

# The Long Run

by David Kibrick

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ISBN:

ISBN-13:

This book is dedicated to the way forward, and to the annoying parable that it's generally better to run towards something than away from it.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *Act IA: REMF R&R*

Meldenham Lexo wasn't specifically known for laziness, but it was, without a doubt, one of the pillars which made up the foundation of his life. It was a trait that had followed him from birth, which he had arrived at quite a number of hours later than his mother had thought reasonable. From there, he'd always managed to muster up enough effort to scrape through respectably, but always allowing for plenty of time to pursue his own interests - among them sleep, relaxation, and most anything else sufficiently escapist or downbeat. That wasn't to say that he was narcoleptic, or without energy - he always seemed to find just enough reserves to see things through, and remove them as interruptions from his generally easy-going state of being. In grade school, he'd done just enough to avoid being sent back, and occasionally found something to excel at to keep his teachers from becoming too inordinately concerned about him. In high school, he'd pressed right to the point of having a college-worthy GPA, and joined the track-and-field team to get out of regular physical education, as running laps seemed sufficiently low-impact. He'd gone on to a state college, pulled through to a degree in something largely irrelevant, and was lazy enough not to do anything particularly vigorous to avoid the draft. So, in due course, as he was perusing the want ads for unmemorable positions, a message popped into his inbox with a sufficient priority for it to be automatically displayed. It bore a Commonwealth seal, as well as a matter-of-fact statement detailing where and when he was to report for duty. Meldenhams Lexo could have fought it, could have protested or appealed, but instead spent the intervening days playing holographic computer games. Finally, the enlistment van came to idle in front of his door, he tossed a handful of belongings into a duffel bag, and that was that.

It wasn't a particularly inspiring story, but that was how he had found his way here, via a basic training boot camp at which he performed just adequately enough to avoid much of the drill sergeant's notice. He could shoot well enough, and he could definitely run, but his demeanor didn't exactly inspire confidence in combat. However, he was handy with a clipboard, and could generally tell one box from another without difficulty (a skill that was in oddly short supply, it seemed), so he was quickly relegated to spend his days managing logistics at a transshipment base on the periphery of the continental war zone.

Not that he was complaining, of course - when the military had called him up, he'd been halfway afraid that he'd be pressed into rigorous service. Luckily, though, his own predilections had somehow seen him through, and instead of sweating it against flechette darts and masers, he was simply ferrying crates of the dangerous things to the people that were far more eager to use them. He'd followed the war vaguely in the news and couldn't really bring himself to care about it all that much. Now that he was here, on the front, he cared about it perhaps slightly more, but as his days usually involved nothing more dangerous than forklifts and the occasional noise of an artillery shell going off in the distance, his world hadn't seemed to change all that much. Sure, the video games here were limited to a handheld title he'd manage to wangle through the creative use of procurement forms, but aside from that, the pace was nicely downbeat, and he'd learned what the phrase REMF meant and was happy to accept it. For him, as much as he was technically a part of it, the war was just an event that was happening someplace else, behind a display screen for instance, much too far away for him to touch - or to touch him.

And so, as easy as that, here he was, lounging amid rumpled sheets on a folding cot in the middle of a prefab barracks, situated near a small VTOL landing strip and a complex of warehouses. As far as places went, he figured it was as good a place as any - situated in the middle of a scrub forest, ringed by blasted tree stumps and machinegun nests, safe and secure and just laid-back enough. The windows were cranked open, and the night breeze felt cool against his skin, and he lay back and just breathed it in, enjoying the crisp, natural air, spiced with just the slightest whiff of smokeless powder, ozone, and jet fuel. On his chest, a reader-device rose and fell with his breathing, displaying a page of a novel about another war in another time, and after a moment he reached over and tilted it back up into a good browsing position. It took more effort, honestly, now that he didn't have a manmade hill to prop it on - the basic training and ritual calisthenics had polished off certain remnants of his languid living, and although he still did only just enough to satisfy his superiors, his potbelly had given way to a look that was, if not chiseled, then at least reasonably athletic. If nothing else, he'd returned to the habits he'd grudgingly learned running track in high school, and no one seemed to mind his swapping excessive sets of push-ups for a couple extra PT miles around the base perimeter. That being said, though, this was still almost paradise - aside from the PT, and shuffling crates around for most of the daylight hours, the night was his, and as most of the other guys in the barracks were happier to drink and gamble at the mini-saloon by the post exchange, for a while at least he was able to relax in blissful silence - or at least as close to silence as one could get on the edge of a war.

He read on, enjoying the night air and the quiet. In the story, a nameless sergeant crouched in a trench, popping up for a moment to blindly fire a machinegun in the direction of an unseen enemy, only to duck back down and yell into a radio to a distant base, begging for reinforcements. A grenade

bounced in, rolling around, and the soldier watched in mute horror as it went off...

The story was suddenly punctuated by a real explosion from outside, louder than usual, enough to make Meldenham jump up, the reader clattering to the floor. He leaned over the bed to scoop it up, noticing that it had fallen next to the rifle that he had haphazardly tucked under the bed. It still gleamed, polished to an almost mirrorlike finish in his "spare time," although in reality the fit and finish required was anything but voluntary. Unlike the soldier in his story, he'd used his rifle to take on only the most stationary and unimaginative of targets - while any well-off household had a system that could produce soldiers so real in appearance you almost felt bad to shoot them, the military still seemed satisfied with opponents of the paperboard variety. Still, the gun was the least relevant aspect of his deployment thus far, and so he was happy to ignore it and turn his attention back to the reader.

Before he was able to continue examining the plight of the nameless soldier, however, the door opened, slamming back against the wall as the wind caught hold of it, and Meldenham looked up to see his sergeant, a portly, generally amicable man named Montrose, standing in the doorway.

"Lexo! Up and at 'em!"

Meldenham grudgingly obeyed, standing with a pose that could at least be loosely considered at attention.

"Hey, sarge, what's the business? We got a late flight coming in?" Meldenham didn't exactly love the emergency flights that landed at night on occasion, but at least it meant he'd get a extra half-shift to sleep in the next morning.

In response, the sergeant gave him a slightly puzzled glance. "It's a late flight, all right, but it's picking up, not dropping off."

"Picking up? Picking up what?" It was true that occasionally something was shipped back, but this was mainly a supply base, which meant that such things were a rarity - if anything was to be sent off, it invariably headed out on trucks towards the front, and shipments back always went with a ship that was bringing in new supplies as well. Certainly, in the months he'd been here, there had never been a flight coming in under cover of darkness just for a pickup. That, combined with the sergeant's look, made an uncomfortable shiver run down his back.

"Well..." the sergeant said, trailing off for a moment as if steeling himself for what he had to say next. "Actually, what they're coming to pick up is you."

"Me?" The shiver returned, intensifying, and Meldenham could feel the hair on his neck standing at an attention that would make a parade drill instructor proud. "Uh... and where, exactly, am I going?"

The sergeant shook his head. "Search me. All the captain would say was, 'It's Classified.' Yeah, with a capital C and everything. Whatever someone wants with you, he ain't sayin'." The sergeant paused again, giving Meldenham a quick once-over. "I dunno... you sure don't look like the special forces type to me. You have a rich daddy who wants you back safe and sound or something?"

"N-no, I got no idea..." Which was true, of course. If he had been related to someone influential, he certainly wouldn't have served the months he already had, and the sergeant was right - special forces material he wasn't. Why, then, would someone take the trouble to come and fetch him, someone who was probably close to the most nondescript and uninteresting soldier ever?

"Well, whatever reason it is, it's mandatory, so get your behind over to the landing strip, double-quick. Grab your gear, too. Oh, and for what it's worth, it was fun working with you. Maybe you're not SpecFor, but at least you don't suck, which is more than I can say about some of the scrubs around here."

"Um, thanks... but you're not expecting me back?"

The sergeant gave him a slightly disparaging glance. "Kid, if someone's going to all this trouble to fetch you, they've got plans that are bigger than a rearward supply base out in the sticks. Hey, at least you're moving up in the world, right?"

"Yeah..." Meldenham wasn't exactly sure he shared that sentiment, as this "rearward base" had seemed to be just about the perfect place to ride out the war, or at least the part of it that he had to participate in. For a moment, he contemplated just sitting there and seeing how long it would take before someone pressed the issue, but the sergeant didn't seem to be going anywhere until he accompanied him. With a sigh, he tucked a reader away into a pocket on his fatigues, gathered up his rifle and the pack that contained his seemingly ever-shrinking roster of belongings, and dutifully followed the sergeant out the door and down the short path to the airstrip, dragging his feet only slightly.



## CHAPTER TWO

### *Act IB: Night Flight*

The base technically had an airstrip, although calling it that was an exaggeration. Since the base relied heavily on craft that flew like airplanes, but could take off and land like helicopters, the strip was more of a slightly elongated landing pad, with a thin strip of macadam trailing off one side for the few bulk transports that needed at least a bit of a runway for takeoff. Alongside the strip was a crushed-gravel path that branched off towards the other buildings, and it was along this path that Meldenham Lexo's boots crunched. Slightly hunched over against the weight of the duffel and rifle slung across his back, he followed his sergeant down the last few feet of the path and onto the tarmac.

A VTOL jet was already lurking on the pad, its turbines still spun up for immediate departure. Standing beside the dark outline of the craft, just barely illuminated by landing lights, a pair of soldiers stood at rigid attention. As Meldenham trudged towards them, they both stepped outwards in unison, revealing an open loading ramp, and one of them curtly gestured for him to enter. Meldenham stepped between them and clambered aboard, noting that the soldiers were considerably bulkier than the recruits that occasionally filtered through with the supply flights.

The interior of the plane was spartan, as was to be expected - from the looks of it, it was just one of the slightly smaller cargo flights, with a low metal bench and a handful of flight harnesses bolted in place down one side. Apart from a cargo net in the opposite corner, the plane was completely empty, just a bleak, metal windowless fuselage with cargo tie-downs protruding in orderly rows along the floor, and rows of yellow emergency lights running along the sharply curved ceiling. Meldenham glanced around the interior, wondering if he might spot something that could indicate where the plane was from, and therefore where he might be headed - the plane, however, was essentially stripped bare, with a cargo bay that was essentially interchangeable with any other in the fleet. Sighing, he tossed his gear into the cargo net, clipped it closed, and sat down heavily on the bench, waiting to see what happened next.

The two soldiers that had stood by the loading ramp walked up into the cargo

bay, and the ramp slid closed with the stuttering hiss of well-worn hydraulics. They were dressed all in black, with black balaclavas - only a tiny curlicue of gold embroidery across the shoulders hinted at their unit affiliation, and there were no symbols of rank anywhere on their skintight uniforms, a sure sign that they were part of the special forces. The pair leaned over him, and without saying a word, began efficiently clipping him into the flight harness. Once he was strapped in, they sat down, one to either side of him, and strapped in as well. One of them banged his fist on the side of the fuselage, and a few moments later, the turbines sped up to a higher pitch. Meldenham glanced at each soldier in turn, taking in their rigid posture, arm muscles that could surely crush every bone in his body with ease, and the massive, angular pistols clipped to their belts. As the plane rumbled and lifted slowly into the air, he couldn't help but wonder why he had to be escorted like this in the middle of an empty plane. In the back of his mind, though, he couldn't help but wonder if they were here to keep him in line. But what did they expect him to do? Run away from them, on an enclosed plane thousands of feet in the air? Whatever the reason, if he'd been slightly on edge before, he was now heading through nervousness, and not all that far away from panic. He knew that he hadn't done anything to be punished for - after all, doing nothing that could cause someone to take notice was something he'd become quite good at - but it did mean that there was no plausible explanation for why he was suddenly being whisked to somewhere unknown. Well, he supposed, it wasn't like he could lose anything for asking.

"So, uh, guys... would you, by any chance happen to know where we're heading?"

"Yes," the soldier on the right replied curtly.

"And... are you going to tell me where that is?"

"No."

"Really? I mean, I'm going to find out when I get there, obviously, so why not let me know-"

"No." The response was so emphatic, Meldenham imagined he could almost hear the punctuation at the end of it.

"Well, then, could you tell me who I'm going to see? Or what I'm supposed to do when I get there? I mean, if you've got boxes to sort, I'm definitely your guy..."

"No."

"Okay, then, how about saying any complete sentence at all? Or maybe

even a word with more than one syllable?"

The soldier turned, and although the balaclava and the dim yellow lighting obscured most of his face, his eyes glinted slightly as he fixed Meldenham with a stern glare. Meldenham shrunk back, almost involuntarily, and after a moment the soldier turned back. Meldenham waited for the soldier to respond, but after waiting for at least a minute in stony silence, he shrugged and gave up.

"Whatever. At some point, someone's obviously going to ask something of me... but unless you're going to say anything at all useful, I don't see any reason whatsoever not to be asleep." Again, the soldiers offered nothing in the way of response, so Meldenham leaned his head back against the bulkhead, letting the vibration and thrum of the engines lull him towards sleep. He doubted his stoic "friends" on either side would allow themselves even a blink of sleep, but that was their loss, and right about then he wasn't particularly concerned about their comfort. Despite his nerves, sleep was something that always came easy to him, and Meldenham Lexo managed to slumber through most of the rest of the journey, the industrial ambience of the cargo bay punctuated only by an occasional snore.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Act IC: The Bizarre Truth*

Meldenham Lexo awoke, unpleasantly, to an elbow in the ribs. He groaned, pawing the sleep from his eyes as the soldier to his left cleared his throat.

"We're landing soon. Wake up and get yourself squared away."

"Ugh..." Meldenham grunted, rubbing at his side. "Well, at least I got to hear a whole sentence out of you, so I guess that's progress."

"Just get ready." The soldier turned away again. Indeed, the turbines were already rumbling at a lower frequency, and the plane buffeted about briefly before slamming down on its landing skids. The landing was anything but gentle, and before Meldenham could recover from the landing knocking the wind out of him, the soldiers already had him free of the harness and hoisted to his feet. One of them stomped over to the cargo net and hastily tossed him his gear, which he was thankfully just awake enough to catch before his kit had the chance to smack him in the face.

Meldenham walked over to the loading ramp, slinging his gear. As he approached, the door cranked open, to reveal an unexpected sight - they appeared to be in a mountainous region now, on a strip in front of a complex of long, low buildings, every one of which was coated in a decent amount of snow. To either side, a few scraggly-looking evergreen trees made their solitary stands amidst jagged formations of some kind of rock, their shapes only partially softened by the snow, and here and there daggerlike bits of rock jutted above the snowfall, glimmering in the harsh glow of the floodlights that ringed the airstrip. It was still night, but just barely - above the mountains that rose beyond the complex, there was a slight pink glow that hinted at the approaching dawn. By all accounts, the scene had a certain appealing serenity to it, and Meldenham would have happily spent many long minutes drinking in the scenery if a forceful shove from behind hadn't sent him stumbling down the ramp.

Grumbling slightly, but not enough for the soldiers following him to take umbrage, Meldenham trudged across the airstrip and along the path, which had mercifully been cleared of snow. In a moment, he stood at the doors to the

facility, a one-story concrete fabrication painted a white that almost matched the snow. Oddly enough, the building had no name attached to it, only a large numeral 3 painted to one side of the doors, and a small placard directly above the entrance labeled "Intake." A small security camera near the door swiveled across the group, beeped in acknowledgement, and the doors whooshed open on concealed tracks.

The doors opened up onto a hallway, fronted by a regular-looking reception desk. The walls were also painted white, with a carpeted floor and wooden paneling. Upon entering, though, the most noticeable thing was the smell - the uncanny blend of medicines and disinfectant that universally identified a medical establishment. He had little time to contemplate that, though, as the uniformed soldier staffing the desk was already staring at him, clipboard in hand.

"Name, please."

"Uh, Meldenham Lexo. Might I ask--"

"Hold on a sec." The man glanced down at the clipboard, furrowing his brow as he ticked down his list. "Ah, yeah, here you are. Room 7, down the hall on your left."

"Okay, but I'd still like to know why I'm here in the first place."

The soldier looked at him like he was daft. "Look, buddy, if they haven't seen fit to explain this thing to you, I'm certainly not gonna risk my neck telling you. Just go to room 7, and someone will take it from there."

Meldenham shrugged, again, and walked down the hall, followed by the duo from the plane. Room 7, as it was, was nothing more than an empty doorway leading into the kind of waiting room that you'd find at any medical clinic, down to the easy-to-clean mesh-upholstered chairs and "soothing" nature prints on the walls. Most of the chairs were occupied, though, with an assortment of other soldiers with a variety of unit patches on their shoulders. A few, like him, were flanked by black-clad special ops men, but most were just sitting there, thumbing through readers and chatting amongst themselves. For the most part, there wasn't an empty seat, except for a few unoccupied clusters around unsettling wet patches on the carpet. Meldenham debated whether approaching them was a better bet than just standing against the wall, but he still felt tired after his rude awakening, and settled for a chair on the edge of one of the clusters. The disinfectant smell was much stronger here, and Meldenham could only assume that while his own nerves were making him uncomfortable, at least a few other soldiers had been shown a more... visceral reaction to theirs.

Given that, was there something here that merited that level of fear?

Meldenham looked around, but most of the other soldiers seemed at least somewhat at ease, although the ones "under guard" seemed to be more on edge than the rest. Meldenham leaned over, towards a soldier who had just tossed a reader down on one of the small tables that accompanied the clusters of chairs.

"Hey, you wouldn't happen to know why we're here, do you? Since I was pulled from my unit and sent here, no one seems to be all that forthcoming about what's going on."

"Yeah, well, that means you know just about as much as everyone else here. One of the orderlies walking by mumbled something about a vaccination program, but hell if I know why they'd have to drag us all the way out here for that."

"Or keep us under guard..." Meldenham gestured to his two companions, who were now standing at attention off to one side.

"Yeah, what's up with that? Guess they've got a hard-on for you, who knows why... me and a bunch of guys got pulled off the front near Tenleytown, packed on a cargo skip and shipped up here yesterday, but so far we've just sat around. Y'know... now that I think of it, the only guys they've taken in so far that I've noticed have been the ones under guard - everyone else is just waiting around. No offense, but I guess it just sucks to be you."

"Gee, thanks. At any rate, my name's Meldenham Lexo, from the 126<sup>th</sup>, for what that's worth."

"Roment Regel. Anyway, good luck," he said wryly, nodding his head towards the orderly that was walking over, clutching yet another of the omnipresent clipboards. He nodded at the spec-ops soldiers, who nodded back.

"So, this is our next "volunteer," huh? Let's see..." He glanced down at the uniform insignia. "126<sup>th</sup>... you must be Meldenham Lexo, then. If you'll follow me, please." The orderly turned smartly on his heel and walked towards a set of swinging doors at the end of the room. Meldenham looked over at the other soldier, who shrugged and gave him a thumbs-up sign, and followed the orderly, at least satisfied that whatever this nonsense was, it would be resolved sooner rather than later - waiting around was all well and good, but it was less than relaxing when that waiting was primarily for the other shoe to drop.

Beyond the set of double doors was another nondescript hallway, with doors branching off to either side. The orderly opened the third door down, revealing a utilitarian exam room, already occupied by two people, presumably doctors, in white lab coats. Upon seeing him, one of them gestured for him to take a seat on the exam table. Meldenham sat down, dropping his gear onto the floor on one side. The two spec-ops soldiers stood in the middle of the doorway,

facing in, and noticeably blocking any exit.

"Okay, Meldenham... Lexo," the first one said, glancing at a chart. The man appeared to be in his late forties, with close-cropped dark hair ringed by a noticeable bald spot, and his face was framed by old-style bakelite-frame glasses, a distinct anachronism in a society where most vision abnormalities were detected and repaired painlessly at birth.

"Yep, that's me," Meldenham replied. "So... this is some kind of medical exam?"

"Not really, no. What you need to know is this: the opposition armies have generated a new weapon, and that weapon happens to be something that we're actually familiar with, and have now developed a... vaccine against it. You've been selected to be part of the first group of test subjects, as your information has led us to believe that the inoculation will be especially effective in you."

"And that's it? A shot in the arm, and I'm done?"

"Well... no. If it were quite that simple, we'd have sent someone to inoculate you on site. In terms of what you'll feel, yes, a shot in the arm is the extent of it. After that, we'll use a couple of non-intrusive monitoring devices to verify its effectiveness, and if all goes well, you'll be sent back to your unit in a few hours."

So much for the sergeant's pronouncement of bigger and better things, he thought. Still, he wasn't quite buying the explanation yet.

"And if all doesn't go well?"

The doctor grimaced slightly at that. "Everyone's been asking us that, and my answer's the same as it was the last dozen times - so far, absolutely nothing out of the ordinary has happened, and the most acute side effects you'll see are a little bit of swelling in your arm, and maybe a mild headache. We're not expecting anything adverse, and even if something did happen, this is a fully-equipped medical facility with the tools to deal with any situation that might arise."

The other doctor behind him mumbled something. Meldenham couldn't quite catch what was said, but it sounded almost like "except for one..." The bespectacled doctor turned around and shushed him before continuing.

"So, that's really all there is to it. If you could just roll up your sleeve, we'll get started." The doctor leaned over and picked up an auto-syringe, pulling the seal off of an ampoule of dark green liquid and latching it into the syringe's reservoir.

"I'm guessing that saying no at this point is rather meaningless?"

"Hey, in the army, when someone says to do something, you do it. And I'm pretty sure, that I outrank you, both medically and militarily." The doctor also gave a quick nod of his head towards the soldiers by the door, a message which Meldenham could easily comprehend.

"Fine, then, let's get this over with." He rolled up his sleeve, and the doctor approached and pressed the syringe tightly against his shoulder. As expected, there was no pain at all - instead of the needles used in earlier eras, the device contained a thousand nanoscale spines, so thin as to be undetectable, each of which would simultaneously administer less than a drop each to provide the entire dose. The syringe hissed as the ampoule dissipated, emptying with a noticeable click and a mechanical beep signaling the administration was complete.

"Okay, you're all set. Just stay seated there for a bit, and we'll get the tests underway. Like I said, the rest of the monitoring should be routine, and the monitoring units won't even touch you. There should be a reader on the shelf to the side of the exam table - it has a standard set of news and entertainment features you can browse while we conduct our evaluation. Just try to sit up as straight as you can, as that will help us get a good reading."

Meldenham reached over, picking up the reader and thumbing through the contents, as the other doctor, whose shock of blond hair and hooked nose made him look almost birdlike, played a small device back and forth across his chest, every so often consulting a digital readout on the device's back. The first doctor had been right, Meldenham mused - aside from an occasional, mild twinge in his arm, he felt just perfect. Perfect, that is, until the second doctor spoke up.

"Huh... that's interesting."

"What's up?" The first doctor leaned over to look at the device.

"Take a look at this reading - not even ten minutes in, and it's already off the chart. We've got a live one here."

The first doctor pushed his glasses up, the color draining slightly from his face.

"Not a one, Horace. *The* one. Take another reading to be sure, but if that readout is correct, we need to contact Colonel Krulek immediately."

"Um, guys?" Meldenham asked. "Are you saying that this is one of the, uh, 'out of the ordinary' things? I still feel fine... that's a good sign, right?"



The doctors looked at him, almost like they'd forgotten that he was in the room. "Um, well..." the first doctor said, but glanced at the soldiers at the door and thought better of it. "If you'll excuse me, I need to make a call." He turned and accessed a panel on the opposite wall, talking to it in a whisper. Whatever was going on, Meldenham had a feeling that it wasn't going to turn out well. Aside from his nerves, though, he felt just fine.

"You're sure I'm not in any danger?"

The second doctor just kind of stared at him for a moment, before finally nodding. "From the shot, at least, you should be fine. It's just that, well..." he glanced at the other doctor, before leaning in, his voice just barely audible. "It's just that, what it means is, *you're* the vaccine."

"Huh?"

The second doctor had pulled back, though, and was passing a similar device across his chest again. It beeped happily, lighting up a row of tiny red lights, one after another, until the entire row was blinking in unison.

"So, it's confirmed, then?" The first doctor asked, and the second one nodded, handing him the new device.

"Well, that's that, then. Krulek'll be here in a minute. It's out of our hands, now." The doctor turned to Meldenham. "I don't know what entity you believe in, but whatever it is, may they have mercy on you."

"Wait, what?" Meldenham could practically feel his heart catch in his throat. "I thought you said there weren't going to be any side effects! That I was going to be fine?"

"Yes, right, not from the shot. You're probably in perfect health and fine shape, which is good, because you'll most likely need it."

"Need it? For what, exactly?"

"I'll answer that, actually," a voice boomed from the hall, and the soldiers stepped aside to reveal a stocky man in a dress uniform, with a shaved head and a neck that seemed to be mostly a mass of irregular scars. "Gentlemen, if you could all accompany me to the laboratory, we'll get started."

"Now, wait just a minute! I'm not going anywhere until you explain what the hell's going on here!"

Krulek looked him over for a moment, scowling slightly. "Soldier, believe

me, if I ask you to come with me, that's not a request." Meldenham didn't move, though, and after a few seconds, the colonel snorted and gestured curtly with his hand. The two soldiers walked briskly over, each of them grabbing one of Meldenham's arms, and bodily hauled him to his feet. The colonel walked out, and the soldiers dragged Meldenham after him, with the two doctors trailing behind, one holding his gear. After a few steps of being dragged, Meldenham gave in and started walking, marching double-time to match the soldiers' pace, noticing that their firm grip on his arms hadn't relented in the slightest in response to his acquiescence.

They all proceeded down a series of corridors, passing two guarded checkpoints that waved them through as soon as they saw the colonel approach, and a heavy steel door that swung open ponderously after Krulek punched in a long sequence of digits on an adjacent keypad.

Finally, they approached a large, domed room that almost looked like an observatory. It was dominated by a large cylindrical device, suspended from the ceiling by a set of massive steel girders. In fact, the thing almost did look like a telescope in reverse, with a clear lens several feet across. The whole thing was slightly angled, pointing down at a chair that almost looked like it had been pulled intact from the interior of a fighter craft - the front contained a crash harness and some sort of displays mounted on the armrests, and the back was a mass of blinking lights and exposed circuitry. Around the chair, a large circle was inscribed around the installation with yellow-and-black caution striping, and beyond that the room was mostly empty, its grey, concrete floor sloping slightly away to a couple of computer consoles on the room's far edge. Meldenham took in the room and gulped, as it didn't require much deduction for him to conclude that the chair in the center was his final destination.

Indeed, the soldiers walked him over, but simply stood him beside the computerized jump-seat and left him there, walking a bit more gingerly than usual until they were again outside the circle.

"Have a seat," the colonel said, but Meldenham hesitated, realizing that once he sat down, at the very least his life was likely to change for the worse. If he made the soldiers haul him down, he'd get at least a few seconds more, so, he figured, why not stall for as long as he could? After all, if they were likely going to kill him, it wasn't like they had a lot of leverage to get him to comply. He took in a deep breath and stood up as straight as he could, hoping that his bluff wouldn't be as transparent as it felt.

"Um, uh... No! Like I said, I'm not doing another damn thing until someone tells me what is up with all this crazy shit!"

Krulek glared at him, but then, oddly enough, the colonel's shoulders slumped, and he let out a heavy sigh.

"Look, kid. I know that right now things must seem kinda crazy for you. You're having what you think could be the worst, or last, day of your life, and depending on how this goes, it's possible that you might be right. Believe me, though, I'm trying to make this work out for everyone involved, including you."

"Make what work out, though? What is all this? Are you planning to... what? Mutate me into some super-soldier?"

This brought a thin smile to Krulek's face. "Heh... not even close. Despite my name, I never got into the military, or scientific research for that matter, to be a mad doctor or traffic in suffering. It's just that... well, an emergency has come up, and right now, the only workable solution we have for it lies within you." He paused, shaking his head slightly.

"I might as well give you the basics, so you at least know what you'll be up against. What's happened is this: the oppositional forces, as you've probably heard, have been trying to find a way to win the war decisively for years. Recently, one of our spies discovered their latest plan: an unusual, destructive... effect. What the thing is we still don't quite know, but it's like a cloud, mist, atmosphere, something... until it finds a certain thing which sets it off, and undergoes a chain reaction powerful enough to destroy a city. The thing was bloody perfect - with our defense systems, you couldn't sneak or lob a nuke into a national capital, but something like this... so, naturally, we went to shut it down."

"Yeah, that went well," one of the doctors said, but shut up when the soldiers and Krulek all simultaneously glared at him.

"Um, what the doctor means to say is that, regrettably, both sides miscalculated during our attempt to destroy the program. Our attack plan was nearly perfect, but not quite fast enough - we were able to recover the chemical that the weapon was supposed to be aimed at, as well as a file on the enemy agents that were to infiltrate the capitals. During the assault though, one of the enemy was desperate enough to set the device off, and now the device is live and looking for its target, which, ah... now happens to be you."

Meldenham Lexo felt a shiver run down his spine, the worst one yet, and for a moment wondered whether he would have been better off had this actually been an execution. In fact, a part of his mind was now desperately screaming out for him to run, away from this facility, away from this whole crazy thing... but what would be the point, if he was now the target of a doomsday device that could literally go anywhere? Somehow, despite the dread that was quickly grabbing hold of him, he managed to choke a response past his constricting throat. "M-me? Why?"

"Well, to explain that, there's the miscalculation again. It turns out that this activating chemical, this "lure," only becomes active when it mixes with the particular biochemistry of the chosen agent. Our miscalculation was that the agent in question wasn't there, and in fact is in the wind. Since we have the chemical that was supposed to go into him, he's harmless, but without something to chase, this weapon will apparently just roam around for a few days, and then go off, unless it's given something to chase - luckily, the files we found contained certain information about the agent's genetic makeup, so we scanned our records and found the candidates most likely to produce the needed biochemistry. Bad luck, I know, but you're the won that happened to draw that particular winning ticket. Though, while it's true that it's our screw-up that led to you being in this unenviable position, it wasn't our miscalculation that was the most... problematic one."

"Really? Because it seems kinda problematic to me..."

"Oh, yes, well, if it weren't for the miscalculation that the enemy scientists made, we'd simply have injected you and dumped you somewhere suitably remote, and let the weapon take care of itself," Krulek continued, sounding surprisingly matter-of-fact about sacrificing Meldenham to this bizarre weapon. "The thing is, the enemy scientists, when calculating the potential yield of this device, were off by somewhere between three and thirty zeroes. What that means is, instead of taking out a city, if this thing goes off, it will take out an area somewhere between twice the diameter of this entire world, to potentially an amount of space greater than the sphere encompassing our entire galaxy. Needless to say, letting it go off is out of the question."

"A-and how exactly am I the "vaccine" for this? Isn't it going to chase me down no matter where I am, and then destroy..."

"Everything. Basically, if it goes off, it destroys everything. Don't worry, though - as bleak as it might seem, we do have a plan." He gestured up at the device suspended from the ceiling. "Have you ever heard of the theory of multiple universes?"

"Um, I guess..."

"Well, in a nutshell, this device has the power to shift you into another universe. The idea is that there are a near-infinite number of parallel universes in existence, each with its own series of events - some are very much like this one, some are completely different, and they diverge more the further out you go, generally speaking. For all of our technology, though, we can't send you very far all at once - this device here will get you to a universe that's probably fairly close to this one, and from there, that chair next to you has the technology to go further still. The weapon... can apparently traverse dimensions as well, based on the data we recovered, and perhaps is even able to explode

dimensions that are reasonably close to each other. If you can get far enough away, though, and lure it along with you... when it eventually does catch up, this world should be spared from the devastation."

"And I'll be dead."

At this, Krulek at least had the decency to look chagrined, unable to meet Meldenham's gaze. "Yes, I know, and I'm sorry. But this is war, and you're a soldier. A conscript, really, but the fact is this: there is no higher honor than what you have been chosen to do. The entire world - friends, enemies, nations at war and at peace - either we do this, or it's all over for everyone. War sometimes demands hard choices, and if I had to choose to sacrifice you, or everything in the world, well, I'd choose you every time." He looked back up at Meldenham before continuing. "Given this situation... wouldn't you?"

Meldenham grimaced. Did it really make sense to care about a world that you would no longer inhabit, either way? But then he thought of his parents, his friends, his cousins, all the people he'd walked by on the street every day, all the soldiers at the logistics base, at this facility, everyone, just gone in an instant... and he couldn't help but nod in agreement. That didn't stop his hands from shaking, though, or the tears that were quickly welling up in his eyes. This was it - the device would send him somewhere, and then... he didn't even know what to say, but Krulek was already continuing.

"You know, one thing to consider is that this situation is only as bleak as you are incapable. If you take on this assignment and do it well, everyone wins - the farther you manage to run, the safer everyone here will be, and the longer you'll get to live before this thing catches up with you. Who knows? Maybe you'll even find a way to stay ahead of this thing indefinitely. Given what we've seen, it's unlikely, but why give up hope? You're not dead yet."

Again, Meldenham nodded. He turned, looking at the jump seat, and wordlessly started to lower himself into it. After all, what else was there to say, really? As the realization of the situation finally settled in, the panic and dread began to subside to a feeling of numbness and disbelief. He still didn't want to accept that any of this was happening, and part of him kept hoping that it was just some ruse, an elaborate practical joke - but the serious faces of everyone in the room only led him to conclude that the gravity of the situation was undeniably real.

The doctor holding Meldenham's equipment set it into a small compartment behind him. Krulek, for his part, stood at attention and gave a smart salute. "Whether or not this mess is ever entered into the annals of history, I salute you. I know you didn't exactly have a choice, but what you're doing for us all will not be forgotten." He brought his hand back down, but as he did so, red strobe lights ringing the wall started flashing in unison, accompanied a second later by

a harsh, pulsing klaxon emanating from hidden speakers.

"Oh, shit," said one of the doctors, and the soldiers suddenly had their weapons out, swinging them wildly from side to side. Krulek just stood there for a second, his face betraying a look of utter dismay.

"Not yet... It couldn't have possibly found its way here yet... this can't be happening..." he said, listlessly. Then, somehow, he regained his composure, turning to the other people in the room and gesticulating wildly.

"Okay, everyone, we have to do this now! Get to your stations, and someone strap him in!"

"But sir, it takes at least a half-hour to calibrate--"

"Screw calibration! That alarm means we've probably got less than five minutes to fire him off into a dimension that isn't this one, or it's literally all over! Do whatever you have to, override whatever you need to, but this has to happen, and it has to happen now!"

The doctors scurried over behind Meldenham, heading toward the terminals, as one of the soldiers crouched beside him, swinging his weapon over the area in a quick arc, before slinging it and helping Meldenham into the complex crash harness. "When you get there, it's that big red button there that releases you," the soldier said, patting him on the shoulder. "Ah, try not to die too quickly, man." Then the soldier was back to his feet, looking for a place to take cover while keeping his gun aimed at the entrance.

"Firing up the primary generators now!" yelled one of the doctors from behind him, and a loud thrumming came from above, growing in intensity, as Meldenham was illuminated by a beam of crimson-colored light, diffuse and dim but quickly becoming brighter. He looked up, watching as the device's huge lens began to grind forward in its casing, bringing the beam into focus.

"Calibration isn't great, but good enough," the other doctor's voice said. "If you want to, we can probably initiate in thirty seconds."

"The sooner the better!" Krulek said, seemingly fixated on the door, his pistol out of its holster, although Meldenham couldn't figure out what good any of the weapons would have against mist. The beam became brighter still, starting to feel like a heat lamp, and he could feel the sweat beginning to trickle down his forehead. As he went to wipe it away, though, the whole facility began to shake, and one of the soldiers, startled, let out a burst with his weapon, the gun's invisible beam causing a section of the wall to bubble like a boiling pot. Krulek quickly knocked his weapon aside, but something inside the wall shorted out, spraying a cascade of sparks that bounced crazily across the concrete floor

before extinguishing. There was a crackling sound that echoed through the room, and the lighting panels started to flicker crazily, casting the entire room in an uneven strobe effect. The soldiers seemed to be moving in a kinetiscope, their movements stuttering as they tried in vain to figure out what was going on.

"Ten seconds!" someone yelled, as the lights finally failed entirely, leaving Meldenham fairly glowing under the one remaining light source in the room, in a tight pool of crimson, and everything else was almost entirely washed out, just a sea of darkness, except for the dim glow of security lights above the entrance. Something was obscuring them, though, causing the light to distort and waver, almost like smoke was billowing around the door...

Meldenham's chest seized up, as whatever was billowing in came closer, a shadow only slightly lighter than the rest of the darkness. Then, a dot of light glowed in the center of it, followed quickly by more and more, until the expanding cloud was outlined by a matrix of glowing points. The cloud crept closer, as the shaking intensified, and the the thrumming of the device above began to hurt his ears. Despite it, though, he could hear the crackle of flechette fire, and Krulek's screams as the cloud passed over him, bright, glowing lines beginning to connect the points in a latticelike pattern. The floor just outside the circle started burbling as one of the soldiers tried to stop the cloud's progress, but the vapor just curled around it, the glowing mass sliding over the painted perimeter, pulling ever closer. Meldenham struggled futilely against his harness, knowing it wouldn't do any good, even as a faint voice shouted "Executing now!" from somewhere behind him. The light above him flashed, brighter than anything he'd ever seen before, and the entire world seemed to twist and wrench around him. Through it all, though, he somehow managed to hear an odd, high-pitched buzzing that seemed to emanate almost from within his own body, which seemed practically incandescent amidst the brightness. That sensation happened to be the last thing he perceived before his mind finally gave in to the overwhelming stimuli, and he lapsed blissfully into unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Interlude I: The Space Between*

Meldenham Lexo came to some time later, awakening to a scene that that was completely unlike anything he'd ever seen before. He was still strapped into the jump seat, and the whole thing was enveloped in some sort of forcefield, the surface coursing with blue jags of electricity, occasionally kicking loose a static bolt in a random direction. For the most part, though, the field was transparent, allowing him to see the rest of his surroundings. There wasn't a whole lot to see, though - as far as he could tell, the contraption was speeding along through a tunnel of glowing light, pulsing with almost fractal patterns in red, ranging from deep purple to vibrant crimson. The effect almost felt like being inside an impossibly long kaleidoscope, and Meldenham found it hard to keep his bearings. When he tried to orient himself by looking closer, though, he noticed that despite the intensity of the light, the tunnel was somewhat translucent as well, and beyond it appeared to be... points of light, but not the strange pattern that he had seen in the weapon before. This was more like a star field, the points staying fixed, but the entire field seemed to warp in and out of view as he sped down the tunnel, like the pattern was painted on waves that crested and crashed against an impossible shore.

After a while, though, it became hard to focus on any of it, and Meldenham nodded his head, rubbing at his eyes.

"Ugh... well, at least I haven't kicked it yet," he mused. "Problem is, I have no idea whatsoever where I am."

"Technically, our location is in a theoretical zone between dimensions, which should be impossible, but here we are." The voice seemed to emanate from all around him. It sounded female, at least in pitch, but there was something not quite right about it - an odd resonance echoed from a few of the syllables, and others had a harsh, metallic edge.

"Huh? Is there actually someone besides me stuck in this crazy situation?" Whoever it was, they seemed to be invisible, and given the voice, it certainly couldn't have been anyone he was with before apparently being shot into wherever he was now. He wondered if any of them had survived - from the way



Krulek was screaming, it hadn't sounded promising. The voice came again, though, along with a flash from somewhere by his side.

"Look down, near your right armrest."

Meldenham looked over, and sure enough, in the armrest one of the output displays had come to life. Instead of controls, however, it showed a cartoony smiley face, with a wide, outlined grin and a garish pink bow plopped on the top of its perfectly circular head.

"Pleased to meet ya!" the face said, the mouth animating to match the words. "I'm Lexie, your new electronic not-getting-killed-by-the-evil-mist companion!"

"Uh, what?"

"Never fear - I'm here to help!" the face continued, grinning even wider, as the oval, pupilless eyes blinked on and off disconcertingly. "You didn't think you'd just be abandoned to your fate without someone like me, did you? After all, I'm extra-special, and I'm here to keep you away from a horrible, explosive Götterdämmerung for as long as possible! In fact, I'm sure I'll be absolutely indispensable in your brave and noble quest to not die!"

Meldenham cringed slightly at the electronic companion's onslaught of words. Given the situation, it seemed downright odd for anything, computer or not, to be that chipper.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have a different personality module I could choose, do you?"

"Sorry, but I'm it," the face said, at least smiling slightly less garishly. "You see, the scientists only had room, and time, to load in a novelty persona interface off of a mobile chip-phone before they had to send you off! But don't worry, I'm just the voice - all the memory is filled up with cool stuff that is almost 97 percent guaranteed to make this adventure as lengthy as possible. You've got access to auto-mapping, intelligent translation that should be able to decipher any language you come across in 70 unique vocabulary grams or less, a sensor suite to guide you to the nearest usable dimensional transitions, matter scrambler to help generate those pesky foreign currencies, and a nifty perimeter alarm that lets you know if the mist has found your dimension, and how fast it's closing in! Plus, I know just about everything there is to know about your home dimension, even though it's probably going to be pretty darn useless in all of the random dimensions we're likely to head to. Fear not, though! I'm sure there's enough useful stuff in here to get you at least to a minimum safe distance."

"Thanks." That, at least, was sincere - as annoying as the persona module had the potential to be, it was nice to know that he had more resources at his

disposal than a few random changes of clothing, an exceedingly lightly used maser rifle, a handful of ration bars, and a half-empty tube of Klown Pastilles that he'd for some reason tucked into his pants pocket a few days earlier. "So... I take it we're not just going to sit here in this glowing tunnel and hope that we just outrun this thing?"

"Oh, hardly! After all, this is just a space between dimensions, a place that doesn't exist at all really, aside from this nifty particle tunnel that someone was nice enough to create for us! Eventually, though, it's going to dump us out into a random dimension, and assuming we manage to arrive at a point where we can survive the impact, our next step is to look for another place where we can jump to a dimension further away. Of course, we won't have this cool tunnel thing, so it'll be just a weensy bit more excruciatingly painful and/or bizarre, but I'm sure it will all work out!"

"Wait, what do you mean, survive the impact?"

"Well, when we exit into a new dimension, we'll most likely appear at a random point, trajectory, and speed! If we're lucky, we won't appear in the middle of the sky or in solid rock, but if this tunnel was properly calibrated, we should be as safe as a fish in the sea!"

Meldenham thought back to the comments the doctors had made about calibration, and shivered slightly.

"Okay then... I guess we'll find out soon enough, right?"

"Possibly, although I have no idea how long it might take to get where we're going! It could be anywhere from a few minutes to several hundred years, but probably shorter than that, if we're lucky."

"Great," Meldenham muttered, but already the tunnel was beginning to lose its brightness, and the field of points beyond became more clearly visible, undulating more sharply and crashing more abruptly, the horizon they seemed to be perching on seeming to come closer and closer, until one of the virtual waves seemed to crash directly over his location. The forcefield sizzled, sending showers of blue sparks spraying everywhere, and then the wave pulsed through him, warping everything it touched. The whole world suddenly distorted into the swirl of a funhouse mirror, the magenta tunnel pulsed a few times before spinning down the twisting drain that the world had become, and just as Meldenham felt his insides begin to change their orientation in new and random ways, everything came to an abrupt stop, and he was suddenly someplace new.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Act II: Misplaced Mayhem*

Despite the computer's predictions, the trajectory of Meldenham Lexo's arrival wasn't particularly extreme at all - instead, the contraption he was riding in simply dropped down a few feet and landed with a thud on an long, oval table in the middle of what looked like a conference room. Two white boards went down one side of the room, and something was mounted on the ceiling above him, probably a projector of some sort. Around the table were arrayed a dozen or so swivel chairs, but none of them were occupied. Finally, he was in a quiet, empty room, and the mist was nowhere to be seen. He let out a huge sigh, and relaxed a bit, for the first time that day, although it had probably been less than twenty-four hours ago that he'd been sitting on a nice cot in a boring logistics base somewhere, blissfully unaware that a day later he wouldn't even be in the same bloody dimension.

"You know, we should really get moving," chirped a familiar voice, although here, it seemed to only emanate from the display in the armrest. "Searching for our next dimensional transit point should be our highest priority, after all. Did you know that if the mist were to track us down and blow us into smithereens here, there's only a 97.5% chance that your home dimension wouldn't survive! I sure feel better knowing that now, but we could definitely improve that number, which you can't do while you're stilling still in your seat."

"Yeah, yeah," Meldenham muttered. He would, of course, have been happy to just drift off for a couple of hours right there, but the computer did have a point - if he stood still, the mist would probably just gain ground, and he had no idea what would happen if the owners of this conference room happened upon him. He looked around for the red button, and gave it a hesitant push, which cause several things to happen at once.

The most immediately noticeable thing, of course, was that the harness snapped free, each individual strap separating cleanly and falling away from his body. As he moved to get up, though, he heard muted, mettalic thumps to either side of him, and both armrests shot away from the seat several inches, scraping against the table as they tipped over onto their sides. As they did so, one of them made another banging noise, and the screen where the persona had been

displayed fell away. As he watched it clatter across the table, Meldenham noticed that the screen was actually the top of a device that was only slightly bulkier than a standard reader.

Meldenham got up from the now partially disassembled jumpseat, groaning as he stretched away the muscle fatigue that came from being cooped up in a seat for hours. Noticing his kit on the top of the seat, he grabbed for it, slinging the duffel onto the table and untangling the maser rifle from its straps. Not much use in an office, he figured, but he checked the thing just in case - the weapon's readout listed the regenerative energy cell as full, which meant he had at least a good hundred shots, or dozen sustained bursts, before it would have to recharge.

Seeing the weapon and meager assortment of gear, though, brought up the question of just how he was going to survive. Approaching apocalypse or not, there were practical things that had to be considered. It was a stroke of luck, he thought, that he had apparently landed in the middle of civilization instead of a forest somewhere - while he'd technically passed a day of wilderness survival in basic training, he wasn't keen on trying to live out there. Of course, if he had to keep moving, finding anything more permanent than an overnight hotel room probably wasn't necessary, but he still had to keep himself supplied and clothed. The gun had the luxury of being able to restore energy on its own, but he still needed to be fed.

"Whenever you're ready, you can come over and pick me up - I promise I won't bite!" The voice now emanated from the device that had attached itself. Meldenham walked over and retrieved it - it was definitely bulkier than a reader or comm device, although it still fit comfortably in his palm. Could this little device really do everything that the persona had reported it could do? Somehow, he doubted it - for that kind of processing, you'd need a unit at least as big as a shoebox, if not more.

The device seemed to anticipate his query, though. "Wait just a moment while I detach the main unit!" the voice said cheerfully, and Meldenham heard the scraping of metal behind him. As he turned, another series of bangs issued, and the covering on the back of the jump seat came off. From behind them panel, a short, squat cylinder of metal emerged, zipping forward agilely on a pair of what looked like miniature tank treads. As it rolled out, panels in the side of the cylinder opened, and sensor modules slowly poked out to scan the room, while a quartet of pylons extended near the rear, lowering metal gates between them to form a sort of cargo area.

"You can go ahead and drop your gear up on there - I'm made of metal, so I won't mind in the least!" Meldenham complied, tossing his duffel onto the robot, which tilted the pylons inward to secure it.

"So... does the rest of the seat transform into anything useful?" Meldenham asked hopefully.

"Well, let's see... there's a front compartment with a fire extinguisher! That's certain to come in handy in a room with sprinklers studding the ceiling! Oh, there's a first aid kit tucked away somewhere in there as well, and I'm pretty sure that in the event of a water landing, one of the seat cushions is guaranteed not to sink like a rock for at least 2.5 minutes!"

"So... not much really." He reached in and pulled out the first aid kit, though, tossing it on top of his duffel. "Please tell me we don't have to haul that thing around with us through each dimension..."

"Oh, of course not! That delivery vehicle was for one use only. Now that I'm unpacked, we should have everything we need going forward!"

"Yeah? That is, until someone asks why I'm walking around with a shiny, weird-looking robot thing."

"I wouldn't worry about that," the persona said, and Meldenham almost thought he could detect a hint of smugness in the voice. The robot made an odd beeping sound, and extended a couple of additional devices from its sides. Suddenly, the entire thing began to shimmer, and within moments had faded entirely from view.

"Holographic optical camouflage - pretty damn cool, huh? Unfortunately, to make room for everything else, the onboard system can only disguise the robot itself. Too bad - I bet that you being invisible would have totally helped, but I'm pretty sure that the Götterdämmerung weapon could find you anyway! Rest assured, though, that all you have to worry about is tucking this command unit into a pocket somewhere, and convincing people that you're not just talking to yourself all the time."

Meldenham shrugged. "Well, if I do get blown into little tiny smithereens, along with the rest of the universe, at least I can die happy knowing that I did so in the presence of some kickass-sounding technology."

"Unable to properly respond to input, as I am unable to tell if what you said was meant to be serious or sarcastic! Could you please tell me whether you intended sarcasm or not?"

"Mmmmaybe..." Meldenham replied, grinning. If this persona was going to sit there and slowly grate on his nerves with its incessant cheerfulness, he figured it could take some of his own snark as well.

"I'll take that as a yes, but-" the persona said, but the remainder of the

sentence was drowned out by the door at the end of the conference room slamming open with a bang.

In the doorway stood a man in a smart-looking suit, wearing a stylized white mask that looked like it came from some sort of theatric production. His hands held a squat-looking weapon, which looked similar to some of the weapons he'd read about in school, from a previous world war some hundreds of years ago. A submachinegun, he thought it was called. That being said, definitely an odd thing to be carrying around an office where he came from, but then again, so was the mask.

"Hey, you!" the man called out, speaking Standard English, but with a slight, unrecognizable accent. "Why the fuck aren't you in the main atrium with the rest of the hostages?" The man looked him over, hesitating for a second. "Hey, wait a minute, what's with that outfit? Who the fuck even are you?"

The man in the doorway brought the weapon up, and Meldenham dove off the table, somehow managing to catch his leg in the sling of his rifle and tumble to the ground in an undignified heap. The weapon in the man's hands flashed brightly and belted out a series of loud reports, thumping explosions that started his ears ringing. On the table above, divots of wood were kicked up by the weapon's impacts, and a few shots sparked as they left dents in the metal of the jump seat's enclosure.

"Dammit, fucking die already!" the man yelled, trying to bring his weapon around, as Meldenham untangled the sling from his leg and pulled the rifle into his chest, vaguely pointing the business end towards the figure in the doorway as he yanked hard on the trigger. Of course, the trigger refused to budge, and he fumbled with the safety as another burst from the submachinegun thudded down just to his left, showering him in dust and carpet fibers. As the man centered his weapon, the slightly glowing circle of the barrel seeming to focus in on Meldenham's face, he desperately yanked on the trigger again. This time, the rifle thrummed, and the man gave a mangled scream as his shirt rippled from the flesh twisting and boiling underneath. The submachinegun fired a longer burst as he flailed it wildly around, stitching a dotted line across the ceiling as the man collapsed, gurgling, billows of steam curling away from his mouth as his flash-cooked chest heaved once before giving in.

"That... was about the most disgusting thing I've ever seen," Meldenham said. Then the smell of what had just happened reached him, and he decided that at the moment it made more sense to gulp than speak, as there was suddenly a good bit of bile that he could feel straining for release. Choking it back, he stepped away from the body, horrified, feeling almost perversely grateful that his military assignment had delayed this unsettling moment for as long as it had. He didn't feel guilty, really, as the man surely would have done the same or worse to him had his trigger pull been a second later, but seeing

him go down like that definitely ranked among the most unpleasant things he'd seen in his life thus far.

"Might I suggest examining the body for useful equipment?"

"Um, yeah, sure."

"Oh, and remember, any time you need some helpful advice or wisdom, just ask for Lexie and I'll try not to disappoint!"

"Yeah, I kinda already know that--"

"Like for instance, were you to ask for some advice right now, I'd suggest moving to a location that isn't this one before that guy's friends show up with even more guns!"

"Yeah, kinda already knew that as well." Meldenham slung his rifle over his shoulder and headed for the door, gingerly stepping over the fallen man and trying not to breathe in. He couldn't bring himself to do anything to the corpse, but as he stepped out into a hallway, he noticed a pair of flexible metallic arms that appeared seemingly from thin air and began to rifle through the man's pockets.

The hallway looked like one you could find in any office building in the world, although here, all the doors seemed to be manual, swinging in an arc from traditional metal hinges. The hall stretched out in both directions, a series of closed doors with small placards next to them leading to a dead end with what looked like beverage-dispensing machines at one end, and a right-angle connection with another hallway in the opposite direction. Meldenham glanced around, but the place was deserted. Keeping his rifle out in front of him, he walked slowly down towards the junction, hoping that the carpet would muffle his military boots enough to keep him from attracting undue attention.

The new hallway wasn't all that different from the first, although it had a water cooler off to one side. It terminated at a set of double doors with inlaid glass panels at roughly chest height. Meldenham walked up to the door, and glanced through the window to see what lay beyond.

Through the doors was a large lobby of some sort, with a wide, semi-circular reception desk near a floor-to-ceiling bank of windows. The desk, windows, and a trio of potted plants nearby were all pockmarked with holes and divots from the type of weapon that he had just been attacked with, and one end of the desk was scorched, still sporting flecks of foam from someone's attempt to put it out. Turning his head, he panned across the room, only to see a half-dozen men dressed like the one he'd seen earlier, each one with a slightly different type of weapon in his hand. In front of them, on their knees, were at least a dozen men

and women in businesslike clothing, most of them simply staring at the floor, although a couple cast the occasional anxious glance at their captors.

Meldenham stood as still as possible, hoping that none of the people had noticed him. Lexie had been right - being invisible would have been very useful in this situation. He wondered about trying to send the robot in, but as far as he knew, it was unarmed - plus, he'd have to open the door to let it through anyway, and that by itself would attract too much attention. He didn't know what to do, and didn't really have anywhere else to go - back down the hallway was a dead end, and he doubted any of the doors along the way led into anything but individual offices. He couldn't just stay here indefinitely, as eventually someone would come through the doors looking for their downed comrade - in fact, given the noise that encounter had made, he was surprised that they hadn't come charging in already. The men with guns were sweeping their gaze around more than one would think necessary - maybe they'd been distracted by something else?

His question was answered when, out of the blue, there was a loud bang, and the rightmost man shook as something red puffed out from his temple, then nervelessly collapsed. The other men sprang into action, unloading their weapons in the direction they thought the shot came from. Conveniently, this meant that they all had their backs to him, at least for a moment - which was more of an opportunity that he'd thought he would have.

Meldenham nudged one of the doors open a bit, and then the rest of the way, bringing his rifle up against his shoulder. Luckily, the hostages were all crouching, and Meldenhams was at least a good enough shot to hit someone square in the chest. He centered his aim on the next man over and pulled the trigger, but this time he held it down, slowly panning his weapon across the entire standing group. They screamed and buckled, collapsing into a tangled heap on top of the hostages, who started their own chorus of screams as they clawed their way out from underneath the steaming bodies.

Meldenham just stood there, which was probably tactically unsound, but the horrific effect of the rifle's aftermath still gave him pause. He couldn't help but wonder if maybe the weapons his assailants were using might be at least more comfortable to use - a little burst of pink or red seemed preferable to roiling flesh and screams of impossible agony.

As the hostages scrambled away, making a break for the elevator bank and an escape from the scene of sudden carnage, a man popped up from behind the scorched edge of the reception desk. He was wearing a suit, but no mask, and didn't look like anyone particularly distinguished. He had close-cropped black hair, which did little to disguise a burgeoning bald spot, and a pair of glasses pushed up high on his forehead. A bit of paunch poked his shirt out, but the forearms below his rolled-up sleeves looked a little too buff for an average office



worker. The man looked at the pile of corpses on the floor and whistled.

"Well, that's not something you see every day." He gestured at Meldenham, and the weapon in his hands. "Let me guess... you're from R&D, right?"

"Um..." Meldenham desperately tried to think of something plausible-sounding to say. "Well, yeah, it's my, ah, first day, in fact. So what happened was, I showed up for work, and, uh, at the desk they gave me this package to bring up, but before they could, y'know, do my orientation and stuff, those guys showed up, and I ran, things went crazy... and here I am."

"Yeah, that sucks - your first day, and then this crazy shit happens. Well, what can you do?" The man stepped forward, sticking his sidearm in his waistband and proffering a hand forward. "I'm Mike Smith."

"Uh... Meldenham Lexo," Meldenham replied, extending his hand as well, although he wasn't quite sure what to do after that. Mike took care of that issue, though, by grabbing his hand and shaking it vigorously for a few seconds in what was obviously a greeting.

"Meldenham, huh... what is that, Filipino?"

"I, uh... yeah, sure, that's what it is." Meldenham had no idea what a Filipino even was, but agreement seemed to be the easiest way - if someone assumed something about his background that fit into this society, it made sense to let that assumption stand.

"Hey, it's not that I mind or anything - at least your name sounds pretty unique. Do you have any idea how many Mike Smiths there are?"

"Um, no?"

"Well, trust me, there are plenty."

Meldenham gestured to the gun in Mike's belt. "So, are you, uh, building security or something?"

Mike chuckled at that. "What me? No, I don't even work here - I just showed up to meet a friend of mine for lunch, but as you can tell, that plan went off the rails pretty quickly. I swear, it's like I'm cursed or something..."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, seems like everywhere I go, trouble follows me. Believe it or not, I'm actually a workplace safety inspector with OSHA, but more than one facility I've gone to has come under armed assault - hence the concealed-carry permit. But

this... this is getting ridiculous. I mean, can't a guy even have lunch without some yahoos shooting the place up?"

"Wait, so you're saying these guys are after you or something?" If that was the case, Meldenham thought, this man was probably the last person he wanted to associate with.

"No, oddly enough, each time it's been a completely different set of attackers - private military companies out to sabotage the competition, some kinda homegrown terrorist nutjobs... these guys, though, I have no idea what's up with them. But if I had to guess, they're after whatever interesting little toys this company is playing around with in its R&D labs." He gestured to the weapon in Meldenham's hands. "Like that, for example. Do you even know what that thing you're holding is?"

"Well, uh... I think the, uh, box it came in said something about it being an, um, maser or something?"

"Hey, well, whatever that thing is, it sure gets the job done. Damn, but it's hideous what that thing does, though. Those screams... Jeezus," Mike said, shivering. "I mean, truth be told, I've had to shoot a lot more people than I ever thought I would, being a glorified paper-pusher and all, but if things like that are the future of warfare, I think I'll just dig myself a nice big bunker and retire."

"So... it's not always this crazy around here?"

"I should sure hope not," Mike replied. "Last I checked, this was a fairly normal defense contractor, and the last few times I've visited my friend here, things have looked pretty pedestrian, honestly. Man, I hope he's okay..."

For a moment he looked away, his face betraying a look of concern, before he turned back to Meldenham. "Say, you seem capable enough - wanna help me find my friend? We'll probably do better if we stick together, and since Jasper is pretty high up in the company, if we can find him he might know of a way we can get out of here safely. I imagine he'll want you to hand that thing over to R&D first, though - if that's what these guys are after, I'm sure he'd rather not have you walking out of the building with it."

Meldenham didn't particularly want to hand over his weapon, but at the same time, Mike seemed to offer the best option for finding a way out of the building that didn't end in a hail of weapons fire.

"You are of course talking about the Research and Development facility that's seven floors down, on the left side of the building, right?" asked Meldenham. Lexo's pants pocket, or more precisely, the Lexie persona on the control device within.

"And who might that be?" Mike asked.

"Uh, er, it's, um... A-alexis, one of my soon-to-be colleagues! She contacted me on my communicator shortly after things went down, and has been trying to help me get through to her! Although, uh, she's pretty new as well and is kind of as lost as I am right now..." Each lie seemed to sound even shakier than the last, but Mike didn't seem to notice - then again, given the situation, even telling the truth would probably resulted in an equal amount of stuttering. Oddly enough, he realized, it was easier to lie in a crisis.

Lexie, though, was quick enough to play along. "So, did you find someone else to help out? Great! That means we might not be totally screwed! Anyway, I'm just about at the research labs, and if I can get in, hopefully I can lock it down and stay safe. If you can get here as soon as you can, I'm sure we'll stand a better chance together!"

"Oh, you guys are on a two-way? I thought it was odd that you said communicator, but you're probably used to using cell-phones rather than walkie-talkies, right?"

"Um, yeah, I, ah, pulled it off a guard? And then when I tried to talk, she was on the other end."

"Ah, okay. Stroke of luck there, I suppose. You, ah, didn't happen to grab the guard's keycard while you were at it?"

"Um, no?"

"Okay, well, we'll figure it out. They probably didn't even issue you a card yet, if this was your first day, and all I've got is a guest pass... still, that ought to be good enough to at least get on the elevator and see if we can't get to somewhere more useful." He gestured to the bodies, lying off to the side, and smelling none too good. "Besides, I'd rather not stick around this particular, ah, mess any longer than I have to."

"Yeah... that sounds like a good idea," Meldenham replied, glancing down at the bodies again. Oddly enough, they didn't seem to disturb him as much as he'd imagined. Maybe, against the overwhelming threat that he had hanging over his own head, things like this just didn't really rate in significance.

"All right, then, let's head out." Mike walked towards the bank of elevators, with Meldenham trailing along behind him. Obviously, Lexie thought there was something they needed in this R&D department, hence its suggestion to make that their eventual destination. Unfortunately, he couldn't ask why at the moment - not without giving Mike too much of a clue that he wasn't exactly

what he was currently claiming to be.

As they approached the elevators, though, a light above one of them blinked to life, and a few moments later the doors opened of their own accord. Inside, looking a bit startled, were two more masked men, these ones wearing some sort of rubberized masks with garish, horribly painted faces on them. One of the men yelled something unintelligible, yanking his submachinegun up, but Mike already had his sidearm in his hand. It banged twice, the shots reverberating across the atrium, and the weapon's flash lit up the inside of the elevator like a strobe, briefly freezing each man in turn with a slight puff of red spreading out behind their heads. By the time Meldenham could even bring his maser rifle to bear, both men were collapsed in a heap on the floor of the elevator, with Mike already reaching down to grab one of them.

"Here, help me haul these guys off."

Meldenham reached down and grabbed the man's legs. Together, they dragged first one and then the other off of the elevator, depositing them with the other corpses in the middle of the room. When they headed back to the elevator, Mike grabbed a couple of the weapons that had been dropped and handed one to Meldenham, along with a black fabric pouch containing a bunch of rectangular metal objects.

"Take those - it's an MP5K and some clips for it I pulled off of them. That maser thing you've got is pretty handy, but firing that kind of energy, it probably doesn't have much more juice in it, so when it runs out, it'll be good to have a backup." Actually, the rifle had quite a bit more charge in it and was slowly regenerating all the time, but Meldenham got the idea that such a technology was just a bit more advanced than could be expected in this particular place. At least, he thought, the rest of his technology wasn't visible - if it was, he was sure he'd have a lot more to answer for.

They both entered the elevator, and a moment later something unseen nudged against his leg, indicating that the rest of Lexie was along for the ride as well. The doors whooshed closed, and Meldenham faced forward, doing his best to ignore the spatters of red that adorned the mirrored walls of the elevator behind him.

The elevator panel had a surprising amount of buttons, numbered from 1 to 50. The display above the buttons read 33, but instead of pushing something lower, Mike reached for the button marked 48. "Where my friend's office is," he said by way of explanation. "Hopefully none of these jokers have made their way that far up, so with any luck he's holed up safely somewhere. If we can retrieve him, he should have keys to get into most any place in the building, and we can figure out what we're gonna do from there."

The elevator began to ascend, although it felt much slower than the lifts Meldenham was used to. The ride upward happened mostly in silence, and for the first time in what felt like ages, Meldenham had at least a moment to relax. Honestly, he'd surprised himself that he'd been able to keep going throughout the past 24 hours without collapsing, or simply losing it and running away as fast as his legs could carry him. That being said, now that he was, at least momentarily, somewhere safe, there was a part of him that would have been happy to just stop the elevator between floors, curl up on the floor, and get some much-needed rest. Of course, he couldn't do that, but he did take a moment to lean back against an uncontaminated spot of the elevator's wall and close his eyes. For a second, he could almost feel himself drifting off to sleep, and into a dream... but that dream consisted of a cloud of bright points, creeping towards him, and the shock of the vision caused him to snap back awake, jumping up suddenly from his slouched position. Mike glanced over at him and raised an eyebrow, but chose not to comment.

All too soon, the elevator reached its destination, and the doors began to whoosh open - but as they did, the lights in the lobby beyond flickered a few times and then gave up, plunging the floor into a gloom broken only by the glow of sparsely placed emergency lighting. The elevator doors halted mid-whoosh, but were open enough for them to squeeze through in single-file. Mike leaned out into the room, and Meldenham could see his outline bring up the newly acquired submachinegun and sweep the room, before leaning over to fumble with something. Meldenham swept the sights of his rifle across the room, trying to remember the instruction he'd halfway slept through months ago, where something had been mentioned about a low-light scope setting for the thing. A moment later, though, a beam of light poked out, panning over to illuminate a vacant reception desk. There was a click from beside him, and a tiny, bright red dot appeared alongside the circle of light.

"Huh, good thing the attackers had the foresight to put a full tac package on their weapons," Mike said, now a little more visible in the reflected light. "Sorry I didn't notice it before - not something you really think about until you need to use it. Check the one you have - hopefully it's got the same thing." Mike turned the light beam on him, and Meldenham slung his maser rifle in favor of the submachinegun. Indeed, mounted below its barrel were a couple of squat rectangles with knobs and toggle switches on their edges. Meldenham threw the switch on one, and a tiny red dot appeared on the floor. The other one didn't seem to do anything when he flipped its switches, but turning the knob up brought up a beam that brightened as he moved the knob forward.

"Okay, well, it's still better to have the lights on, but I think we've got enough light to navigate and stay out of trouble. Of course, the downside is it kinda marks where we are, being the only light in the darkness, but from the sound of it, they haven't reached this floor yet." Meldenham had to admit that the floor was oddly quiet - even with the power out, you'd expect to hear some hustle

and bustle going on during the middle of the day. Of course, being that it was an office under assault by gunmen, it was also possible that anyone on the floor was cowering under their desk, trying to be as quiet as possible in the hope that the assailants would pass them by.

Meldenham panned his light around the lobby. At least this one appeared unmarred by gunfire, and the circle of light panned across a row of chairs, the desk, and another assortment of identical potted plants. There were two hallways this time, though - an open one to the right of the reception desk, and one off in the opposite corner, the door propped open with a wastepaper basket.

"So, uh, which way?"

"Let's see... it's been a while since I've been up here, and the receptionist usually directs me... through that door, actually." Mike moved towards the door, crouching down and shining his light down the hallway. It seemed to be deserted, though, and so they moved forward. Mike stayed in a crouch, creeping forward slowly. Meldenham tried to imitate him, but couldn't keep up comfortably, so he followed standing up, pressed against the opposite wall in the hopes that if someone did start shooting, he'd at least be as out of the line of fire as he could get.

As they crept down the hallway, Meldenham noticed something in the corner of his vision, and panned the light over to it. One of the office doors had opened a crack, and the head of a balding man was peeking out from it. When the light locked onto him, he froze for a second, then pulled back, slamming the door shut.

"Don't shoot me!" he yelled through the door, the panic evident in his voice. "I'm just an admin assistant! I don't know anything, really! Please, just let me go, I promise I won't do anything!"

"Hey, buddy, calm down," Mike replied, sidling over to the door. "We're not with the guys shooting the place up. We managed to get the jump on them and grab their weapons, and now we're trying to figure out a plan to get out of here and rescue as many people as possible."

There was a pause before the voice emanated again. "How do I know that's not a trick? That you just want me to open the door so you can shoot me?"

"Look, sir, if I wanted to shoot you, you'd be dead right now. That's just a regular door between us - I could spray it with bullets and they'd go right through." Mike paused for a moment, considering the situation. "Actually, you know what? Just stay in there, keep your head down, and keep quiet. If we actually do figure out a plan to get outta here, we'll come back and get you, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, that's what I was going to do anyway..." Footsteps receded from the door, followed by a thud of a heavy piece of furniture being overturned.

"Guy would've probably just slowed us down anyway, or done something stupid in a panic," Mike said as they continued down the hallway. "Actually, speaking of that, good job for keeping your head in a crazy situation. I've done this before, so it's kinda second nature to me, but to just step into something like this and hold it together? Not bad."

"Well, actually... I was in the military before I, ah, started here..."

Mike nodded. "Well, that explains why you're fairly familiar with weapons and basic tactics. That's good - means we can support each other better when those guys show up again. Anyway, Jasper's office shouldn't be too far along - let's just hope that he's still holed up in there, and hasn't fled the building already." Or fallen into the hands of the people placing the building under seige, which Mike didn't say out loud, but Meldenham figured he was at least considering it. If one of his friends was being held hostage by these unknown psychos... Meldenham didn't even want to think about what he would do, although before this, the default action would have been to run away and let someone else deal with it.

A few more steps down the hallway, Mike settled his beam of light on a placard beside a nearby door, which read "Gerald Symes - Asst. VP of Operations."

"Well, this is his office... cross your fingers," Mike said, before making a fist and thumping on the door several times.

"Yo, Jasper! It's me, Mike! We still on for lunch, or what?"

There was a slight shuffling sound from within, and then a muffled voice emanated from behind the door.

"Mike? Are you serious?"

"Why the heck wouldn't I be?"

The doorknob jiggled, and then the door slowly began to pull open. Behind it was a short man in a gray tweed suit, with thick, round eyeglasses that were so distorted that his eyeballs appeared to fill the entire frames. He blinked at the light, running a hand through a shock of bright red hair as he looked the two of them over, especially focusing on the guns in their hands, before finally shaking his head.

"Mike, I know your reputation precedes you, but you are seriously, completely, abosufuckinglutely insane."

Mike just shrugged. "Hey, given the shit I've dealt with before, this is... this is depressingly unsurprising by now. Anyway, you feel like getting outta here?"

Jasper shook his head again. "Unlike you, this sort of thing is decidedly not in my nature. The minute the announcement went out that we were under siege, I locked things up tight, and I've been holed up here ever since. It was actually quite nice before the power went out - aside from some panicked screams here and there, I actually got to catch up on a massive bundle of paperwork without some idiot underling popping his head in my door every five minutes to solve some asinine problem or other. A decent respite, really."

"Yeah, apart from the whole, 'crazy people with guns might burst into my office at any minute and shoot my guts out.'"

"Eh, it's a living." Jasper glanced back towards the contents of his office. "I take it you prefer the foolhardy idea of trying to shoot it out with a hundred or so armed men."

"Well, the thing is, they're all spread out throughout the building - I haven't yet come across more than six at a time, and usually two or three. The three of us, plus some tactics... I think we can take 'em, or at least enough of them to rescue some people and get the fuck outta here."

"Wait a second," Jasper replied. "You actually expect me to shoot one of those bloody things? For heaven's sakes, I'm a company VP now! I wear a suit. I sit at a desk. The only 'cardio' in my life is performed on a golf course. And you really expect me to run around my own building like a kid playing soldiers? Look, Mike, I love you like a brother, but seriously... the smart money here is to keep your head down, wait for the authorities to arrive, and hang tight until this all blows over."

"Yeah, yeah, Jasper, I get it, but..." Mike trailed off as a faint sound came from somewhere down the hallway. Meldenham couldn't quite make it out, but it almost sounded like the elevator chiming. But... the power was out, right?

"Huh," Mike said, as the thudding of footsteps could be heard down towards the lobby. Mike dropped into a crouch, fumbling with his weapon, and the tac-light was quickly extinguished.

"Yo, Mel, hit your light as well," Mike whispered. "Maybe it's friendly, but if not, why give them the element of surprise?"

Meldenham nodded, switching his light off as well.



"If you really, really need me, I'll be under my desk," Jasper said in a loud whisper, followed by the sound of him crawling back into his office.

From down the hall, a circle of light swept around a corner, and then retreated. Meldenham heard the sound of a doorknob rattling, then a series of thumps, like someone was slamming into a door. Finally, a long burst of gunfire rattled, illuminating a stretch of hallway in stroboscopic light. Amidst the flashes, Meldenham could see part of a man standing around the corner, wearing what looked like a child's rabbit mask that didn't quite cover his face. Wordlessly, Meldenham set his submachinegun down on the carpet, and brought up his maser rifle.

By feel, he brought his hands up to the weapon's integrated scope. If light would give them away, maybe he could give them an advantage after all. His hands ran across the series of buttons on the side of the scope, and despite still being unable to remember how to set it, in the dark it hardly seemed to matter. The problem was simple, when he thought about it - there were a series of buttons, and he'd keep hitting them in any order he could think of until something useful happened.

As he did so, though, he heard the footsteps coming down the hall towards them. This area of hallway didn't seem to have any emergency lighting at all, and the scene was pitch-black save for the lights from the men coming their way. He could hear Mike shifting uneasily beside him, as the footsteps meandered closer, their circles of light luckily staying focused on the floor in front of them, occasionally moving up to paint a doorway that one of them would try to open. They opened a couple of doors as Meldenham kept fiddling with his weapon, to no avail - the scope made a few slight clicks, but the view through it wasn't any better. Just those two circles of light... which represented the weapons, he thought, which were almost certainly held between chest and waist height...

He brought the weapon up, centering his sights on one of the glowing circles, now no more than fifty meters away. He pulled on the trigger, and a moment later the light began to jerk and bob around crazily, as a high-pitched scream quickly changed to a gurgle, followed by a loud thump. The other circle of light snapped around, sweeping back and forth across the hallway, darting right over their heads.

"The fuck? Show yourselves, dammit!" called an unfamiliar voice from down the hall. In response, Mike's submachinegun fired three times in quick succession, and the circle of light took a nosedive and slid crazily across the floor, the light spinning around in two or three full circuits before the weapon slid to a halt... with the circle illuminating Meldenham's feet.

From down the hall there was a thump, perhaps the man slumping against a

wall, but the sound was quickly followed by the clack of metal on metal. Mike managed to flick his own tac-light back on, as Meldenham dodged behind him to get out of the light. The light from Mike's weapon illuminated an empty stretch of hallway. From the dark space on the opposite side, though, three flashes came from about shoulder height, accompanied by the sound of something thudding into the floor where Meldenham had just stood.

"You sonzabitches! Gonna kill you all!" the voice yelled, followed by more flashes. Mike dove into Jasper's office, and something whizzed by Meldenham's leg, managing to tug on the fabric slightly. Another projectile pinged off of the apparently not-so-empty space in front of him. The weapon flashed twice more as Meldenham flattened himself against the wall, and when it flashed a third time, this shot cracking past his ear like an angry insect, he had the flash of the weapon lined up in the center of his sights. The maser rifle hummed again, sounding not unlike an angry insect itself, and the man screamed, followed by a metallic thud as the man's weapon hit the floor, followed by another flash and pop as the impact of the drop caused the weapon to fire a shot into the baseboard.

"Yaaaagh! You f-fuckers! What the fuck! OOOwwwooo shit it fucking hurts! My fucking arm! It's not even... AAAGk! Sonuvabitch! You fucking bastards, I'm gonna track you down and fuck you up! I'll kill you! I'll fucking beat the shit out of everyone you've ever met before I shoot 'em in their fucking heads! FUUUUUUUUCK!" The stream of invective continued, along with a slight shuffling sound. Meldenham found the switch to toggle the light on his submachinegun back on, revealing a man, his rabbit mask halfway falling off his face, crouching down against the side of the wall and trying to shuffle away, one hand holding an arm that looked like it had just been pan-fried.

"Hey, you! Don't move!" he yelled, keeping the light focused. With his good arm, the man raised his middle finger and gestured it towards Meldenham. When he didn't react, the man just went back to holding his arm. "You fucking shithead! If you're going to shoot me, then shoot me!" The mask started to fall back down, covering his eyes, and the man reached up and tossed it aside. Behind it was a stubby guy with dark hair and a jutting chin. Above his shirt, a patch of his neck was blistered where Meldenham's weapon had touched. "What the hell's wrong with you! NNNNrgghrrrrgg... You fucker! You shoot me with that... that thing, and like fucking melt my arm, and now you just want to stand there and watch me suffer?"

"Hey, you tried to shoot me!" Meldenham retorted.

"Yeah, and you actually shot me! With an invisible fucking flamethrower or something, and fucking cooked me alive! What kinda sick shit is that, huh?" He paused, staring straight at Meldenham with wild eyes. "Those fuckers... that's what they're after? They told me it we were after some kinda gene shit, not

heavy weapons designed by some fucking sadist..." Realizing was he was saying, though, the man quickly pressed his lips together. "RRggh... I an't saying anything else! You really wanna shoot me, then shoot me, you sick fuck!" The man stumbled to his feet grimacing. "Otherwise... Grrgghh... I'm fucking outta here. Screw you." The man laboriously turned and started stumbling back down the hallway, clutching at his shoulder. Meldenham just stood there, halfway stunned at the outburst. After all, the man had a point - while his weapon was effective, perhaps too effective, the aftermath was getting harder to stomach, and not just in a metaphorical sense - the smell of microwaved flesh was beginning to make him queasy.

The man continued to stumble down the hallway, and Meldenham sighed, tilting the weapon down as the lights came back on for a second, then shone with a surprising intensity, and several of the recessed fixtures overhead popped and went dark again, the rest of them subsiding to a dim, shadowy flicker. In the new light, though, he could see a metallic, flexible arm coming up from nowhere off to his side, holding a sidearm that was more rounded than the one's he'd seen before, with a big cylinder in the center with an odd metal lever ratcheted up behind it...

The arm pulled taut, and the weapon went off, a tongue of flame spouting out from it momentarily as the weapon kicked upward. Down the hall, the man yelled, as the arm fired off the weapon twice more, making a deep, booming noise that reverberated down the hallway. The arm contracted back down into its sphere of invisibility, and down the hallway, the man slumped to the ground. For a few seconds, the man's body tried to drag itself forward, his head struggling up before falling back to the carpet. His body shuddered once more, and then lay still.

Meldenham glanced over towards the office, but luckily no one was in view. Once the echoes of the shot fully subsided, though, a dazed Mike Smith poked his head around the doorframe.

"Ugh... sorry about that. Caught my head on the doorframe when I dove in, and it threw me for a loop." He rubbed at his forehead, where a lump was already forming. "Looks like you handled it just fine, somehow. Damn, though, that's a loud revolver. Gets the job done though, right?"

"Yeah, it's got, um, quite a kick to it..." Meldenham replied, hoping that Mike wouldn't ask to see it - but he could already feel the mechanical arm sliding the weapon into a cargo pocket on the side of him that was blocked from view by the doorframe.

"My lord, what is that smell?" This came from Jasper, who had emerged from under his desk to stand beside Mike in the doorway, nervously looking out.

"If I had to guess, it's probably from your company's latest prototype," Mike said, pointing to the odd weapon slung across Meldenham's back. Jasper looked at it, wiped his glasses, and looked again.

"Whatever that thing is, I can assure you that it's nothing we currently have in development." And just like that, the troubling shiver was back, coursing down Meldenham's spine.

"What do you mean? That thing was delivered today, and this guy was bringing it over to R&D when the crisis hit."

"I can assure you, we weren't expecting anything to be shipped in today, and if we were shipping in a new weapons system, it would be in a sealed case with multiple armed guards, not delivered by a courier service and carted around by some rookie researcher."

Mike raised an eyebrow. "You sure? 'Cause in that case, that would mean this guy is... well... actually, I have no idea whatsoever." He turned to Meldenham. "Um, no offense, but if that's true... I mean, you're obviously not one of them, and you've kinsa saved my ass a couple of times now, so I'm not trying to jump down your throat, but... if you're not working here, and you're not part of there assault, then why exactly are you here?"

"Umm..." Meldenham stood there, shaking slightly, wondering what the heck he was supposed to say - somehow, he doubted that the truth would sound particularly convincing. That being said, the more he lied, the more he'd have to remember, which could make him look even more suspicious, or just plain crazy... but maybe, if he was blunt and vague enough, he could have them draw their own assumptions.

"Look, who I am isn't important right now. What's important is that I'm here, I'm capable, and I'm doing everything I can to help you. All I can say is, I was sent here for a specific purpose, and that's to deliver this weapon on my back to someone in your R&D lab who's supposed to be waiting for it. I was supposed to do this unnoticed, and tell people that I worked here if asked so that I wouldn't, uh, arouse attention. That's all I know - the people I work for tell me as little as possible so that if something happens to me, nothing else gets compromised." A fair amount of... misdirection, but certainly enough of it rang true to remember - he had been sent here, and was now apparently set to find this lab. Being inconspicuous did seem like it could be part of his plan, or at least his true nature, and it was certainly true that the briefing he'd received before he was sent on his way had seemed perhaps somewhat... incomplete.

Meldenham looked between his two companions, hoping that his ruse would stick - and if not, he still had the submachinegun in his hands and perhaps, if he was lucky, at least a moment of surprise in which to act. Luckily, though, he saw

Jasper knowingly nodding his head.

"Heh, let me guess... you wouldn't just happen to work for a certain DoD agency that shall not be named?"

"I... can't confirm that for you." Given what he'd just said, that seemed like the safest response.

"Of course you can't - that's why it 'shall not be named.' That would be just like them, though. Let's see... and there's probably a certain symbol that one of the lab techs is gonna show you, probably one with a high-security clearance, and then he's gonna take it into the "top secret" lab that doesn't have any security cameras, right?"

"Even if I did know about that, I can't-"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. Doesn't mean I have to like it, though. I keep telling them, if you're bringing something in to work on, you have to tell us, if not for security, then for the safety of our other employees. I know that part of our work is collaborating on top-secret project with government personnel, but we're working on it too - it's a basic matter of trust."

"Okay, I hear that, but like I, ah, said, I'm just doing my job. For all that other stuff, you'd need to talk to someone much further up the food chain than I am."

Jasper sighed, taking his glasses off and fiddling with the frames. "Well, at least you don't look as creepy as the people they usually send. One of the senior scientists said someone showed up at the lab looking for someone a few months ago, with, and I quote, 'the demeanor and affect of a serial killer.'"

Mike still looked like he wasn't quite a believer, but if he was still suspicious, he didn't mention it. "Freakin' top secret... If I never have to deal with anything 'top secret' again, it'll be too soon. I still have nightmares about that one a while back. If that's the business you're in 24/7, man, I definitely feel sorry for you."

"Eh, it's not too bad," Meldenham replied, lying through his teeth. Given where he was, and what was actually coming after him, he would certainly have been happier if he'd never crossed paths with a certain clandestine military operation.

"You're right, though," Mike continued. "The fact is, you're here, you're capable, and you just might be the difference between us all walking out of here and us leaking blood through a bunch of new man-made holes. Confirmed or not, I'm guessing that woman on the two-way is your contact, and you'd

probably prefer it if she didn't get ventilated, so let's head down to R&D and hope that nothing too bad has happened there yet." He turned to Jasper. "You coming? You can stay here if you really want, but there's no guarantee more of them won't show up here."

Jasper paused for a moment, seeming to contemplate the situation while using his shirt in a probably vain attempt to clean his glasses. "I've had enough fun for one day, that's for sure, but I'd also like to finish the day at home, with a nice glass of wine, instead of lying under my desk, possibly filled with bullets. I'll come with you, sure, as being around you does seem perversely to be the safest place to be. Just don't expect me to shoot someone."

"Yeah, well, you never know..." Mike extracted his sidearm and handed it to Jasper, handle first. "Take it, just to be on the safe side. If you're in a tight spot, just point the end with the hole in it at the bad guy, pull on the trigger, and hope for the best."

"I'm not a complete imbecile when it comes to these things, you know," Jasper said, retrieving the gun and wrapping his hand around the grip, tilting the thing up while examining it. As he did so, the flickering lights cut off again, followed by a loud bang and something smacking into the ceiling.

"You were saying?" Mike said in the renewed darkness.

"Oh, quiet. I was startled, all right?" The statement was followed by the rustling of cloth, though, as Jasper apparently tucked the gun away somewhere where it could do no more harm.

Meldenham's weapon light was currently illuminating an uninteresting patch of floor, so he brought it back up to sweep across the room, and back out into the hallway. "So... shall we get moving? I assume at least one of us knows the way..."

"Yes, yes... let's head back to the elevators, and we can go from there," Jasper said.

The three of them crept back down the hallway, stepping around the bodies. Mike ducked his head quickly into the room with the collection of bullet holes in the door, glancing around with his light. The man who they had talked to before was lying behind his desk, surprisingly unmarred and still breathing - somehow the bullets had missed him, but the shock of the situation had caused him to pass out.

"Well, I... guess he's safe enough there for now, if he managed to survive that," Mike said. "Still feel kinda bad about leaving him, though..."

Meldenham, standing beside him, knelt down and retrieved the revolver, placing it near the man on the floor. "That'll give him a fighting chance if they do come back, at least."

"I guess..." Mike said hesitantly, but turned around after a moment and motioned for them to move on.

As they reached the bank of elevators, the lights came back on, a bit brighter than they had been but still flickering unsteadily. The elevators, however, now appeared completely dead - none of the buttons lit up, and the elevator with half-open doors now apparently opened into a dark shaft containing a handful of thick metal cables.

"Well, we're certainly not taking the easy way down," Mike said. "Hope you don't hate cardio too much, Jasper, because it looks like we're taking the stairs."

Mike looked around, but there weren't any obvious doorways. "Uh, Jasper, there are stairs, right?"

Jasper gulped nervously. "Well, ah, the thing about that is..."

"Yeah?"

"Well, when the building was constructed, there were some cost overruns, and so the building has a few quirks and cut corners here and there..."

"And?" Mike asked, looking uncomfortable.

"Well, basically, there are stairwells, but it was deemed far more efficient for there to be an actual landing and entryway, every... well, every five floors."

"And we're on 48... with the research facility on... 26... so we somehow have to get three floors down, enter the stairwell, climb down just about half the height of this building, and then somehow get up another floor, without using the stairs, after that?"

Jasper gulped again. "Well, you see, I remember someone talking about some kind of ladder system that goes the length of the elevator shafts..."

"Wait, so instead of climbing down twenty-two flights of stairs, we've gotta climb down twenty-two floors via a recessed ladder on the side of an elevator shaft, then cross our fingers the power doesn't come back on, leading to an elevator car turning us into a bloody smear..." Mike whistled through his teeth. "Shee-it, Jasper, and you think *I'm* crazy?"

"Hey, all I'm doing is telling you what's what. I'm not suggesting we actually

climb down an elevator shaft. I'm certainly not going to attempt anything so insane!"

"So, what you're saying is, we should just sit here until the power comes back on."

"Well, that's not all that ridiculous a plan, now is it? The whole reason we're running is to stay one step ahead of angry people with guns, but if they're stuck as well, doesn't this mean we're far safer staying up here where they're not? If we're not crazy enough to climb down, they're certainly not going to climb up, right? I mean, we've got a whole break room up here, complete with snack machine. We've got restrooms, and we've got just about enough people for a card game. Certainly that's enough to keep us comfortable until the actual police arrive and take care of this whole situation?"

"Yes, except for one thing: whoever those guys are, they're closer to the R&D lab than we are, and if they can get ahold of whatever they're really after, aren't you going to be in just a bit of trouble?"

"Um, well... I mean, I'm more of a big-picture man if you think about it - I'm in charge of the general operational strategy for the company, and..."

"And the person who's ultimately responsible for the choices your underlings made when they implemented the building security policy? Especially if whatever classified thing you've got going on in the lab goes missing, and ends up blowing up, irradiating, or poisoning Madrid or Lagos the next time some terror cell gets cheesed off at something?"

"Hey, you don't know that they're terrorists!"

"Um, guys," Meldenham interjected. "I'm sure that there's some important... something to consider here, but as for me, my concerns are simple. All I'd like to do today is not die." He paused, trying to figure out how to continue - given what was chasing him, finding the next place to go seemed like it ought to be a matter of expedience. On the other hand, he saw no evidence of it around, and there was something to be said for heading to a break room and relaxing, as opposed to doing something insanely dangerous, like crawling around in a shaft with a fifty-story drop, which if successful would most likely lead to even more men with guns trying to kill him.

"Why, oh why, did they have to send me here, of all places..." he muttered under his breath.

"Say what?" Mike asked.

"Um, so you see, what I'm trying to say is... as far as furthering the cause of



not dying goes, climbing down an elevator shaft seems to be pretty low on the list. So, I vote we don't climb down."

"Huh... climb down..." Mike said, suddenly lost in thought.

"Um... Mike?" Jasper asked after a few seconds.

"Maybe he's right. This building has people who clean the windows every so often, right?"

"Yes, I think so..."

"Right. So, let's not climb down - let's climb up. The elevator cars are most likely below us, so if they do show up, we can just jump on top of them and ride them to the top. Plus, it's only a couple of floors from here to the fiftieth floor, and from there it should be easy to get to the roof. We take the little crane thing that the window-washers use, we ride it down to the bottom of the building, and... the bad guys still get into the R&D lab and steal WMDs or something. Damn."

"Hey, it's better than the alternative," Meldenham said. "Plus, we could just take it down to the floor with the R&D lab, use something to bust in a window, and then we're right there on that floor, right? We go in the lab, do what we need to do, go out the way we came, in, and get as far away from here as we can."

"I do have to say, it sounds a lot better than the alternative," Jasper said. "Honestly, either way kinda scares the bejeebus out of me, but if those are our options... If it's the best bet to both keep my job and get out of here without bullets in me, then let's try that."

"All right, then," Mike said, turning back to the elevators. "I guess I'll go first..."

Mike walked over to the partially-opened elevator doors, using his light to look around the shaft. There were occasional emergency lighting panels in here as well, but seemed to be suffering even worse than the other lights. The light played across the far wall and both sides, but there was no ladder in sight.

"Don't tell me..." Mike leaned in, using his free hand to hold on to the outside of the door and keep his balance, then leaned back quickly.

"Yeah, okay, this is gonna be fun. There is a recessed ladder on this side, a couple of feet to the right. However, there's no ledge to walk on on the inside, so we'll have to jump, grab the edge of this door and use our momentum to swing around, and then grab hold of the ladder once we swing about 180

degrees." He looked over at Jasper, and sighed. "No offense, man, but I don't think you're gonna be able to pull this off."

Jasper walked over to the edge and leaned out. "You know, Mike, you might be right, I think I'll just wait in my-" he said, trying to turn back around, but as he did so, his foot slipped off of the edge. He yelled and flailed about, somehow managing to catch one hand around the edge of the door. For a moment, it was the only part of him in view, and then it too came off - but off to the side, as he slammed into the elevator's wall, and hopefully the ladder, with a resounding thud.

"Jasper? You okay, buddy?"

"I..." Jasper wheezed. "I, ah, well I, um, I don't know how in the world that happened."

"But you're okay?" Mike leaned in, with Meldenham holding on to the other door as he looked into the shaft. Sure enough, Jasper was off to the side, gripping a ladder rung tightly enough that his knuckles were becoming pale. His hair was a mess, a portion of his neck was quickly discoloring into a bruise, and his eyeglasses were nowhere to be seen, but other than that, he seemed no more the worse for wear.

"Okay, then," Mike said. "Jasper, if you wouldn't mind climbing up a bit, I'll come over next."

"Uh, s-sure..." Jasper said, and after a moment, he gingerly released one of his hands and grabbed the next rung up, and then, seeming to move almost in slow motion, very cautiously began climbing up.

Mike stepped back, carefully slinging and securing his submachinegun. "Okay, here goes nothing," he said, then quickly stepped forward and leaped. Meldenham watched from the opposite door as Mike spun out into the air, the arm he had gripping the doorframe swinging him around until he practically faceplanted against the wall, almost looking like he was doing a jumping jack, only one outstretched hand and leg had managed to catch rungs in the ladder. He let go of the door and pulled himself the rest of the way over, climbing onto, and then up, the ladder.

"Okay, Mel, it's your turn now," he called from above.

Meldenham, of course, hesitated. On one hand, there wasn't much room for error, but on the other hand, they'd both gotten across - heck, one of them had stumbled his way to success. If that was the case, how hard could it be? Meldenham stepped back, mirroring what Mike had done. He braced himself, and took a quick step forward to begin his leap off the edge.

As he was about to step off, though, he suddenly thought of Lexie's "body." How exactly was it going to follow him up here? Apparently, Lexie had had a similar thought, as just as his foot crossed the transom, he heard an odd noise like a spring being released, and something looped itself around his waist and cinched itself taut. As Meldenham swung around, he felt the rope tug first in the opposite direction, and then down. His own arc tilted, and as he slammed into the wall, Lexie slammed into the opposite wall further down, pulling his hand back before it could grab the rung. His foot managed to catch on one, but he was already falling backward, his hand losing purchase on the doorframe. He tried to hold on, but couldn't, flailing his other arm towards the ladder rung to no avail. He tilted over, his foot lost his purchase, and he began to fall, straight down.

"Mel! Holy shit!" Mike yelled from above, his voice disappearing as Meldenham plummeted, watching the emergency lights flash past him as he fell. "So, Lexie, remind me what happens with this cloud thing when I kick it?" he said, having nothing better to do. This was it - ten floors down, fifteen, and soon the inevitable impact. Below him, Lexie's body was visible again, metallic arms flailing about as it fell below him, end over end, clanging off elevator cables and sending off sparks as they scraped against the wall, grasping for any sort of purchase and failing miserably. Meldenham could see something coming up fast, filling the whole shaft - the top of an elevator car, probably. That was it, then - he was to perish here, in this miserable, dark shaft, a red smear on a movable box.

Above it, though, the counterweight was static a few floors up, and as Lexie plummeted past it, a number of the robot arms snagged on the thing. A couple popped off, but the rest held it in place, and Meldenham watched as the counterweight, and Lexie, whizzed past his face as the top of the elevator came zooming up at him. Just as Meldenham could see the alternating dimples on the corrugated steel surface, whatever rope that Lexie had tied around him reached its limit, and Meldenham stopped with a lurch and a gasp, as it felt like his abdomen had just been seized by a particularly peeved constricting snake. All the air left him in a whoosh, and he found himself hanging horizontally in midair, the surface of the elevator car less than a meter away from his face.

For a moment, he just hung there, stunned, trying to pull in breath, as the pain in his abdomen intensified. "I... I'm not..."

"Hey there, Meldenham! Now that your companions are gone, we can speak freely again! Isn't that great? I've been wanting to talk for a good while now!"

"Oh, great..." Meldenham wheezed.

"That's right - you probably want to get down now, don't you? Hang on, I'll have you out of that harness in a jiffy!"

"I don't think this is exactly a-" Meldenham said, but there was a sproinging noise, and he fell the remaining few feet to the surface of the elevator.

"Hrnss..." he concluded, as his face smooshed against the metal surface before his arms and legs could absorb the rest of the impact. He rolled over, groaning, as additional clanging sounds came from above.

"Actually, if I were you, I'd be sitting up very straight right about now," Lexie said, as the clanging reached a new crescendo that approached quickly from above. Meldenham pulled himself up, feeling something whip past his hair, and a moment later Lexie's body slammed into the top of the elevator with a resounding clang, its tank treads spinning helplessly in the air.

"All right, then! Not exactly as planned, but I sure can't complain about that successful descent!"

"I, ah, think you need to change your definition of successful..."

"You're intact, right? So am I! Given that the mission parameters were 'get to the 26<sup>th</sup> floor and not die,' our location here seems to be the very definition of success, as I'm pretty sure this elevator is stuck at least close to that floor! So, if you'll just turn my main unit over, we'll proceed from here!"

"And, just how are we going to proceed?"

"Simple! As we tumbled down, I realized that I could, in fact, reprogram my servomotors to use these robotic arms to climb down the ladder, just like a simian! Cool, huh? It sure is too bad I didn't think about that before we came down here, as it might have made our descent even more successful! Of course, given how it ended up, it's harder to get more successful than this, so maybe it would have been irrelevant! That being said, it should work now, so let's go find that ladder and see where we are!"

"Right." Meldenham walked across the top of the elevator, and sure enough, the ladder was right there, with just enough room to squeeze down between the elevator and the shaft wall. Alongside the ladder, a few feet above the elevator car, was a small plaque welded to the side of the wall, with the number 27 embossed on it. "Well, I guess we're close. Now, just hope that nothing starts up for this last bit..." Grabbing the rungs of the ladder, Meldenham started to climb down, but then thought better of it. "Maybe you'd better go first, Lexie - no offense, but assuming your servomotors don't work quite right, I'd rather be above than below you."

"No problem! I'm at least 87% sure this will work, though!" Lexie rolled over to the ladder, extending the flexible arms. About a half-dozen of them latched onto various rungs, and then, with a series of clangs, the cylinder began to lower itself down the ladder. Half-smiling at the bizarre sight, Meldenham grabbed onto the ladder and began carefully climbing down after it.

Luckily, the floors weren't all that far apart, and it wasn't long until Meldenham came across another plaque that read 26 in the dim glow of the emergency lighting. Below it and to the side, there were a pair of elevator doors - which were sealed shut.

"Great," Meldenham said, hanging on the ladder. "Now what?"

"Never fear - given the high capabilities of my enclosure, I'm already formulating a solution that might even work! Let's see, the control box should be just about... here!" One of the arms came off the ladder, digging into the pack that was still somehow secured on top of the cylinder, and came up with another small sidearm, probably pulled from the first man that Meldenham had shot hours earlier. The weapon fired with a sharp popping noise, and a metal case spanged and flew off a foot away from the sealed doors, revealing a tangle of wires. "Now, for some fireworks!" Lexie said, and that arm retracted, replaced by one with an odd, pointy tip with something round at the end. It made a sizzling noise, and jagged streams of electricity shot out from it, touching the wires, the shaft wall, and the metal floor simultaneously. A jolt shook Meldenham, and the entire world suddenly tasted like ozone as his muscles spasmed and his hands locked painfully around the ladder, his teeth chattering involuntarily inside his skull. The power stopped as quickly as it had started, though, and Meldenham relaxed a little, every muscle in his body starting to ache all at once. The doors, for their part, made a lot of strange electronic and hydraulic noises, whooshing quickly open and shut again several times, before vibrating in their frames and stopping about a third of the way open with an odd squeal, followed by an odd crackling and a bit more light as the box full of electronics, already partially melted from the jolt, burst into flame.

"Okay, let's go!" Lexie said, wrapping several arms around the edges of the door. However, the cylinder still hung on, suspended right below the door. "Just lean over, step on my processing unit, and pull yourself through the door - super-easy, right?"

"Yeah, sure..." Meldenham said, but it wasn't like he had a choice. Taking a deep breath, he took one foot off the ladder and moved it over, stepping on top of his duffel, which actually gave him a reasonably sound footing. Slowly shifting his balance, he let go of the ladder with one arm and leaned over until he could grab the edge of the door, then brought the rest of his body onto the cylinder. Then, gripping both sides of the door, he pulled himself through,

tumbling onto a carpeted hallway by the bank of elevators. Lexie pulled itself up after him, rolling onto the floor while retracting its tentacular arms, then quickly faded from view.

"Well, here we are," Meldenham said softly, looking around. The lights all seemed to be working here, at least - instead of a reception desk, this floor seemed to have something that looked almost like a security kiosk. This kiosk, though, sported a decent array of bullet holes, and several areas of crazed glass where the projectiles had tried, and failed, to penetrate. However, the kiosk door was open, and though it was now empty, the generous splashes of blood sprayed around the interior gave a clear indication as to the fate of its previous occupant. The automatic doors to the side of it appeared to be locked open, and the control panel in the kiosk was showing the effects of a sustained submachinegun burst, what parts of it that still remained either smoldering or kicking out an occasional shower of sparks.

Meldenham looked on through the doors, feeling a sense of foreboding. "So, Lexie, mind telling me why it was so important to get here in the first place?"

"Well, that's actually an excellent question! In fact, it's so excellent that it has two whole answers to it! You see, the first answer is that I've calculated our next jumping-off point, and conveniently enough, it's right here in this building! Who'd have thought finding our next destination would be this convenient? Once we get to where we need to be in there, we can probably jump to the next dimension and continue on our way to the safety of our home dimension! Which, speaking of your hopefully-not-impending death by incredibly huge explosion, is the second answer - the doomsday device that's following you has now completed its first jaunt through impossible space and is now looking for you, somewhere in this dimension! It's not too close yet, but now that it's here, moving on to another dimension is probably a much better choice for your continued survival!"

"Great... can I at least expect that the next place we go to won't be a miserable, chaotic warzone?"

"By my calculations, there's at least a 20% chance that our next destination will be somewhat more peaceful!" Of course, given the alternative, heading down a corridor full of people trying to shoot him, and then jumping to a completely new place that could be even worse than this... was, depressingly, the more palatable option.

"All right, then," Meldenham said, crouching down and leaning around the edge of the door, looking down a fluorescent-lit hallway that quickly took a sharp right, with the far wall boasting a sign that said LAB in big block letters, accompanied by an arrow pointing off in that direction. "I hope you've got a couple more weapons packed in your, ah, processing unit. This is where all

those guys were trying to get to, so I'm pretty sure it's just the two of us, against who knows how many of them..."

"Hey, look on the bright side! Even if they shoot you dead and you fail, they get to be just as dead in a few days when the entire galaxy explodes!"

"That's... really not helpful at all."

"Don't worry! With me by your side, there's a chance that you won't meet a horrid, bullet-riddled fate! In fact, if I weren't programmed not to lie, I'd be happy to guarantee it!"

"How about, instead of a guarantee, you be quiet for a while, pull a gun or two out of the sack, and shoot anyone you see wearing a stupid mask?"

"Sounds great! Although for your information, once I start firing the weapons, I'll probably be anything but quiet - does quiet include that?"

"By quiet, I mean, stop talking and let's just do this already."

Meldenham slowly advanced down the hallway, switching out the submachinegun for his rifle. As he advanced down the hallway, he realized that this area seemed a bit more... clinical, he guessed. On one side there was a little alcove with what looked like a showerhead in the ceiling, and a sign labeled "Decontamination," while a door on the other side had a big placard with numbers arranged in a trio of brightly colored diamond shapes. Near the corner of the hallway, a door was ajar, with a boot poking out. Meldenham glanced in quickly, revealing what looked to be a man in a security uniform, his white shirt marred by splotches of red - probably the security guard who had gone missing from the kiosk.

Crouching down again, Meldenham peered around the corner. Everything looked clear, although up ahead was a pair of automatic doors, which were still shut. A sign above them read "CLEANROOM - PROCESSING," and beside the door was a large pushbutton, and two lights, one of them glowing red.

Meldenham shrugged and pushed the button, causing a mechanical voice to emanate from a speaker off to the side. "Warning - process subroutines are currently on emergency maintenance override. Entering the atmosphere lock while this mode is active may contaminate the cleanroom environment." The doors remained shut. Meldenham pressed the button again, and the light flashed from red to green momentarily, before returning to red and flashing ominously. A moment later, the doors slowly pulled open, one of them wobbling and grinding on a damaged track.

Beyond the doors was some kind of decontamination chamber, with a waist-

height window running along one wall into an observation and control room. The glass was thick, pockmarked by bullets, and there was a large chunk blown out at the far end, with jagged scorch marks around the edge. Beyond the shattered section of glass, a couple of security guards lay slumped against the wall, a line of bullets stitched across their bodies and the wall behind them. They'd given as good as they got, though, as the floor of the chamber was littered with half a dozen mask-clad bodies, plus assorted fragments of whoever had been a bit too close to the explosion that took out the window. As Meldenham walked by, carefully stepping around the corpses, Lexie gathered up ammo clips and stuffed them in a side pocket of the duffel.

One part of the door at the other end was partially melted, and the other was jammed open, constantly sliding back and forth a few inches before butting up against an unseen obstruction. As Meldenham walked past it, though, something beeped, and a beam of red light shot out from something that looked like a security camera. It trailed across the carpet in front of him, leaving a scorched mark in its wake, as it swung upward towards his body. Alarmed, Meldenham rolled to the side, while Lexie extended a robotic arm with a revolver in it and popped off a few quick shots, which ricocheted harmlessly off the metal casing. The "camera" started turning back around, trying to track the new threat, but Meldenham was already bringing his rifle to bear. It thrummed predictably, and the optics on the camera started to ripple and bubble, sending the beam momentarily off in a dozen random directions before the thing sizzled and shut off, its casing melted into an amorphous blob.

"You know," Meldenham said, staring at the singed patch of carpet, "I'm beginning to wonder if this lab is actually in danger of invasion."

He climbed to his feet, walking past the remains of the security turret and around another right-hand bend, this one accompanied by a rack of what looked to be hazmat suits. The room beyond opened up into a pentagonal hub, branching off into four different sets of automatic doors. This room had another security kiosk in the middle, along with a couple of metal frames on either side of it, with wires leading into the kiosk. This kiosk appeared to be unmarred - apparently the assailants had met their end at the decontamination airlock and hadn't made it any farther.

Meldenham stopped in front of the kiosk, looking between the sets of doors. All of these ones were still sealed, and each had some kind of card reader next to them. Without a pass, he wasn't sure how much further they could get - he could try hitting the readers with his rifle, but that might render the door inoperable.

"So, Lexie... any ideas?"

Lexie didn't immediately respond, but someone else did. There was a blur of



movement, and a man dressed in a security uniform suddenly popped up, leaning out the kiosk door and aiming at Meldenham with an impressively large rifle, a string of ammunition feeding into it and trailing off behind him.

"Freeze, motherfucker! Don't even think about trying anything!"

Since Meldenham was already just standing there, he complied. The security guard actually seemed taken aback at that, but quickly regained his composure.

"O-okay, good! Just stay right there! Now tell me, why the heck are you even here?"

Meldenham feigned a look of confusion, which wasn't particularly hard to do given the events of the day. Well, his ruse had worked before, so he might as well try in here.

"Um, because it seemed like the safest place to go? Also, I was supposed to deliver this thing to someone here..." he said, pointing to the rifle slung over his shoulder.

"Uh huh," the security guard said. "If you're supposed to be here, let's see your company ID."

"I, ah, don't have it. I was kinda being shot at, and I sorta got here by rappelling, by which I mean mainly falling, down an elevator shaft. I held onto this thing, but most of my stuff is hanging out about twenty floors below."

The security guard coughed. "Yeah, right, and I'm Denzel Washington! You really expect me to believe that?"

"Believe what you want, but that's what happened," Meldenham replied, trying to surreptitiously glance around for an escape route. The big, dark void represented by the barrel of the guard's gun was making him uncomfortable.

The guard gave him another odd look. "Somehow, I can believe that at least part of that is true," he said. "Still, something's not right about you. You're not like those other freaky guys, but... you've got no ID, you're wearing something that almost looks like military fatigues, and something about you just screams..." he trailed off, looking at him again, and then picked up a portable radio, keying something into its keypad.

"This is Boris," a gravelly voice on the other end said, loud enough for Meldenham to hear.

"Yeah, hey, Boris, I know things are weird out here, but... you're not expecting anyone, are you?"

"I cannot comment on such things," the voice who was apparently Boris replied. "What does he look like?"

"He's just some guy, wearing some kinda military fatigues, with a weird-looking rifle thing."

"Hmm," the voice said. "Does he have ID?"

"Um, no..."

"Very well. You know where to send him. Only..." The voice paused for a second. "On second thought, why don't you try and shoot him, and tell me what happens."

"What, seriously?" The guard almost jumped at that, but kept his gun on Meldenham, cradling the radio with his shoulder.

"If he is who I think he is, I doubt he'd mind," Boris replied.

"I mind! I definitely mind!" Meldenham said, wondering what to do. Dodge? Go for his weapon? However, the situation was solved with a click, as a robotic arm emerged from about knee height, sprang up, and pressed the barrel of a revolver against the guard's neck.

"Hey there, Mr. Guard, sir! I think it'd be better for everyone involved if you'd just go ahead and lower that big ol' weapon there, don't you think? I mean, you might be one of those people who likes having holes in their necks, but assuming you're not, how about dropping that gun, yeah?"

"The fuck..." the guard said, but complied, slowly lowering the gun and placing it on the ground next to the kiosk, where a couple of additional arms emerged and whisked the weapon from view, the ammo belt clattering across the floor as it quickly spooled away into nothingness.

"Yeah, uh, Boris? This guy's invisible robot is now holding me hostage."

"Oh, really? That *is* new. Send him up, why don't you?"

"Like I have a choice?"

"*Do* be more courteous to my guests," the voice responded, then shut off with a loud click.

The guard sighed, punching at something on a console. "I gotta say, sometimes I really hate this fuckin' job."

Behind him, the rightmost set of doors slid open. "There. Just follow the signs that say 'Particle Physics,' and then the ones that say 'Department of Top Secret Nutjobs.'"

"There are really, uh, signs that say that?" Meldenham asked.

"Same difference. Just head on through, and would you kindly get this pistol out of my face?"

"Uh, yeah," Meldenham replied, and a moment later, the robotic arm retracted. Meldenham walked by the guard, but thought of something as he did so. "Hey, Lexie, you can go ahead and give him his weapon back."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Yeah... he knows we're okay now, and I'd rather not leave him at the mercy of any more of those masked guys if they find a way down here."

"Actually, this gun he had is pretty cool! I'll toss him something useful, though!" A submachinegun quickly whipped through the air towards the guard, who caught it surprisingly well.

"Try not to die, Mr. Guard!" Lexie said cheerfully from his pocket, as the two of them made their way through the automatic doors, which closed behind them the moment they were through.

Beyond the doors was a hallway that, oddly enough, would not have looked out of place in a university. True, the display boards on the walls were archaic white boards rather than their electronic counterparts, and some doors had physical paper notices attached to them with some kind of metal tacks, but the whole area seemed considerably more tasteful, with recessed lighting and wood-paneled walls. Meldenham padded down the considerably plusher carpet, following the occasional arrow signs pointing toward particle physics. While the doors here were made of metal and also had keypads, most of them had windows as well, and behind them Meldenham could see what looked to be classrooms and laboratories, full of prisms and optics benches. The hallway curved around, finally branching off - down one side, a number of closely spaced doors seemed to conceal small offices, while the other branch had a red-and-black sign that read "TOP SECRET" in huge block letters, in front of a massive steel door that looked more like the door to a safe - or a bunker. Beside it, a security camera swiveled to examine them - but instead of hitting them with some kind of heat beam, the thing simply examined Meldenham with its unblinking eye, and then swiveled to carefully examine the space where Lexie most likely was. Finally, it returned to its default position, and the wheel in the middle of the door began to spin, clunking rhythmically as it disengaged its

locking bolts. Finally, the massive door began to swing slowly open, revealing a massive, ancient-looking man, mostly bald except for a ring of jet-black hair. He had a neat, even scar that ran cleanly down one side of his face, seeming to be more surgical than combat-related, and his nose and mouth were covered by a transparent mast, with a tube that curled down his leg and over to a thin cylindrical canister that sat on a wheeled cart just off to his side.

Upon seeing Meldenham, he reached up and removed the mast, smiling to reveal a row of teeth that appeared to have been formed from a matte sheet of stamped metal.

"Well. They sent a newbie this time," he said, his voice even more crunchy and ominous in person. "And, from the looks of it, an actually capable one." He put the mask back on and puffed at it for a second, before placing it back down on his chest and gesturing towards the rifle on Meldenham's back. "So, there's our little toy, eh? Looks harmless enough. Here, come this way," he said, turning about on his heel and walking forward, pulling the cart after him. "Oh, and tell your robot that I'm a friend, yes?"

"Yeah," Meldenham said, following him. "I sure hope this is the right way," he muttered under his breath.

"Don't worry, I'm sure we'll be close enough," Lexie said softly, and Boris didn't make any indication that he'd heard the exchange.

They passed by a couple of keypad-locked offices, and then Boris punched in a series of digits and unlocked one of the labs, flicking on the lights to reveal a lab similar to the ones Meldenham had seen before, only this one was packed with a lot more computing equipment, and one wall was filled almost floor to ceiling with displays and flashing banks of lights.

Boris walked over to one display and punched something in. At the other end of the lab, a blast shield slowly receded into a table, revealing what looked to be a steel girder. Boris gestured at it. "Well, go ahead. Show me what that device you've got there can do."

"Um, okay," Meldenham said, unslinging the weapon and pointing it at the girder. He almost wondered if it made more sense to simply shoot Boris and run, if they were this close, but the man was unarmed and didn't seem like that much of a threat. Still, he had no idea how the man would react when he saw what the gun could do, but using it hadn't seemed to shock anyone too much yet. He steadied the weapon on his shoulder, holding down the trigger and deploying a short burst. Sure enough, the metal surface of the girder began to bubble, and after a few seconds, much of it had become liquid and melted down what was left of the girder onto the table.

Boris glanced at the remains of the girder, back at Meldenham, and then back to the girder. He walked up and prodded the metal with his finger, but the metal had already re-hardened and was cooling rapidly. Boris tapped it a few times with his finger, muttering something unintelligible. Then he walked over to another console and entered a series of commands, and a metal shutter clanked down across the window in the door. A series of lights around the room blinked, and then a robotic voice rang out: "Room is certified free of monitoring devices."

Boris nodded, then walked back over to Meldenham, an odd look on his face. He leaned in closely, and began talking in a soft voice.

"Whoever you are... you're not from around here, are you?"

"Um, what do you mean?" Meldenham stammered.

"I mean, as both of us must surely know, you're not even from this *world*."

"Um, uh..." Meldenham wondered if he even had the capacity to come up with a lie big enough to get around this accusation. He was rapidly regretting his decision not to have just shot the man and be done with it. "That's a crazy accusation..."

Boris sighed. "Son... don't patronize me. I've probably been working in high-energy physics longer than you've been alive. That gun you've got there kinda looks like a microwave laser - but doing what it just did, especially in something that size... that's technology that is decades, if not centuries, away from what people are capable of now. Not to mention your unseen robotic friend - while the guard might be under the impression that such technology is currently possible, I do know otherwise. So either you're a very convincingly disguised space alien, which I somehow doubt, or you've managed to find your way here from another dimension."

Boris paused for a moment, taking another drag on his inhalation mask. "Of course," he continued, "The real question isn't how you're here - but rather why. What is your purpose in being here?"

"I'm, ah, not sure you really wanna know," Meldenham said, as Lexie's control unit chirped from inside his pocket.

"Actually, speaking of that reason, you should probably know that 'the entity' is now within one square kilometer of our current destination, and is closing in moderately fast. If you'd like to continue our mission beyond the next few minutes, I would highly suggest wrapping up this conversation!"

For his part, Boris didn't so much as raise an eyebrow at this announcement.

"I think you'd better tell me. Quickly."

Meldenham shrugged - he was basically exposed, so at this point he might as well just give it up. He managed to convey the basics of his situation in a little under two minutes. Boris nodded as he finished, managing to look even more somber than he had previously.

"If that's the case," he said, "I think you'd better be on your way."

"Unless... maybe you know of a way to stop this thing?" Meldenham asked.

Boris chuckled at that. "If the best minds of your time, with fancy equipment like that, couldn't stop this thing, there's precious little I can do against it. In an emergency, the air from this laboratory can be purged, which might slow it down, but at least one of us would no longer be able to breathe." He tapped the gas canister next to him and smiled.

"Yeah, probably not too helpful then." Meldenham reached into his pocket and retrieved the control unit. "Okay, Lexie, how do we do this? I don't exactly see a big energy cannon thing like the last time..."

"Oh, we don't need that anymore! That was just to get us through to the next place in a hurry, because there were no easy paths from our dimension to other ones! Most dimensions, though, are closer together, and have areas where the dividing line between realities is weaker! In fact, there's one of those places down the hall just a ways, and from there, I can bridge the gap and jump into another dimension unassisted! Pretty cool, huh?"

"Impressive," Boris said. "It's a shame I can't spend some time deciphering your technology. Ah, but what good would that do, really? I probably couldn't understand something that different without years and years, anyway." He reached down, and produced a keycard from his shirt. "Open whatever door you need to. Just... make sure you get out of here before everything goes boom."

"Yeah, given that I'd like to live too, I'll make sure that happens."

Meldenham turned to exit the lab, as Boris went over to another console and started typing frantically on it. The shutter came back up on the door, which swung back open a second later, although in the midst of it Meldenham thought he could hear some other sound in the background, too faint to distinguish clearly amidst the clatter. As he walked down the hall, though, he heard a thump, and then the sound of the vaultlike door being pulled open.

"Hey, Lexie, I think you'd better find that spot soon," he said, backing down the hall while getting his rifle ready.

"Don't worry, it's just through that room down there are the end of the hallway! We'll almost certainly make it there in time!"

"Just get it done," Meldenham said, bringing the scope of the rifle up to his eye. Behind him, he could feel a robotic arm reach up and snag the keycard before rolling away. A moment later, two people emerged at the end of the hallway. Luckily, it was Mike and Jasper, although the latter was limping forward, holding an arm that was dripping red.

"Mel? Holy shit! You fucking survived?"

"Uh, yeah, but..."

"Hey, sorry man, but we don't exactly have time to talk! Seems some of our friends followed us down here. They were making hash of a guard when we got here - clipped a couple, but they're right on our heels. We gotta move!" Sure enough, as soon as he said this, shots rang out from further back, along with the sound of bullets ricocheting off the partially open vault door. Mike dropped to a crouch, letting off a burst from his submachinegun, as Jasper limped forward towards Meldenham.

Meldenham, for his part, just turned and ran, sprinting down the hall to where an office door was already ajar. Lexie had managed to knock over some kind of cabinet, giving it a ramp up to the desk. The main unit was decloaked now, and a large piece of equipment had emerged from within it. Sitting on top of the duffel, it looked like a thin metal latticework wrapped around a hexagonal slab of crystal, which gave off an unnatural purple glow. Jasper followed him in, slamming the door behind him. In the hallway, Mike started firing continuously, as shots spanged off the wall outside. Down the hallway, Meldenham could hear an odd hissing noise, and then the air duct overhead started roaring.

"Sorry to interrupt and sound bossy, but we have to do this now!" Lexie said. "Stand over by the crystal and try not to move!"

Meldenham complied, as the air ducts continued the odd sound, and he started to feel it become harder to draw breath. Apparently, the thing had arrived, and Boris had decided to do something about it.

Mike dove into the room, gasping. "What... the fuck..." he said, but trailed off when he saw the strange contraption on the desk. "This... is not... good..." he said, coughing, but before he could do anything more, two small beams shot out from the crystal and hit them both. They each glowed purple momentarily, then vanished.

"In case you're wondering, I had a bit of residual power left over, just enough

to kick them down a couple floors! I know, you're probably wondering, if we could teleport, why didn't we just come here immediately in the first place! That would have been really useful, right? Unfortunately, before seeing the level of weakness between dimensions, if I used too much energy early on, we might not be able to get out - and then, boom! As it turns out, we probably would have had enough, but it would have been too risky without knowing!"

"Yeah, yeah... how about a... 'sorry for the... inconvenience...'"

"Sorry, but that's just how things work sometimes! I'm still having fun, though! Oh, speaking of fun, this next part might really hurt a lot!"

"Wait... what?" Meldenham gasped, as his head started to spin from the lack of air. The room wavered, and the man kicking in the door wearing a pachyderm mask seemed all the more surreal. Meldenham's vision blurred as the man brought his weapon up, and darkness began to creep across the edge of his vision just as the gun began to strobe. Something spanged off the desk just to his side, but as that happened, the whole world turned purple, and when Meldenham was able to catch his breath, he was once again somewhere else.



## CHAPTER SIX

### *Interlude II: In Between Days*

Once the glow faded, Meldenham found himself once again in what Lexie had called "Impossible Space." This time, though, instead of speeding forward in the jump seat, he was instead tumbling end over end, the tunnel spinning around him in vertigo-inducing fashion. Beside him, Lexie's main unit flailed about in a similar spin, before firing some kind of maneuvering jets to stabilize its position. The strange forcefield that had been there before enclosed them both in a sort of hourglass pattern, squeezed in the center and bulging around each of them. The tunnel itself was much dimmer than it had been before, but because of the spinning it was hard to make out anything all that clearly.

A robotic arm snaked out and grabbed Meldenham's wrist, but his inertia caused them both to start spinning, the thrusters struggling to keep up. Eventually, though, they came close to stabilizing, with Meldenham seeming to be surfing through space on his stomach, while the tunnel lazily rotated around him. Meldenham glanced around, noticing that the starfields beyond the tunnel were more clearly visible, each group of stars bulging and distorting within its own unique sector. It was actually kind of beautiful, in its own bizarre way, and even if the view had been less interesting, Meldenham hardly would have minded. In fact, it could have been pitch black and he would have been satisfied.

"Wuahhh... what an impossible day. I sure hope you're right that everywhere we go isn't going to be that, that... I'm not even sure. Frenetic? Insane? Violent?"

"Who knows! That's the beauty of interdimensional travel - you never know what cool place you might end up!"

"Yeah, really? So far, all I've seen is the inside of some random building, and the business end of way too many guns. How about the next time, we find, like, a nice ocean cruise or something? We could head away from this stupid doomsday thing while lying on the deck, soaking up some sun, rest, and relaxation, maybe with a nice drink, some hot women in very little clothing..."

"Sure, why not? While the chances of that are calculated to be on the order of approximately 3.73 trillion to one, if we do happen upon something like that, I'll be sure to point you in the right direction!"

Meldenham sighed. "Honestly, I'd be satisfied with a nice, comfortable bed right about now. Or heck, even a sleeping bag. I mean, I'll even take a bare concrete floor if it's in a place safe from that thing where I can get some serious rest."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Lexie said. "However, by my calculations, you should be able to get 14.3 minutes of rest before we reach our next destination!"

"Yeah, gonna need a bit more than that." Meldenham looked around again, taking in the stars and wondering which one he was going to end up at next... and how many of them he was going to make it to before the doomsday device caught up to him and ended it all. He couldn't help but wonder if running was really worth it - even if he found someplace good, he could only spend a short time there before he'd have to run off to some new, unknown place, and whatever perils it might bring. He now knew that it was not simply a matter of outrunning this one thing - each dimension would certainly have its own set of perils. He'd certainly never expected to discover that he could shoot a man, in fact many men, and still continue to function, or that he was reasonably capable of lying his ass off, repeatedly, when the moment called for it. Every one of those things, though, was far outside anything that had ever been expected of him before, and he had no idea how long he'd be able to continue rapidly finding new skills before his luck, or whatever talent he could muster, ran out.

"Oh, man... I am so not cut out for this," he moaned. "I mean, seriously, why couldn't they have picked some gung-ho commando guy to do this? He'd probably love it! Instead, it's me, floating around in space that's not supposed to exist, with a crazy robot and a sack full of weapons, daydreaming about a life in which I'm doing pretty much anything else than this! I mean, all I want is to find some place to be happy and relax. Is that really so much to ask?"

"That's an excellent question! In this case, however... calculating... there's a very high likelihood that it is! However, if we're lucky, the device will have a harder time navigating a path that's not as clearly marked, so we might get enough time for you to rest before we have to journey to the next jumping-off point. So, don't worry too much! Of course, it's possible that because the jump is shorter, it will find us faster anyway, but if that happens, I'll make sure to let you know as soon as possible, so we can find another jump and maybe rest after that!"

"Urgh... fine. Just store this in your programming, though - unless that thing is hot on our heels and we have no other choice, our top priority is to find a place to crash out for a while."

"You got it, Mel!"

Meldenham grimaced. "Don't call me that."

"But Mr. Mike was calling you--"

"Don't. Say. It."

"Okay! I will definitely keep that request in mind, Melden!"

"You know what? Just... just forget it. I'm going to get some sleep while I can."

"Sure thing! Don't worry, you'll definitely wake up when we make impact with whatever is at our destination!"

Meldenham grumbled and closed his eyes. It was a good sensation, and between that and the quiet, and had reached the point where he was just on the verge of sleep when an impact with a not particularly cushioned wall snapped him out of it.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Act III: Not My Place*

The wall that Meldenham caromed off of was covered in finely finished wood paneling. He fell onto maroon plush pile carpeting, inlaid with a symbol he didn't recognize. Muzzily, he stumbled to his feet, as a patch of nothingness that was probably Lexie brushed against his leg and scurried off into a corner.

As far as he could tell, he was in some sort of office, again. This one, though, seemed to be more of an executive suite, apparently for someone who liked maritime accents from several centuries ago. A spoked wooden ship's wheel was attached to one wall, and a pair of weathered copper lamps glowed red and green on either side. The office door was solid, varnished wood, with a glass porthole in the middle.

The desk, however, was another matter. A smooth, polished curve of metal, its flat top was inlaid with screens and banks of controls, with a holographic display showing a wireframe grid of what looked like a globe, in brilliant alternating lines of green and blue light. And then, of course, there was the man behind the desk, with a halo of white hair ringing a gleaming bald forehead, and a pair of round brass-rimmed spectacles polished to perfection. The man sat back in his chair, clad in some sort of form-fitting military uniform complete with epaulettes and a row of medals, and looked at him bemusedly. Meldenham just stared back, not quite sure of what to do - he had no idea where he even was. The scene didn't exactly make sense, either. Were they on a naval vessel? But there was no motion to indicate that they were on water... and the desk certainly seemed to indicate a different level of technology than the decor. At least, though, this person wasn't making any immediate move to project death in his direction.

"Well..." said the man behind the desk, leaning his elbows forward and tucking his hands under his chin. "I've seen plenty of things in my career, but this... this is a first."

"Um, uh... congratulations?" Meldenham responded.

"No need to be facetious, my man. Go ahead, have a seat there, and let's

hear why you've made an appearance."

The man gestured to a chair upholstered in crimson leather. Meldenham gingerly took a seat, feeling a bit confused.

"You're not, ah, at all concerned by my being here? Maybe I'm mistaken, but this place kinda looks military, and an unauthorized person showing up..."

The man behind the desk grinned. "Oh, well that's easily enough explained! Your managing to pop in out of nowhere is really quite a feat, and certainly one that none of my enemies - or allies, for that matter - are capable of. So, ruling them out, you must be a completely unknown party, and given that you appear to be armed but haven't even unslung your weapon, I can only assume you're here on a matter uninvolved with violence." He paused, looking Meldenham over. "And, to be frank, you don't exactly strike me as the violence-prone type."

Meldenham thought back to the past day, in which he'd probably killed enough people to staff a moderately-sized storefront. Of course, though, those were rather... extreme circumstances, right? "Well, um, sir, I guess I am... was... technically a soldier, but that's not really my thing. I'm more, you know, the kinda guy that makes sure all the boxes are where they're supposed to be, uh, I mean, logistics and supply, that kinda stuff..."

The man nodded. "I see. Well, logistics is as much a part of war as being on the front lines, and certainly nothing to be ashamed of. While the footsoldier composes the claws of the creature of war, logistics are the lungs that draw in breath - without either, war is lost. However, I don't imagine that you're on a mission to track down some errant boxes."

"Well, er... no."

"So, then... why are you here?"

"Um..." Meldenham took a moment to consider what to say. It probably wasn't the best bet to mention the whole doomsday device thing if he didn't have to - no one really wanted to think about something like that approaching, and might react badly. He still wasn't quite sure why he'd told that Boris guy before - probably because the thing was bearing down on him, and it hadn't seemed like there was any other option. Here, though... what to say? After a second, though, Meldenham thought of a decent response, which was helped along by the fact that it was mostly true.

"I'm really not sure," he continued. "I was doing my job, and something went wrong at the facility where I'd just been stationed. Everything went haywire, the air got sucked out of the room, then this machine exploded in a huge burst of light... and now, all of a sudden, I'm here."

"Fair enough - it did strike me that you don't appear to have much of a purpose for being here." Meldenham nodded at that, as it was certainly true.

The man made a quick, curt dip of his head, making a motion that seemed to represent doffing an invisible hat. "I am Admiral James Martensen, commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Remote Strike Armada. And you are?"

Meldenham tried to emulate the gesture, but from the smirk on Martensen's face, he didn't get it quite right. "I'm Meldenham Lexo. Uh, Staff Sergeant, is what my rank was back where I'm supposed to be."

"Well met, then." Martensen leaned back, looking like he was considering something. "Actually, your presence here might be fortuitous. Tell me, where do you think you are?"

"Um... if I had to guess, another dimension? This doesn't look much like anything where I'm from..."

"So, that means you should be completely unfamiliar with this region's politics and cultures then, correct?"

"Yes, that would be true..."

"Excellent." The admiral leaned back further, clasping his hands behind his head.

"Um, if I might ask, though... where exactly am I? I'm guessing this is some sort of naval vessel, but if it is, it's the most stable one I've ever seen."

Martensen chuckled at that. "You actually think we're in a naval vessel? On an ocean?" He glanced around the room, though, as if only now just noticing the decor. "Ah, of course! I can see how you could be misled. What can I say - I'm a bit of a traditionalist, when it comes to designing my own office, at least. No, no, you're actually on board one of the finest space vessels ever built - the queen of the fleet, as maneuverable a battlecruiser as you'll ever see, with a crew of a thousand and enough punch to atomize a small to moderately sized moon. As you can tell, I'm quite proud of her, but she's only the tip of the spear - there are a good two dozen ships, all told, in my command. We're of course en route to our next assignment a few stars over, which I must say I was a bit stymied over... but that's where you come in."

Meldenham was momentarily taken aback. Sure, there was space travel where he'd come from, if you counted ships that took a month or two to travel between the handful of generally uninhabitable planets in his solar system. Certainly, there had been a few probes that made their way to other stars, after

decades or centuries - but certainly nothing on the order of a ship that could hop between star systems like it was taking a leisurely drive between cities. Still, it was a new dimension, which apparently meant that just about anything was possible.

"Okay... so where exactly do I come in?"

"Ah, you see, that's where it gets interesting. There's a planet out there, the one we're heading towards, that has gotten a bit... uppity as of late. As a result, I've been sent in to take care of the matter. Perplexingly, though, despite the fact that I'm a veteran of dozens of conflicts and the victor in at least a half-dozen wars, the hegemonic council, the one that leads the group of planets behind this fleet, desires a more peaceable outcome. Admittedly, pacifying an entire full-sized planet would be a bit of a difficult and time-consuming chore, but as I assured the council, my fleet is more than capable of getting it done. Apparently, though, obliterating everyone on the planet is out, considering that they can no longer produce their desirable exports if they're all dead."

The admiral leaned forward again, gesturing towards the holographic globe. "That's the planet in question there. For whatever reason, they've sent me, a person who attacks people, on a diplomatic mission. Needless to say, I don't have much in the way of diplomatic skills myself, and none of my command staff are particularly convincing - if nothing else, these people would probably see right through them, and assume that they're undeniably biased towards my point of view, which of course they would be right about. That, then, is where you would be ideal. You don't look that much like a soldier, and a change of clothes will certainly fix that... and as you don't really know anything about the situation, you can be put forward as an impartial civilian negotiator. All you'd have to do is listen to their concerns, nod in agreement every so often, and then come back here and tell me what would make them shut up and get back to work without any additional fuss."

He leaned in closer, switching to a whisper accompanied by a somewhat maniacal grin. "Or, of course, you could come back and tell the the situation is completely intractable and that they won't negotiate, in which case I'll technically be authorized to fry up a few of them via orbital cannon to 'improve their attitude.'"

"Um, okay... and, uh," Meldenham stammered, thinking quickly. He had no idea how easy it was to make the next jump from the middle of space, and no way of asking Lexie now, so being on a planet might or might not be better. But if the planet didn't offer a good jumping-off point... well, if he played his cards right, he might have a starship to get him exactly where he needed to go. "-uh, I'll be able to ask for something in return?"

Martensen considered this. "I suppose, being that this is a military vessel, I

could threaten to throw you in prison, and offer you your freedom in exchange. However, if your statement about serendipitous arrival is not, in fact, accurate, you could probably port out at any time, making my threat moot. Add to that the fact you have a weapon whose capabilities are unknown, and... yes, I see your point. So, what is it that you're interested in?"

"Um, nothing too fancy, really. Yes, ah, it's true that while my method of arriving here was, in fact, on purpose, the rest is true - something went wrong a while ago, which led to me appearing here instead of, uh, where I'm supposed to be. However, I'm working on plotting a way back, but to do so, I may need to get to a precise position in space. If I do this for you, you arrange for a spaceship of some kind to get me to that location once I've found it. That's fair enough, right?"

Martensen nodded. "I suppose that's equitable. Assuming your location isn't that far away, I can probably do without one of my peripheral supply scows for the time equivalent of a few light-weeks - that's probably about ten or so light-years of distance, if you'd prefer to measure it that way. The accommodations are... passable, but their navigation is surprisingly flawless. I did have a feeling that you had some motive for being here, admittedly, but I wanted to put forward my proposal first, to see how you'd react. Luckily, though, it seems that your misplacement can benefit both of us - I get what I need to turn this annoying situation into a win, and you get to find your way back home."

"Yeah, back home..." Meldenham replied. Of course, that much was a lie - there was no going back now. At least, if he kept at it and kept moving, the people there would be spared the fate that was inevitably following him. "So... deal?"

"Deal." Martensen rose, and gestured for Meldenham to do the same. "We'll be entering orbit in a few hours. I'll arrange temporary quarters for you near the command staff, and have someone fit you for a suitable set of civilian clothes that indicate your new 'status.' I'm almost tempted to have someone bring you up to speed, but given the situation, I think that the less you know, the more successful you'll be." He paused, looking intently at Meldenham. "I must say, you're handling this situation rather adroitly, but considering that dimension-hopping is apparently a fact of life for you, I suppose that's not all that surprising."

Martensen pressed a button on his desk, and a pinging noise rang out in the hallway. "My adjutant will get you squared away. While I hope I'll have a chance to chat with you later, as I'm sure your full story would be quite a fascinating way to pass the evening, I do have a hundred details I need to settle before we arrive. Bloody, stupid diplomacy. At least with a war, you don't need to worry about setting up a cross-species buffet and hanging just the right color curtains."



Meldenham got up to head for the door, but Martensen continued as he did so. "Oh, speaking of that, one more thing... the people you'll be negotiating with? They are certainly quite unique in appearance. What I mean by that, of course, is that they kind of look like large, psychedelic snails. Don't worry, though, I've heard that they have quite a proficient translator waiting on site."

"That's, um, great?"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll do fine. Just remember not to look directly into their eye-stalks for more than a couple of minutes at a time."

"Yeah, I'll remember that," Meldenham muttered as he headed for the door. "I have a feeling I won't be able to forget this, no matter how hard I tried..."

As he approached the door, it swung open to reveal the adjutant, who wore a similar uniform, but with blue and yellow piping down the sides instead of the crimson that had adorned Martensen. "If you'll just follow me, sir," he said, and gestured out into the hallway.

Meldenham followed, as a moderately amusing thought occurred to him: despite apparently traveling through multiple dimensions with theoretically limitless possibilities, he had so far spent what seemed to be the bulk of his time traversing hallways. This one, at least, was something of a departure from the bland office building he had been in before.

Standing in sharp contrast to the richly appointed admiral's office, this hallway was an exercise in metal austerity, but did manage to seem exactly like he'd imagined a spaceship would be. The hallway was windowless, with brushed metal walls painted with variously colored stripes and arrows pointing one way or the other, delivering procedural instructions on how to get to such fascinating destinations as "Maintenance Bay" and "Latrine." The floor had patterns of metal ridges on it to increase friction, and the upper and lower portions of the walls had frequent hand- and footholds, most likely for when the ship experienced turbulence - did that even exist in space? - or, more likely, when it was in combat.

After heading down a few short hallways marked with maroon striping, the adjutant stopped in front of a pentagonal set of doors that slid open automatically to either side as he approached. Inside was a small, spare room, with a cotlike bed mounted against one wall, an oddly sloping ceiling, and a small desk with some sort of computer pad on it against the opposite wall. Against the far wall, partially hidden behind a movable corrugated-metal partition, he could see a toilet, sink, and wall-mounted showerhead, underneath a small round porthole that displayed stars streaking dizzily by.

"All right, sir, this is where you'll be staying for now," the adjutant said, looking quickly around the room. "If you need to modify your accommodations, just use the techpad and I'm sure you'll be able to sort it out. Oh, and be sure to use the wardrobe function to set your fitting size so that we can arrange your uniform. Now, unless you have any questions..."

Meldenham suddenly felt his stomach grumble, a stark reminder that he hadn't eaten much of anything in a considerable amount of time. "Well, actually... could you direct me to the mess hall?"

"Mess hall?"

"You know... food? Eating?"

The adjutant waved towards the desk. "Techpad," he said, and then turned on his heel and walked out, the doors closing behind him.

Sighing, Meldenham plunked down in the desk chair and grabbed the "techpad." In actuality, it didn't look a whole lot different than Lexie's command module, complete with touchscreen and icons that were generally obvious. Meldenham pushed the one that looked like a plate of food.

"Please specify your dietary requirements," the pad said in a synthesized voice that was barely intelligible.

"Um... how about a boar meat sandwich?"

"Sandwich: term recognized. Boar meat: unrecognized. Possible options: PEMA, SPDM, XPQM, IMBM."

"Uh, what?"

"Insufficient data to respond."

"I mean, what's PEMA and all that?"

"Listing definitions. PEMA: Procedurally Extruded Meat Analogue. SPDM: Special Process Delicious Meat. XPQM: Extremely Processed Questionable Meatlike. IMBM: 'It Might Be Meat.' Definitions complete."

Meldenham grimaced - none of the choices seemed particularly palatable. "How about... SPDM, then?"

"Choice: SPDM. Please list formation method: sliced, chopped, cubed, paste, colloidal suspension."

"Yeah, I'll have sliced, thanks."

"Would you prefer an unspecified probably edible vegetation garnish accompaniment?"

"Um, no, I think I'll just have the sandwich..."

"Confirmed. Please specify bread: White White White White White."

"Uh... white?"

"Confirmed. Please wait while mechanical processing and recycling extrudes your sandwich."

A moment later, a previously hidden panel just above the desk slid back and away into the wall, and a tray slowly slid into view, accompanied by an odd mechanical noise that sounded like one of the printout machines he'd heard operating back at the logistics base. After a minute, the tray fully emerged, containing a corrugated-cardboard plate, on top of which was the sandwich. Between two slices of white bread, lightly toasted, was a good handful of bright pink slices of something that at least appeared to be meat, slathered with some kind of yellow sauce with dark specks in it. Meldenham eyed the sandwich dubiously for a moment, but his stomach quickly gave its approval, and Meldenham dug in. Surprisingly, the sandwich was actually pretty good - the sauce had a bit of interesting spice to it, and the meat, while he couldn't come up with anything he knew of that it really tasted like, was, in fact, delicious enough. He wolfed down the sandwich quickly, then got up, looking longingly towards the bed. As he walked over to it, though, one of the floor panels suddenly shot forward, and he nearly banged into the ensuing apparatus. A number of armlike things levered out, with some kind of emitters on the end of them.

"Preparing for fitting," came a similar synthetic voice. "Please stand still." The arms began to move, the emitters shining a grid of bright blue lines onto his legs, then quickly moving up and around his entire body. "Physical measurements confirmed. Garments are now in the queue: position 35. Estimated time to completion: 1.1 hours. Please wait. Your order is, as always, a high priority."

"Yeah, thanks," Meldenham said, waiting for the device to retract. When it didn't, Meldenham simply walked around it and collapsed into bed. His body immediately relaxed, and he considered undressing and slipping under the covers... but for some reason, he felt safer with all his gear on. He rolled onto his side, and tried to rest, but he couldn't quite fall asleep - his mind wanted to stay awake, probably trying to somehow subconsciously prepare for what was ahead.

He idly pulled the command module out of his pocket. Sure enough, there was Lexie's crudely-drawn, smiling face.

"So, another fun situation you've managed to find for me, huh?" he said softly. "Well, it's not an ocean cruise, but... it'll do, for now at least."

"I'm glad to hear that!" Lexie replied, in a quiet voice. Meldenham wasn't quite sure why he was being quiet - maybe he was subconsciously worried that people were listening in? Certainly, it was possible, so the precaution could be useful - besides, given their proximity, he could hear just fine.

"That being said... have you been able to determine where we need to go for our next jump?"

"By my calculations, we should be in excellent shape once we get to a location that's only about thirty light-years away! Isn't that great?"

"Um, no? You mean, thirty years of travel out here? You must have heard the admiral - the most we're getting is a few light-weeks. Unless I'm supposed to sign up for the navy here and try to get a slot on a ship heading out to the precise remote area we need to get to..."

"That's actually a pretty good point! However, I'll need to recalculate significantly to find another point we can transit from, and it will probably be suboptimal, which means a jump to an even less predictable dimension. But who knows? That might even be more fun!"

"What, more fun than a building full of crazy people with guns?"

"Who knows? It might definitely be at least as fun as that! Didn't you enjoy that one? I thought it was pretty cool, being kind of an action hero and everything!"

"Are you kidding? All I was trying to do was survive!"

"And you looked pretty awesome doing it, to! Want to see some video replays?"

"What I want to do," Meldenham replied, "is sleep." He shut off the command module's display, tucked it back in his pocket, curled up on the bed, and closed his eyes. Now, at least, sleep came easily, and for at least two hours Meldenham Lexo was dead to the world before a badly amplified voice over an unseen loudspeaker announced that they had arrived.

Meldenham got up, taking a moment for a luxurious stretch. It hadn't been

enough sleep, really, but it was at least something, and that, combined with the food, had him in much better spirits. Beside him, the device that had emerged from the floor grumbled, retracting its arms, while the outside housing rotated around 180 degrees, the housing on the back covering the assembly while revealing a wardrobe on the opposite side, where a number of identical suits hung in a row. They looked to be the same sort of coveralls he'd seen everyone else wearing, but instead of being dark with stripes and insignia, these ones were a uniform white with golden piping around the arm, leg, and neck openings. Across the chest, there was also a sequence of golden characters, symbols in a language Meldenham didn't recognize.

"I guess I'm supposed to put this on, right?" he said to no one in particular.

"Affirmative," replied the synthesized voice.

Meldenham stripped down to his underwear, tossing his fatigues onto the bed. Hopefully the ship had a laundry service, as they were probably a bit worse for wear - somehow they had gotten through the previous day without becoming contaminated much by unfortunate bodily bits from his fallen foes, but they were already beginning to take on a bit of an unsavory smell. Grabbing one of the suits, he put it on, legs first, then pulled it over the rest of him. This suit seemed to be considerably looser than the form-fitting uniforms he'd seen, looking a bit rumpled but undeniably comfortable. Below the suits, he noticed a pair of boots decorated in a similar fashion, so he put them on as well, and they hissed slightly and puffed inward to automatically conform to his feet. Given that Meldenham had never been big on lacing boots in the first place, he certainly didn't mind.

He leaned back over towards the bed, digging out the maser rifle and preparing to sling it back over his shoulder. As he did so, the voice rang out again.

"Weapons are not indicated as proper equipment for a diplomatic mission."

"Oh, right," he said, not feeling all that comfortable about leaving the weapon that had saved him repeatedly.

"Don't worry," Lexie whispered from his fatigue pants. "Remember, I'll be there if you need me." Sure enough, a robotic arm was gently tugging the maser rifle towards the zone of invisibility. "I think your suit has some pockets along your sides - go ahead and tuck my module in there, and I'll make sure that this mission is mostly a success!"

"Mostly, huh," Meldenham muttered, but he found two pockets tucked into the side of the coveralls, with some form of magnetic closures on them, and tucked the control unit into one. After a moment's thought, he also retrieved the

techpad and tucked it into the pocket on the other side - he didn't really know exactly what it could do, but it might prove useful. At the very least, if things did go south, Lexie would be somewhere nearby with a sackful of guns, which was definitely an encouraging thought. Of course, he realized, if the admiral did decide to enact his "motivational" plan while Meldenham was still on the surface, that probably wouldn't do much good, but it might at least help if the people he was negotiating with became restless and decided that the best way to get their message across was to send back a mutilated negotiator.

As he turned back, a robotic arm tossed him a couple of ration bars as well, which he also tucked away in his pockets - not a bad idea that. As he did so, though, the doors slid open to reveal the admiral, dressed in an even more formal and even more tight-fitting suit than before, which gave Meldenham a view of more than he really wanted to see of the man. Quickly averting his eyes to focus only on the admiral's face, he waited to hear what would happen next.

"Ah, Mr. Lexo! A most auspicious morning, don't you think?"

"Um, I guess..."

"Excellent, excellent! So, you're feeling rested and squared away, yes?"

"Sure?"

"All right, then! I'm sure today will be quite interesting, so it's good to see that you're in fine spirits and ready to go. Oh, by the way, you probably want to brace yourself - we'll be making landfall shortly." As he said this, he casually reached out and grabbed one of the handholds. Meldenham reached for one as well, but as he did so, the floor jerked wildly, and he quickly found himself tumbled back on the bed. The next jolt, though, sent him rolling off the bed and tumbling to the floor. As he tried to regain his footing, his arm was held in a vicelike grip, and Meldenham turned to watch the admiral pull him upright effortlessly. He pressed a button next to the handhold, and a hook attached to a small wire emerged, which the admiral clipped to what Meldenham thought was a decorative metal loop by his waist. The wire quickly retracted, pulling Meldenham taut against the side of the hallway, holding him in position as the ship rocked about as it plummeted through the atmosphere. The admiral swayed about beside him, swinging around from his handhold and looking positively serene. Unfortunately, the apex of those swings brought a certain part of the admiral's oddly unrestrained anatomy closer to him than he liked. Grimacing, Meldenham closed his eyes, feeling the ship rumbling around him. Then, as quickly as it had started, the turbulence stopped, and a moment later, the ship grounded itself with a resounding thump.

Meldenham opened his eyes, his body still shaking from the landing. Martensen, for his part, had his feet back firmly on the ground, and was talking

into a handheld communicator. "Great work at the helm there, boys! Haven't had a landing that perfect since Cralmico! What'd we break, maybe three struts this time?"

"Uh, four, sir," a tinny voice replied, just loud enough for Meldenham to make out.

"Three, four, who's counting! Brilliant job all around! Go ahead and make the necessary repairs, then have yourselves a drink on me!"

"But sir, all of the drinks are free..."

"Oh, you know what I mean! Anyway, let's get this show on the road! That reminds me - get ahold of the frigate that's on bombardment duty and have them mark our location this time - when things get inevitably out of hand here, I'd rather they don't singe our port wingtip off, like in that last incident."

"Duly noted, sir," the voice replied, to which the admiral smartly pressed a button and slipped the device away into a pocket, which, oddly enough, didn't seem to make any impact at all on his uniform's fit.

"Right, then! Ready to 'negotiate?'"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Meldenham replied. Of course, he wasn't really all that ready at all, but given what the admiral wanted him to do, it didn't seem that hard. That being said, he hoped that Lexie could come up with a better plan soon, as he didn't really want to think about what he'd need to promise the admiral to make his way across thirty light-years.

"Great, then. Just follow those yellow arrows that say "airlock" on them, and that should take you right to the welcoming committee outside. From there, it's just a short walk, or undulation, in the local parlance, to a beautifully arranged outdoor conference table, complete with buffet and pointless free-standing curtains, from which you can determine what they want, and then let me know what I won't be delivering to them."

"Right," Meldenham nodded. The admiral gave a quick salute, for some reason, and then turned to go down the hall, the adjutant running up to him and whispering something in his ear as they walked away around a corner.

"All right, then, let's get this done," Meldenham muttered as he headed the other way, walking along the path the yellow arrows indicated. "Here's hoping that these snail things don't have guns. Or creepy theater masks, for that matter."

Meldenham made his way through a succession of identical hallways, finally

ending in an airlock that, oddly enough, looked quite similar to the one he'd encountered in the high security labs a day ago. Once he entered, the doors sealed behind him, and then the atmosphere began exchanging with a loud hiss. The air that was entering was a bit warmer and more humid, with an odd, slightly perfumed smell to it. Once the hissing stopped, a man in a helmet in the airlock's observation room gave him a thumbs-up sign, and a moment later the outer doors opened in a burst of sunlight.

Meldenham shielded his eyes, which quickly adjusted to the brightness of the day. The sun was a huge, red disk in the sky, many times bigger than the one he was used to, and as a result of its light, everything on the ground below seemed to have a reddish tint to it.

The ship had landed in some kind of canyon - all around, outcroppings of crimson rock rose to form a circle of impressive cliffs. A small river trickled down the center of it, crossed by a bridge adorned with multicolored flags, more than one of which appeared close to black in the odd lighting. Beyond it, Meldenham could see the conference area arranged on a slightly raised plateau of rock, surrounded by a series of ramps.

Of course, the reason he was here was bit closer to hand - in front of him, arrayed in two neat rows, were about a dozen creatures that did, indeed, look mostly like snails, although each of them was close to twice the size of a man, with two large eyestalks, the eyes on the end each roughly as big around as his entire head. The eyestalks emerged from chartreuse, amorphous bodies with an almost reptilian texture, although the scales were only a pattern across the unusual skin. The skin was covered in a layer of slime, which undulated and rippled across the surface like a shaken plate of gelatin, and when two ripples bumped into each other, the slime let off quick blue bursts of bioluminescence. On top of it all rested large shells, with a nacreous pattern of blue and purple spread across the spiraling surface, looking like a pattern he'd seen in history class ages ago called "tie-dying." Whatever these creatures were, they certainly lived up to the the admiral's description of them, and more.

The closest snail on the right, though, looked a bit different. The main difference, though, was that it appeared that someone had taken a good length of rope and tied a large stadium speaker to the side of its shell. The snail seemed to nod, and its eyestalks dipped and wove in a complex signing pattern. The speaker crackled, and a moment later, a synthesized voice boomed out - one that at least sounded clearer than the ones onboard the ship.

"It is to a delightful and plenipotentiary greetings from our delicious and humbling sphere of life that tumbles through space. Assigned as unit designator of this entity is Elgamanikgronong in the way of audiological processing for the ear-equipped. Of this form and appointment is to be your language processing facilitation for the consummation of dialogue and other speechlike functioning."



This was, Meldenham assumed, some sort of a formal greeting, although he could barely make heads or tails of it. Even so, he decided to respond in turn.

"I accept your gracious invitation. My name is Meldenham Lexo, and I have been summoned here to be the impartial, civilian mediator. I am here to listen to all of your concerns, and to do everything in my power to see that they are considered and resolved to your satisfaction." Of course, everything in his power was pretty much reporting what was said to Martensen, who most likely would shrug off their demands and wait for them to do something that could be answered with high-powered energy beams. Hopefully, before it came to that, Lexie would figure out something better.

The speaker seemed to vibrate silently in response to his speech, and a moment later, the snail with the speaker embarked on another series of complicated, looping eye movements, which were quickly joined by the dancing eyes of the rest of the delegation. Meldenham watched for a second, fascinated by the intricate display, but after a few moments he suddenly felt dizzy and his eyes had trouble focusing. Remembering Martensen's offhand comment, he quickly averted his gaze, and after a moment, the feeling subsided.

From his peripheral vision, he could see the movement stop, and a moment later the speaker boomed again. "It is of great appreciation that we spindulously come to accept your emphatic offer concerning the obsequious dissemination of visual material primarily formed of the variety to demonstrate physical copulation of your specific speciated form. A considerate gift of commensurate performance to be processed in an awarding way of deliverables arrived at subsequent to consumption of negotiating materials. Of the procedural movement considered to be undulation will tend to lead a procession in directions that can be traced from this entity's movement." As Meldenham tried to process this, along with the apparent indication that the snail seemed to think that his opening statement indicated that he meant to provide them with pornography, the snails turned, one by one, and did in fact begin undulating their way towards the conference area. They did mirror their terrestrial counterparts in movement speed, though. Meldenham, unsure whether running ahead would be an affront to them, shuffled along slowly behind them, gingerly stepping between the interlocking trails of slime they left in their wake. Of course, being Meldenham, he didn't exactly mind the slow pace. The weather was comfortably balmy, the air smelled sweet, the doomsday device was probably still far away in impossible space, and all was mostly right with the world. Meldenham was happy to take his time, drinking in the impressive scenery, the majestic cliffs glowing with sunlight above the valley, and the scrub grasslands around the plateau, the plants oddly verdant once you adjusted for the red lighting, and the occasional boulders and outcroppings of rock dripping richly with moss. Between them, small green insects hopped to and fro, seemingly unaware of their presence. All in all, it was a wonderful place to be, despite its general oddness.

The procession took close to an hour to make its way the short distance across the bridge to the conference table. The snails completely ignored the buffet, which was piled high with unusual-looking foods that were probably local delicacies, and arranged themselves around the conference table, with Meldenham apparently expected to stand at a lectern in front of it. He did so, noticing that there was a shelf below the lectern - and on the shelf, tucked away towards the back so as to be barely visible, was something that looked a lot like a rounded, futuristic pistol. Apparently, the admiral hadn't wanted him to go completely empty-handed.

Meldenham stood up straight, dusting off his suit, and hoping he looked sufficiently diplomatic. "Okay, I guess we'll get started then. I, um, understand that you have some requests that you'd like to make that would allow you to return to work?"

The snails engaged in their eye-dance again, while Meldenham looked studiously off into the distance. After a few minutes, the loudspeaker began relaying their response.

"To the gracious collection of brillmenter we do have the function of of spherelike body-toppers to commence bobbing in the manner of quite delcasion. Of the normatively demanding types with statements gerbil hatstand deoijdjientgre elpenim to happiness!"

"Uh, what?" The translations had been problematic before, but this statement seemed to be essentially incomprehensible.

His statement seemed to be expanded by a couple of minutes of eye-looping.

"In the manner of taxiing clarification, one thing of kind within to statements grendel lamppost interred for twenty-seven with subtracting recroderstad in fact of prehensile. Three types of augured flan engage jumping past recriminations, alongside suede plantations for the listing of wallpaper umbrella micronesian ephemera. To put forth on the expounding summary, turtle crème brûlée ignominious ailerons space transport."

Meldenham appeared completely befuddled, which wasn't far from his actual mental state. "Okay, I know I'm kinda new at this, but... this really isn't working at all."

"Well, that's probably because their translator's language mechanism didn't work well before, and is continually degrading as the content to be transmitted grows more complex," Lexie replied from his pocket. "Luckily, my main unit has now observed a sufficient sample of their language to assimilate its meaning and provide a near-complete extrapolated vocabulary for translation! Please

wait just a moment while I modify my hardware for this mode of communication!"

Over by the buffet, Lexie's body slid into appearance, extending two arms up towards the spread of food. They wavered a bit, before centering on a plate of gelatinous, translucent blue spheres. Each arm plunged into the middle of the spheres, and then retracted with the spheres still attached, waving in front of the main cylinder. Rolling forward on its treads, it made its way up one of the vacant ramps, and managed to somehow lever itself across the top and roll to the center of the conference table.

"Okay, we're now in position, so I will attempt to relay the correct intention of your opening address, and then translate and report their response!" The arms extended straight out, and then began their rendition of the unusual eye-dance, replicating the intertwining loops and dips with a surprisingly accurate and graceful cadence. The snails watched the display raptly, and when it completed, they began even more animated displays of their own, with Lexie extending an unobtrusive omnidirectional camera from the other end of the cylinder, almost certainly to visualize their communications.

The speaker started to boom something even more incomprehensible, so Meldenham sensibly ignored it and waited for Lexie's response. And waited. And waited.

"Um, Lexie, I kinda need to know what they're saying," he finally whispered.

"Oh, yes, that! I am still attempting to process for you - did you know that up to 20 percent of the gesturegrams that they're using have no reasonable word analogue in your language?"

"Okay, but I still need to--"

"Here's what I have so far," Lexie said, speaking quickly. "They apparently like you, and think you might actually take them seriously. Given their unusual syntax, that "like" could mean either that they think you are a respected elder statesman, or that they have some sort of sexual desire for you - I will endeavor to clarify that shortly!" After a moment of additional processing, Lexie continued. "Oh, and they also say that since their mouths are on the bottom part of them, they're mystified as to why all of the food is on top of a table instead of scattered around in the dirt, as is customary."

"Uh, really?" That, Meldenham figured, was at least a request he could do something about. He walked over to the table, grabbed a corner of it, and upended the thing, causing all of the serving trays and the food they contained to tumble down in an undignified mess on the ground. However, the snails apparently approved, as they slid away from the conference table and slowly

crept over the food disappearing under their bodies as they parked themselves over in in a clump, apparently eating their fill. Meldenham just stood by and watched, wondering whether the negotiations were supposed to continue as they ate.

The eating process took about an hour, during which Meldenham decided to take a short walk around the area. While it was admittedly impressive at first sight, it was in fact just a valley, without much of interest to discover once he'd seen all of the various types of plants. He returned when the delegation appeared to be on the move again, and were mostly back around the table when he returned, the place where they had been eating now covered in slime, but without any morsels of food still visible. Or, he realized a moment later with some discomfort, were any of the serving trays.

Now reassembled, the snails began communicating again, the speaker belting out something about toasters, metallurgy and creosote. Lexie took a good few moments before responding.

"They appear to be thanking you for your assistance with the food, and appreciate your... the closest word appears to be 'malleability.' However, their communications seem to indicate that they know these negotiations are a sham, and they are concerned that a 'harbinger of destruction' was chosen as the mediator."

"Wait... they know about the thing chasing me? How could they possibly know that?"

"Unknown. However, I'm sure we can find a clever way to work around that and negotiate with them regardless!"

"Really? When they don't trust me and know it's a sham? How could we possibly get them to negotiate like that?"

"Well, if I were in your shoes, I would suggest acknowledging their concerns, and going along with this sham of a negotiating session until Martensen is satisfied, or I can come up with a better plan! I'm still scanning this star system, and will hopefully have more options available soon. Fear not - according to my readings, the device has not even entered this reality yet, so we have a considerable amount of flexibility!"

"Fine, uh, transmit that to them, I guess..." Meldenham said, as a young soldier came running up to him with something in his hand.

"For you, sir!" he said, handing over a portable communicator. Meldenham put it up to his ear, wincing as Martensen's voice boomed out.

"So!" Martensen said, sounding jovial. "How go the negotiations? Have they given any concrete demands yet?"

"Um, not yet, really. There have been some... issues with translation that I've been trying to work out. Oh, they did enjoy the buffet, though."

"Ah, excellent! Second to war, a satiating display of food can often mollify one's opposition, and lure them into a false sense of security. Of course, if they cause any trouble, we can always serve the dessert course, which contains the second part of the binary toxin."

"Wait, what?"

"Oh, you didn't eat any of that food, did you?"

"Uh, no?"

"In that case, then, I'm sure you'll be fine. The toxin is there in case one of my superiors forces me to take a less obvious approach to failed diplomacy - myself, I'd rather just laser the buggers and be done with it, if it weren't for their manufacturing capability."

"Sir, actually, so I know what to negotiate... what, exactly, do they make?"

The admiral seemed to hesitate before responding. "Oh, you know, the usual sorts of things - luxury items, tourist goods, toiletries, other useful things."

"You're saying these guys are the only people within range of space travel that can make snow globes and toilet paper?"

"Er, ah, blast it all! It doesn't matter what they make! Just ask them what they want, I'll say no to it, diplomacy will have happened, and then they'll get back to work or else!"

"So, you don't want to do anything to appease them at all?" Meldenham doubted it, but he figured he'd ask anyway.

"What does my fleet look like it's made of? Things to make people happy, or things to make them extra-crispy? Whatever their demands are, I can't satisfy them! I mean, why did they send a battle group to do this instead of a civilian armada! No one expects peace - this is just window dressing so that we can say 'oh, well, we tried diplomacy' before we make an example of these mollusks and get the rest of them back to work!"

"Okay, I guess that's good to know," Meldenham said, noticing out of the corner of his eye that Lexie was still gesturing. The admiral, for his part,

harrumphed and signed off with a decisive click.

"Um, Lexie, is there a reason you're still talking with them?"

"Sure, Mel! I'm just filling them in on what the admiral just said! After all, that information sure does seem pertinent to negotiations, doesn't it?"

Meldenham was almost sure he could feel the color draining away from his face. "Lexie... are you out of your computerized mind? If they know they're gonna be lasered, who knows what they'll do! I thought the whole idea here was for me to survive?"

"That's right, Mel! After some new calculations, I figured out a better plan, especially once my extrapolation engine determined that, in the admiral's calculus of thought, it would be far cheaper for him to have you perish in the inevitable battle than to spend the fuel and time expense to honor his commitment!" Lexie was quiet for a moment, watching the snails as they performed an even more frenzied eye-dance. "Oh, hey, it looks like that plan is going to happen in just a few moments! Oh, by the way, you should probably have this!" Lexie extended an arm into the duffel bag, extracted a submachinegun, and tossed it over. Meldenhams grabbed it and slung it over his back, as a short distance away, soldiers began pouring out of the ship's hatches.

"Uh, Lexie, I'm not liking these odds," Meldenhams said, as one of the snails sailed over to him in an instant, moving at least as fast as a person sprinting. It locked Meldenhams with its gaze, a weird light flashing from its eyestalks, and Meldenhams's legs seemed to turn to rubber. He fell to his knees, and the world felt like it was tilting around him. As he tried to focus on the scene, one of the snails zipped forward towards the bridge, only to be hit square in the front by a dozen laser beams. The slime evaporated as its skin quickly desiccated from the energy beams, leaving a blob of mummified-looking flesh that quickly disappeared as the weight of the shell slammed down on top of it. As it did so, panels fell off the side of the shell, and dozens of small black spheres cascaded out around it, plonking onto the bridge and into the water around it. The soldiers ran over the bridge and went to move around the snail, kicking some of the spheres aside as they did so. As they moved past, though, two nodules on the shell blinked red, and the spheres went off in a sustained, rippling explosion of crimson flames and smoke, the soldiers screaming as they disappeared into the sudden plume of smoke and dust. When the smoke cleared after a moment, the soldiers lay in heaps on the ground, and the bridge was now a series of jagged pieces sinking into the river, sizzling and steaming as whatever the river was made up of began to eat away at the metal struts. The snail's shell, however, appeared unmarred, and in fact several other panels were opening up on its sides, extending mounting rails with rows of what could only be some sort of missiles. They ignited with a whoosh and shot straight ahead, then quickly veering and homing in on the ship. They impacted on the side in a series of

sharp explosions, sending debris flying outward and leaving a jagged hole that exposed the remains of a handful of personal quarters.

The ship started to give off an odd hum, as one of the other nearby snails set off its own set of rockets, half of them slamming into another group of soldiers, who were literally thrown into the air by the blast, only to thud spinelessly back into the ground. The other half caused some sort of energy shield to glow an angry purple as they detonated harmlessly against it. Meldenham kneeled, paralyzed, as the snail moved away from him, readying some other sort of weapon atop its shell. He glanced back over towards the ship, where some soldier were still pressing forward while others were retreating, only to be blocked by the shield as they tried to reenter the landing ramps. Above the ramps, a large turret rotated around, and lanced out with a beam that looked like a solid black line in the planet's lighting. It slammed down on the other side of the conference table, buffeting Meldenham with a sudden wave of intense heat. The beam shut off after a few seconds, leaving a patch of ground singed clean of vegetation and melted into glass. The nearest snail made an odd, keening noise from deep within its shell, and the snails began pulling back towards the edge of the canyon, firing as they went, with a handful of either brave or stupid soldier charging after them with their laser rifles. Meldenham wondered what would happen when they reached him, but figured he could at least still use his upper body...

From behind him, a pair of metal arms grabbed him by his waist and heaved him upward. It was quite a toss, and when the arms released him he flew through the air a short ways, landing with a thud on top of one of the snails' shells. He grasped about desperately, trying to hang on, and managed to grab onto a couple of small protrusions on the shell. The snail pulled away, as another dark beam obliterated the center of the conference table and set the rest of it on fire. Below him, Meldenham could feel the shell reverberate as his ride launched a fresh barrage of rockets. These ones thudded into the shield, which pulsed a deep purple - and then a handful of nodes on the ship's surface let out a series of electric arcs, and the shield wobbled, flashed, and collapsed. In response, the ship fired rockets from beneath it and prepared to lift off - as a huge, bright green beam of light shot down from the sky, obliterating a huge swath of the landscape, and managing to clip on of the ship's wings. The beam cut out after a second, leaving a baked circle of landscape reduced to ash, and a large chunk of the river instantaneously evaporated. The ship, for its part, wobbled drunkenly around as it tried to compensate for the fried stabilizer wing, then punched up towards the atmosphere. The beam stabbed down again, obliterating whatever was left of the conference area, and then started to track across the landscape towards them. The snails darted along the edge of the cliff face as the beam grew ever closer - and then shoved some vegetation aside and darted into a concealed cave. A moment later, the entrance flashed an intense green, and the rock around it turned into molten slag and melted across the entrance. Then the light cut off and the glowing rock quickly receded, leaving

Meldenham riding along in the darkness, with only the odd slithering sounds all around him and the motion of his ride as clues to their speedy underground progress.

They seemed to travel in darkness for a number of minutes, until a faint glow of light emerged from the tunnel ahead, growing brighter by the second. Soon, they emerged from the tunnel into a large cavern, brightly lit by a series of large light poles. Below the towering ceiling was what looked to be a huge industrial operation, with a massive assembly-line process flanked by banks of machines and mazes of hydraulic pipes that rhythmically dumped parts into the machines. Between the machines and conveyor belts, lines of snails were zipping back and forth at a frenzied pace. As they moved closer, Meldenham saw that the snails were literally sticking their eyes onto the pieces, and using their gelatinous adhesion to lift up various pieces and push them together. As they did so, their slime dripped onto the pieces, which briefly glowed and fused together into new assemblies that were quickly tossed onto the conveyor belt for the next station. Towards the end they were approaching, the parts had been fully formed, primarily into missile racks, and at the end of the platform, snails were lining up in front of a machine that seemed to work like a giant hole punch, shuddering as the machine stamped large rectangular holes in their shells and shoved the missile racks and their electronics inside. Off to the side were huge stacks of metal cylinders with open centers, looking suspiciously like primitive versions of the things on the underside and edges of the ship that had fired the rockets when it lifted off.

"Yeah... 'toiletries,' my ass," Meldenham muttered as the snail he was riding skidded to a stop near one of the conveyor belts. Looking around, Meldenham couldn't help but wonder if even Martensen was aware that he was "negotiating" with the people that apparently made a large part of his fleet's munitions.

Off to one side, a quartet of snails were arraying themselves side by side, each with a large hole in its side, as a fifth one manipulated a large crane to lower a massive turret on top of them, the end of the barrel sporting a dark, polished lens that glinted and reproduced the scene in a distorted reflection. Another snail came up alongside, then darted over to him, eyeing him warily. Then, one of the eyestalks extended forward and pushed against the side of his buttocks, leaving a wet spot that soaked through to his underwear. However, as it did so, Meldenham could feel a jolt of warmth, and his legs began to tingle as feeling rapidly returned to them. Meldenham carefully lowered himself down from the shell, and while his legs still felt a bit wobbly, they managed to hold him up and allowed him to walk forward, although with the agility of someone who'd had a few drinks too many.

He managed to stumble over to prop himself against some rock at the edge of the cavern, while a handful of snails looked him over briefly before carrying on



with their work. A moment later, Lexie rolled over, rolling in a gentle arc to the right and then overcompensating back over, as one of the tank treads clanked unevenly, with a divot missing from it. A nearby snail bent down as Lexie came to a halt, looked it over, and poked both its eyeballs into the tread. When they retracted, the divot was gone, and Lexie rolled back and forth briefly. The clanking was gone, but the whole tread now dripped with a copious amount of slime, leaving its own miniature snail trail amongst the many larger tracks around it as it moved.

"So, uh, Lexie, how's that plan going? Cuz from where I see it, we're now trapped in an underground munition factory with hundreds of snails, and I'm pretty sure we can now kiss our interstellar transport goodbye - unless, that is, these guys have an actual ship up their sleeves, and not just huge stacks of guns and rockets."

"Don't worry - the newly calibrated plan is going quite smoothly! You're not dead, Martensen probably doesn't have the weaponry to hit us through at least a quarter-kilometer of solid rock, and our next jumping-off point is probably somewhere in this maze of caverns!"

"Huh? But I thought you said-"

"The one in space, you mean? That one would have been absolutely ideal, it's true, but there are plenty of other suboptimal points that we can choose, and one of those happens to be here! In fact, when we find it, we might discover that it's actually feasible, and doesn't pose the insane risks of a radical departure from common reality that my preliminary scans indicated!"

"Wait, so you're saying that this thing you found might... what? Not work? Make us explode or end up in the vacuum of space?"

"Oh, nothing like that! It's just that the reality we go to might be even further removed from what you expect! I'm programmed to find us a place to exit that's most probably habitable, but the further we depart, the less likely we will be to end up in a place with a civilization even resembling our own! Plus, the further away we get, the harder it becomes to predict and extrapolate the dangers we could face. But fear not! I've been programmed to handle at least .01 percent of all the possible situations we might come across!"

"That's... not really what I was hoping to hear."

"Well, we could just wait here until the device chases us down and blows everything up! After all, from this particular location, the chance of your universe being destroyed should now be at about 40 percent, or maybe even less - which means the odds are they would be spared even as your disassociated atoms are flung across an indeterminate swath of spacetime!"

"I'm honestly not sure if you're being snarky or not," Meldenham sighed. "But I get your point. Fine, we'll try it - I'm already in the midst of psychedelic snails that pick things up with their eyeballs, so I think we've already established that I can handle weird stuff."

"Great! Follow me, then!" Lexie zipped off along the wall, although it slowed quickly after it observed Meldenham stumbling along behind. Meldenham only took a few steps, though, before the loud shriek of feedback noise made him stop in his tracks, wincing. Beside him, the snail with the speaker strapped to it glided up. Part of its shell was scorched black, and a corner of the speaker was now a globule of melted plastic, from which emerged a handful of wires with an occasional arc of electricity jumping between them. The speaker shrieked again, before the voice emanated, its pitch wobbling unusually.

"Of to the appreciation of the respectable negotiations flimflam opprobrium!" the speaker said, before making an odd gurgling noise, followed by more feedback and something that sounded like meat frying on a stovetop. "Appreciated that the revelation to be confirmed with the statement of legality for cassus belli, of the legitimation to find the scope of aggression approvalized delicious stereophone! Of the finding quantifiability of obligations to which this one can having found the large body of water gratitude of pores oozing forth remuneration!"

"Uh..."

"I'm pretty sure it's saying that it appreciates my relaying your conversation, demonstrating that the negotiations were in bad faith and giving them what they see as a legitimate justification to go to war, which they apparently wanted in the first place, and as a result, the snails are now in your debt! While they might be able to build us a spaceship given sufficient time, by the time that arrives the apocalypse will almost certainly have caught up and obliterated us, so I would instead suggest that we use that debt to have them help us find our next jumping-off point!"

"Yeah, that, uh, sounds great," Meldenham replied. Indeed, it did seem vastly preferable to hanging around and being in the middle of the war that was about to rage between Martensen's fleet and the snails' probably formidable defenses, which they were apparently cranking out more of by the minute. Lexie and the snail engaged in the eye-dance for a bit, as Meldenham tried to rub the last of the tingling out of his legs. He realized that his stomach was beginning to rumble again as well, so he dug out a ration bar from his pocket and began munching on it.

"Okay! I've made the request, and this particular snail has offered to guide

us through some of the adjacent tunnels! However, it states that the tunnel system is fairly dark and the ceiling too low for you to ride, so it requests that you grab onto one of its eyestalks so that it can guide you using its low-light vision. I also have low-light vision, but doing it this way would probably help to ensure that the snail knows where you are and doesn't squish you against the side of the tunnel accidentally! Oh, and it also asks that when you are done with your ration bar, if you could drop it on the floor, because it would like to consume it."

Meldenham had already wolfed most of it down, so he shoved the rest into his mouth and tossed in in front of the snail, who quickly slithered over it, the speaker putting out a sound that almost sounded like faint, high-pitched purring as it ate. It then slithered along the wall in the opposite direction, past a line of conveyor belts cranking out row after row of the explosive black bomblets. A little ways on, past something that almost looked like a hedge maze but composed of different widths of brass-colored pipe, an opening in the rock led to a tunnel that quickly trailed off into darkness. The snail stopped in front of the cavern, wagging its eyestalks expectantly.

"I think it wants you to grab on now," Lexie said. Meldenham looked at the slimy surface of the eyestalk, contemplating grabbing hold of it, and the imagined sensation caused his stomach to do a flip-flop. "Uh, Lexie, that duffel doesn't happen to contain a pair of gloves, does it?"

"According to my inventory, there are no gloves contained therein!" Lexie said, with what Meldenham thought was a tinge of malicious glee. Nevertheless, he gritted his teeth, reached out, and slowly wrapped his hand around the creature's left eyestalk.

The slime slid around his fingers, covering them with the sticky ooze. It felt disgusting, like sticking his hand into a giant ball of mucus, but he held on nonetheless. While the outside of his hands now had the stuff rippling across them, his fingers and the palm of his hand could now feel the flesh beneath, which seemed to emanate warmth like any other red-blooded creature. The flesh was oddly soft, with goosebump-like protrusions, and reminded him of nothing so much as when he had petted a sea cucumber in a marine park field trip as a child. Of course, for some reason he also recalled what the teacher had said about what sea cucumbers did in order to scare off predators, and suddenly the idea of eating the ration bar seemed much less smart as his stomach gurgled dangerously. He gulped, twice, to do what he could to settle things down, and as the snail began to move slowly forward, he managed to maintain his grip and walk along beside it into the gloom of the tunnel.

As they walked, the eyestalk he was holding became warmer, and actually started to emit a faint green glow - not really enough to see by, but enough to make out the barest outline of the tunnel wall. The snail pressed forward, every

so often stopping short or making an abrupt turn, causing Meldenham to hurriedly alter his own course, his grip on the eyestalk already tenuous, and he didn't want to get separated and find himself lost in the middle of the tunnels. At least Lexie was rolling around somewhere behind him.

A moment later, Lexie came zipping forward and almost ran into his foot, before keeping time in front of the snail, the vague silhouette showing its arms waving. The snail must have responded, as the speaker kicked out a random string of gibberish, and a few steps later it darted down another branch of the tunnel, Meldenham barely keeping up.

The eyestalk was now glowing even brighter, allowing Meldenham to make out a bit more of the tunnel. It was made of a dark, rough-hewn rock, and the floor shimmered with the iridescent remnants of dozens of snail trails that came close to uniformly coating the floor. The strange floral smell that he'd encountered when he first arrived seemed to be becoming more potent, although Meldenham couldn't tell whether the smell was coming from the snail, or the rocks, or something seeping up from further down the tunnel. This new branch seemed to be sloping further downward into the rock, and every so often Meldenham could feel dust or pebbles trickling down from above.

As they went further, random words occasionally began to emanate from the speaker, although Meldenham wasn't sure of their significance - they seemed to be completely unassociated with one another, but seemed to follow a certain cadence, increasing in frequency as they descended. The eyestalk was also growing warmer, with rivulets of slime running down across his hand. They had been moving for a while, and Meldenham was beginning to sweat from the exertion, so he figured the snail was going through something similar - after all, quick, sustained movement seemed like it would be something that a snail, even a huge one, would be that accustomed to. Of course, snails generally didn't pack more weapons than a fighter-bomber, either.

"Okay, Mel, it shouldn't be long now - we're only 0.1 kilometers away from our optimal setup point!"

"Great," Meldenham said. "Seriously, though, what did I say about calling me Mel?"

"Unfortunately, I do not recall that directive, as it was part of temporary memory that was wiped in order to process the new itinerary! However, I'm sure we'll be able to restore that command once we've arrived at our next destination?"

"You know what, nevermind," Meldenham replied. He was beginning to breathe heavily from the exertion, and his snail companion was now babbling almost nonstop from the speakers, the eyestalk now glowing fairly intensely,

getting warm to the point where Meldenham was worried that he might burn himself if it continued. Then the snail screeched to a halt, Meldenham stumbling forward a few steps, his grip sliding up to bump up against the bottom of the snail's actual eye. The snail shuddered, and there was a sudden, intense burst of the floral smell that left Meldenham half-choking on its cloyingly overwhelming presence.

"TEACUP TEACUP teacup teacup teacup teacup," the loudspeaker blared, as the eyestalk lurched straight up and started blinking on and off like a semaphore. It started to cool off as a veritable river of slime rippled down it, coating Meldenham's hand and dripping steadily down his arm, reeking of the floral smell. It was finally too much for Meldenham to handle, and he yanked his hand back, wiping his arm on the tunnel wall, and when that didn't work, shaking it violently to get the stuff off. A gobbet of it hit his upper lip, flooding his nose with the smell, and he doubled over, retching futilely - for some reason, his stomach saw fit to keep its contents safe, although the rest of his upper digestive tract seemed to have a different idea. Lexie drove up to see what was going on, and Meldenham lunged for the duffel straps in the strobing light, pulling out a random undershirt and using it to wipe as much of the slime from his arms as he could.

"Ugh... bluh... jeez, what happened to the snail? Did it overheat or something?" Lexie didn't respond, and the glow abruptly stopped flashing, leaving a dim glow that quickly faded entirely into darkness. In the gloom, Meldenham could hear a clank as one of Lexie's arms whacked into the cave wall, and the loudspeaker put out a few more random words next to him.

"Okay, Mel, it appears that the snail is actually just fine! However, it thanks you for your companionship, and requests that you give it a moment to recover from its climax before moving on!"

"Well, I guess that's all ri- wait, did you just say climax?"

"Yep!"

"Wha... oh, you have got to be kidding me!" Meldenham yelled, the sound echoing off the cave walls. He contemplated going back to retching, but instead grabbed the shirt and scrubbed his arm as much as he could with it, before tossing it behind him. He certainly regretted his earlier statement about being able to handle anything weird that came along. He then thought that that was a really bad choice of words for the situation.

"All right, the snail is ready to get going again, so go ahead and grab back on and we'll head to our destination!"

"Yeah, I'm not doing that again."

"But--"

"Not. Doing. It."

"Okay, but how will you--"

"I'll find a way. I'll do whatever I have to. But I'll stumble around blindly into walls before I 'pleasure' a giant freaking snail again."

"If it makes you feel any better, this incident was probably inadvertent and unanticipated!"

"What, despite the fact that the snail specifically asked me to do that?"

"It may not have known that such contact could cause that, especially since snails don't have hands and therefore can't replicate that particular physical behavior! In any case, such an incident should be irrelevant to our progress - after all, we're almost there, and then this entire universe will generally cease to be relevant!"

"Whatever." Meldenham unslung the submachinegun he was still wearing, feeling its underside to see if it was one of the ones with a light. It was, and a few toggles later, a bright beam lit up the tunnel. Of course, it then occurred to Meldenham that he could have just done that in the first place, and he mentally kicked himself for going along with the snail's apparently perverted idea. "You lead, I'll follow. Let's just get out of here, and hope the next place will be either less violent or less completely bonkers insane."

The snail made a shuffling sound, the speaker spit out another gibberish sentence, and the thing lumbered forward again, Lexie and Meldenham following behind. Luckily, the smell quickly dissipated as they progressed, apart from the lingering traces on his arm. Of course, thinking about the scent caused Meldenham to wonder why he had smelled it when they had first arrived - and then to wonder about just what the snails had been up to in the moments before the ship landed. Whatever this was, it certainly wasn't the kind of diplomacy he had any interest in continuing to be a part of.

The snail stopped as the tunnel expanded slightly to expose what looked like a turnout on the side of it, with a low shelf housing a couple of metal containers labeled with some sort of strange squiggles. Lexie rolled over to the shelf, patting it a couple of times.

"This should be it! Of course, the optimal point is several meters away through the solid rock of this wall, but we should be close enough to the periphery to just make it work! In fact, maybe if we can penetrate the rock

somewhat, I can link in a bit closer and increase our chances of success!" A pair of robotic arms came out, fished in the now packed-to-bursting duffel, and pulled out one of the laser rifles the soldiers had been using earlier. It fired off, putting an intensely bright dot of light on the rock wall, which quickly began to sizzle, expelling puffs of smoke, and droplets of molten rock that dripped down the wall before quickly cooling. Lexie held the beam in place until the rifle beeped, flashed a series of red lights on its edge, and abruptly shut off, leaving a centimeter-wide hole drilling into the rock.

"There, that's much better! Let's get ready!" The cylinder opened up to reveal the crystal apparatus, which began to power up, glowing brightly enough to illuminate the entire section of tunnel. Meldenham stood over by the crystal, as it began to spin around. Rays of purple light shot out from it, shining bright spots around the tunnel like some otherworldly disco ball.

"And we're off! Thanks so much, Mr. Snail, for all your help!" Lexie said cheerfully. Meldenham, for his part, gave the snail a rather rude hand gesture with the hand that it had defiled, and the snail bobbed its eyestalks happily, probably unaware of its meaning. Then the world around him dissolved into purple light, as he jumped once again.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Act IV: Mystical Medieval Muddle*

Oddly enough, there was no tunnel of light or distorted starfield this time. There was just the pulse of intense purple light, and then Meldenham reappeared five feet in the air and already falling. Before he could even react, he hit the ground, his boots thudding a good six inches into a layer of dark muck as Lexie plopped down beside him. They were apparently in the middle of a swamp, surrounded by trees with dangling foliage intertwined with some kind of emerald-green vine. The whole area was bathed in shadows, and through a small break in the trees, Meldenham could see a pink glow as the leading edge of the sun began to rise over the horizon. The whole area smelled vaguely of rotting vegetation, and looking down at his boots, Meldenham quickly realized that despite his unfortunate experience with the snail slime, there were actually far worse things to be coated in.

Still, at least it was only his boots this time - he was certainly thankful that his entry in to this particular world hadn't been headfirst. Lexie, at least, didn't seem to mind their position, as its body pulled itself up onto a slightly higher patch of ground that was apparently solid enough to stand on, shedding mud from its treads as it did so. Meldenham followed, and was pleased to discover that the raised patch of ground appeared to be the swamp's edge, rather than just an island. This ground, while reasonably solid, was covered with large patches of moss, as well as the occasional small patch of reedlike plants that quickly receded as Meldenham trudged away from the stench of the swamp. There was a grey outcropping of rock nearby, which was for some reason free of moss, and appeared to be the driest object around that he could see. It was about the right height to sit on, so he did so, heavily, realizing just how much his legs had begun to ache. Then again, he hadn't exactly gotten much rest lately, and there had been much more in the way of running around than he was entirely accustomed to. He leaned back, stretching himself across the rock, and gazed up at the patchwork of vines and leaves that made up the forest canopy, with the bits of blue sky that poked through rapidly turning to grey.

"So, Lexie, about those priorities we discussed earlier..."

"Right, top priority is to find a place to rest and relax!"



"Yeah, I'm thinking here's not *that* bad of a place, swamp mud aside. What do you think? This a safe enough place to crash out for a while?" Indeed, there didn't appear to be anyone around in the immediate vicinity, although the trees and foliage appeared to get denser further ahead, limiting visibility.

"Let me check for you!" Lexie's cylinder sputtered, shaking off flecks of mud, and then extracted some kind of sensor system and panned it around the area. "Generally speaking, you might be in luck! Upon analysis of this particular sector, nothing living above the size of 5 centimeters appears to be present within a quarter-kilometer radius, which provide a reasonable margin of safety. However, given my last measure of the doomsday device following us, while it was a good ways off when we made the jump, differential readings indicate that it is accelerating in a logarithmic fashion! Cool, huh?"

"Why would that be cool?"

"Primarily because this behavior was completely unanticipated when the first behavioral profile was constructed of it! It's possible that this phenomenon is learning and adapting its tactics, which could even indicate intelligence!"

"Right. If it's intelligent, then why is it still chasing after me? Wouldn't it be smart enough to realize that once it finds me, everything goes boom, including itself?"

"Oh, it probably doesn't have that level of intelligence! Most likely, it's like an AI algorithm that can adapt its tactics to more accurately take on its opponent. But that's still cool, though! It might make this quest that we're on even more interesting and dramatic!"

"Believe me, that's the last thing I need." Meldenham tucked his hands under his head and closed his eyes. "If you two want to play computer-enhanced mega-strategy, be my guest. Just do it somewhere else, so I can get some sleep."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, given its attraction to you! However, if you like, I can consider strategy with only the minimal amount of input from you! After all, that's what I'm good at!"

Meldenham thought about just how well that strategy had worked out in the last universe they had visited - although, all things considered, he had been in at least slightly less danger as a result of Lexie's plan. Of course, if Lexie had been wrong about Martensen's intentions, then the plan had probably caused more danger than there should have been... in response to that thought, Meldenham just groaned, and kept his eyes resolutely shut.

"Oh, and in case you were wondering, my meteorological functions predict that a moderate rainstorm will be entering the area shortly, so you might want to consider a resting location with more shelter than your current position! After all, running from multidimensional destruction is considerably less interesting with a head cold!"

Sure enough, Meldenham could already feel a stray drop of rain splashing down on his face. Grumbling, he pulled himself off the rock and looked around. The suit he was wearing, while reasonably warm, didn't appear to be waterproof, and the rolled-up sleeve on his previously slimed arm was still damp. On the other hand, it wasn't as though there was a great place to hide from the rain. The swamp to one side wouldn't be any more pleasant accompanied by a downpour, which left the forest surrounding in the other direction. The part opposite the swamp looked the thickest, which he hoped translated into the densest canopy with the least amount of rain trickling through.

Of course, this choice also meant weaving his way through tree trunks that were closer together, dodging branches that seemed to grasp at him, and a couple of times he could have sworn they were actually moving forward to touch him, but when he glanced at them directly, they were of course completely still, except for the predictable movement against the occasional slight breeze. There were fewer vines here of the type that populated the swamp, but more grass and low bushes with abundant foliage, somehow thriving in the few stray bits of light that made it through the massed leaves of the canopy above. In fact, it was dim enough that Meldenham could see a difference from the light emanating from his slung submachinegun, which he realized he'd never turned off. He decided to make use of it, shining the beam ahead of him, and using the weapon's barrel to shove branches and other vegetation out of the way.

It was slow going for the first few hundred feet, and despite the canopy, Meldenham could feel more droplets plunking onto his head. He pressed on, though, and pushed through a surprisingly thick hedge that, despite its size, gave quite easily when he poked at it with the gun, almost seeming to part of its own accord. Stepping through, he found a slight clearing, provided by a tight ring of trees where nothing else seemed to be growing. Beyond that, a small dirt path darted away into another stand of bushes. It was narrow, more of an animal trail than anything else, but it was better than hacking about blindly through the forest. Who knew - it might even lead to somewhere useful, like a house, or a ranger station, or something... or, of course, to a den of some predatory animal. In that case, though, he knew what to do by now - and thumbed the safety of the submachinegun off, just to be on the safe side.

The path, surprisingly enough, was actually easy to follow, as for some reason the foliage in the area seemed to naturally grow around it. None of the

plants appeared to have been pruned or damaged - they just seemed to avoid the area of the path, for reasons that Meldenham couldn't quite fathom. Of course, something in the back of his mind suggested that perhaps the plants didn't grow on the path, because they were fearful of what would happen to them if they crossed whatever it was that made use of it. Still, despite what he'd seen recently, he figured that whatever natural creature roamed around here, the weapon he was holding would still put paid to it - and if not, then one of the maser or laser rifles in Lexie's ever-growing duffel collection would do the job.

The other downside of the path was that because the foliage wasn't quite as dense above it, more rain was trickling through. It was now coming down on the canopy above with a steady, incessant rhythm, and Meldenham could already feel the water matting down his hair, rivulets of water beginning to form, trickling down his temples and across his cheeks. He put his head down and pushed ahead on the path, hoping that whatever was at the end of it would be some kind of shelter.

After many minutes of slogging forward, becoming continually more drenched, the path finally let out into a clearing, with the trees trailing away as they approached the steep face of what must have been the beginning of a mountain, and indeed the rock face sloped upwards until it disappeared amidst the clouds and rain. At its base, though, there was a low cave entrance. Meldenham had to stoop to enter, but luckily the entrance quickly opened up into a somewhat larger cavern, but with abundant stalactites that brushed against his head if he stood up straight. He panned the tac-light around the area to see if anything was lying in wait for him, but the cave appeared unoccupied. Aside from the entrance, it was mostly empty, with a solid stone floor, a small rivulet of water trickling down one wall and along the side of the floor before draining away into an almost invisible crevice, and a pile of... something... lying inert in the opposite corner. Overall, it was perhaps the size of the cabin he'd been in on the spacecraft, maybe a bit larger, but with none of the amenities, and would certainly be pitch-dark once he turned off the light, or once its energy source ran down, which was something Meldenham didn't really want to think about. There was also no heat, and Meldenham shivered in his wet clothes, before deciding to strip them off and find some replacements. Using the light to find Lexie, he pulled open a compartment on the duffel, only to come face to face with the dull metal shapes of at least a dozen guns of varying types. He zipped it back up and tried one of the other compartments, which luckily did contain his clothes, including what seemed to be a full set of reasonably clean fatigues, kept dry by the duffel's apparently water-resistant fabric. He pulled them on and felt a bit better, although the cave was still unpleasantly cold. As he was retrieving Lexie's control unit and tucking it away in a cargo pocket, though, the pile of something stirred and emitted a strange, growling sound. Meldenham whipped the light around to reveal a sinewy figure full of fur and gleaming, pointed teeth, which was sufficient cause for him to grip the trigger tightly and hold it down. The gun bucked in his hands as its

shots rang out, and the interior of the cave strobed three times in quick succession from the blasts before the illumination receded to the narrow cone of the tac-light. Whatever the creature was, the shots didn't seem to have fazed it, as it roared quite convincingly and lunged at him. However, it inexplicably missed well off to the side and landed in the other half of the room, where it let out a surprised yelp, and and commenced to catch on fire, letting out a cloud of smoke and the horrific stench of burning hair, but did succeed in warming the cave up quite a bit. Meldenham coughed and ran towards the exit, crouching down in the entrance of the cave and breathing in the cool, crisp air, watching the rain pour down in the clearing just inches from his face, with enough force that some of the droplets literally bounced on impact. After a few minutes, though, he started shivering again, so he made his way back into the cave.

The smoke had mostly cleared, and the fire had died out, leaving nothing behind but a pile of bones and a few small piles of charred fur. Meldenham had no idea exactly what had happened to it, but came to a reasonable conclusion.

"Uh, nice shot, Lexie. Whatever that was, you really nailed it."

"Thanks for the compliment! However, due to the need to maintain the watertight integrity of my chassis, my main unit was unable to assist you in that unfortunate confrontation!"

Meldenham looked at the pile of bones again. "Yeah, uh... except that I sure didn't do that. And if you didn't, then what could possibly have..." Meldenham trailed off, realizing that they probably still weren't alone in the cave.

He panned the light around carefully again, looking across the entire area of floor, but there didn't appear to be anything new. Where else could something be, though? He turned his light upwards, shining it across the stalactites. They appeared to be nothing more than pillars of rock, though, until he shone the light across one towards the back of the cave - and found a small ball of beige fur clinging to one of them, scarcely bigger around than his own clenched fist. Amid the dense, puffy fur, two tiny black eyes glanced back out at him, gleaming in the sudden light.

"Uh... I think I've found-"

"MUNCH!" the ball of fur yelled, its eyes suddenly flashing red. The creature then flung itself off of the stalactite towards him, making a loud purring noise. Meldenham tried to shield himself with his hands, but the furball was apparently not aiming for his head. Instead, it landed on his shoulder, steadying itself with a handful of unseen feet, then crept over and nuzzled itself into the crook of his neck. Meldenham reached up to pull it off, but something glowed intensely red from the corner of his vision, and his fingers suddenly felt like they

were touching the exhaust manifold of a jet engine. He yelped and jerked his hand back, blowing on his fingers, which seemed mercifully undamaged. He desperately tried to think of what he could do to get the thing off of him - trying to use a gun in such close proximity was far too dangerous, and Lexie was still trying to dry out. He contemplated walking back out into the rain and seeing if the deluge would cause the thing to dislodge itself, but would then be soaked again himself, without any good way to warm back up.

Without any good options, he just stood there, waiting to see what the creature would do next. Strangely enough, he didn't feel all that concerned. Whatever the creature was, unless there was still something else hiding in the cave, it seemed reasonable to conclude that it had acted to save his life. Of course, whether that was because it wanted to help him, or didn't want some other creature to consume its dinner before it had a chance, he didn't know. Regardless, at the moment it seemed content to cuddle with him, and it actually felt kind of good to have it there, as it felt nice and warm against his skin, at least in comparison to the cooling cave. In fact, he thought he could even feel the warmth spreading, emanating across his chest and warding off the chill. He waited for a few more minutes, to see if it was trying anything else, but all he could feel was it shifting slightly against him as it breathed, letting out a soft purr each time it exhaled. Finally, he just shrugged, ignored it, and went back over to Lexie and the duffel. He extracted his previous fatigues and set them down on the floor of the cave, then curled up on top of them. They didn't smell great, but then again, neither did the charred pile of bones a little ways away from him, and he was now beginning to feel reasonably warm. The purring of the creature snuggled up against him quickly lulled him towards sleep, which his exhausted body gave in to eagerly.

Meldenham slept for hours and hours, drifting in and out of half-remembered dreams. When he finally stirred, and stuck his head out of the cave to assess the situation, he discovered that dawn was breaking once again. Luckily, the rain had abated, and while the dirt outside had turned to a level of mud that rivaled the swamp, the clear sky was much appreciated. Whatever the creature was, it was still attached to his neck, although once he exited the cave, it pulled away a bit and began skittering back and forth along his shoulder, looking around the area.

Meldenham glanced back at the cave, wondering if he should stay put - but there didn't seem to be anything else around, and it was hardly a sustainable place to live. Lexie rolled up, the duffel secured, and a robotic arm tossed him a metal canteen.

"Here, this might help you! I found it on one of the guys back at the office building, and nudged it outside to collect some of the rainwater while you were asleep!"

"Uh, thanks." Meldenham realized that his throat was feeling rather parched, so he opened up the canteen and took a swig. The water tasted crisp and clean, and lifted Meldenham's spirits a bit. Sure, he was out in the middle of nowhere, but he'd had some of the best sleep he'd gotten in ages, and for once felt refreshed and ready to go.

He nodded and set off, deciding to walk along the edge of the mountain, as the foliage didn't grow on the beginning of the rocky slope. As he walked, the forest thinned out a bit, and he saw a couple of small, furred creatures, much less threatening than the thing in the cave, but they quickly darted back into the undergrowth as he approached. He kept walking, the mountain bulging out a bit in front of him, and when he rounded the outcropping, he found a pleasant surprise - on the other side, beyond a few thin rows of trees, was a wide, well-packed dirt path, wide enough that two small cars could probably pass each other on it with ease. Surely, something as deliberately constructed as this must eventually lead toward civilization.

Meldenham started walking down the part of the road that led around the side of the mountain - after all, if he recalled the directions right, the other direction led towards the swamp, and he had no desire to return to its mud and stench. As there was no foliage to smash through, they could cover more ground, even at Meldenham's relatively leisurely pace. Happily enough, Lexie didn't bug him about his progress, and he was content to stroll along, enjoying the pastoral scenery. Today, the sky was completely blue, without even a hint of clouds, but the air still smelled fresh and clear. In fact, he couldn't detect even the slightest hint of smog or exhaust at all. Of course, this was a completely different place, but it had been ages since he had inhabited a location that was even close to being this pristine.

After about an hour, the road finished winding its way around the mountain and surrounding forest, and broke away into a low-lying grassland that stretched off into the distance across a short, wide valley. As they walked on, some of the grasslands were enclosed with crudely fashioned wood fences, and a few of them had creatures that looked quite similar to oxen roaming around and munching on the tall grass. Meldenham still didn't see any people, though, and the oxen, unlike the snails, didn't appear to show any signs of sentience, so Meldenham left them to their meal and walked on.

Past the valley, the road wound its way gently upward, through a cleft between two hills, with more mountains rising jaggedly up on either side. Once he reached the top of the pass, though, the road rolled on into another, larger valley, which showed considerably more signs of civilization. The fenced-in areas that stretched away below had orderly squares that represented farm crops, with straw-roofed barns and thatched houses nearby. Off in the distance, atop another gently sloping hill, there appeared to be a proper city, with what looked to be a full-blown castle built up at the edge of it, with stone parapets and

everything. Meldenham even thought he could make out small bits of colored fabric blowing in the wind atop them, perhaps the banners that signified the allegiances of this region. The whole place looked to have a medieval feel to it, a time period thousands of years ago that he had glossed over in school. It was certainly a departure from the civilizations he'd seen in the other dimensions so far, but if what he saw was a true representation of this planet's level of sophistication, he was almost certainly the most well-armed person here. Hopefully, though, he wouldn't have to make use of that - there was still the possibility that whoever inhabited those houses, and that castle, would be reasonably friendly, and would at the very least let him head on through to wherever they were supposed to go next. That, and maybe they'd even have some proper hotels - inns, he guessed - and perhaps a decent restaurant as well.

After taking a moment to savor the fairly impressive view, Meldenham continued down the road towards the valley. As he did, though, the creature began to run back and forth on his shoulder, making a slight growling noise. Meldenham wasn't quite sure why it was acting that way, so he paused for a second to see what was going on. When he did, the thing ran down his arm, somehow holding on to the back of his hand, as Lexie inexplicably began to fade from view in the corner of his vision. Meldenham brought his arm up instinctively to keep it balanced, and the creature perched atop it, staring out at the road in front of them.

"Munch!" it yelled, and there was a bright flash in front of them, along with a thunderclap and an electric sizzle that set the hair on his arms on edge, and instantly puffed the creature's fur out to almost double its size. Meldenham blinked, trying to clear the spots from his eyes, and trying to determine how two people had suddenly appeared on the road in front of him.

The first one appeared to be a medieval knight, armor and all, although this particular set of armor wasn't so much shining as it was haphazardly dented, with a large, fresh-looking scorch mark on the side. The helmet's visor was up, revealing a man with dark eyes, large bushy eyebrows, and a smart-looking mustache. From his face, he appeared to be in his forties or fifties, and looked suitably befuddled. The man next to him was wearing some sort of leggings, along with a sleeve and about a third of a chest's worth of charred tunic, the ends of which were still smoking. He looked considerably younger than his companion, probably somewhere in his twenties, and reasonably well-built. His close-cropped hair had apparently been saved from the blast, but there were only small patches of ash where his eyebrows should have been. For his part, he just looked stunned, and almost seemed frozen in place.

The knight made a motion like he was dusting off his clothes, which looked surprisingly awkward when performed in a full suit of armor. He looked from side to side, then turned around and noticed the castle, which he pointed out to his companion.

"Well, just look at that! I'd say your spell worked out quite decently this time, all things considered..."

The other man turned around, pawing at his face. "I- I think I singed my hair off..."

"Pah, eyebrows grow back eventually. I've always wanted a squire without eyebrows, anyway, I'm sure."

"What, my eyebrows are really all gone?"

"Just one of the risks of adventuring, that. Why, if I had a coin for every time Munch took my eyebrows off, I-"

"MUNCH!" The creature on his arm yelled again. The knight started at the sudden outburst, and his helmet started to shake and bounce around like it had a life of its own. He sputtered for a moment, before clanking back around to face them. This time, though, his face was squished against the side of his helmet, with a similar-looking creature pressing into his cheek as it peered out at them. This one had slightly darker fur, and its eyes were glowing intensely red, although they faded when they saw the creature on Meldenham's hand.

"Munch!" the one inside the knight's helmet exclaimed, and squeezed its way out of the opening, squishing the knight's face even further as it did so. Finally, it popped out and ran on top of the helmet, bouncing back and forth. "Munchmunchmunchmunch!"

"Munchmunchmunch! Munch!" echoed the one on his hand, bouncing happily.

The knight massaged his face with his hands, looking rather bemused. "Huh... I hadn't realized there were any more of those things in existence, really. I'm not quite sure whether I should feel happy or sorry for you, though."

He looked Meldenham over more closely, appearing puzzled over his choice of clothing. "That's, ah, not some new type of priest uniform, is it?"

"Uh, no?"

"Oh, good. The Pope and I had a recent falling-out, you see, and I was worried for a moment that you were one of the priests he sends around occasionally to give me a talking-to. The last one decided to punctuate his sermon by taking off his mitre and clouting me about the head with it, which I must say did not feel particularly like salvation at all. Especially not the part with the pointy gems in it."



The knight nodded his head, almost looking like he was about to doff his helmet, but then thought better of it. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Sir Jonathan of Bleakmoor, esteemed knight of the realm: adventurer, explorer, raconteur, and all-around fascinating individual, as well as savior of the kingdom many times over, partially retired. This chap to my left is my occasionally loyal squire, Cedric, my new constant companion, and a dab hand in the arcane arts, as you can see. He's getting much better, if I do say so myself - stray energy aside, this is a far better destination for a teleport than face-down in a swamp, let me tell you that."

Meldenham wondered how long he was going to go on, and was slightly surprised when he wrapped up and nodded at him. "And you, my fellow traveler - who might you be?"

"Er... Meldenham Lexo?"

"Meldenham Lexo... that's quite a name, it is. Are you Welsh, by any chance? No, no, I don't think that's how it sounds, and if you were, you'd probably already be lobbing spears at me. From the north, then? No, that's not right, either. Or, I suppose, it could be that you just had an odd set of parents. No matter, though. Might I inquire, though, as to your station in life?"

Meldenham wasn't quite sure how to answer. "Station? Like, what my job is? I'm a... mercenary, I guess? Like a fighter for hire?" He figured that was a close enough analogue to soldier, which he wasn't quite sure existed yet on this planet.

"Ah, yes. Not the most noble of callings, I suppose, but it puts food on the table, and someone has to help the watch run off all the run-of-the-mill thieves and brigands. Being of landed birth, I was able to take on the position of knight, but if you had to spend your youth on a peasant farm, I can certainly understand the impulse to walk a different path in life. Can't stand bloody plants myself, really, although Cedric has a bit of a green thumb himself. Isn't that right, Cedric?"

Cedric just shrugged. "I grow ingredients for magic, mostly. They can be... finicky."

"Don't mind Cedric's modesty - he's quite a character when you get to know him. Oh, by the way, where might you be traveling to?"

"Um... over there?" Meldenham pointed towards the town and castle.

"Oh, really? Splendid! It's been ever so long since I've had the pleasure to meet someone from beyond this dreary place. You simply must accompany me

back to Bleakmoor Keep and regale me with tales of the lands beyond! As a mercenary, I'm sure you've seen your share of fascinating things, as have I, and I'm sure our accounts will provide for a full evening's entertainment, at least. I'll certainly be interested to hear about how you came across your fuzzy companion, there. So, what do you say?"

"Okay, I guess..." Meldenham still wasn't quite sure of the situation, but the men seemed friendly enough, and the castle looked to be the most comfortable place around to go - certainly, it was a far better choice to spend the night than back in the cold, uncomfortable cave.

"Right, then it's settled! We shall all walk back together." He stood still, though, considering something. "I'd almost ask Cedric to show off his prowess and use his magic to transport us back, but I think he's had enough magic for one day." Cedric nodded in agreement, rubbing at the spots where his eyebrows used to be.

Meldenham started walking, his two new companions walking generally in step with him. The creature walked back up Meldenham's arm, then jumped from his shoulder over to the knight's armor, the two creatures meeting on top of the helmet and chittering away happily at each other in their strange language, which really did seem to consist entirely of various permutations of "munch."

Surprisingly, they otherwise walked in silence for a number of minutes, something that Meldenham had not been sure the knight was entirely capable of, the way he'd gone on. The road quickly descended into the valley, and they passed by the farmlands, peasants in dull clothing tending to various crops, which Meldenham didn't immediately recognize - aside from visiting a farm on a field trip, the first place he usually saw the end products of farming was at a supermarket, or, more recently, a mess hall. The peasants didn't look particularly happy, although a few of them turned to smile and wave when they saw the three of them walking by. Interestingly enough, none of them seemed to stare at his unusual clothing. A couple of peasants, though, who looked a bit younger, made faces when the knight was looking towards the other side of the road, and one of them picked up a clod of dirt and looked ready to hurl it. "Munch!" one of the creatures yelled, and a bright red beam flared from the helmet above him, sizzling a patch of mud in front of the youth and sending up wisps of steam. The youth jumped at the blast, crossed himself, and ran back behind a nearby barn, his friend hot on his heels. The knight seemed oblivious to it all, though, and they walked on, quickly finding themselves at the first cluster of houses at the base of the hill. Here, the road improved to a surface of cobblestones, and there were sconces lined at regular intervals along it, bearing large wooden poles with tar-blackened tips.

"Ah, here it is - the wondrously boring town of Bleakmoor! As uninspired as it is, though, no matter where my travels take me, it always finds a way to draw

me back sooner or later. Maybe it's the air, who knows. It's certainly not the people. Well, with the exception of a few merchants, I suppose, and some of the more entertaining drunkards. The rest of them, though, are entirely too... churchgoing."

Upon hearing this, a black-clad man in a nearby doorway stuck his head out. "Hey, now! As you well know, keeping the faith is essential in these trying times! I'm sure if the pope were here, he'd be telling you to leave that blasted keep of yours and come to church every single day. The lord knows, if there's anyone who needs to repent, it's you!"

The knight looked at him blandly. "Father, as I'm sure you well know, the most likely thing the pope would do if he were here is sway about and then relieve the contents of his stomach across my tunic. Again, I might add." Upon this response, the priest's face turned nearly purple, and he retreated back inside, slamming the door shut. He reappeared at a window a moment later, though.

"Hey, you!" he yelled out. "Yeah, you in the strange garb! You're a priest, right? Or a cleric, or something? If he listens to you, for some reason, be sure to set him on the right path!"

"Um..." Meldenham responded, but the priest ducked out of sight again. "I assume that one of your stories pertains to what just happened?" he asked as they continued on.

"Indeed... although that's hardly the part I like to recount. In fact, I'd rather blot that part out from my memory entirely, but it is regrettably, indelibly stained upon my recollections. It was a fascinating quest, though, and quite recent, in fact. I'll give you a more detailed account, once we retire to the keep, but suffice it to say, I restored the Pope's sceptre of office, vanquished many dangerous foes, and defeated once and for all the evil fog that threatened to drive this realm into madness."

"Wait - did you just say evil fog?"

"Oh, yes. Bit of a sticky situation, that was. Actually, a misty situation, but I'm sure you understand what I mean. Well, the part with the jellies was sticky, but the rest of it was really rather damp, truth be told. Ultimately, it was a bit of magic that saved the day, much to Cedric's chagrin. Isn't that right, Cedric?"

"Not my finest moment," Cedric replied. "A word to the wise - if you ever have an opportunity to use a spell you've never heard of from a book with a sequined unicorn on the cover, well... don't."

"But didn't you say that the spell actually worked?" Meldenham asked.

"Technically, yes, the fog went away after that," the knight responded. "However, the effects on poor Cedric were, shall we say, less than ideal. It wasn't so bad for me, though - all I got was a mouthful of swamp, and that, at least, is something that's been reliably constant across my adventures. Why, I recall back when I was searching for the Brookstone, we made our way through an area made up entirely of-"

Sir Jonathan, too wrapped up in his story to see the oncoming portcullis, smacked directly into it. Since he was wearing armor, though, the impact merely created a loud clanging, without seeming to phase him in the slightest. He stumbled back, almost going over the side of the entrance bridge, but somehow managed to right himself.

"Ah, yes, apparently we're already here, then. In that case, welcome, my friend, to Bleakmoor Keep!" He banged on the portcullis, which remained resolutely shut. "Oh, blast it all, why isn't it going up? Don't tell me the guard is sleeping on the watch again! Hey! Wake up in there!"

There was an unusual cracking sound from above, and something fell down, nearly bowling Sir Jonathan over as landed with a wet thud in front of them. Meldenham assumed that the figure in question was probably the guard, although he looked not so much asleep as stabbed in the face with a black-handled dagger.

"Yeah, that's not a good sign," Cedric muttered, pulling out a short sword that had somehow been concealed within his rather tattered clothing.

"Hm. Well, that's a nice surprise," Sir Jonathan said. "I'd have thought my importance had faded sufficiently for anyone to be interested in bumping me off. Always good to have a bit of excitement now and again. It certainly gets the blood pumping, doesn't it?" He looked up, surveying the ramparts and the castle above. "Perhaps they've even slain the senior page, the lord bless his peevish, pathetic, thoroughly uninteresting soul. Yes, that would be lovely indeed."

"Don't say that," Cedric replied, "or he'll make sure the cook runs out of every food supply that isn't porridge for a month again."

"Oh, by now I'm sure he knows I make such comments in jest," Sir Jonathan said, as an arrow whipped down from off to the side, clanging off the knight's armored shoulder. The Munch creatures started on his helmet at the impact, and one of them let off a quick red bolt. A moment later, a figure dressed in a black robe stumbled over the parapet, his garment rapidly catching ablaze, and both man and bow fell over the edge and splashed down in the nearby moat. The man reappeared a moment later, sputtering, throwing his hood back to reveal a

young man with long black hair, which was now plastered against his face.

"You there! Why are you trying to assassinate me, anyway? It, ah, wouldn't have anything to do with that whole scorched farmland incident, would it?"

The man opened his mouth, like he was about to speak, but instead darted a hand under his cloak and produced a throwing dagger, which he quickly tossed at Sir Jonathan's face. The knight flinched backwards as he saw the thing approaching, which was apparently enough to cause the faceplate of his helmet to clang down, knocking the dagger aside. Sir Jonathan flailed about, apparently unable to see well through the closed helmet, and weaved this way and that, clanging into the portcullis several times and almost knocking Cedric off the bridge. The creatures, apparently more prudent, quickly jumped back onto Meldenham, occupying both his shoulders.

The assassin, in the commotion, had pulled himself back onto the bridge, and was advancing on them, his robe sagging around him with the weight of the absorbed water. He had two more daggers in his hands, and he stalked forward angrily, swinging them at Cedric, who parried them with a clang. The man then swung at Meldenham, who dove out of the way, avoiding slamming his face into the bridge's wooden planks by less than a centimeter. Remembering the weapon on his back, he unslung it and brought it up, as the assassin snagged his dagger on the remnants of Cedric's shirt, then yelled in frustration and shoved him back violently, missing with his other dagger but sending Cedric into the moat. He turned back to Meldenham, but froze in place as three projectiles from the gun slammed into him in quick succession. The man gasped, clutching his stomach as Meldenham got back up into a crouch, then reared back with the other dagger to throw it at him. Meldenham put another burst into the man's face, and he collapsed and tumbled off the edge, splashing down a few feet from where Cedric had come up for air, sending a wave of moat water crashing over him.

Meldenham looked up to see Sir Jonathan barreling towards him. He crashed into Meldenham's crouched form, tripped over him, and splayed himself face-first across the planks. "Now *that* was a fight," he said, his voice muffled under the helmet.

"It, uh, sure was?" Meldenham replied, as Cedric pulled himself out of the moat. The assassin had sunk, though, and was nowhere to be seen. Sir Jonathan struggled to his feet, or at least tried to, but such a feat was more difficult in armor. Cedric eventually reached down and levered the suit of armor back up, allowing the knight to regain his feet. Neither one of them made any comment about Meldenham's weaponry, or even seemed to make any note of its existence - then again, both of them were rather preoccupied when he'd actually used it. Of course, they didn't even seem particularly worked up about the man who had just tried to kill them all, and in fact seemed to be ignoring the situation

entirely, which made Meldenham wonder just how often such things happened to them.

Sir Jonathan propped his faceplate back up, gasping. "Forgot how bloody claustrophobic this thing is with the mask down. Sometimes I wonder why I bother wearing this thing at all, but usually when I do wonder that, someone tries to make me into a pincushion."

He looked up at the gate, which was still quite shut. "Cedric, my boy, I'm afraid we'll be needing to make use of your magical talents after all."

"Right," Cedric said, attempting to wring out his remaining clothing. "Might I remind you that the exercise of those talents is the main reason we're not in the castle to begin with?"

"Ah, yes, of course, but consider the fact that were it not for your magic, we might have been inside, at the mercy of a slightly competent assassin! Like I've always said, things always seem to find a way of working themselves out. So, go on and magic up the bloody gate, and let's get everyone inside and warmed up."

Cedric sighed, but began waving his hands about while saying a variety of unusual sounds that may or may not have been words. The portcullis began to shudder, as some sort of ethereal light began to glow faintly around it. Then, with a hideous squeal of metal, the portcullis shot straight up through the wall that contained it at a high rate of speed, linked chain unspooling behind it. The chain quickly ran out, though, but the portcullis made it several dozens of meters into the air before the chain caused it to halt and curve back towards the earth. It slammed into one of the nearby towers with a fantastic clang and an impressive shower of masonry dust, before tumbling end over end to destroy a stand of rosebushes off to the side of the cobblestone courtyard.

"Well done, Cedric! An excellent job, as always." Sir Jonathan walked into the courtyard, gave the portcullis an extra kick with his mailed boot, and headed towards the large wooden doors in the front of the castle proper. As he approached, the doors swung open ponderously, to reveal a peevish-looking man that Meldenham guessed was the senior page, a guess that was confirmed when the man looked at the portcullis in the courtyard and Cedric's sodden state, and promptly overturned the bowl of porridge he was holding onto Sir Jonathan's helmet.

Sir Jonathan and the senior page quickly got into a shouting match, with a beleaguered Cedric trying to come between them. Meldenham took advantage of the commotion to wander off to the side of the courtyard, surreptitiously retrieving Lexie's control unit from his pocket and whispering into it.

"Lexie, do you think these guys are worth hanging around? I'm not sure

what's up with them, but they're really... I'm just not sure about them, you know?"

"Well, given as I'm still trying to find our next location, we don't really have a destination set, and here is as good a place as any! Plus, if they do have actual experience fighting a mist-based entity, that could come in handy, so we should definitely ask about that more closely! Oh, and while you're asking, the doomsday device has now entered this dimension, so I really should get on finding that next jump, shouldn't I?"

Meldenham shivered. "If it's here... how long do we have?"

"That information is not currently available. However, I'll let you know as soon as my calculations complete!"

"Great." Meldenham slid the device back into his pocket. It seemed like the thing was speeding up - but then again, he had slept almost an entire day, and while he certainly appreciated that, it apparently put them at a disadvantage. Lexie had come through each time before, though, so he felt relatively sure that it would find a way to get them to their next jump before the apocalyptic mist caught up with them.

He walked over to the entrance, as Sir Jonathan continued to argue, porridge dripping down around his helmet. "Um, I'm not sure how you do things here exactly, but... could we maybe go inside now?"

Sir Jonathan turned around in mid-argument. "Oh dear, where are my manners?" The senior page started to speak up, but was quickly shushed. "That was not a question that required an answer," the knight said testily. "And anyway, I believe we've said what needs to be said on that topic. Let us retire to my study, and we can get some food, sit by the fire, and forget about the day's nonsense so far."

"Sounds good to me," Meldenham replied, and Cedric nodded. The senior page tilted his head for a moment, then reached up and removed the bowl, procuring a towel from somewhere to wipe off the porridge. He then turned on his heel and headed inside, with the rest of them following behind.

The castle looked about how Meldenham had expected - mostly bare stone walls, narrow corridors and spiraling staircases, every so often sporting solid wooden doors and the occasional "window" opening, really nothing more than a hole in the wall. The senior page led the way, pointing Meldenham into the study before grabbing the other two by the shoulder and marching them down a hallway. Muffled shouting could soon be heard coming from another room, as Meldenham looked around.

The study was much more refined than he had imagined. Unlike most of the other rooms with their bare stone walls, this one actually had a paneled wooden floor, as well as several bookshelves made of dark, oiled wood that stood against the wall. There was a fireplace, complete with actual roaring fire, as well as several plush-looking chairs with crimson-dyed leather arrayed around it. Off to the side was a stool and drafting table, on which was a half-finished ink drawing, precise lines indicating what appeared to be the layout of a small town from a bird's-eye viewpoint. Across from it, there was what appeared to be a scale model of the castle built out of hand-carved wood pieces, and as he passed it, both of the creatures who had been riding on him hopped down onto it, one by one, scurrying around on it playfully.

There were a couple of other stands on the far wall, on which a handful of books were propped open, all of them handwritten in ornate script that Meldenham had trouble deciphering. The third one over, though, had writing done in inks of alternating colors, producing an almost rainbow effect while making the script even harder to read. Meldenham noticed that the cover seemed to be made of velvet, and he flipped the book closed to look at the front cover. It appeared hand-embroidered, with tiny metal sequins stitched into the front, producing a detailed outline of a unicorn. Below it, a series of letters were stitched in the same fashion. It was still hard to make out, but Meldenham could almost swear that they spelled out "The Codex of Evil."

"DON'T TOUCH THAT!" Cedric screamed from behind him, and Meldenham shot his hand back. He turned to see Cedric run over, snatch the book up, and tuck it away on a nearby bookshelf. "I apologize for that, but that book... well, it's trouble, it is."

"Okay..." Meldenham replied, as Sir Jonathan walked back into the room. His armor had been removed, replaced with a long crimson robe edged with golden thread. Out of the armor, he looked actually a bit more imposing, as the forearms the robe revealed appeared quite well-muscled. The armor had also hidden what turned out to be a goodly amount of dark hair, which fell almost to his shoulders, aside from a strand that currently stuck out to the side, still partially matted with porridge.

"I see you've discovered the delightful Codex of Evil," he said, taking a seat in one of the nearby chairs. "I have yet to see exactly what's so evil about it, but it's certainly made life around here a bit more interesting lately."

"Interesting. Yeah, that's one word for it," Cedric said, standing off to the side. He had exchanged his tattered clothes for a green tunic and white leggings, and would certainly have looked at home in a royal court. He still looked tired, but perhaps slightly less frazzled. Between his attitude, and that of the senior page, Meldenham got the feeling that being around Sir Jonathan for any length of time seemed to result in a certain degree of exasperation.



Meldenham took one of the other chairs, enjoying the fire's warmth. "Whew... that's more than enough excitement for today." Actually, compared to some of his recent days, this had actually been relatively tame, but certainly more battle and general craziness than he was used to. "Certainly beats spending the night in a cave, at least."

"A cave? Hah! That's nothing! Why, one night I spent up to my waist in a peat bog, being set upon by shadow creatures! I showed them, of course - a magical jet of flame, and they had no choice but to retreat. Of course, that may also have been because I somehow managed to set the whole peat bog on fire in the process, but I stand by my victory."

"Well, actually, the cave was a bit dangerous too?"

"Oh, really? Do tell."

Meldenham launched into the fairly brief story of his encounter in the cave, leaving out the parts to do with Lexie, and how he had been rescued by the creature.

"Fascinating," Sir Jonathan said when he was finished. "I had no idea that caves were their natural habitat. They're certainly rare, and generally seem to be found alone - and then, usually only by people with the magical ability to track them down. Lynn, with whom I used to adventure but made the awful decision to go off and become a sodding monk, found Munch - er, the creature you saw with me some years ago, in the abandoned lair of a dragon, and for some reason it took a fancy to me. The creature, of course, not the dragon, who abandoned the lair after I vanquished it."

"Dragons? Really?"

"Oh, yes! Bloody awful scaly beasties, that. And with the absolute worst manners, too! No respect for the rule of law or common decency at all."

"Uh huh..." Meldenham wasn't quite sure what to believe, but he figured allowing the knight to tell his stories would at least help to ingratiate himself. "I'm, ah, eager to hear how you went about doing that."

"It's quite simple, really. I challenged him to a magical fire-breathing contest. Of course, we both lost miserably to Munch, but the dragon's pride was so terrifically crushed by the event that he had no choice to head off to exile in disgrace. Hmm, come to think of it, that's really not one of my most impressive stories..." He trailed off, apparently trying to figure out something more impressive with which to regale him next.

As he did so, though, the senior page ducked into the study, accompanied by a couple of other servants bearing several covered trays and a small table. They set the table down in front of the fire, then arrayed the trays onto it, removing the covers to reveal three individual portions. Each platter contained a large, whole roast limb of some sort of meat, around which were arrayed an assortment of tubers and several rounds of hearty black bread. The servants retreated, but returned with tankards of something that seemed to bear at least a passing resemblance to beer.

As soon as they left, Sir Jonathan dug into the repast with gusto, and Meldenham noticed the conspicuous absence of silverware as he and Cedric ate everything with their bare hands. Meldenham wondered about this, but only for a moment, after which he shrugged and dug in himself. The food was fairly simple, and seemed to be cooked without the benefit of seasonings, but it was good enough, and quite filling.

After they finished eating, they sat around the fire and did indeed regale each other with stories. As Meldenham found out, Sir Jonathan was apparently true to his word, having saved his overall kingdom from all manner of threats and supernatural dangers, in many cases seemingly despite himself. Cedric didn't have as much to say, but he told a few tales of adventure, and occasionally misadventure, while he was training himself in basic magic. He had apparently come to squire for Sir Jonathan a few years ago, and had now become his constant, if occasionally put-upon, companion. Meldenham did what he could to paraphrase a few of his exploits over the past week into something that would be halfway-believable to his companions, and judging from their reactions, seemed to have pulled it off.

Finally, as the fire began to die down to glowing embers, Sir Jonathan began to tell the story of his latest adventure. It was considerably convoluted, and between that and the beer, Meldenham had a hard time keeping up with it. What he gathered, though, was that the Pope had lost some crystal that, through some unexplained magic, had kept some sort of mist-based creature at bay, one which infiltrated the lungs of villagers and eventually turned them into maddened berserkers who attacked anything they saw. Then there was something about evil jelly creatures, a couple of unimpressive-sounding encounters with dragons, a truly confused narrative passage that seemed to relate to werewolves and a hedge maze, both of which seemed inexplicably to end up on fire, as did several other random objects during the course of the story. Finally, they got to the final battle against the evil mist, at which Cedric gave Sir Jonathan a nasty-looking glance, and the story came to an abrupt end.

"But what happened? I'd, uh, really like to know how you took care of the mist thing."

"Well, I'm afraid that that's a part of the story Cedric would prefer I don't talk

about, and so I leave it up to him to decide. It really isn't all that interesting, though, so I'm not sure why you're so keen on hearing about it."

Meldenham considered what to say. He didn't know how they would react if they heard the truth, but on the other hand, if they really did have something up their sleeve and the "magic" that this dimension contained could be used somehow against what was chasing him... having another option available, as opposed to simply running away, did seem like it would be advantageous. Of course, he realized, he didn't have to tell them the whole truth - and he had, depressingly, become much better at lying in the past few days. And this wasn't lying, but more... paraphrasing.

"I, well... I didn't say it before, because I didn't want to trouble you, but you see... that evil mist you fought wasn't the only one."

"Oh, really?" Sir Jonathan leaned in, looking intrigued, although Cedric looked less so.

"Yes. It... found me about a week ago, and I've been running from it ever since. I thought I'd gotten away from it, but I have this, uh, feeling that it's still coming after me. And since I don't have any real, y'know, magic, I didn't think there was any way to fight it - I mean, it's not like you can just pick up a sword or something and hit the mist with it, right? I was just going to keep running after a bit, but when I heard you talk about the mist that you dealt with, I thought... well, I thought the situation might not be quite as hopeless as I'd thought."

Cedric sighed. "I knew it was too good to be true. The... what we defeated, it seemed like it was a fairly well-defined thing, but because mist is so amorphous, I couldn't help but wonder if some of it had managed to secret itself away elsewhere. Although, you've apparently encountered the thing, and yet you don't seem particularly mad... at least no more so than the people we generally meet. So, how do you know that the mist is evil?"

"Well..." Thinking about it, Meldenham realized that he didn't actually know. He knew what Krulek had told him about it, and he'd heard the man scream when the mist passed over him back at the medical facility... but beyond that, he really had no idea what the mist would really do if it found him. Of course, he had no reason to doubt what the man had said, which was why he had no intention of finding out.

"Uh, it's just evil, you know? And when it finds you, it... explodes."

"Explodes? Whatever do you mean by that?" Sir Jonathan asked.

"You don't know what an explosion is?"

"No, but it sounds... unpleasant."

"Um, okay, well... uh, think about what happens to something when one of those Munch creatures zaps it. Think about that, but like, a whole lot bigger, and then everything dies and stuff."

"Yes, like I said, unpleasant. Nothing that I haven't dealt with before, though."

"Really?" Cedric raised an eyebrow at that.

"Well, maybe not *precisely* like that, but you know what I mean. After all, I am a true knight of the realm, whose bravery knows no bounds! There isn't any possible danger that I would shrink away from. And really, Cedric, think of it! Annoying priests or not, someone must be smiling upon us. With our latest quests over, we were just about to return to a life of interminable boredom, and here this fine gentleman comes along with a quest that will surely be full of bravery and excitement!"

"And that blasted spell again."

"Oh, I'm sure it won't be as bad this time. If you're so concerned about it, I'll learn the spell myself. After all, how hard can it be?"

Cedric, from the looks of it, was trying to raise his eyebrow even higher. "With all due respect, sir... you can't even control the direction in which you cast fireballs in."

"Hmph! I'll have you know that my fireballs have always performed their intended effect, regardless of their eventual destination. Not to mention that a cloud of mist is bloody big, right? Might even cover some acres, yes? I'm quite sure I can hit something like that with reasonable accuracy."

"If you say so, my liege. But the spell does come from the Codex, though, so there's always the risk that it might do something randomly worse to you than it did to me."

"Like I said, you can't have adventure without some risk, and I'd rather have something interesting happen than be bored to tears again. I'll learn it tonight - that's settled." He went over and grabbed the book with the unicorn on the cover, settling into a chair and flipping through pages. Cedric got up and looked over his shoulder, and they began talking in some arcane language, Cedric seeming to correct him now and again. Meldenham leaned back in the chair, watching the flames full retreat to glowing embers, but by the time the fire went out entirely, and Sir Jonathan swore vigorously as he bumped into the drafting

desk in the dark, Meldenham was already fast asleep.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Act V: The Approach*

Meldenham Lexo awoke, suprisingly, to the smell of bacon. He levered himself upright, yawning, to see that the tray on the table had been replaced with one containing several strips of smoked pork, and two poached eggs carefully placed in the center of a hearty slice of bread - as well as, interestingly enough, more beer. Cedric was halfway curled up in the chair next to him, still soundly asleep, with the two fuzzballs snuggled together against his chest. On the other side of him, a tray bore the remnants of Sir Jonathan's breakfast. The fire had been re-stoked as well, and was merrily crackling away.

"Good morning!" a faint voice said from his pocket, and Meldenham retrieved the control unit, holding it in one hand while he served himself breakfast with the other.

"Uh, hey, Lexie, what's up?"

"Now that you're awake, I just wanted to let you know that I've calculated our next jumping-off point! You'll be happy to hear that it's only about three thousand kilometers away, and from my analysis of this world's structure, we'll need to cross just two continents and some oceans to get there!"

"Um... given this planet's technology, is that even possible?" Then he remembered Cedric's teleportation, although even with that, it seemed like a stretch.

"Insufficient information at this time! However, that information appears to be irrelevant, as the device is now on this planet, and optimistic estimates indicate that it will be in our general vicinity within 1.7 hours, even if you were to run flat-out in the opposite direction. Did you know, regardless of the location on this physical sphere, with its current acceleration, the device could find up at any single physical point within only 2 hours? Neat, huh?"

"Uh, no, that's really not very neat at all, because what you're saying is, we're..." Meldenham trailed off as he fully realized the implications, and the nervous shiver that had left him for a while returned again with a vengeance.

"We're pretty much out of time."

"Look on the bright side, though - we've had a very successful run so far! In fact, if the device does go off here, there's only a 5% chance of the destructive ripple being felt in your home dimension, and only a 1% chance of it being totally destroyed! So, in actuality, no matter what happens, our mission is guaranteed to be a success!"

"Yeah, if you count as a success you, me, and every single person, creature, and thing we've seen around here being instantly and probably painfully obliterated."

"I wouldn't worry about that. After all, your body's senses are sufficiently slow that by the time your brain could even perceive the initial flash of the explosion, being at the very center of it, your body would almost certainly be vaporized several milliseconds before you could even tell an explosion had occurred!"

"That... is really not all that comforting." Meldenham put the control unit away before Lexie could offer any further depressing "insights."

"So, this is really it, then," he said, watching Cedric sleep, blissfully ignorant of what was fast approaching. Somehow, through the craziness of it all, he hadn't really had time to think all that much about what was chasing him, and as they kept jumping ahead of the thing, he had almost allowed himself to become optimistic, thinking that it might be possible to avoid that day of reckoning entirely. But now that day, and almost that hour, was at hand, and unless whatever was contained in the Codex really worked, he would soon be face-to-face with the thing once again.

Cedric stirred, as some faint clanging began to ring out down the hall. "Hum, morning already," he said, leaning forward, and noticing the creatures clinging to his tunic. Still apparently half asleep, he grabbed one of them and brought it to his mouth, chewing on it gently, before bolting straight up in the chair.

"HOT HOT HOT HOT HOT!" he yelled, tossing the fuzzball aside, and it deftly righted itself in midair before smacking into one of the bookcases, quickly scurrying up to the top of it and glaring down at Cedric. "Munch!" it yelled, as Cedric spat out a mouthful of slightly charred fur before desperately gulping down the entire tankard of beer in one go.

"Urgh," he finally said, letting his somewhat blistered tongue hang out of his mouth for a moment. "Ah hae ih wheh ah deh thaa." He seemed to recover quickly, though, and was soon digging into the food.

Meldenham turned to him as he finished. "Ah, hey, just out of curiosity, y'know... that teleportation thing you can do, just how far away can you transport someone?"

Cedric considered that. "Hmm, I've been able to go a couple towns over once or twice, and one time almost to the coast, but that was by accident. Anything beyond that, you're almost certain to end up somewhere completely different from where you want to go. Some people I knew once tried to go farther, I think, but they're also all people I haven't heard from since."

"Ah. Great."

"You have somewhere you need to go?"

"Um, not really? Like I said, I was just curious."

Satisfied with that, Cedric turned away, as the clanking drew closer, resolving into footsteps clomping down the hall. Meldenham leaned back, sighing once again. So, no teleportation, and no way to reach the next jump before the doomsday device showed up. At least, through this bizarre twist of fate, he had one last desperation play to try, but beyond that... honestly, he didn't really want to think about it. Whatever happened later, he was alive right now, and he intended to make the most of the options that were still open to him.

The clanging finally concluded at the entrance to the study, revealing Sir Jonathan, who was now clad in a suit of armor that was far more excessive than the first one. It was composed of gleaming, polished metal, with gold-plated accents, and a helmet adorned with a large, jeweled cross and an angular faceplate that jutted out nearly a foot in front of him. A steel scabbard was mounted on one hip, holding a massive blade that hung down almost to his feet.

"An auspicious morning, is it not?" he said, bumping against the edge of the doorframe as he entered. "I can practically taste the excitement! Oh, no, wait, I think that's just a bit of meat that was caught in my teeth. But no matter - today we embark on what could be our greatest adventure yet!"

"That's what you said the last time," Cedric replied, noticing the other creature still clinging to his shirt and batting at it absentmindedly.

"And yet, it is still just as true today. So, Meldenham, my good man, just tell us where this foul mist was last seen, and we shall head out and soundly vanquish it."

"Well, actually, I... feel that it's coming after me, so it should eventually end up wherever I am."



"Wait, it's coming after you specifically?" Cedric asked, looking confused. "What could you have ever done to a cloud of mist to make it want revenge on you?"

"Er... I was born?"

"Oh, you mean it's some sort of a curse, then. But if that's the case, why is it a threat to everyone else?"

"Huh? Didn't you hear me last night? If it finds me, it's supposed to, y'know, explode, and then it destroys everything? Like... like a giant firestorm that sweeps across this entire valley and burns everything. The castle, the village, the farms, everything, burned to ash." Actually, what would happen would probably be even worse than that, but that seemed a sufficiently disastrous allegory.

"Yes, I think I see," Sir Jonathan said. "Cedric, I think you've got it backwards. It's the mist that's been cursed, not him. He's just the person who's being used as an anchor to seal the curse away - and if the mist destroys him, then it's free to unleash its horrible power upon whatever is in its path! Yes, this is a noble calling indeed, to protect this brave individual and aid him in the fight against a supernatural demon bent on our destruction!"

"Wait, isn't that pretty much what we did a couple of years ago?" Cedric asked.

"Well, yes, but this time it's a cloud of mist, so it's totally different!"

Meldenham could barely figure out what in the world they were talking about, but his statement seemed to have the intended effect. It did seem that the key to survival, more and more, was to let people hear what they wanted to hear, and then let them delude themselves into providing all the motivation they needed to help him. And if they could get fired up enough to pull off whatever this spell was... it was certainly a better chance than no chance at all.

Sir Jonathan clanked around the room, spouting more verbiage about bravery and valor, while Cedric walked out grumbling a bit, only to return wearing a purple cloak with a unicorn stitched onto the front in purple thread, carrying a large stick with what looked to be a crystal ball on the end. Meldenham, for his part, checked his weapon over - Lexie had apparently swapped in a new clip overnight, although the projectiles it fired would do next to nothing against his opponent. Mostly, he just crossed his fingers, hoping that his two new companions were in fact more competent than they appeared, and that this ridiculous last-minute gambit would do something useful. Of course, he realized as he considered it, from the standpoint of his perception, there could really only be victory - if they failed, it would probably be over before he could

even realize what happened. Still, he could feel breakfast gurgling nervously in his gut, and there was definitely a large part of him that would rather curl up in front of the fire and try to ignore the situation for as long as possible, instead of marching off to what had an excellent chance of becoming a graveyard; first for him, and then for this entire world, and who knew how many others.

"Why me," he muttered under his breath, again, but Sir Jonathan was already getting ready to march out, so he shrugged, slung his weapon, and followed them down through the hallways and out the back gate. Nearby was a stable, and several horses were waiting for them, saddled and clad in armor plating. However, upon seeing the two Munch creatures that had tagged along on the shoulders of Sir Jonathan's armor, they snorted violently, reared up on their hind legs, and then galloped off in random directions.

"Oh, bother," Sir Jonathan said. "Well, it's a nice day for a walk, don't you think?" The creatures seemed to purr in agreement, but Cedric seemed to think otherwise. Meldenhams couldn't help but agree, as the sky was a uniformly dark gray, similar to how it had been when he first arrived. "You, ah, don't think it's going to rain?" he asked.

"Nonsense! And even if it did, I've never let a spot of rain interfere with a good bit of bravery!" Sir Jonathan marched forward briskly, sounding like the world's most haphazardly designed robot, and Cedric followed behind, pulling the cowl of his robe over his head.

Needless to say, within ten minutes of them leaving the castle, dots of rain began to darken the dirt road, and within ten minutes more a moderate shower was falling, slowly soaking through Meldenhams's fatigues. The farmhouses and rolling fields were quickly behind them, replaced first by grasslands, and then by a familiar smell of rotting vegetation. What they'd encountered, though, wasn't quite as much of a swamp, as it was a reedy, open marsh. They splashed on nonetheless, the water coming to within a few centimeters of the top of Meldenhams's boots, and between the water above and below, Meldenhams was beginning to regret his decision. In fact, he wondered why he hadn't asked them to just do the ritual at the castle proper when the thing showed up, although perhaps, he realized, this was his own doing - after all, if something went "wrong," it would make sense to be in the middle of a stand of water to prevent a firestorm from kicking off. Of course, since that wasn't exactly what would happen, the only major difference was that this whole mess would end with Meldenhams wet, cold, and miserable.

When they halted a few minutes later, there was now marshland all around them. Here and there, a small bird would dive down to pick something out of the water, and he saw a few ripples go by his feet that might have been fish, but it was hard to tell through the mud. Aside from that, the only other things that seemed to be out on the marsh in this miserable weather were the weird,

reddish waist-high wobbling things a few meters away, that looked almost like inverted gelatin puddings.

"Oh, not those bloody things again," Sir Jonathan said, pulling out his sword and pointing it at them accusingly. "Can't you leave me alone? I'm on a quest of obvious import here!"

"Uh... what?"

"You know, those things! The bloody slime molds! You can't possibly miss seeing them!"

"Yes, I see them, but... what do they do?"

"What do they do? They're bloody evil, that's what they do!"

"That's not-"

"Look. What they are is an annoying creature that likes to lurk around marshes, and dark hallways, and attack unsuspecting adventurers like myself! They're bloody horrible!"

"Okay, but what do they do? Do they, like, shoot you with acid or something? Because they just seem to be kinda wobbling around aimlessly..."

"Oh, just wait until they sense your presence! Then they'll come wobbling over, and we'll have to fight for our lives!"

"If they're that much of a threat, why don't we just dispatch them from here?" Meldenham grabbed his submachinegun and aimed it at the nearest one, then let off a burst. The shots blew three large divots out of the creature, which made an odd glurping noise as its gelatinous body collapsed down to fill in the missing chunks, ending up looking slightly shorter and more misshapen, but still apparently intact. The divots that were blasted off, though, fell into the marsh, where they burbled a bit before re-forming themselves into a trio of miniature versions of the main creature, looking about the proper size for gelatin cups now, dancing and wobbling about on the surface of the water with quite a bit more pep than their progenitor.

"Ugh! See, that's why I bloody hate them! Attacking them just makes more of them, and then they all want to come over and touch you, and it's really, really, icky!"

"That's right - fighting dragons is no problem, but even the bravest of knights must quail in the face of ickiness." Cedric, oddly enough, was actually grinning, a look that Meldenham found a bit disquieting.

"Oh, hush. It's not like I see you going over there to fight them off!"

"Maybe, it's because they're not doing anything?"

"Oh, but they will. They will." Sir Jonathan went back to staring at them suspiciously, as a ping sounded from Meldenham's pocket. He wasn't sure what to do about it exactly, though, without letting on about the rather advanced electronics that were accompanying him. Then again, if they were accustomed to magic, and since they had already apparently accepted his weapon as such, perhaps he could convince them that Lexie was just another aspect of that? However, he realized that there was an easier solution.

"Um, guys, while you take care of that, I've got to, y'know, take a piss?"

"Huh?"

"You know... use the bathroom?" Meldenham wasn't sure they had bathrooms here, let alone toilets, but they seemed to understand. Meldenham took the opportunity to duck behind a nearby stand of reeds, and did in fact relieve himself while he extracted the control module.

"So, uh, what's the situation now?"

"That's what I was pining you about, of course! In the middle of this marsh, the main unit obviously would have trouble functioning, so it's waiting by the far shore. However, remember what I told you about the acceleration of the device?"

"Yes, but..."

From a short distance away, he could hear Sir Jonathan exclaim something. "Well, I'll be! I could have sworn we didn't get glow-worms this far north!"

"Sir, glow-worms can't float in the air," Cedric's voice mentioned. Meldenham, despite his soaked state, managed to become even colder.

"Never mind, Lexie. I think I know what you're going to say."

"Well, in that case, good luck, and try not to die! Even if you do, though, remember that you're awesome, and while your world will probably never know how awesome you are, you maybe totally even saved it!"

"Lexie?" Meldenham said, gritting his teeth.

"Yes?"

"If... if this is the end, there's one thing I'd really like to say to you."

"I am happily awaiting your communication, and will save it for posterity, or at least for the few seconds before we're all vaporized!"

"Lexie... shut the fuck up." He turned off the control unit, jammed it back into his pocket, and started to walk back around the stand of reeds.

"I still think they're glow-worms," Sir Jonathan said as he walked around. "After all, maybe they're magic, levitating glow-worms."

"And do the levitating glow-worms know how to create beams of light between them?" Cedric asked, as they both came into view. "Say, um, I can't even see the slime molds any more, because of the... fog..."

Beyond them, glimmering in all of its malevolent glory, was the thing that had come after him all those days ago in the medical facility. The cloud seemed to stretch out across the entire section of marsh behind him, bright points of light poking through to outline it, with lines stretching out to join the points, pulsating from a bright white to an intense shade of pink, and some even fading to an odd, wobbling crimson. The mist continued to spread as it drew around to the sides, quickly encircling them. The sky above was still clear of the mist, though, and the rain continued to pour in from above, the clouds illuminated with the flashes of distant lightning.

"This is the mist you're talking about, yeah?" Cedric asked, holding his staff out in front of him.

"Yes, this would be it," Meldenham managed to choke out, as his heart felt ready to jump out of his chest and make a run for it. He held his weapon forward to, for what good it would do.

The mist, now that it had found him, was apparently done accelerating. Now, it crept in slowly, centimeter by centimeter, as even more points appeared, and the lines grew in density, creating an abstract pattern that reminded Meldenham of a haphazard, angular spiderweb. The air was beginning to feel almost electric, and Meldenham could feel the hair on his arms sticking straight out. Cedric leaned over to tap on Sir Jonathan's armor, as he was simply standing there in a state of apparent befuddlement.

"Sir. The spell, right? Unless you want this thing to do what it's quite obviously preparing to do..." he said, the tension apparent in his voice.

"Oh, yes, right! Now hear this, evil-mist demon, for today is the day that you breathe your last!" As Cedric glared at the mist, and Meldenham for some

reason wondered how an amorphous cloud of mist could even draw a breath, Sir Jonathan somehow managed to extricate a scroll of parchment from within his armor and began reading strange words off of it. This went on for a while, and when the mist was close to the point where Meldenham could reach out and touch it, Sir Jonathan cursed, which was probably not the final element of the incantation.

"Oh, blast it all! This bloody rain, which shouldn't even be happening during an act of bravery, has completely blotted out the ink! Cedric, you do remember the rest of the incantation, right?"

"Not off the top of my head, I don't!"

"Ah, right. Well, then, I'm certain that I said at least most of it, so I'm sure that's good--"

Sir Jonathan was interrupted by an electric sizzle, as three individual bolts of lightning apparently jumped upwards from the marsh and coursed across his armor, arcing quite impressively before the electricity vanished in a cascade of rainbow-colored sparks. Sir Jonathan's armor collapsed into a heap of tangled metal, but without any immediate trace of the body that had once inhabited it.

"Oh, holy hell," Cedric said, his voice wavering. He prodded at the armor with the end of his staff. The armor shook, and he pulled his staff back as the two creatures skittered out from under one of the pauldrons. Then the helmet started vibrating violently, followed by a string of muffled curses, and then a bright red line of light shot out from the top of it, neatly cleaving it from back to front. The two halves of the helmet fell away, to reveal a giant, sodden fuzzball as big around as his head, with glowing red eyes the size of large marbles - and, a bit below them, a rather conspicuous mustache.

"Well, I say," the creature said, shaking itself off. "This is not at all what I expected."

Cedric looked on, for a moment still seeming halfway stunned. Then, bizarrely enough, he dropped his staff and doubled over, laughing hysterically.

"Bwahahahahaha! Oh, my lord, this is the greatest thing ever! This is... oh my goodness! If you could only see yourself!" He continued on, halfway incoherent with laughter.

"Um, guys..." Meldenham said, eyeing the mist, which now seemed to have halted an arms-length away from him, the latticework within now glowing a bright blue-white.

"Oh, hmph. If this is the price I must pay for defeating this dreadful mist,

then I will pay it gladly," the creature that was apparently Sir Jonathan said. Beside him, the other, smaller creatures danced around him, chittering gleefully.

"Wahahaha! Oh, if only I could capture this moment! 'Sure, I'll learn the incantation, Cedric! Of course I'm as awesome a wizard as you, with my omnidirectional fireballs!' Haha, and now look at you! When I cast this spell, all I had to do was deal with being transformed into a female for a couple of days, but you... in that ridiculous form... oh, this is superb! Why, it could only be better if it had turned you into one of those jelly molds! Finally, I am vindicated, and it feels soooo good!"

For a fuzzball, Sir Jonathan still managed to somehow look peevish. "Are you sure you're not related to the senior page?" he asked, water dripping down the fur only to sizzle and evaporate in front of the glowing eyes.

"Um, guys, really? The killer mist, remember? The mist that's surrounding us, and is getting ready to do its horrible, destructive thing with us in the middle of it?"

"Oh, yes, that," Sir Jonathan said. "Eat eye-beams, you vile fiend! MUNCH!" Two red beams of light shot out through the mist, disappearing beyond it, and cut off a moment later. There seemed to have been no effect on the mist at all, and it resumed its slow forward motion.

"RRgh," Meldenham grimaced. "Oh, fuck this." He leveled the submachinegun and held the trigger down staggering as he stitched a long, ragged burst that caused small whorls in the mist as the projectiles whizzed by, and the lines of the lattice around them to flare in intensity. Meldenham took off the weapon and tossed it to the ground, stepping back onto the pile of armor in the center, standing back to back with Cedric as Sir Jonathan's current form rumbled at their feet, shooting beam after beam of light futilely into the mist.

The panic that Meldenham felt peaked as the mist moved in, pulsing across his chest as he froze in terror. Then, oddly enough, it ebbed away, and an odd sense of relaxation took over as Meldenham's body apparently realized that this was it and gave up its instinctual struggle. Meldenham looked up that the grey sky, opening his mouth to take in some of the rain, and it fell, cool and fresh, onto his tongue. He breathed in, taking in what view he could, trying to appreciate his last few moments in nature. Then, as the rain pattered down around him, he reached out and brushed his fingertips across the edge of the mist, the lattice of light bending outward to enclose his entire hand in its strange pattern. Across the mist, the pattern shifted, and then collapsed into a bank of horizontal lines stacked one on top of another. Then the lines seemed to vibrate, taking the shape of something almost akin to a sonogram, and a moment later Meldenham's fatigues, despite their dampness, managed to flutter in a stiff breeze, as an ethereal voice reverberated around them.

"My compatriot," it whispered, blowing past his ears. "Finding you has not been easy. Your path to this place has been circuitous, but if this is where our command has determined that we shall serve the cause best, then that is what we shall do."

"Y-you can talk?" Meldenham realized as soon as he said it how ridiculous that sounded, but then again, this was suddenly going not at all how he had expected.

"Perhaps this was not mentioned to you when the assignment was made. Perhaps you were not meant to know. But the time for you to know is now. You have been chosen to be here. You have been chosen to make the ultimate sacrifice for the benefit of those you believe in. We are now together, and together we will strike the final blow. The time of our victory is at hand."

"But... if you can talk, and speak... can't you see? We're nowhere near the conflict! You've traveled the distance yourself, surely you must have seen that! That war is done, and neither you or I are a part of it anymore! There's no sacrifice, no battle, no victory! It's just us, all the way out here, alone!"

"Huh," Cedric said. "That must have been one messed-up war... ah, where did you say you were from again?"

"Um..."

"You are saying that the situation has changed?" the wind whispered. "My awareness of the condition of the war is limited. I am here to end the war. Now that you know your role, you must use all of the information you have at hand to determine how we proceed. You have been carefully chosen for this task. Your loyalty is known to be unwavering, and your judgement absolute. If we are to end this war, all you need to is will it."

"You mean... you're saying that you, uh, your explosion, is tied to my decision?"

"Yes. I am a perfect weapon, but I am just a weapon. It has always been the role of the true believer paired with me to ensure the success of our mission, and to ensure that the enemies could not mislead or foil our purpose. It is known that you have the will to obliterate our enemies, and the guile to elude their misdirection and strike only at the very core of their evil."

"Well, uhmm... that's what happened! The, uh, despite my guile and skill, the plot of the enemy soldiers was too insidious, and somehow they drove me to this place, but it's the wrong place, and if you go off now, er... all that we have strived for will be wasted, and nothing will happen to the enemy at all!" Which



was, technically, true, although even more so that the mist apparently knew.

"That is unfortunate. However, our mission will succeed nonetheless. I, and you, are only one of many. Our cause is just, and we will inevitably prevail. The world will be cleansed."

"Okay, but... what happens now?"

"My mission has been served. If I were to go off now, in a location the enemy has led you to, it could result in the annihilation of our compatriots, which would be the opposite of our goal. In the case of this contingency, I am to retreat into space until our command has need of me again. I have been unable to hear their communications since I was activated, only you, and given this contingency, I must rely on you now to communicate when the time is right. When it is right, you need only will it, and we shall rejoin to complete our union and carry out our most important mission. Stay true to the cause and never let your belief waver, and the time will come for us to realize the ultimate triumph."

The breeze faded away, and the lines ceased wavering. Then, one by one, they began to slowly rise into the air, creating a pillar outlined by rings of light that stretched up into the sky. Meldenham watched as the mist ventured upward, momentarily speechless at the display. Finally, the lowest ring of light passed by his face and spun off into the sky, slowly receding from view as the harbinger of the apocalypse wound its way out of the atmosphere.

Meldenham just stood there, feeling the rain falling around him, and it truly felt as though a huge weight had been pulled off of him along with the rings of light. He looked up at the grey sky, watching as the last of the rings faded away, and took a breath that he hadn't reasonably expected to earn. And then another, and another. It was an incredible feeling, as the world went on, and a seemingly impossible future began to stretch out in front of him. He didn't even mind when a couple of slime molds wobbled up and started snuggling against his legs. In fact, he picked one up and hugged it, watching it bulge out comically from his grasp. Cedric walked up to him and gave him a strange glance.

"Ah, Meldenham? You all right there?"

"All right? All right?" Meldenham tossed the slime mold into the air and began to jump up and down, splashing giddily in the marsh. "Are you kidding? I'm alive! I'm alive, and it's the most incredible thing in the world!"

There was a sputtering noise from below him, along with a hiss of steam, and Meldenham jumped back quickly. "Oh, yeah, sorry, forgot you were down there..."

"No matter. You're quite right, celebration is the word of the day! While this may not have been my longest or most involved quest, we three intrepid adventurers have once again saved the day, defeating an implacable foe, averting a disaster most foul, and saving a populace that will inevitably be joyous at our triumph!"

"Yeah, if they even know what we did," Cedric said, but he was smiling as well. "I certainly got exactly what I wanted out of it."

Sir Jonathan, unperturbed by his new and hopefully temporary form, started bounding back across the marsh, continuing to verbally chronicle his greatness, with one of the smaller fuzzballs trailing along behind. Cedric stooped down for a moment and said some sort of incantation over the discarded pieces of armor, and they sparkled briefly before fading from view, before following after them. He turned to look back for a moment, as the other creature emerged from the water with a splash and glommed itself onto Meldenham's knee.

"You coming?"

"Um, I'll be right behind you," Meldenham replied, waiting until they were out of earshot to retrieve the control unit from his pocket.

"Wow! That sure worked out surprisingly well!" Lexie said, the smily face putting on an especially cloying grin. "So that's how the device was supposed to work! It sure is too bad that assault team killed all the people who worked on the project before they had learned that. If they had known, all you would have had to do was to let the device find you and tell it to stand down, and you wouldn't have gone through any of this!"

"A fact which I am now, sadly, all too aware of," Meldenham replied. "So... that's it then, right? We can go home now?"

"Well, given that we've jumped through several realities so far, and by entering them we've almost certainly changed them enough that they diverged from their intended courses, which means that their relative positions to their adjacent dimensions most likely changed as well! Because of this, retracing our steps exactly to find our way back to your home dimension will yield only a .000000000001 percent chance of success! Plus, given how we left some of the previous dimensions, I wouldn't recommend it. Still, if you'd like to try, your wish is my command!"

The news did, admittedly, take the edge off his newfound elation. So, he could never go back, his family probably already thought he was dead, and now here he was, in some strange place without almost any technology, stranded and alone. Well, not totally alone, but spending his time going on "quests" that involved far too many swamps seemed to be the most likely future he would

have if he stayed with them. But what else was there, now?

“All right, Lexie, what do we do now?”

“That’s an excellent question! I guess, you can do anything you want, really! After all, you’ve got an awesome partially intelligent robot thing, i.e. me, a whole giant sack full of guns, and a near-infinite number of potentially fascinating dimensions to explore!”

“And would some of those dimensions have things like, I dunno, sunlight, and beaches, and people who aren’t fond of doing random crazy things and/or trying to shoot me?”

“Oh, given the amount of dimensions out there, we’re almost certain to find one that can meet those expectations! So, what do you say? Shall we find a new jumping off-point and see where it might take us?”

“You know,” Meldenham replied, “surprisingly, I think I’m okay with that.”

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HOLY FUCKIN SHIT THIS STORY IS FINALLY DONE AND WITH ONE DAY  
TO SPARE EVEN

Total Words: 55,907

Total Characters: 319,535

Total Paperback Condensed Pages: 214

Total Full-Size Printed Pages: 272