember you as a calm but driving force—a man who could fight and win without throwing a punch. You're the kind of man I always hoped to be."

Nick chuckled lightly and shook his head. "At ease, Jude—we're not in basic any more."

"Are you *here* here, or just visiting?" Hiram wondered. Nick still commanded a great deal of respect, and rushing over to shake the man's hand joyfully would have seemed to trivialize the moment, somehow.

"I'm here, Hiram. I ended up at the seminary about ten years after your basic training, Jude. A few years after that, I vanished in South America, searching for ruins. I'm not sure, exactly, what happened to my body, but now when I walk the earth, I do so as a ghost. My two favorite students," he suddenly said, holding his arms wide. "I wondered if you'd ever find me."

"I tried," Jude admitted. "But I was told you'd disappeared and were presumed dead. I never dreamed of looking here ..."

"So is everyone here dead?" Hiram asked. "I thought they were just ... other-worldly—"

"Everyone here is without body," Nick replied. "It's just whether or not you can go back to a body that causes a distinction. Except the golgantry—they are here and they are frustrated that they live in an ethereal world given substance by the whims of others."

"But if that's true, how did the girl get shot?" Jude asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Gentleman," Nick said, changing his posture and looking at the ground, then gazing at them through his drooping hair. "That was a reality you all created. Did you not ask yourselves why the bullets didn't bother the golgantry? Or how her body simply faded away?"

"But I can feel myself, Nick!" Hiram cried, squeezing his forearm excitedly. "And the golgantry—they carried off those soldiers."

"Only because you have given yourselves physical properties, because that's how you see yourselves. It's what you expect, and things tend to live up to your expectations."

"But the girl!" Jude growled. "Are you telling me she's not dead? Hiram, we have to find Luci—"

"No, Jude, she truly did die. The weave that unites our Radiance with our bodies is more tangled than you can imagine—or I can explain. Everyone's belief in her physical reality—most importantly, her own—was so great that she did become physical here, just as you all have, and what happens here happens on the other plane also."

"And so our bodies? Our real bodies? If we believe enough ... "

"Your real bodies, as you call them, are asleep in a ship on the surface of Mars, and no amount of belief can bring them here, physically. Except for dear Sophie. She is in Radiance, and her body is dead."

"Shot?" Hiram asked, wondering how they were going to explain the return of a young girl with a bullet hole in her chest.

"No. Just dead. A weak heart, no doubt," Nick added slyly.

"How did you know her name?" Hiram wondered, his voice losing the admiration it had once held. Jude glanced at him, and Hiram saw that he, too, was suspect.

"Ilmenecier told me," he replied evenly. "He asked me to look for you because he said the one thing you didn't understand was death."

"You did this ... " Jude suddenly realized. "We didn't create this reality—you did!"

"But you believed," Nick replied. He held each of their gazes for several seconds, then

turned without another word and drifted back into the shadows whence he came. Jude trotted after him, turning the corner sharply to grab him and confront him, but there was no one there. He whirled on Hiram, his eyes steely and determined.

"That wasn't Nick Thorsephe, was it?" he demanded.

"I believe it was," Hiram said coolly, but his expression belied the same sense of betrayal and unassignable guilt as Jude's.

87. Henry's Revelation [\[top\]](#)

"So did you already meet your dad here?" Henry asked. He sat sullenly on a stone wall with Sophie, across the street from the building Luci had entered. According to her, the building was the spitting image of the first apartment block her and Sophie's dad had lived in, so she'd felt confident she'd find him inside. That had been at least 20 minutes ago, and she hadn't come back out.

"Not yet," Sophie replied. "But I dreamt of him often, you know ... before."

"Before you died?" Henry snapped, flashing her an angry glare.

"What's wrong, Henry?" She reached over and touched his hand, unconsciously emulating her mother's actions in such a situation. But her concern was real and her sense of peace deep and unshakeable. "You know we can still hang out, like this ... ?"

"Great." He pulled away derisively and gazed down the road. The whole city seemed deserted; seemed to echo (or mock) the way he felt. Tears began to slide down his cheeks and he tried to turn further away from Sophie. "So I'm supposed to be happy that my only true friend is a ghost, who I can only visit by dreaming? And all this might be an illusion anyway," he added feebly. "I could be talking to myself right now."

"Henry," Sophie said, taking his elbow and gently forcing him to turn back to her. "Henry, look at me—what do you see?"

Henry wiped his eyes and sighed, taking in her soft features and shining eyes. Her hair still sparkled and flowed over her shoulders; her nose still sat pert and joyful. "What do you mean? I see you, don't I?"

"Exactly." She smiled widely, then jumped from the wall and danced a few spirals in the street. "You see *me*, Henry—not numbers, like all the rest!"

"Jesus!" Henry breathed, his face brightening with revelation. "Holy crap, Sophie—you're right!" She stopped twirling and ran over to him, her hair streaming behind her like a pony. She took his hands, and Henry twirled with her. He could feel her and see her and smell her. Eventually they slowed, giggling and separating as they dizzily stumbled back to the wall. The mood faded; Henry became serious again.

"Jesus, why'd you have to die, Sophie?" he pleaded. "I mean, what's it like?"

"I died so I could be with you, and my mom, *and* my dad." She dropped her face and gazed at her nervously twiddling fingers. "And it doesn't feel any different than before, I don't think ... "

"So do I have to come here all the time? Can you come there and see me, on Earth?"

"I've already been back to Earth, even before I died," she admitted, looking up and scooting closer to him secretively. "I helped Hiram find the door, because Dala moved it. You don't need a body in Radiance."

"Right," Henry agreed. "I know ... But will I be able to see your Radiance there? I mean, here we're *all* Radiance, so it sort of makes sense. But back there ... "

"We'll find out," Sophie said, smiling softly. "It'll be fun."

"I guess so," Henry shrugged. "I still like my body, though. I can't wait to get back."

88. Horizon of Eternity [\[top\]](#)

Mouse found John and Carlos at the fountain in the town square (or at least the park-like area Mouse had come to consider the town square, as he passed it umpteen times in his search for his father). The pair looked quite comical, both leaning over the rim, peering into the water.

"Lose your money?" Mouse wondered. Both men jumped and straightened simultaneously, rounding on Mouse as if expecting a fight.

"Jesus, Mouse, you scared the *hell* outta me!" Carlos cried. Without waiting for an explanation, Mouse sidled up to the fountain and gazed over its side. What he saw equally terrified and mesmerized him. He was filled with dread, but he couldn't back away. The fountain rippled, but the water—if such it be—was black and somehow

formless. He could not tell dimension, but got a strong sense of unfathomable depth. It was the inky blackness of infinity stretching too far for him to focus on, even as the undulations belied a surface not three feet from his nose.

Carlos and John saw Mouse's expression and watched him with uncertainty. His eyes first showed the fear, then the dread, but slowly they exposed recognition.

"What is it?" John asked. "What do you see?" He looked again at the water which, though much darker than he would have expected, didn't seem all that interesting.

"My father was right," Mouse whispered, clearly thinking out loud. "'Son,' he said, 'if I'd let the guy who did it take the fall, they'd've executed him. Sometimes you have to make hard decisions for the greater good.'"

"Hey, Mouse? Buddy ... ?" Carlos tried, stepping up to him and putting his hand on the larger man's shoulder. "You okay, man?"

Mouse's gaze slowly focused as he turned to face Carlos, but his tone was still slow and thoughtful. "The other guy went to jail for life, too, but the way they did it, they both got to stay alive. So they both got to see their kids, if only for visits. It wasn't much, but at least they were still there for us. Who knows how much of a difference that made?"

"You saw your father in there?" Carlos wondered, nodding at the fountain.

"No, no," Mouse replied, snapping out of it. He shook his head slightly, then held Carlos tightly by both shoulders and smiled. "I saw the old man at some bar back there. But now I get it! Now I see why he did it!"

"So ... What *do* you see in there?" John asked. Mouse dropped his grip on Carlos and assumed his usual calm (but imposing) posture. He shrugged heavily and glanced at the blackness again. Its pull was still strong, so he backed away a few steps.

"It's like a darkness without depth," he said. Carlos and John shared a knowing glance at the revelation, which Mouse caught. "What? What do you guys see?"

"Water," Carlos replied. "Though not as dark as John here sees it. But I think you see what's *really* there."

"Oh yeah ... And that is ... ?"

"God," Carlos said simply. "An unmanifest union with God."

Mouse considered what he said for a few moments, but was unprepared to face the implications of what it meant. He glanced at the darkness again, then walked off far enough that it was out of view over the rim. He stopped and turned back for second and waved for the other two to follow him.

"C'mon, guys, we've been here long enough," he said, moving on. "We better get back to the gates and find the others."

Carlos and John shrugged at each other, then reluctantly followed him.

89. Bransen's Fifth Dream [\[top\]](#)

The tomb was at once nondescript and stunning. Nondescript, because its marble walls were undecorated and the roof plain; stunning for its location in the middle of the woods, surrounded by nothing but trees.

Bransen knew the tomb held a secret, and he assumed the secret to be his. He was standing before the heavy oak door and he tried to open it, but the knob wouldn't turn and he got the sense that ten elephants would've been unable to force it. But something was driving him to enter.

"Sophie?" he called out, though he knew not why. "Sophie?"

"We're with Ana-loop," a small voice from the other side of the door secretively replied. "Don't worry. They can't find us."

"Find who?" Bransen cried, kneeling before the keyhole and trying to peer in. "Who's after you? Who's in there with you?"

There was no reply. Bransen didn't know how, but he knew there was no one in the tomb, at least not any more. He stood and backed away from the door, looking for a way in—any way, be it a window, a loose brick with which he could start a hole, or a wrecking ball. As he backed far enough into the woods behind him he saw the name over the door: Von Embers. And beneath that the inscription read, "Luci, mother, and Sophie, child."

Bransen cried out, the sound of his own voice waking him up. He was breathing heavily, but was not confused as to where he was. The woods of Perendjo seemed to breathe around him, the air and light soothing him. He looked over at Lorna who sat on a rock several feet away. Her face was distraught and she seemed about to cry.

"Why do we still sleep, if we don't eat?" he asked her.

"Because we still need to dream," she replied.

"Did you sleep?"

Lorna didn't answer for several seconds, but her gaze said she was thinking of an appropriate response—or, more likely, how much to share with Bransen. Finally, her eyes locked with his again and she said softly, "I'm afraid."

90. Dad's Suggestion [\[top\]](#)

Henry was feeling a bit better about things, but he still walked hand-in-hand with Sophie, her grip a constant reminder that she was still as real as could be. Luci's emergence from the house had lightened his mood somewhat, too, as her face had been bright and smiling, though also tear stained. Sophie had run over and hugged her gratefully, which had caused Luci to shed a few more tears, even as she smiled.

"I can still smell your hair," she'd whispered, holding her daughter at arm's length and looking at her. "But I know by the way it glitters that it's not ... " She trailed off without completing the thought, then sighed heavily and stood up. "Well, kids, I think we better get back to the others—they must be wondering where we are."

"Are we going back to the farm?" Henry had asked. Giles and Anabel seemed safe to him, as well as divorced from the unreality all around them, and Henry wanted to spend longer at their house. Had he been pushed, he might even have posited that their farmhouse was not actually in Perendjo, but somehow real and back in their own world.

"I really don't think we have time, honey," Luci had replied, and they'd begun to walk slowly, like tourists, back through Lithari, toward the purple gloaming sky of the forest beyond the gates.

Sophie was enjoying the walk. Her awareness seemed heightened and she was noticing colors, shapes, and shadows where previously there had been none. It was like the difference between watching a color movie in color versus black and white—on some level, everything was the same, but on another level, it was quite different. But she knew that trying to explain this to her mom and Henry would be useless—to them they had only ever known black and white, and there just isn't any way to describe colors to someone who can't see them.

"Isn't this place beautiful?" she asked, trying to offer some semblance of her experience. "Say, Mom, did you meet Dad back there?"

"Yes," Luci replied, snapping out of a reverie. "Yes I did. We had a long talk."

"I know," Henry grumbled, but Luci didn't seem to notice.

"He told me you'd visited him many times, but he wasn't sure you remembered any of it, once you woke up."

"I remembered some of the dreams," Sophie admitted, scrunching her brow as if trying to recall a specific example. "He never said anything about this, though. We were always in the woods."

"I think this was to make it easier for me," Luci decided. "If we'd just come across him out there, in the woods, I think I might have freaked out." She chuckled and watched her daughter and Henry swinging their clasped hands until the motion knocked them off balance, sending the pair into giggles.

"Is there more to this place, Soph?" she asked her daughter, trying not to sound too serious. "Dad said there was a lot to see and do here."

"Where is Dad?" she replied. "Why didn't he come out with you?"

"He said we should meet him by the lake. He didn't think this was really the place for a reunion. Do you know where the lake is?"

"Sure, Mom. Henry and I used to go there all the time, right, Henry?"

"Sure." He dropped her hand surreptitiously and sighed, and Sophie unconsciously took her mom's hand instead. "The lake's great, Mrs. von Embers."

"Well, I think we should go there," Luci said.

"I think I want to go home," Henry replied. "I don't think I like it here any more."

And whether or not the boy would admit it, Luci at least recognized that he understood even more than she did about what she was really suggesting.

91. The Poppies [\[top\]](#)

At the behest of Howard and Angelo, the NASA scientists had been busily gathering samples: blades of grass, handfuls of dirt, rocks—anything they could find that appeared to have real, physical properties. The crash course on ethereal physics had gone well, Howard thought, in so much as it had released the scientists from fear. Now they wandered around like busy bees, stooping to consider objects in the grass and stopping to share their discoveries with others.

Howard smiled to himself. This is, he imagined, how these people behaved on school field trips when they were ten: Full of wonder and disbelief at discovering that all the things they'd seen in their textbooks were real.

"Okay, everyone!" he finally called out. "I think we've established that the things around us are, as best we can tell, real. Right?"

There were mumbles of assent as the scientists regrouped before Howard. Angelo, who had adopted the role of scientific provocateur, moved to the front of the group and asked, simply, for them all, "But how? What if one of us doesn't expect to find grass, what then?"

Howard shrugged, admitting a large amount of uncertainty. "I suppose it's first dibs. Perhaps if we all concentrated on this grass being not green, but blue, it would turn blue. Or perhaps it's a simple majority—more people believe the grass to be green, and so it is. We are, effectively, three-dimensional beings trying to describe the sixth dimension. Let's try an experiment."

The crowd mumbled gleefully. Experiments were good. Experiments were repeatable and proved things, and proof took away the need for faith. Or so they thought.

"Charles, can you go and stand over by a tree—any tree—and wait for someone to come and get you? And while you're there, take your notepad and jot down everything you see by the tree, in detail." The man nodded and walked off to a tree. Once out of earshot, Howard motioned for the rest of them to huddle in, so he could speak quietly.

"Okay, now—what do you think he'll find over by his tree?"

"Grass!" someone cried with a laugh.

"Okay—but what else? Let's get specific."

"Mushrooms," a woman said softly. "I think I saw some before ... "

"Good—what kind of mushrooms? What color? How tall?"

She shrugged and glanced at the others for help. "I don't know. Just regular mushrooms, I guess. Couple inches tall, brown ... "

"Even here?" Howard asked incredulously. "You think that even here, they'll just be regular mushrooms? Could they be bright red, almost glowing?"

"They could be ... " she agreed.

"And what about flowers—has anyone seen any flowers?" Everyone shook their heads, but Howard nodded. "Well, I imagine Charles may have found the first field of flowers we've seen. Poppies, do you think? To match the mushrooms? All right then," he decided, standing straight. "Shall we go and find out?"

The group parted for Howard as he led the way over to Charles. Before anyone could say anything, Howard snatched his notepad and turned the man, forcing him to look at the walls of Lithari, with his back to the tree.

"Now, Charles," he said. "Will this notepad describe everything you saw?"

"Yes, it should. I tried to note every detail."

Howard looked over the notes, nodding to himself, but still not letting Charles turn around. "Says here you found a large tree, at least thirty feet in diameter. The bark was unremarkable. Around its base you noted the same green grass as everywhere, but you did note that on the far side of the tree from the wall, the grass seemed to thin, exposing a patch of dirt. There's more, but in a nutshell, that's all you found?"

"Yes, sir, that's it."

"Sylvia, can you tell me what you find around the tree?" The mumbling of the others already had reached a dull fever pitch, for they all saw what she now described: A small clump of vibrantly red mushrooms, and on the far side of the tree, a field of bright poppies, their black eyes swaying a low breeze. Howard turned Charles around so he, too, could see.

"How did you miss so much color, Charles?"

"I have no idea, Howard. They weren't there before—I swear!"

"I believe you," Howard replied triumphantly. "Remember, folks: All it takes is one person to observe something to take it from superposition and give it position—to bring it from fantasy to reality. We expected to see mushrooms and poppies, and that is now what's there."

"But what about the rest of it? Before we got here? Before we knew what to expect?" Angelo asked.

"Well, I think in that case, it proves that we're not the only ones here with expectations, are we?"

92. Rendezvous [\[top\]](#)

Lorna bent down and reverentially plucked one of the poppies from the ground. It's delicate head bobbed as she stood, twirling it between her fingers as she turned to the rest of them.

"But Hiram," she said. "This is a really poppy. I can feel it and smell it—we all can."

The rendezvous point had been apparent as the several disparate parties emerged in their own time from their own directions. Hiram and Jude had been the last to reconvene, and now the crowd looked to the monk-like visionary to illumine how a field of poppies had been willed into physical existence by a bunch of scientists.

"True," Hiram said simply. "But I assure you, there is no such thing here as physical reality. We are given weight and depth by our minds, not our bodies. That's why we don't need to eat—in this land of light, the light itself sustains us."

"Then why do we sleep?" asked Bransen. "Why do we need rest if we aren't actually here? If we don't have muscles that tire?"

Hiram chuckled lightly, as if at an inside joke. His tone was not condescending, but that of a man amused to discover that the same things that had always confused him also confused others.

"We sleep to dream," he replied with certainty. "But dreams do not sustain the body—dreams sustain our Radiance. As long as we're here, our bodies sleep where we left them, but the sleep is so deep that we are, to science, dead. In reality—" (he chuckled again at the word) "we are in stasis, neither living nor dead, sustained by our

Radiance."

"Like a vampire..." a voice in the crowd breathed.

"Perhaps," Hiram smirked. "I hadn't quite thought of it that way, but it's entirely possible that legends of vampires arose when a Traveler was found in stasis. And when they killed his body for good—with a stake to the heart, let's say—they severed his silver cord, and he truly did die."

"But if they'd left him alone," Luci said, stepping forward and narrowing her eyes at him. "If they'd let him be, he would've remained in stasis forever? Immortal, right? If he stayed here most of the time, his body would appear dead, but never actually die, and he could always go back."

Hiram glanced at Sophie as Luci took her hand, then smiled at them both and sighed heavily. "I don't know the answer to that, Luci. I don't know anyone who's tried such a thing. Surely the physical body would start to deteriorate?"

"I don't think so," Luci decided. "My husband told me he came back to his body three times as he lay at the bottom of that gorge. Three times -- but he gave up because he recognized by the change of seasons that he'd been long ago left for dead, which they had thought he was when they first found him, hours after his fall, and told me that bringing up his body was too dangerous. But you said it yourself -- we're inextricably interwoven with our bodies there and our Radiance here. What happens to one affects both, so if my Radiance is sustaining me, then surely my body will live ... Forever?"

The scientists mumbled crossly among themselves—such a theory was taking even this new vision of reality a tad far, they thought. It was risky and unproven. It was unknown, and thus inherently suspect.

"I don't know," Hiram finally admitted, his tone defeated.

"Well, I'll find out," Luci declared adamantly. "I'm going to stay here with my daughter and my husband."

"But why?" Hiram begged. "You can always come back and visit—I'll show you every portal I know—"

"Because he thinks we can help Ana-loop," Luci cut in. "She has helped my daughter immensely over the years, and especially recently. And I won't leave here until we've freed her. Will you keep my body safe, Hiram?"

Hiram sighed heavily again and rubbed his chin, glancing at the shocked faces gazing at them. He knew, of course, that he was powerless to stop her.

"Yes, Luci," he said quietly. "I'll build you a tomb on my property, and I'll tend it every day, in case you come back. And I'll leave food and water if I ever have to go away."

"Thank you," she whispered, tears filling her eyes. Behind her there was a dull thud and a few gasps, and their attention turned to a body lying prone in the poppies.

"Bransen fainted," Lorna said to the crowd, bending over him and lightly slapping his face. "But I suppose that's just what he expected his body to do..." she added wryly.

93. Dajenour's Warning [\[top\]](#)

Bransen may have fainted, but Mouse was the most visibly upset by Luci's decision. All she could offer in the form of solace was a shy, "Everything's changed," which Mouse knew was true, but it didn't diminish the sting.

He had walked with them far enough to be out of earshot of the others, then had stopped her with gentle tug on her elbow and turned her back to him. Sophie had politely skipped ahead so she could pretend to examine the roots of some tree or other, only to discover they were the feet of Dajenour, the golgantry sentry who had tried to take her bullet.

"Oh!" she gasped in surprise. "I didn't recognize you!" The golgantry trilled strangely in response, which Sophie took to be a form of laughter. "But you can still see me?" she asked, her brow furrowing.

"You are like a small, bright sun," Dajenour replied in his distinctive tinkling cadence. "Like the rest of them now, but I know that it's you."

"Thank you," Sophie replied reverentially. "Thank you for trying to save me."

"The bullets were not real," Dajenour responded, his voice carrying a dischordantly plaintive tone. "We did nothing more than make you think you were safe. But Axlow has told me it was all for the best, anyway. He's also asked me to tell you that he will take care of Ana-loop."

"I'm sure he will," Sophie chided. "That's why we want to get to her first. Will you have to try and stop us?"

"I can take your mother out now, like those others with the guns." Sophie knew it wasn't a threat, just a statement of fact. She could also tell he had no intention of doing so, even if Axlow demanded.

"But you wouldn't, would you?"

"You're on your own now, little sun," Dajenour trilled, rising into the air on his leathery wings. "But you are more than they are—don't forget that." And he buzzed off into the canopy, Sophie quickly losing sight of him in the shadowy darkness of the branches in gloaming.

Behind her, Luci jogged up, panting for breath. "What the hell was that? What did it want?"

"He was a friend," Sophie replied, telling her mother with a glance that she didn't want to explain that much any further. "He came to tell me that Axlow doesn't want us going after Ana-loop."

"After what R'dau told us? He thinks you transformed to your Radiance for nothing?"

Sophie shrugged. "Axlow can be a bit irrational, from what I've heard. So how did Mouse take it? I liked him, but not as much as Daddy."

Luci smiled softly, tears running again down the same trails that had just dried from her parting with Mouse. "He took it pretty well. He was more concerned about my feelings, the poor guy. He was afraid it would be weird between me and my husband now, but I assured him that would only be true if I felt guilty about our relationship."

"And you don't?"

"Why would I? If we hadn't come here, I think Mouse and I would've been together for a long time, and I don't think your father would ever have minded. But now ..."

Sophie waited for her mother to finish, but instead Luci smiled warmly and tussled her daughter's hair. "Now we should go and find your father and see what he thinks of your friend's warning."

"Will you ever go back to Earth?" Sophie asked as they set off toward the lake.

"I hope so," Luci admitted. "I'd like to share your light with the world."

94. Morning on Mars [\[top\]](#)

Bransen woke up last, and by the time he managed to stumble to his knees, the others had already taken care of Luci and Sophie. Mouse sat sullenly looking at the two bodies, his eyes swollen and red with tears that he refused to release.

"What happened?" Bransen asked. "Did anyone see it?" He glanced at each of them, but all just shook their heads—none of them had consciously returned to the ship. Some time after the lightfall, back along the path through the forest, each had simply fallen asleep. Lorna was the first to complain of being extremely tired, and when she sat down to rest, they all sat down with her. And slowly, they each fell asleep.

Henry awoke first, back in his rebreather suit inside the pod, and found all the others stretched out around him, as if dead in their own rebreathers. At least one of them, he knew, was dead. He had looked out the windows and caught his breath, because now they were truly on the surface of Mars. Where they had once landed within the forest of Perendjo, now that the portal had been moved, they had returned to the dusty and rocky terrain of the true Mars.

"No geese here," he said to himself, scanning the pale blue sky for any signs of life, be it Light or otherwise. Seeing nothing, he had turned to keeping himself busy while he waited for the others to wake up, contemplating momentarily a solo excursion over the surface of the red planet. Had Lorna not woken up, he may even have gone through with it.

"Did we make contact with Hiram and Jude yet?" Bransen wondered.

"No," Carlos replied. "But it will take them a while to walk back, and then they have to drive from Hiram's place to the PISA labs. Of course, we have no frame of reference—we could have been asleep up here for hours already."

Carlos speaking seem to trigger Bransen's mind, and he looked confused at him for a second, then at Mouse, and then he finally turned and looked out the window, where the pod Mouse and Carlos had used sat amid the rocks on the red desert of Mars.

"You walked out there?" he said to them, turning back incredulously.

"That was the original plan, wasn't it?" Carlos asked, smiling. "To explore Mars?"

"But where's the forest we landed in? Where's Perendjo?"

Carlos shrugged. "It's up here somewhere, but they moved the door, remember?"

"Right," Bransen agreed, then looked down at Sophie and Luci. "Christ," he breathed. "How am I going to explain that a child died?"

"Just remember what Dala said," Lorna replied quietly. Bransen caught her gaze and nodded imperceptibly, but as Carlos was about to ask what she meant, Bransen stood up and looked at the gauge on his arm. "How much time do we have?"

"The pod still has six hours of air left," Mouse replied. "We never turned it on yet."

"My suit only has about two left," Bransen noted. "That means I've been breathing for four hours—how far away was Hiram's place from the lab? Has anyone sent them a message yet?"

They all kind of looked guiltily at each other and chuckled nervously. "No," Lorna finally said, standing up and looking hopeful. "We haven't."

Bransen smiled and moved over the RS-CD device, but just as he was about to hit the button, he glanced back at her. "Out of curiosity, how much air does Luci have left?"

Lorna bent down again and looked at the gauge on Luci's arm. "Six hours."

Bransen didn't reply, but his expression dropped and when he spoke into the RS-CD, his tone was downtrodden. "This is Bransen up on Mars—are you guys back yet?"

The reply was almost instantaneous, and as Howard spoke, they could hear the cheers of the other scientists—who'd had no choice but to tag along with Hiram's group, back out of Perendjo—in the room with him.

"We're back! Are you all awake?"

"Yeah," Bransen said. "I guess so."

"Are you ready to come home?"

He turned and glanced at the others—their faces all tired and, he knew, changed forever.

"Yes, we are," he said simply. "We certainly are."

95. Cutting Langer Loose [\[top\]](#)

The cover up was easy—so easy, in fact, as to be unnecessary. While it felt as if they'd been gone for days, it turned out to have been just over two hours, so their return had been just like their departure: To the media, as uneventful as is anything the second or third time. It wasn't until weeks later that anyone bothered to call Bransen Labs for a follow up on the official mission, by which time Bransen was able to pass the whole thing off as old news ("Yes, yes—it went very well. We brought back some rocks and dust and plan to go back with clearer objectives."). The story appeared on page five, and only got about 250 words of coverage.

It helped, too, that the government arm of the exploration told a similar ho-hum tale, because while they had not suffered the loss of a woman and child, they did have to contend with an entire platoon that had gone unclassifiably insane.

Admiral Jude Thomas was the link, and he made sure their stories matched and were suitably boring so as to not inspire journalistic investigation. He also managed to get the patent for Circadia X classified, in the name of national security, and slowly but surely, whatever tracks they had left were swept away. Such is how the crowning achievements of human space exploration—including travel at the speed of light to meet with extraterrestrial beings—were publicly forgotten.

Internally, it was a different matter. The Mad Platoon, as it became known in Deep-Space Ops, had been carefully selected for a complete lack of family ties, but the problem they had was that one of them -- Eric Langer -- had not gone mad upon his return, after all.

"How am I supposed to stay quiet?" he'd quite rationally asked Admiral Thomas in his debriefing. "What we saw was so beautiful..."

"You admitted you threw down your gun shortly after falling over the cliff," Jude stated simply; Langer nodded. "That sounds a lot like desertion to me."

Langer leaned in and whispered, "But that's the only reason I didn't go nuts like the rest of 'em did."

"I know," Jude whispered back, leaning in himself such that he was speaking directly in Langer's ear. "And that's why you have to keep quiet." Jude leaned back and crossed his arms, sighing heavily. "But it's your choice. You can keep yourself quiet and live on a nice government pension. Or we can keep you quiet in a nice government cell."

Langer thought it through for only a few seconds, scuffing the floor dejectedly with his booted foot. "Fine," he finally decided. "You win. Of course you win. But tell me one thing." He looked up and held Jude's gaze. "Why did they go mad? And why are you covering it up?"

"That's two things," Jude smiled. "But they went mad because they came back without their Radiance -- don't ask me to explain that any better, please. Find Carlos Resua. He can tell you more than I. And we're covering it up, Private Langer, because they told us to."

"Who did?"

"The beings who seem to be in control over there. We talk, they take over, capiche?"

"Yes, sir," Langer mumbled. He looked away for a few seconds, out his window and onto the world, then turned back to the admiral. "Can I keep my job, though, sir?"

"I don't think that's a good idea, Langer," Jude replied regretfully. "Speak with Carlos. He's been living under a plan similar to yours for years now. He really is a good contact for you."

"Thank you, sir," Langer said, standing up and offering a weak salute. "I'll begin to pack my things."

96. Debriefing [\[top\]](#)

Bransen didn't want to turn from the conference room window and face his team, because he knew it would be the last time they'd all be together—what was left of them, anyway. His posture was making them nervous, he knew. He could feel them staring at his back, wondering what he was going to say or, more likely, demand. It was two weeks after their journey and the press hadn't yet sniffed around, for which Bransen was grateful. It had given them time to remove themselves from the events via normal life. But now, this was it: The last meeting.

"So, Bransen," Mouse said. "What's this about? I thought we agreed the team was disbanded?"

"We did," Bransen agreed, finally turning to them and smiling as best he could. "I thought I made it clear that none of you had to stay, or even come to this meeting." Mouse

shrugged; he couldn't argue.

"We're here just to tie up the loose ends," Bransen explained. "First and foremost, my offer to keep you all on an indefinite retainer at your current salaries still stands. I've even drawn up the appropriate legal paperwork to ensure it will stand even in the case of my untimely death. You should also know that, while our team has been disbanded, a new Mars team has been created, consisting of myself, John and Howard Fobell, Angelo Moore, and Lorna Jacobs. Its purpose will be the exploration of Mars and the moon, at first, using Circadia X, and in conjunction with NASA."

"No," Mouse cut in, shaking his head and glancing at Hiram and Carlos for support. "You have to destroy that machine. What if you enter a portal by accident, which is basically what we did before? Using that machine would be like shooting a gun in a dark room—you never know what you'll hit."

"Well, this time we know what to look for, don't we?" Bransen replied calmly. "We send unmanned rovers up first and check out the landing site. And if we see something other than Martian desert or moon rocks, we evaluate our options."

"Evaluate your options?" Mouse blurted, standing and ramming his fist down onto the table. "We lost a mother and daughter on the last mission—"

"Mouse, it's okay," Hiram said, reaching out and touching his arm, urging him to sit back down. "Everyone went of their own free will. And let's not forget that Luci chose to stay—"

"I know that," he spat back, shaking his arm free from Hiram's grasp and dropping into his chair with a huff. "None of this makes any fucking sense."

"Please, Mouse, I know how you feel," Bransen assured him. "But think of it this way: If we destroy Cricadia X, then the team's loss—because truly, it affected us all—will be for nothing. No one's planning on going back to Perendjo with the machine, but I know that if we did and if we found Luci, she would beg us to continue using the machine, if only for the advancement of science."

Mouse mumbled something under his breath and tried to dodge Bransen's gaze. He crossed his arms and sighed, then finally said, "Whatever," and continued staring out the window at his machine.

"But there is one thing we do need to make clear," Bransen continued, once he was sure Mouse was as settled as could be. "None of what happened is to be corroborated. Someone blabs, the rest of us deny it, agreed?"

"What about my book?" Lorna asked. "You said I should publish it?"

"Hiram?" Bransen asked, turning the question over to him.

"You should, Lorna," he said. "And I will provide a preface suitable to the task of explaining that everyone on the team reacted to the mission in different ways, and that you seemed to have entered a dream state, not unlike my own, where you believe you experienced some kind of divine interaction. In this way, we are admitting everything, but proving nothing. The one thing you don't want to do is try and explain a place like Perendjo. You can't. It's beyond us for now. All we can do is experience it, and all you can do is tell us what you saw."

"This is bullshit," Mouse said, standing up again, but this time heading for the door. "You think a few fucking tips to the moon will honor the memory of Sophie and Luci? Meanwhile you sit here and consciously plot a fucking cover up to deny what really happened to them?"

"You know what Dala said," Lorna replied, speaking before Bransen could.

"I know what you told us she said," Mouse corrected. He scanned the faces around the table, then flung open the door and stepped out into the hall. At the last moment, he turned back and growled, "Don't worry—I'll keep your fucking secret for now. I know who your friends are and how a guy like me can disappear without anyone noticing. But let it be known that this is bullshit and you're all fucking hypocrites. Bransen—with this meeting, your little private space thing has just been sold to the Man."

He gave them all one last glare, then slammed the door and stormed away.

97. Collateral Damage [\[top\]](#)

Mouse sat in his living room, the only light source his TV, which was tuned to some obscure cable channel that was covering a speech by Bransen. Mouse had found his use of lights was much more economical now that he had seen Perendjo—since he'd come to glimpse the true nature of light, he was wary of it, and the last thing he needed was a desk lamp morphing into some threatening creature.

"Ms. Jacobs and I are engaged, yes," Bransen was saying to the press corp on the TV. "And I support her as much as any man supports his fiancee, but that does not mean I have to consider her book with scientific credulity. Lorna knows this, and she

understands."

"Liar," Mouse mumbled to himself. He'd started to drink more than he should again, only now he spent his money on wine instead of canned beer. During the day he managed to stay sober and found himself more and more often at the planetarium—he had even looked into volunteering there. But the one thing he didn't do—and which Lorna had called and begged him not to neglect—was write down his dreams. Those he let slip quietly back into the darkness, no matter who he saw or what they said, because the one person he never saw was Luci von Embers.

"No, I most certainly do not think she is crazy," Bransen was categorically denying from his podium, at which point Mouse leveraged his weight enough to stumbled out of his chair and grab the remote from the coffee table, cutting Bransen off. He let the darkness surround him and leaned back in his chair again.

"I haven't even touched a screwdriver for two months," he said to no one. "And that fucker's carrying on like nothing happened."

He didn't hear the knock on his door the first time. Or, rather, it had been so timid as to not filter all the way to his consciousness. But when it came again—with a bit more force—he realized what he'd heard and sprang to his feet. None of his friends who came to visit him ever knocked.

Mouse reached over and flipped on the lamp beside him, the pull cord springing back out of his fingers and tinkling against the lamp's post. He heard feet shuffling on the other side of the door, but didn't hear voices—just one person, then. Mouse got up and walked across the room, weaving very slightly, his head full of sleep and wine. When he got to the door he peered out through the small window in its center and saw a sturdy but small man, with neat, dusty blonde hair, looking around nervously. Mouse threw open the door.

"Yeah?"

The man jumped at how quickly Mouse had opened the door, but didn't take a step back.

"Are you the one they call Mouse?"

Mouse nodded and straightened himself to full height.

"Hi," the man said, extending his hand. "My name's Eric Langer ... Carlos Resua thought we'd have something in common."

"Oh yeah?" Mouse chided, starting to close the door.

"My platoon went to Mars," Langer blurted. Mouse stopped closing the door and turned back to the man on his doorstep. "But I'm the only one who came back whole."

"Come in," Mouse decided after a few awkward seconds of silence. He turned and walked back into his sitting room, leaving the door wide open.

98. Normal Life [\[top\]](#)

Lorna worried about Henry, not because he was holding a detailed conversation with the thin air, but because she knew he was talking to a ghost, and she wasn't sure that was the type of thing a growing boy needed. He needed friends who were flesh and blood, like he was. Friends who played backyard football and rode bikes and climbed trees and set off model rockets without parental supervision.

But she couldn't tell him that. And she certainly couldn't ask Sophie to stay away.

She turned from the door to his bedroom and walked back into the living room where Bransen was dozing on the couch, his own most recent speech droning on the TV in front of him. She chuckled to herself—he'd only been watching it to make sure he hadn't said anything that could be misconstrued as insensitive to her.

She flopped down beside him and took the remote from his hand, turning off the TV and laying her head on his chest. He stirred and woke up, then put his arm around her and hugged her close.

"Is it over? Did I make an ass of myself?"

"I turned it off," she replied. "And you always make an ass of yourself."

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "So what's wrong, Lorn? You seem tense."

Lorna sighed heavily and sat up so she could see his face. "I'm just worried about all this. Is it the right thing?"

"The cover up?" he asked. "You were there when Dala—"

"No, not that, really. And it's not about my book, either—even if you'd got up there and said it was all a hundred percent true, the scientific community still wouldn't have believed

it. It's just not in them to believe."

"So what, then?"

"Henry," she said simply. "Henry and Sophie. I mean, it's great that she visits and he has someone to talk to, but can it possibly be healthy for him? He needs real friends, don't you think?"

"I think it's fine," Bransen said. "He's been through a lot, hasn't he? He spent time in a parallel world where his best friend died, for God's sake, and now his mother is about to get remarried—"

"But he loves you! To him, I'm marrying Superman!"

Bransen laughed and shook his head. "I know he likes me, but it's still a lot for him to handle. I think Sophie—ghost or not—is the only friend he needs right now. Give it time. When everything settles down, he'll find new friends. That's how kids are. We all form our strongest friendships when we're their age, but then we move on."

Lorna's eyes moistened with tears. She wiped them away then tried to smile at Bransen.

"I'd known Luci since we were nine," she finally said.

"Really?" Bransen gasped. "I had no idea..."

Bransen hugged her tightly to him, understanding what this was really about: If Sophie could visit Henry with such regularity, then where was Luci?

"Has Sophie mentioned Luci to Henry?" Bransen asked. Lorna shook her head against his chest, "Not yet."

"Actually, she just did," Henry's voice said timidly. Bransen and Lorna looked over to where he had just come into the room, and Lorna sat up straight to give him her full attention.

"She says, 'Hi,' and that she wants you to know she's afraid to visit because she doesn't think they'd let her back in right now, if she came home."

"But Sophie ... ?"

"Sophie is one of them now," Henry said simply. He stopped midway to the candy dish,

focusing on them for the first time, now his message was delivered. "Hey—what's going on? What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," Lorna said, smiling widely and reaching out her arms so she could hug him. "Nothing at all, Henry. Nothing at all."

99. The Once and Future Bride [\[top\]](#)

The snow lay heavily over everything, dampening the sound and exaggerating the light. These had been the warm, puffy flakes of early December, so the whiteness did not glisten but lay stretched like a blanket through the trees. Hiram wore his hood close and grasped his walking staff with a mittened hand. His breath puffed before him in tiny clouds that danced before dissipating. He stopped to catch his breath and looked through the ribcage of trees before him, to the tomb, its gray slab walls matching the color of the sky.

One of these days, he hoped, he'd see that the door had been opened. But no, today, as always, there was no sign of egress. The snow was still piled right up to wood of the door—darker along the bottom with moisture—and the candle in the window was not lighted.

Hiram sucked in his breath and began to move again, plodding purposefully through the snow. It was part of his routine now—just another stop on his daily meditative walks around his property.

When he got to the door of the mausoleum, he stopped and looked at the lettering above it: "Von Embers," it read, then smaller, underneath that, "Luci, the Once and Future Bride," and below that, "Sophie, her daughter." Hiram bowed his head, his eyes burning with tears—just another part of the routine. Sniffing and wiping his eyes on his mitten, he reached into his cloak and brought out the key to the door. It fitted easily and turned with the definitive *thunk* of a heavy lock releasing. Pulling the door open, he held his breath, and stepped inside.

Luci's body lay undisturbed on a plain marble slab, her skin white as death, but otherwise unchanged. Her eyes were closed of their own volition, which was the only clue that she was something other than deceased. To her left, Sophie's small sarcophagus was still sealed, hiding her body from view. Hiram pulled back his hood and leaned his staff against the wall. In the corner to his left, the sticks and the tiny fireplace were untouched; to his right, the table holding a crystal glass of water, a candle, matches, and a note to Luci was likewise as he had left it the day before.

He opened his cloak and pulled out a silver canteen, then took the glass of water and dumped it outside the door, refilling it from the canteen before putting it back on the table. Hiram then moved between the two bodies and produced two roses, one white and the other black. With the white, he replaced the rose on Sophie's sarcophagus, and with the black he replaced the rose in Luci's grasp. He then knelt beside Luci's body and whispered his usual prayer for her safe return.

Minutes later, Hiram stood at the open door again, wrapped tight against the wind, his hood close and his mittened hand grasping his staff.

"Death to him who under my secrecy betrays his oath," he said reverently, then closed and locked the door.

Finis

53,000 words

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