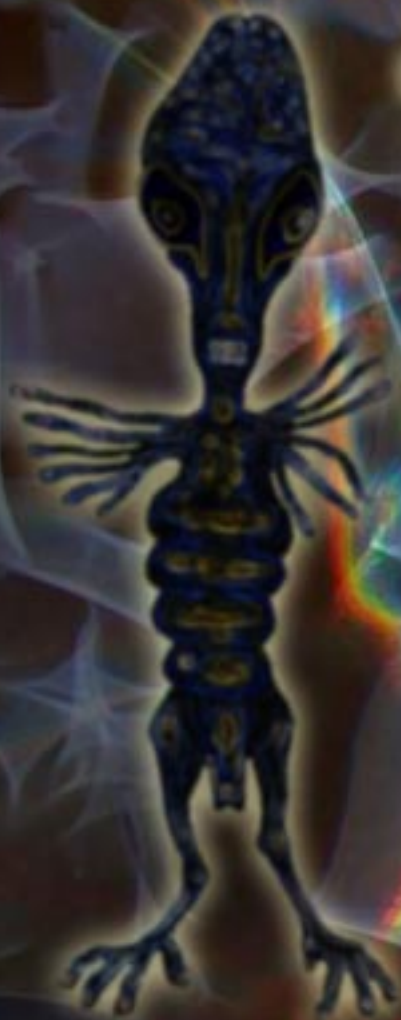


Cosmigellan: Shadowverse

The Sequel to
Cosmigellan: Universe Unfolding

Lily Splane



Cosmigellan: Shadowverse

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CHAPTER 1

THE SYMMETRY OF CHAOS

Every exit is an entrance to someplace else.

–Qwiffian Handbook of Sapience
Qwiffian Truths–Article I

Just as I rise we see it in Cosmigellan’s thoughts—a mere visual whisper—seconds before the blast from my weapon evaporates it into the infinite background of spacetime. All that remains is the hissing echo of its scream. The pulsing tube of energy fades. We can’t believe what my eyes see.

What happened?

Phased out of here again.

Dammit! I missed? I didn’t kill it? Charged with the mania of desperation, I rush to the control console. Give me the sequence again! Quickly, before it comes back!

It’s not time, Rita.

What the fuck are you talking about? It’s time! It’s time!

You missed. You can’t see zhan; I can. Wait for my cue, will you?

Not now with the lectures!

Zhe won’t be back in this wherewhen until the next linear cycle.

Zhe’s out of phase.

Cos, dammit!

All right, all right. Don’t get your tampon in a kink! We must wait twelve linear hours.

My god, why?

The generators are too weak. It could kill you to transport now. Besides, do you really want to leave now? The Hagion will be back; zhe will resume zhaz activities. Can you really leave now?

My blood ran cold, my skin becoming a sheet of goose-pimples. There is something predestined about everything that has happened since I’ve been guided here. All at once, it makes sense. There is a reason I’ve been left behind. A plan. And Cosmigellan, in his irritating wisdom, has arranged for me to play an integral part in its unfolding.

You bastard, I think-voice.

You misinterpret my intentions.

You knew.

It has to be this way. You are the solution.

The satisfaction of getting a good punch in at Cos will be denied me, now that he is safe inside my brain.

You need rest. You've been slipping into delta on occasion. If you don't stay alert, we could both dissolve into the substrate of The All That Is.

He's right. As long as I have to wait, I might as well try to rest some. I wince from the residual pain in my left upper arm as I lower myself to the cold hard floor of the ship. There will be no risk in sleeping out here in the open like this. There is only one Hagion left that believes me to still be alive—to the others, I had died days ago alongside my sister.

I know my sleep will be disturbed at best, filled with the replays of how I have come to be in this place, fighting this impossible war, a war I can tell no country's government about—a war I now fight on their behalf.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of the dissidents, two neohumans, and Stella have died since the Honorable Altruist discovered our plan. I'm trying not to let it get to me, the fighting, the waste of lives both Hagion and neohuman, the sick feeling of so much loss. I have to clear my mind of this grief; I need rest.

It is difficult to cuddle up here and close my eyes and not think about the surroundings, that floor, a floor I can't see, only feel. Ever since the visual molychine stopped functioning, it is like living in a ghost world. Though the phase shifters are still functioning, and I don't just pass through solid objects, I can see nothing around me but ethereal shadows and wisps of impressions—like afterimages that burn in the retina and the mind's eye after the lights go out.

My cheek presses against a floor that is invisible, transparent to all of space and the cold whiteness of Antarctica below me. I feel the stars stare at me from all around—I am vulnerable to them as I hover above Earth in this shadow of a ship.

In the last moments before sleep ensnares my weary brain, I wonder why I have come to care so deeply for the human race. I had not anticipated caring. Why should it matter to me what happened to them? They never cared what happened to me. Those fucking infrahumans, so eager to diminish each other, so convinced

that they can't triumph unless someone else fails—why should I care about them? They'll just grab you by the ankles, hold you upside down and shake out the pockets of your soul until everything falls out like so much loose change.

But I do care. I don't want to. If I didn't I'd be home now: What was at stake for me personally has been recovered. As much as I've bitched about humanity, its stupidity and cruelty, I find myself reaching out to it when it disgusts me the most. What is society anyway, but controlled rivalry? Maybe I never really believed my own dismal evaluation of the human race—or Cos' either.

Cosmigellan started me on this species dissatisfaction I have internalized so completely. He took my alienation, my fear, and turned it into disappointment in my own kind. That damn alien showed me the truth. He did it just by being so different, by the way he and his kind cared for each other, cooperated without words, or laws, or tyranny. They may have taken human form, but the Phaedrans had not taken on human attitudes. That's what saved them.

They are so *conscious* of their own potentials, their belonging. The One. The quantum mind, each part a representation of the whole. This is what they have, and what humans have sought, fought for, killed each other for, for all of history; humans have never attained it.

The Phaedrans—neohumans—are what humans aspire to be. They are what every religion dictates humans must practice. They are everything humans are not.

What went wrong? What went wrong with the universal infection? The Phaedrans, originating in another wherewhen, an “otherverse,” created this universe as their sanctuary, infusing intelligence into life throughout known spacetime, infecting life with awareness, connecting it to all other consciousnesses. Now that I am part of that, I cannot go back to living as humans do, honoring human values as they are practiced.

The contrast between humans and Phaedran neohumans has become so obvious to me that I scarcely have time for any other than Phaedran friendships. The neohumans have become my family.

Oh, I tried reaching out to humans every once in a while. The last time I sought human companionship—and the way things look for me right now, it really *could* be the last time—I had decided

it was just time to howl within my own species. I had been so eager to start a relationship with a human male now that Cosmigellan was, well, noncorporeal.

Had I been able to carry a child to term, Cosmigellan would have become my daughter. When he lost his ability to consciously control his alien-human physiology, he would revert to his native amoeba-like form and die shortly thereafter. My only recourse was to accept his DNA within my brain, his consciousness cradled within me, his life ending, dissolving into the substrate of the All That Is when mine does.

As fine a friend as Cosmigellan is, the relationship is far from complete. My body has many fine memories of physical love with him and it hungered to return to erotic expression. But I had become very selective in my middle years. Cos was very understanding, even encouraged me to find a lover, promising not to interfere or make snide remarks while I enjoyed sex with another in his presence.

But the hope of connecting with a human ever again is a faint memory now. I may never again see the fascinating man I have come to love.

Nancy, formerly a human mate to one of the colony's neohumans, had invited Dr. Childress to the ranch for dinner one evening so that we might meet and start a friendship. I remember catching my breath when I first saw him—his long dark brown hair and green eyes sang a sensuous song so loud I nearly slid out of my chair. And he was an astrophysics professor, to top it off.

Though he seemed unusually nervous—smoothing his long hair, sipping brandy in timed installments, dabbing beads of sweat from his forehead—he impressed me with his unconventional demeanor. He carried himself like a dancer. When he moved he flowed, gently, deliberately, as if a path had already been etched through space for his body. He seemed to pass from one point to another without passing in between. This man not only understood the quantum world, I thought—he lived it. But his pale skin and soft middle betrayed an unathletic lifestyle. He was a man of the mind, a thinker who gave himself to the world, to the universe, not having time to indulge in California narcissism.

Nancy had not steered me wrong.

It was thrilling, just watching him stand there in the middle of the room, as if he owned it and everyone in it. He had everyone's attention as he spoke. I loved being next to him, captivated by his

slight English accent, sharing his energy field.

“... star rests within its own gravity well that curves space in such a way that closer planets are obligated to maintain a higher orbital velocity just to keep from spiraling into the star. Those gravitational tides are also responsible for the fact that galaxies group into rotating clusters. Gravity waves are transferred between the galaxies, keeping them together.

“The most peculiar thing about galactic rotation is the speed at which galaxies rotate: There isn’t enough visible mass to account for the observed rotational velocity of the outer stars. This, and other effects, compels us to postulate the existence of dark matter.”

“And how does dark matter affect gravitational tidal forces? Are physicists still looking for gravitons, or can gravity waves be explained as a wave through a medium—much as sound in water?” I asked.

It took him a few seconds to think of an answer. “Ms. Grayson, I see you’ve been busy with the books I gave Nancy to lend to you. Have you read chapter thirty of *my* book? Spacetime *is* a medium. Also, you realize of course, that in order to complete the grand unified theory whereby all four forces of nature are one, gravity must be quantized. It’s the only way a GUT will work.”

“Yes, I agree. But trying to force nature to fit into a predetermined theory is not very satisfying when you have that nagging feeling that gravity is an effect—and *only* an effect, as is mass an effect of atomic velocity and expanding space, and time an effect of an expanding universe. Einstein himself stressed the concept of gravity as an effect. True?”

“Well, I cannot disagree . . . but quantizing gravity would put it all in a nutshell, now wouldn’t it? The beauty is in its simplicity.”

“Couldn’t gravity be making waves through dark matter, matter that we can’t see or detect in any way?”

“It’s interesting that you think this,” he remarked blithely, continuing his speech. *Aren’t you going to answer me? Say anything?*

I looked around and saw approving faces as he continued to speak. I however, had completely changed my mind about him; I did not find him so attractive as I did unimagined.

A glass of brandy later, the atmosphere of the living room had turned to something inexplicably odd. The tension among the neohumans was palpable. Even some of the outsider humans seemed disturbed by something. The children suddenly stopped their game on the sofa and sat quietly staring into space . . . waiting.

For what? Listeners strayed from the gathering around Childress and looked out windows, at doorways. Someone turned off the stereo and the room was immersed in silence, except for the lone voice of Childress trailing off in mid-sentence. He seemed ill at ease now, though I don't think so much from the general change in mood as from the loss of his small audience.

The human mothers pulled their neohuman children, children that contained the entire personality and memories of each mother's former neohuman lover, close to them. A child's muffled sob escaped into the quiet room.

The changes had been imperceptible at first, but now there was no mistaking it: Alarm, danger clung to the air like blood clots on a silk scarf. I almost wretched, the feelings were so strong now. Something bad was about to happen. I had only seen it happen twice before in the preceding neohuman generation, but I knew it was inevitable: The neohuman children were about to spindle and there was nothing I or anyone else could do about it.

We heard loud thumps, like those of an amplified sage grouse, perhaps forty or fifty feet in the distance, approaching the entrance to the hospice. A jetliner at the local airport with engine trouble?

I looked from neohuman face to human face, all of them riveted on that kitchen door—the same kitchen door my psychotic father had burst through over six years ago, the same door that had allowed his entrance, had steadied his gait as he reached beneath the kitchen cabinet and pulled out a rifle, shooting into the crowd of neohumans, wounding Anthony, who died later. The same door that had allowed that bastard's escape into the night, and from prosecution for his deeds . . . the very same door I had re-entered to find Jim Grayson all but dead, skillfully poisoned at dinner by my own hand. . . .

I reached into the neohuman minds, searching, finding nothing but unreconcilable terror, and . . . surrender. *Surrender?* What could be so horrible as to render an entire colony of neohumans completely passive and helpless? That was not the neohuman way—it was not *our* way, the Qwiffian way. I prodded their collective mind, insisted on an explanation. I felt them push at me, close down around me like two-dozen shutters before a storm. Much to my surprise, they had excluded me from their horror and I couldn't understand why.

Cos! Cos, tell me why . . . why are they . . . why are you— But Cosmiggellan wasn't responding, either. He was part of me and he

had deliberately sealed himself off from any contact. Without him, I was completely cut off from The One. Abandoned.

“No! No, don’t shut me out! What is it? My God, tell me! What is it? We are Of The One, of The One Mind, The One—” Before I could get my last breath out, hell folded in around me and swallowed me whole.

The screams echoed piercingly throughout the hospice in a smear of frantic, running, climbing, clawing bodies. They were in spindle, and nothing, no one, could stop them. The thumping grew louder, closer. I heard a lamp, lots of glass, shattering over the screams, I spun around to face a frozen and horrified Professor Childress. He searched my face for an explanation, an idea of what to do, where to go. Before I could reach for him, a body crashed into me sending me to the floor hard. Someone stepped on my face, grinding my left cheek into my teeth, filling my mouth with the metallic taste of warm blood. I screamed in anger more than pain. Goddamn them and their uncontrollable spindle! Would they never be able to rid themselves of this one last ancient behavior? Through tear-veiled eyes I looked across the room and saw a pillar of struggling neohuman children, screaming, climbing across the furniture and each other, reaching for the ceiling, trying to *break through*.

The thumping sounds were in the living room now, all around us, coming from nowhere but everywhere. I rolled over to look for Childress, who stood stunned in the middle of the room. I still could see nothing, nothing to account for the neohuman spindle and the dull thudding shrouding us. A sharp pain ripped through my lower abdomen as I struggled to get up; it was so difficult, I felt so heavy. I couldn’t move my legs—they were completely flaccid and without feeling. My God, the fall had done what I’d feared all these years: paralyzed me from the waist down, the spinal cord finally severed by the arthritic growth in my spine.

And the thumping sounds continued. They became softer, nearer, down close to my head—so close, for a second I believed them to be my own heart, beating outside my body. I must be hallucinating—isn’t that what happens just before death? Isn’t that how the mind distracts itself when faced with its own end?

I rolled off my elbow onto my back, and listened with eyes closed, at the last sounds I believed I would ever hear. My own heavy breathing punctuated with gushing sobs dominated the background sounds of the thumping. Across the room where I

knew the disgusting pile of neohumans to be, I heard only snuffles and soft whimpers: Spindle was over for them. Fleetingly I wondered how many had been injured or, Universe forbid, even killed this time. I couldn't be there to help them, ever again.

The thumping sounds surrounded my head at ear level as I lay on the floor. I listened to these strange rhythmic sounds, coming first from the left, then louder from above, then again from the left. A thumping rappid, it seemed. I knew then that I was not alone down on the floor. Something inside me now disassociated from me in my last breaths. A calmness was in control now, an acceptance. If this was how I was to die, then I wanted to be calm enough to *be there* for my last experience.

I needed to say goodbye to Cos, to tell him it was OK, that I was not afraid, but he simply was not there. When I dissolved into the substrate of the All That Is, I would take him with me, and there was no way for me to let him know: He would die with me.

I opened my eyes. The room looked crystal clear. Out of the corner of my left eye, Professor Childress sat hunched over on an ottoman with his head in his hands; it seemed like an inappropriate response. No matter. I would never even learn his first name. He was just a man, and my fascination, just lust.

Suddenly a stinging cold shot through my eyes. I slammed my face shut on the burning, the effort bringing to the forefront the chewed-up inside of my left cheek; my tongue found five deep half-moon cuts. The thumping grew tremendous and frantic . . . urgent. I had to see, I had to know the source of the deep throbbing sounds. It hurt like hell, but I flashed open my smarting eyes.

The ceiling was gone.



CHAPTER 2

$F = g \times Mm/r^2$ (GRAVITY INVERSE SQUARE LAW)

Particles = Energy = Forces

—Qwiffian Handbook of Sapience
Cosmic Truths—Article II

Professor Jason Childress leapt the stairs to the university planetarium two at a time. He looked at his watch. It was 4:45 P.M.; he was forty-five minutes late for his class. Hesitantly, he weaved his way through the clogged entrance and down the aisle, taking a few deep breaths to ease the growing panic in his chest. The crowd was unexpected and it pressed in on him like a plastic bag in a sauna. There should have been only a few die-hard students to greet him. There were hundreds, most not his students.

“Professor Childress! Doctor!” a man yelled, waving his arms above the crowd.

Up at the front of the lecture theater, sweaty palms gripping the edge of his desk with all the strength that remained, Childress concentrated on his breathing, on calming a body nearly out of control. Just as he looked up, a young blond man oozed through the squirming mass of humanity.

He thrust a microphone at Childress’ nose. “Dr. Childress. What do you know about what’s happened with the ozone hole over Antarctica?”

His heart still beat too fast, his mouth too dry to answer. Finally, his English accent thickening, he croaked, “Would you please bring me some water? And, for God’s sake, turn the audience lights down.”

The young man dashed out the side door, just catching himself with one hand to pull himself back in and press the light buttons.

The theater dimmed except for Childress’ desk area. The crowd vanished; only soft murmurs and the creaking of chairs remained to remind him he was not alone. Everything would be OK now: He couldn’t see them.

The events of two days prior, the confusion, the screaming and the voices still ricocheted like jagged stones off the inside of his skull. And Rita.

Rita: sassy, bright, striking long red hair. He had left her unmoving on the floor. Surely someone had seen her to her feet.

The young man returned with a paper cup full of water and instead of pursuing his taped interrogation, seated himself on the floor at the end of Childress' desk.

Childress downed the water and folded his hands in front of him on the desk. "A lousy forty-five minutes tardy and you gang up on me." Chuckles and titters escaped into the theater. He felt more relaxed now. "I've just come from WCPW. I suppose that's the reason for this unexpected reception. News sure does travel fast." He cleared his throat and pulled his elbow-length hair back behind his ears. "We've learned that the ozone hole over Antarctica, previously covering eight point nine million square miles, has increased in size by a phenomenal five hundred percent. That means that all of South America and upwards into Northern Mexico is affected. We don't know why or how this has happened. West Coast Planetary Watch labs will be monitoring the Antarctic from their five satellites for any changes. They've asked me to join them. That means no classes until further notice."

"Dr. Childress," a voice from the invisible audience said. "Can you speculate on how this could have happened and what the immediate effects on algae and phytoplankton growth in the Antarctic area might be?"

"Marion," he said with a smile, "marine biology is your major, not mine. We know of nothing natural or man-made that could account for such a dramatic change. This is an unprecedented occurrence. Though there are scattered and unsubstantiated reports of blind sheep and cattle in South America, there are no documented cases of human blindness or disability. We don't know what, if any, the immediate effects will be on other life—in the Antarctic Circle or elsewhere. I'm sorry, we just don't *know*."

"What does this mean for sports? Does this mean we have to put on SPF forty-five from now on?" another voice asked.

"It's best to stay indoors. I can't recommend any particular sun protection strategy other than that." *The world won't come to a standstill if you can't surf.*

"How long do you think you'll be at WCPW? I mean, like, how far behind will we get in this course? Will we have to take it

over?”

“It’s impossible to say. I don’t know how long this thing will last, or how long they’ll need me. It’s unusual for them to request an astrophysicist as it is. As for having to take the course over . . . well, would it be so bad? I’m wounded.”

Laughter broke out, interspersed with an occasional “we love you” and “you’re the greatest.”

With that, Childress rose and went to the lighting panel where he turned up the audience lights. “You’ll be notified when the course resumes,” he said quickly, facing the wall, hand still on the light controls. “I wish you the best in your other courses.” He slipped out the side door onto a bright, empty sidewalk that led to a wide open lawn stretching two acres across the campus. At last, he felt welcome . . . and safe.

The bright February sun beating on his dark gray jacket brought back the reality of the new crisis, replacing the all too familiar battle with a new panic. This hole—this awful hole—had just swelled up out of proportion inside two days. And why the WCPW needed him, he had no idea. He was a deep space astrophysicist, his expertise extended off-planet, to places humans would never set foot. That last thought comforted him.

After all, humans seemed so adept at making places uninhabitable for so many—even themselves. For all Childress knew, one of the WCPW’s own satellites could have blown up over Antarctica, destroying ozone on a massive scale, triggering the expansion of the hole. It would be so like humans, to dismiss and bury their own stupidity in search of mysterious outside influences—a cosmic scapegoat. Human stupidity, however, was more often than not responsible for the demise of other species, and that alone was what drove Jason Childress to accept the position with the West Coast Planetary Watch’s Beta Team. He never even asked how much he would be paid.

Childress looped his hair back in a pony tail with a rubber band from his wrist, and vaulted over the door of his 1965 Mustang convertible, settling into the driver’s seat. He smoothed his hands reverently over the steering wheel before reaching for the seat belts, fondling them indecisively yet again. Jerking his hands away, he started the engine; it purred like a panther in heat—a thirty-seven-year-old panther, but a panther nonetheless.

Before long Childress had found his way through the five parking lots and onto the narrow back road at the far east end of

the campus. Hardly anyone took this road anymore, but for Childress it was the only route, out of three choices, that he'd taken home for the last nine years. It was the only road where he could be sure he'd never see another car, or even one of those new hovercrafts the rich bought their spoiled children to terrorize free airspace. These days all legal levels of airspace, every inch of ground, even a lot of underground, and the surface of every body of water was crawling with humanity. Except for this narrow road.

The sanctuary of his lone house up on the hill welcomed Childress with bright glinting windows and spacious gardens that unfolded back to an aviary behind the house. He had designed and built all of it himself; it was of his fantasies, of his dreams, of his mind.

A quiet dalmation pup frolicked up to his car, sniffing the tires, his pant leg, the attache he carried. Childress reached down to pet the dog, speaking softly. "Is it dinner time already, Phoebe? Not yet. It's still light. Come on."

Casually he glanced at his old digital watch. An odd uneasiness gripped then released him. He tapped the watch crystal.

His presence in the house aroused the birds in the aviary just outside the rear picture window, to noisy activity. "You too? A bit impatient, aren't we?" he mumbled. He snapped up the remote control, brought the large video screen on the central stone room divider to life, and flopped down on the big plush couch, struggling with removing his last shoe.

". . . delay could affect the playoffs this spring. And the top stories at 6:00: Scientists at the West Coast Planetary Watch laboratories have confirmed through rigorous computer simulations that the ozone hole over Antarctica has stabilized and is not expected to expand further. There is still no data available as to the cause of the sudden inflation of the hole."

"Expectations for an unexpected event? Gimme a break," Childress muttered, absentmindedly folding the puppy's ears into little bundles atop her head.

The news continued. "President Benson spoke at a San Francisco Gay Rights Convention today, stating 'Your lifestyle is helping to fight overpopulation. If only more people were as-

"I've just been handed a bulletin. There is still no data available to explain the unusually bright evening we seem to be experiencing. Reports are coming in from around the globe that some kind of magnetic subspace fluctuation is affecting every clock

on Earth. Here it is in the middle of February and it's still light at 6:00 P.M.! Researchers assure us that there's no reason to be alarmed and that the affects are limited strictly to electronics. There is no health hazard. Think of it as an especially powerful solar flare."

Childress clicked the volume down and checked his watch again. He jumped up to check the clock in the hall, then went on into the kitchen to look at the clock on the microwave. They all read approximately the same: 6:05 and 6:06 P.M. The puppy scrambling behind, skidding on the polished wood floors, Childress rushed on down the hall and into his bedroom where an antique grandfather clock sulked in the corner near his bed. He stared at it in disbelief: It too, read 6:06 P.M.

"That explains your impatience with me," he said down at his puppy. "You're right. It's way past your dinner time."

After feeding Phoebe he sauntered out to the aviary where nearly fifty canaries, finches, and parakeets fussed and flitted. The birds were out of both food and water, and Childress worked calmly to fill their feeders.

It was in his yogic duty-trance that it all crashed in on him like a ceiling collapse: The grandfather clock too!

Finishing with the birds, he clamored back into the house and phoned the only person he knew he could ask a stupid question.

After he typed a one-key code, the modem dialed, squealed, and connected. A rotating silvery logo appeared on the screen. "Pacific Rim Quantics," a female voice cooed.

"Sidney Panadel, please. It's Dr. Jason Childress."

Seconds later the modem beeped and the smiling face of a seventy-year-old man drew itself on the screen. "Jason, how *are* you? We missed you at the game."

"I'm sorry. I've been selected by the WCPW and spent a hellish two days getting security clearance. Sidney, that's not why I called. Nature's gone bloody nuts."

"That ozone hole thing? Damnedest happening."

"That's not why I called, either. Sidney, what's going on with the daylight? It isn't the clocks, it isn't magnetic interference, is it?"

"I . . . I'm not authorized to discuss that. But, no, it's not."

Childress lurched to a chair to sit down. "Then, what is it? Why is it still light? What is the media covering up?"

"This really isn't a good idea, Jason. It's outside your area of

expertise.”

“You know something, don’t you? Tell me! We’ve been colleagues for years.”

“I can’t. It’s classified. I’m sorry.”

“Classi—” He stared at the screen, at Panadel’s stoic expression. The old man’s natural friendliness was cloaked. “It’s me Sidney. Remember? I promise it won’t go past this screen.”

Panadel paused, eyes lowered. “Not like this. Go to code twenty-seven.”

Childress pushed the keys. A blue line split Sidney’s face and squeegeed it in opposite directions, leaving a blank cyan screen. Letters appeared, slow and white:

EARTH’S ROTATION RETARDED
DAY = 26.7 HOURS
CAUSE UNKNOWN



CHAPTER 3

RESPONSES

Universe = Possibility

–Qwiffian Handbook of Sapience
Cosmic Truths–Article I

I choked to consciousness—blind, deaf, chest heaving for precious air I couldn’t find. Inhaling a thick tasteless syrup through my mouth, swirls of the liquid curled over my tongue and through my lungs, expanding my chest in a huge wave of effort. I exhaled, pushing the fluid through with my abdominal muscles. This was going to take a lot of concentration. It didn’t help that I felt numb, groggy, as if drugged.

I had no other body sensations. But, I sure as hell had lungs—my whole body felt like one big lung. Besides the tremendous exertion of transferring this viscous fluid in and out of me, all I was aware of was an extraordinary feeling of well-being. I was . . . *happy*. Was this death? This was not what the Phaedrans had told me death would be. There was no sense of expansion, of being the whole universe. In fact, there was a definite sensation of confinement, buoyancy.

Had I been reincarnated? Was I back in the womb? I listened for a distant maternal heartbeat. There was only silence, not even the sound of my own heart beating. Where the fuck was I? *Cos, Cos are you there? Do you hear me?*

Silence. Aloneness. Emptiness. And . . . I didn’t give a shit.

The pressure was unbelievable—not exactly painful. I wasn’t sure if I should open my eyes or not. It felt like goggles grew inside my skull and were trying to force their way out through my eye sockets. I knew if I opened my eyes, something I wanted to keep—like, my brains, for instance— would jettison from my body into this thick medium.

I decided before I opened my eyes I’d try to move some body part. If I really *was* just a lung, then there was nothing left to do, not *even* open my eyes, which I wouldn’t have anyway. I willed

my fingers to move. They did—I thought they did. I lifted my arms, feeling the heavy fluid tug against them, and reached out in front of me, stretching my fingers, touching . . . something like glass. It tingled with weak electricity; it was not unpleasant. I felt my face smile then: I was more than a lung.

I spread my arms apart slowly, walking my fingers across the tingly surface, and determined that my container was cylindrical. Interesting. I was apparently in some kind of tube—alive, and not a bit concerned about my close quarters. I then kicked my legs, gently at first, then more vigorously. The fluid gushed upwards into my vagina. Woa, I won't try that again. Wherever I was, I had no intention of partaking in an involuntary Karo syrup douche.

Why was I here, and how did I get here? I didn't remember much happening before this. It was like *this* had always been; there was no before. But, intellectually, I knew differently. I had a whole past with the Phaedran colony. I just had no memory for the few moments before I came to be the contents of this tube.

I had to talk to Cos. He knew everything. *Cos? Cos, answer me. I need to talk to you.*

I felt his presence, at last, but still he would not communicate directly. I was aware of an impression of sorrow and defeat.

It was then I decided to defy the pressure in my eyes and, reaching up to press my fingers gently against the lids, I slowly opened them, ready for their escape.

My eyeballs shot out what felt like a quarter of an inch, into an azure sea. They stayed in their sockets though, and I strained to focus on what lay beyond the glass barrier of my cozy cylinder.

For the first time since I awoke, fear and worse, revulsion, gripped me like a tiger's caress. Bugs! Bugs standing upright on two legs! Huge exposed brains and chartreuse bulbous eyes! Dark roaches circled around my tube, glaring at me as if I were a lab specimen.

My lungs convulsed to keep up with the demands of a heart gone awry. Nausea overtook me as the cylinder seemed to spin while I remained stationary. Weakly, I pressed my hands against the glass, insanely trying to push myself as far back into the tube as I could—away from the leering, spinning spectators before me. I heard Cos' voice just before everything went sparkly, then black.

* * *

Rita? Rita wake up. Rita!

Cos! Cos, I had the most horrible dream. . . . I took an easy breath of crisp room air.

It wasn't a dream. They have us, Rita. Rita, I'm so sorry. I have failed you in the worst possible way. It's all our fault—not just mine, but the whole colony's. We buried this threat deep within our minds, always believing we had escaped successfully. We denied to ourselves that the Hagions would ever find us, ever dare follow us. Our denial led them right to us, to you, to Earth.

Wha—? What the hell are you babbling— I opened my eyes and found myself staring up at an expansive clear dome that opened up the heavens as I lay on my back on a flat, hard table. The table was too short: My feet dangled off the end. “Where the fuck am I?” I said aloud. My voice echoed as in an empty room. Turning my head sideways, I saw the far walls of this circular room. It resembled a lounge with a beige leather-upholstered bench that went completely around the base of the wall, a bench that looked far too close to the floor to seat most people. The floor was gray, flecked with glitter or something. I pushed myself up and scooted to the end of the table; it too, was very low. As my feet just touched the floor it felt spongy, almost foamlike against my toes. I noticed I had on my dark blue caftan, but no shoes. “What is this place? A planetarium?”

A Hagion virtual-drive ship. We're several miles above Earth right now. Go to your right and put your hands on the wall, if you don't believe me.

I got up and walked to the wall. Before I arrived there, I realized that there was no pain in my back or legs, no limp. *Cos! Look! I'm not hurting, I'm—* I suddenly remembered the fall, the paralysis. I had been certain I would die. Now, I moved freely, and most remarkably, painlessly. It was the first time in twelve years I'd been pain-free; I'd almost forgotten what it was like. I jumped and ran in a circle. Still no pain—no arthritis at all, even in the hands I clenched tightly. I couldn't help it—I just laughed out loud. *Cos! How has this happened? It's incredible! I've never felt so good! Who did you say these geniuses were? Did they do this?*

Hagions—the Holy Ones. Rita, listen to me! Things are not as they appear. It's all part of a grand deception, with you as the primary pawn. They've injected molecular machines into you. The machines have restored your broken spine, and will continue to clear out and dissolve any new arthritic growth. But, you must—

It's wonderful! I'm arthritis-free with nanotechnology!

Forever!

No, Rita. Listen to me. The machines are wonderful, but the Hagions control the machines—

Somebody has to!

. . . and now, the Hagions control you.

Control me? What for? I haven't heard anyone ask me for a damn thing.

Yet. Know that the price will be quoted. Soon.

There's not even anyone around. Hey! Maybe I have the whole ship to myself!

I ran to the wall and slapped my palms on it just as Cos had instructed.

"Holy shit!" I staggered back a few steps as the whole wall faded to transparency. As far as I could see, there was nothing but black space and stars. I peered downward. There, white and beautiful below me, lay Antarctica, ignorant and peaceful as a swan. *My Earth. My beautiful Earth. I really am on a ship in space. Look at this ship! I'll bet this is just one room! This ship must be huge! These Holy Ones, as you call them, are obviously very advanced. What do I have that they could possibly want?*

They will take from you the most valuable thing you've ever had: the Phaedran colony. They will have us. And you will help them.

Oh, Cos! I laughed out loud again, this time at the absurdity of his fears. What do they need with Phaedrans? Just look at this, Cos! Their technology is astounding! Molecular machines, that tube I was in, that shit I was breathing. . . . Then I remembered their faces, staring in at me as I thrashed in my liquid prison. Well, maybe if I understand them more, their appearance won't be so disarming. They had to have had a good reason to put me in that tube—probably to repair my back and let it heal without pressure on it. And a fine job they've done! Molecular machines—my own personal army of surgeons. Imagine that! And what are the chances of an alien ship being of such a precise temperature for humans that the ambient air could be perceived as having no temperature at all? It's wonderful!

Rita, I hope you realize that when whatever drug they've pumped you full of wears off, you'll have a whole different outlook on our situation here. At least, I hope the hell you will.

Drugs? Hell, I'm on a natural high! How wonderful to be out of pain. At last! Look Cos, look! And I had to show him how happy I was by running through the room and springing up like a dancer,

legs apart, free, free like a gazelle!

Yes, drugs. Why do you think when you tried to contact me, that you didn't hear me respond? Your receptiveness was—in a way, still is—drugged out.

I'd know if I was drugged. I'm not, I tell you!

There was quite a pause before I heard more from him. Meanwhile, I was having a great time bending, stretching, kicking, moving in every way I hadn't been able to move in years.

Rita, he said in a low thought-voice. I'm going to try and calm myself and wait out this chemical stupidity you seem to be enjoying so much. By the way, not that you'd ever think to ask in your condition, but no one in the hospice was hurt-- except for you. The children and the others are all right. When the reality of our situation hits you—and it will—call me. I'm going to my room. I felt a twinge of remorse that quickly dissolved to relief that the neohumans were unharmed, then my mood mutated to mirth. I giggled. *Oh, Cos, you shilly sit! I mean . . . What room? My brain doesn't have rooms!*

That's what you think.



CHAPTER 4

SACRIFICES

*Electrons maintain their own territorial energy levels
and can't collapse into each other.*

–Qwiffian Handbook of Sapience
Cosmic Truths—Article II

It felt like a miniature demented tree-surgeon with a chainsaw was inside my head hacking on every dendrite. It hurt to turn over, to blink, to breathe too deeply. My time-out from the euphoria that had seized me must have turned into a nap, and I had no idea for how long. God, I feel like shit. *Cos, are you there?*

Of course. Drug hangover? I told you so.

Don't start with me. I'm at a disadvantage with this headache. I sat up; unexpectedly, the throbbing in my head eased. The lighting in the lounge was soft; I hadn't noticed it before, but it didn't seem to have any definite source: It was just *there*. I damn near broke my ankle when I swung my legs to the floor from the cushioned bench where I sat: I forgot how close to the floor it was—not more than a foot.

How long was I asleep?

Twelve linear hours. Give or take five minutes.

Twelve! Jesus. Has anyone been here? Have we been alone all that time?

No, we haven't. We aren't now.

Huh? We're being watched? From where? I whipped my head around to look for two way-mirrors, cameras. Big mistake. It took several seconds for my brains to catch up with my skull—a serious case of the drunkard's stay-behinds. I heard myself moan.

I've been instructed to . . . to direct you to the panel on the wall behind you.

Instructed? By whom?

The . . . the Hagions. They—

My God, how could they know you're in here? How could they?

They know. You told them. You have recently acquired the nasty habit

of talking in your sleep. Now, will you do as I ask? We don't have much time, I'm afraid.

What did that mean? His thought-voice conveyed a restrained sadness. I felt my stomach fold in on itself. *OK*, I agreed, and went to the panel, bending down to reach it. It was an array of two dozen oddly marked keys. *Uh, what do I do now?*

Push in the half-circle key and hold.

I did. *Nothing's happening. What's supposed to—*

For an insane instant the whole lounge blinked out of existence and the only thing between me and infinity was my caftan. Before I could say another thing, I found myself standing in the center of a giant metallic parabola, perhaps thirty feet in diameter, sides so steep escape would be an impossibility. And escape was exactly the first thing to come to mind, but there were only a few inches of flatness in which to maintain a sure footing. The sides were too smooth, too curved to be scaled in bare feet. The metal's cold seared through my bare soles and rushed headlong to the core of my being.

A booming thud accosted me from somewhere up on the rim. The effect was like being inside an enormous speaker. The thunder seemed to bounce off the sides of the dish and reverberate back into my body. Startled, I clasped my hands over my ears and promptly slipped and fell on my ass from the sudden motion. The cold surface made my anus dive deep into my body, cramping me.

I suspect the words “anal retentive” have taken on a new meaning.

Shut up, Cos. Easing to my feet, I looked up into the blue-gray gloom, just to the rim of the dish about fifteen feet above my head. The air looked smokey and I could barely make out the muted figure of someone . . . some *thing* standing at the rim, peering down at me, booming and thumping.

Bite down, Cos thought-voiced.

What?

Bite down. The lingual decoder-transmitter has been implanted in your upper right wisdom tooth.

I bit down so hard my head ached all over again. The thumping dissolved and was replaced by coherent, carefully enunciated English.

“. . . are not to consider yourself our prisoner. On the contrary, your role holds more importance than anything you have ever

done. Vtekdao requests your assistance in implementing The Purpose. I humbly suggest your enthusiastic cooperation will result in glory beyond imagining, for you will return the universe to the natural order. And when this is done, you will be no less than worshipped. Idols will be erected in your honor for eternity. You will be known forever as the Savior of the Hagion race.”

What kind of delusion is this? “I’m in the psychiatric ward, right? Are you a patient?”

“I am Vnoim, Second Flagellant to the Honorable Altruist.”

Did he say “Flagellant”? Kinky. “Where am I? Where is this place?”

“This place is Lolbah.”

“Are we still on the ship or somewhere else?”

We’re still on the ship, Rita. This wherewhen was phase-shifted to us when you pressed the button.

“What exactly, is *The Purpose*? And why, for chrissakes, do you think I know anything about it and can, or will help you?”

“It is no trivial undertaking, The Purpose. You, Ree-tah, have been chosen. You are solely responsible for its success. It is by the divine will of Hope that you have been sent to us.”

“Sent to you! I was minding my own business at a party when I fell and was whisked away to this place! No one asked me if I wanted to go!”

“Vtekdao reveals the divine will of Hope. Hope has sent you to us.”

“No one sent me! I was abducted! I can’t help you! I don’t fucking want to help you!”

Rita! Do not taunt him, he is only an instrument of the Honorable Altruist. He has been told who you are, and that’s what he believes.

“Of course you will help us. You are weary from the conditioning and the surgery. And hungry, no doubt. Once you rest and take sustenance, you will remember your agreement . . . your important mission.”

“What agreement? Goddamn it! What do you bastards think you’re doing?” I hyperventilated a few seconds before going on. “I really appreciate the work you’ve done on my back and everything, but I don’t have anything for you. Don’t you understand that?” Right then I just lost it and began to cry, more out of frustration than anything else. “Goddamn you! Goddamn you!” I yelled through my tears.

Rita don’t. You don’t know what you’re dealing with.

They're not going to hurt me! They think I'm their stinking messiah. Look where they have you. Could you leave if you chose to? Would a savior be treated as such?

I had no chance to consider an answer before I found myself hovering in empty space for an instant and saw through eyes heavy with tears that they had sent me to a different room. Or, if it was true what Cos said, I stayed in one “place” while these rooms were brought to me; that would be a hard concept to digest.

There was a bed—long enough for me, I was relieved—and something resembling a round computer CRT imbedded in what I decided I would call the north wall. Below the computer was a metal bowl of . . . I looked closely . . . an attempt at lasagna. Not smart, putting hot food in a metal bowl. I leaned in to sniff it—no aroma at all. *Hmm, lasagna. They even know your favorite food. All of a sudden, I'm starved. Is this safe to eat?*

Yes. But you will be disappointed—as will I.

I picked up the utensil—a bizarre affair resembling a curling iron—and stabbed at the square of quasi-lasagna, then ensnared a corner of it with the clip on the utensil and shoved it in my mouth.

My brain must have frosted over.

Panicked, I swallowed. Right then, I knew I had just downed a bolus of hell frozen over. It sluggishly seared an icy path down my esophagus and crash-landed in my stomach like neptunium at critical mass—taking forever to fade to a reasonable temperature.

“Christ!”

I take it, that was not pleasant.

That, Cos, is one friggin' understatement. I think their messiah needs to command a warm meal. What do you think?

To summon a Hagion press the key that looks like a tornado.

Did you learn all this while I was being interrogated in my sleep? How do you know so much?

I remembered; I didn't want to. It's all come forth in a flood—like it happened yesterday. We Phaedrans have a long history with the Holy Ones, as you well know.

But, how can you know of their present technology? Things have to have changed in fifteen billion years.

For the Hagions, technology is arrested. They've spent fifteen billion years in life-suspension—until now. They have found their destination: That destination is us.

My God, why are they after you? Why won't you tell me why they're after you? I thought-voiced, pressing the tornado key on the wall

console.

I don't think it's wise to—

“I am C'toikth. The reason for my presence?”

I caught myself on the edge of the desk as the figure materialized, almost subliminally *happened* before me from nothingness. Or had the room and myself materialized around *it*?

The first thing I noticed was that I towered over it but felt dwarfed by its bilious yellow-eyed stare. Those pupils-- they twirled like little propellers; I knew if I stared too long they'd own me. The second remarkable thing was its huge exposed oblong two-lobed brain. Its chest pulsed with the words it spoke. The teeth looked like little boulders, gray and uneven, and were exposed--lipless. The upper appendages-- six-digit hands, armless and helpless--jutting out from the torso. Those hands could not possibly be functional: They would never meet in any imaginable contortion. All of that, every bizarre feature, was set in a housing of dark blue chitinous shell, but I got the feeling if I touched it, it would “give,” revealing a soft center.

“I, uh . . . The food's too cold. It's painful. Could you warm it up?”

“To what temperature?”

“Oh, I dunno. A hundred degrees?”

“It is done. I am honored you have summoned me. My function is actualized.”

Accommodating creature, he was. I looked over at the bowl--its contents boiled furiously, dissolving into an orangish mush. “Fahrenheit, I meant.”

“Please be hasty in taking your nutrition. You must be prepared for The Procedure. I will return in twenty human-minutes.”

“Procedure? What pro--”

He had vanished.

Cos, do you know what he's talking about?

Eat, Rita. There's no sense in going over the details, since it's inevitable. You will not be harmed, nor will I.

What's inevitable? Little is inevitable. Isn't that what we Qwiffians believe? Dammit, tell me! I felt his refusal--an impression of arms crossing over a defiant chest, shutting me out. *I really hate it when you act like that.* I waited for the bowl to cool before picking up the utensil, dipping into the thick, unappetizing gruel; it looked like it had already been eaten. At least there was an aroma now, though

not one that matched what I had believed was lasagna. I tasted it: The flavor was completely out of place, more like split-pea soup than cheese, tomatoes, and herbs. If I ate it with my eyes closed the visual signals wouldn't argue with the taste; I quickly devoured the whole bowlful before I had a chance to change my mind. A calmness enfolded me; it was hard to tell if it was just the leveling of blood sugar or the Hagions had drugged me again.

It wasn't important. It was time to explore this confining wedge-shaped space they'd put me in.

The bed was soft and appealing. Across the room the dumb stare of the computer screen beckoned further exploration. Reluctantly, I left the bed to study the two rows of twenty-four iconed keys; I could only guess their function. I didn't think it would be a good idea to start punching them at random. When Cos tired of his tantrum he'd clue me in.

The really bad thing about the room was that it had no windows, as well as no door that I could see; that was especially disconcerting. Remembering how the window was in the lounge, I walked the room patting the walls, looking for an opening of some kind. The "west" wall became suddenly transparent, revealing all of space, and below, the same scene of Antarctica as in the lounge. It was unnerving, but preferable to the claustrophobic feeling of before, so I left the wall transparent as I continued my discoveries.

Just at the foot of my bed in the "east" wall a seam appeared to my touch. It was apparently a door, but with no way I could figure, to open it. It reminded me of a police car—no handles on the inside. The effect was not reassuring.

Patting the south wall created an opening into what I assumed was the bathroom, though it was no bathroom I'd ever seen the likes of before. Again, the lighting had no specific source—the room just glowed when I went in. Behind me, the wall returned to solidity where the doorway had been. In a nervous impulse, I rushed back through again just to reassure myself that I could.

Back in the bathroom, I saw ahead of me a stall, dark and ominous. Standing at the edge of the darkness, I pushed my hand in: Nothing happened. I reached down, hoping I'd find a floor: I did. The stall came alive with light and five Ritas. I went in. All around me, on every wall, including behind, above, and below, my own reflection gawked back at me in six different views. Maybe the Hagions were a vain race, or so insecure as to require constant

visual validation that they existed. I dubbed this place the *Ego Box*.

I bounced through the rear wall back into the bathroom. To my right stood a fountain set in the center of a circular grid where I presumed water drained. The whole affair was installed in a rectangular marble depression. This must be the shower.

Across from the shower, imbedded in the floor, grew a rather low golden funnel resembling a tuba. I tittered. Was I to shit in a tuba? I hoped I'd find out for sure before I went ahead and used it for that very purpose.

Satisfied with the facilities, I slipped back through the wall into my quarters. I came about three inches from crashing into a five-foot-tall roach.

"You're back. So soon," I sighed.

"It is time for The Procedure. Follow me." It turned on spindly many-jointed legs, click-clacking across the floor on hooved four-toed zygodactyl feet.

"Wait a minute! What procedure? I'd really like some details here." I followed the Hagion through the wall, feeling it give around my body like warm bubble gum, into a tunnel-like corridor that had an obvious grade to it. "Where are we going? How come I have to walk this time? Can't you just zap our destination to us, like before?"

"This level is the Ignorant living quarters. We will be on the Society level soon, and then proceed on to the Procedure level. You will need to remember the ship's configuration, so please remain alert."

Cos, I don't feel good about this. Where are we going and what for?

There's nothing I or anyone can do. In spherical time, it's already happened. Neither of us will be--has been-- harmed. Just remember: Whatever happens--has happened--I will always love you. You will always be with me.

Are . . . are you saying goodbye? Cos, please! Can the dramatics!

You will know, soon enough. No sense in getting upset in advance. You will need your wits about you.

But I *was* upset. I wanted to scream. I wanted to beat the creature ahead of me senseless. Something real unpleasant was going to happen to me against my will. But from the impression I got, it was going to be a lot worse for Cos than for me.

I stopped.

The roach kept going, clicking its way up the low-grade spiral. It then spun around—I didn't expect that it could move that fast.

“Please quicken your pace. Vtekdao dislikes delays.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said, folding my arms under my breasts.

“You *are*.”

“I’m *not*.” I rocked back on one hip, standing fast. The tunnel flickered.

“You *have*.”

I stood beside the low table in the big beige and gray lounge, a hundred pairs of bulbous ochre eyes glaring at me, their flower pupils twirling. I had to look down, avoid the hideous spinning of those black pinwheels. For the first time, I realized that I was not in control.

“Ree-tah,” a gentle low voice commanded from the group of Hagions seated on the bench against the curved wall. The large Hagion in the middle unfolded its many-jointed legs and rose. “I am Vtekdao. Hope has chosen you to implement The Purpose. Destiny will be fulfilled.”

“Yeah, yeah. So I’ve heard. Just what *is* The Purpose?”

“To restore universal order.”

Christ. “Your answer has no meaning for me. Would you mind terribly, expanding on that?”

“You will remind the Benefactors of their duties and rightful place, and bring them to us. In return, the Benefactor Cosmigellan—as you refer to zhan—will be returned to you unharmed.”

About then, I could have sworn my brain spasmed.

This sounds ominous, Cos. What does he mean? “Who are these Benefactors? I don’t know anyone by this name. Why do you think I can, or *will* convince anyone of anything? I’d just like to go home, if you don’t mind.”

“You refer to the Benefactors as Phaedrants. The Phaedrants must be restored to us. We cannot take them because of their self-destructive behavior when fear overcomes them. . . .” He stopped speaking all of a sudden and froze. Wet membranes slid from the inner corners of his eyes and quivered at half-mast for maybe twenty seconds. Everyone just sat there, waiting. Was this roach epileptic or something?

“We do not wish them damaged,” he continued. “You, Ree-tah, are greatly respected and trusted by your colony. They will do as you ask without quarrel, without incident. Your cooperation will fulfill The Purpose.”

“Wait a minute. They don’t *belong* to me. I don’t govern them.

I won't tell them what to do with their lives—I can't. From what I understand, they've been running from you since this universe began. They don't want anything to do with you. They hate you, don't you know that?"

Vtekdao's eyes expanded alarmingly, and his torso flushed a brilliant light blue. Was this anger? Fear? Amusement?

"The Purpose must be realized. It is the will of Hope."

I never got a chance to say another thing. Before I knew it, two Hagions had approached from behind with dangerously long tweezers—I felt a sharp sting on the back of my neck—and my whole body went rigid. I couldn't even move my eyeballs.

Instantly I was surrounded by a swarm of roaches; the ceiling rotated into view as I felt my body being placed on the table. Vtekdao twisted and leaned over me, unwadding his hand to place a small but alarmingly heavy silver sphere on my forehead.

A vacuuming sensation built to an agonizing suction, tearing at my brain, turning it inside out, pumping it dry of something I was sure I needed.

Cosmigellan's scream sheared through my head.

My God, what were they doing to him? I'd never heard him scream like that before. They were hurting him! Cos lied to me. Why would he do that?

Cos! Cos, what's happening? Are you OK? Say something!

There was silence now.

Mute tears ran down my face, pooling in my ears. I couldn't help him. I couldn't stop *them*. A feeling of emptiness possessed me, leaving me as hollow as a discarded egg shell—my very reason for being, ripped from my brain and taken . . . where?



CHAPTER 5

CONCESSIONS

*In order for an electron to jump from one level to another,
it must “know” its own path as well as the paths not taken.*

–Qwiffian Handbook of Sapience
Cosmic Truths—Article II

Out of frustration I slammed my fist into the wall with a wrist-wrenching thud. It was all my fault. If I hadn’t been so tired and talkative in my sleep, the Hagions never would have known Cosmigellan was with me. I had serious doubts now that he wouldn’t be harmed. My attempts to contact him through The One were fruitless—he simply would not answer. Cos had tried to warn me when we first came here, but I wouldn’t listen. Now the whole colony was in danger.

I paced my small wedge, spending the adrenalin that gushed forth with my every regret.

So much for personal glory—all that spewage about being worshipped, idolized, was supposed to have been some kind of incentive to get my cooperation in turning over the colony to them. They expected me to be thrilled with my new role: I should have pretended I was thrilled. When I didn’t respond appropriately, they took Cos as insurance.

No wonder Cos, all of the Phaedrans, had just surrendered to the Hagions. There was no resisting Hagion control when they could just zap you where they wanted you to be, paralyze you in mid-thought, take things from you without your permission. It was beginning to look pretty hopeless.

Hagion dominance explained Cos’ obsession with freeing me of my abusive father so many years ago: It was born of his past relationship with Hagion oppression. He had delighted in psychologically tormenting Jim Grayson, had made it his reason for being. Now I understood why.

It was my turn, I decided, to repay the favor.

What I didn’t comprehend was where Cosmigellan’s strength

had disappeared to. Where was it now that he needed it not only for himself, but for the colony, for me? Why was he so passive? It didn't make sense.

The Hagions called the Phaedrans "The Benefactors." I'd have to find out what exactly they were supposed to benefit: What *The Purpose* really was.

That's not all I'd have to find out. If in fact it was intended that I have free run of the ship, then I'd better start learning everything I could about my captors. Know your enemy; as far as I was concerned, the Hagions *had* graduated from unknowns to enemies.

Fortified with a growing confidence, I touched the east wall, felt the density change, and slipped through unimpaired. I hadn't taken five steps before I heard a rhythmic thumping from my right. Beside me calmly walked a Hagion, just thump-chattering away, hands gesturing in intriguing wadding and unwadding motions. I bit down hard to activate the lingual decoder; it must have got turned off when I went rigid during Cos' extraction.

"... level is Vtekdao's chambers and the very heart of Hagion governmental procedure."

"I'm sorry, my decoder was accidentally turned off. Would you mind repeating?"

"I merely enlightened you to the function of the levels of Lolbah. It is better I show you."

"Uh, I don't mean to offend, but you all look alike to me. Which one are you?"

"I am C'toikth, Obligant to the Honorable Altruist—whoever zhe may be."

Ah, yes. Of molten lasagna fame. "You mean Vtekdao."

"I will always be an Obligant to the Honorable Altruist; perhaps Vtekdao will not always be the Honorable Altruist. The upcoming election may prove otherwise."

Did I detect a certain sarcasm in its voice? "You don't like Vtekdao?"

"My feelings regarding Vtekdao are unimportant. The next election will decide all. The Ignorants will do the honorable thing for our society."

Obligants. Ignorants. Jesus, what kind of strange heirarchy did they have here? "Obligants don't vote? If you call it voting...."

"Only Ignorants may vote. We have arrived on level five. Enter here." C'toikth turned sideways and pointed a long first finger

at a red dot on the wall, freezing in mid-action for about twenty seconds. Jesus, another petit mal sufferer. I was glad to rest my legs. The walk had been all uphill, and apparently in a spiral curling to the right. C'toikth recovered from his fugue and pressed the dot.

What I saw when I went through the wall with the blue roach had my whole attention now. My heart skipped several beats.

"Cos!" I gasped. He had been completely restored to his human body, a body he had been forced to give up that he might save himself from certain deterioration, reversion to his native amoeboid form, and ultimately, death. For six years he had existed as a DNA packet within my brain. For six years I had longed to look into those Hershey-syrup eyes, to wrap myself around his physique. And here he was, shrouded in one of *my* caftans, no less, recreated in every detail—I hoped.

But something important was missing from those dark eyes. The fire in them was gone, burned out by an oppressive resignation.

I rushed to hug him, but a Hagion quickly intercepted my embrace by stepping between us. If I'd had my boots on, I'd have stomped the roach into an unrecognizable goo right then and there.

"This Benefactor is not yours. You have not permission to handle zhan," Vtekdao said in his distinctive baritone voice.

His whole face smiled, filling me with joy. "Cos, are you OK? Have they hurt you?"

"I am well. And you, my beloved Rita?"

"Ak! The psychosis of *love!* Spare us!" Vtekdao bellowed, then said to a subordinate, "Take the Benefactor to Procedure. I have special plans for zhan." He returned his bile glare to me, pupils whirling.

"Honor your agreement and zhe will be returned to your custody. Violate it, we keep zhan."

"What agreement? I don't remember agreeing to anything."

"You will convince the Benefactors—the Phaedrans—to return with you to Lolbah. It is the will of Hope."

"You're sending me back down?" That came as a surprise. "I take it I'll be escorted."

"You will go alone, unimpeded. We do not wish to distress the Benefactors with our presence."

"How can you be sure that once I'm back on Earth, I'll do as you demand?"

"Do it, Rita!" Cos yelled over his shoulder as he faded through

the wall with a Hagion at his heels.

“Your sickness for Cosmigellan nearly guarantees it. Nearly. To further ensure your loyalty, an Executioner has been implanted within your flesh that will kill you after a pre-determined time. You must return to the ship to have it removed.

“Gather the Benefactors and yourself in a closed circle; all must be touching to transport back here. Do not be so foolish as to attempt to bring anything back with you, especially weapons. Anything not of your flesh will be out of phase when you are put back in phase with Lolbah—and will simply pass through, falling back to your planet’s surface. You do anything other than what you’ve agreed to do—you die. You have half a sextet—three human hours, starting . . . now.”

I hung for a second in space, Antarctica below me, before I felt my bare feet touch solid ground again.

I stood, knees weak and shaking, in the kitchen of the hospice. I expected to be naked, but found my caftan intact. Maybe that phase thing worked in only one direction.

Two men sat at the dining room table sipping something steamy. In the living room an audience of human mothers embraced their neohuman children as if saying goodbye. No one spoke. I got the feeling they had been expecting me; Cos had probably told them through The One that I was coming back—and why. I wasn’t really sure what to say.

I noted the time on the microwave clock; one twenty-five P.M. “I . . . I . . . uh, guess you know why I’m here.”

“We know,” Anne said, hugging her teenage daughter Jaynah close, a daughter born with the fully conscious personality of her former neohuman lover, Gilbert. Six-year-old Jaynah looked all of sixteen, developmental acceleration an unexpected consequence of Phaedran-human DNA conjugation.

“Stella’s been looking for you,” Anne continued, bitterness spiking her voice. “The children accept Stella; they’re her friends. How will you explain this to her?”

Stella. I didn’t have time to deal with Stella’s neediness now. But once the colony was transported, where would Stella go? Who else could be there for her as we were there for her?

I hated my little sister just then—her alcoholism, her helplessness, the empty place in her that sapped the good out of everyone around her. I hated myself for not being able to help her, for not loving her as I loved the neohumans. I couldn’t think

about her now. Not now. Not ever again.

“I don’t know how to say what I have to say . . .” My voice quavered and my face flushed hot.

One of the men at the table stood, pounding his empty cup on the table. He was Nancy’s brother, Bob. “What makes you think you’ll get away with this? Why should we listen to you? Who the hell do you think you are, little lady? No one’s going nowhere. Got it?”

“Bob, you don’t understand. They’ve got Cos, they’ve implanted a device in me that will kill me just after four this afternoon. I—we—have no choice.”

He barked a short laugh. “Why should we believe you? You’re a Goddamned traitor! You know what we do to traitors don’t you? Same thing we do to anyone who breaks the codes!” He stepped closer to me, his voice lowered. “Hit the road, little lady. You’re no longer wanted here.”

“Bob!” Nancy broke in. “You know we’ve discussed this for two days. You promised to keep your mouth shut. Rita’s doing the best she can. She . . . has to do it.” Nancy shot me a quick glance; I barely caught it.

Bob mumbled something under his breath as he stared through his sister; I only caught the last part of it: “. . . women weren’t in charge, it’d all be over. We could just storm the ship, catch ‘em by surprise,” he said, hitching up his pants and storming out the kitchen door.

I had the sick feeling Bob might be right. How could I tell the people I’d lived with and shared thoughts with through The One for six years, that I was about to betray them in the most horrifying way imaginable? How could I tell them that to save my own lover, my own skin, I was about to turn them over to a race of oppressors they managed to escape and remain hidden from for fifteen billion years? I should just reach into the drawer, pull out a knife and kill myself: I would be as good as dead inside without my neohuman family.

“The children will go with you, if that is what must be,” Anne said coolly. “We don’t like it, however, and we don’t relinquish them willingly. It’s just that. . . .” Anne finally broke down in tears. “They insisted! They *want* to go! They said it’s the Ancient Way! My God, I don’t understand it! How can you all just give up like that?” she wailed, looking to each child’s expressionless face, then back up at me. “And how can *you* cooperate with those monsters?”

What's wrong with you?"

I felt sick. Shame boiled up from the past: An image of my father sneering, pointing an accusing finger at his "bad seed."

Jaynah hugged her mother. "It's OK. We can't fight it. It's better if we just go."

"It may not be permanent," I offered. "I'm sure if we all work together, we can find a way to. . . ." But I didn't believe it myself. There was a time-bomb ticking away somewhere inside me and if I didn't deliver, I'd be history. And knowing the Hagions as little as I did, I knew they'd find some other way to come harvest their Benefactors once I was dead. I managed to convince myself that my staying alive might be the only way to reverse this nasty turn of events. I just didn't have any good ideas right at this moment, but that didn't mean I wouldn't ever find a solution.

The neohumans, after all, seemed all too eager to submit to the destiny dictated by the Hagions. The neohumans believed that it was right somehow. The last words Cos said to me still rang in my ears: "Do it, Rita." It was completely against the Qwiffian codes: self-sacrifice for its own sake was a crime in our isolated society on this southern California ranch. The only honorable action was to live to one's potential—not surrender one's values, everything one stood for, to the whims of another. The Ancient Way—submission to axioms, to fate—no longer held power. Or so I was led to believe.

Who was I to interfere? Still, how could I ever live with what I was about to do?

The Hagions had simply claimed the neohumans as their property. The Benefactors, they'd been called. How ugly. How utterly disgusting to possess another.

It *wasn't* going to happen! Not while I was still alive! "Where's Macro?"

"Painting. I'll call him," Anne said, closing her eyes.

Through the hall sauntered a tall, lean, dark-haired teenage boy: one of the masculinized females. When Abrazuver had transferred to Julianna, he chose to remain male.

"Macro, how are you?" I said, holding out my arms. Macro eased into them, returning the hug. "Have you had time to process our situation? Do you understand what's going to happen?"

He paused before speaking. "I th-think s-so. Tell me." His speech was improving. Julianna's death during delivery had left Macro with an unusual kind of brain damage that not only affected

his speech, but had shut down the corpus callosum, so he had in effect two separate brains, and as a result, some remarkable information processing talents—the reason for his nickname “Macro.” I held him, never able to forget the day he was born, a fully conscious being trapped in an infant’s body, emerging from Julianna’s fifty-one-year-old womb, giving him a second chance at life, only to result in her death. That day would be with us all forever.

“Macro, listen carefully. When you have the whole program, repeat it to me. It’s important that I know you understand.”

“Oh-k-k-kay. Go ahead.”

“Hagions arrived. Hagions keep Cosmigellan. Hagions want Benefactors. Rita forced to help Hagions. Hagions return universe to previous order. If not, Rita dies. End program.”

He looked up at me, a glimmer of something mysterious churning behind those crystal eyes framed by straight dark hair. I had to smile, seeing Julianna in his features, and knowing now that she had not been a natural blond.

Macro pushed away, a wild look in his eyes. “We m-*must* go. No choice.”

He understood. No need to put him through the drill of repeating the statements. My heart sank. For a minute I hoped he wouldn’t understand, would remain ignorant of his fate. “That’s right.” I pulled him in close. “I’m so sorry,” I whispered. “When I promised to care for you, I never imagined I’d be up against the Hagions.”

I still had time to try to talk some sense into these passive neohuman reborns. I called a meeting where I could have everyone’s attention at the big dining room table. Bob came back in, sneaking to a chair at the far end of table.

“We have to fight the Hagions, don’t you understand? I know there has to be a way. Now, I don’t have much to work with yet, but I’ve seen a few things that could help us—weaknesses.”

“From what I can gather, the one called Vtekdao has absolute rule; the other Hagions defer to him without question. That is, I *think* they do. I’m not so sure about the one called C’toikth. I can’t explain it, but I detect some animosity towards Vtekdao from that one. C’toikth told me there’d be an election soon and I got the feeling he and a class of Hagions called Ignorants—the only ones allowed to vote—would just as soon see Vtekdao out on his ass.

“Another thing: A couple of the Hagions suffer from some

sort of absence epilepsy. Every once in a while they just stop and their eyes flutter. When they come out of it twenty or so seconds later, they continue speaking or doing whatever it was they were doing and don't acknowledge that anything odd happened. I don't know if any of the others have these seizures, but I'm hoping they do. Twenty seconds is a long time—enough time to do damage. I need to know more about their values—if individual lives matter to them, and if kidnapping or even death, if necessary, would be taken seriously. Do any of you know? Do you remember anything about them that could be useful to *our* purpose?"

The children shook their heads. "No one remembers," Darwinia said, more in defiance than apology.

"Important f-f-facts. Delay t-transport. I go w-with you. Others s-s-stay."

"You mean, call their bluff? Tell them the colony isn't ready or something? I don't see them as patient. It's my life and your freedom we're gambling with."

"I help you l-l-learn more. We m-must."

"You've got that right. Well, OK then! It's worth the chance. When it's time, you'll stand beside me."

"Oh, and that bullshit about my being their messiah—I'll flush that." I directed this specifically at Bob. "What being would set up their savior for destruction?"

Bob snorted, "Yeah, ask a Christian."

"Never mind. The bottom line is, I've been told one thing and am being treated exactly the opposite. I *am* their prisoner. If I don't return with at least some of you, I die sometime after four—if I can assume that transport from the ship was instantaneous."

"We're going to need a weapon of some . . . Damn! Vtekdao said anything that wasn't part of me couldn't be put back in phase with the ship." Yet, I had materialized with my caftan. "What does it mean—in phase, out of phase? Objects out of phase would fall through the ship, Vtekdao said."

"Phase refers to the resonances, the vibrations of energy/matter waves or knots. Essentially, the reason you can't walk through a wall is because you and the wall are out of phase—your waves are discordant and do not vibrate at similar frequencies," Jaynah said. "If you were in phase, you'd dissolve through the wall."

"But . . . that's the opposite of what Vtekdao—"

"It can't happen as he says."

I didn't believe Vtekdao would make such a mistake—not in his position, with all that advanced technology—not by accident. “Then, maybe we *can*. . . .”

“I'll get right on it. Should have the calculations in a few minutes. The rest is easy.” Jaynah sprang to her feet and trotted down the hall, long light-brown curls bouncing around her shoulders.

At last, some effort from the neohumans on their own behalf. It was going to take a lot of encouragement on my part, but if I kept up this strategy of enlisting their help for my sake, they'd eventually be involved in saving themselves from a fate they were far too willing to accept.

“Jaynah's a bright girl. She'll be just as adept at electronics and math as Gilbert was,” Anne said. She laughed softly. “I keep forgetting Jaynah *is* Gilbert.”

“Do you really think we have a chance against the Hagions? Is it crazy to think the colony can survive? I understood it was hopeless,” Nancy said, stroking Doron's albino head. Doron still looked very feminine; the hormone treatments would have to be increased.

“I have no doubt we can do this—we have to. It's the *how* that has me stumped. Macro and I will gather more information . . . if, that is, Macro is allowed free run of the ship as I am. I never thought of that.” Doubt threatened to rob me of my resolve just then; it would take everything I had in me to keep uncertainty at bay.

I got up from the table and seated myself in the overstuffed chair that faced out the picture window to the east pasture. By some miracle and a lot of ingenuity, this would not be our last day on this ranch—our sanctuary, our sovereign society where no one uninvited intrudes.

The neohumans and their human companions had built this place together. Following my father's planned demise, they all pitched in and bought the ranch, erecting seven new houses soon afterward. We lived together in peace, subject only to our own values and codes while rejecting most outside influences. No one even owned a TV or read newspapers. The U.S. was a foreign country to us; we would no more be influenced by the media from it than we would India. Whatever the government did to its citizens was their problem, not ours. We chose to live separate from society and its woes—the pollution, the traffic jams, the waiting in line, the stealing, drugs, killing, and the obscene roster of new restricting

laws put on the books daily—all manner of obsession and oppression.

For all those years we had been nearly self-supporting, raising our own food, making our own clothes and most of our tools, repairing our own equipment from cars to computers. Yes, we still had to go to the cities occasionally for supplies—we called it our monthly excursion into hell—but in essence we had just dropped out of society. No neohuman was even registered with the Social Security or the school system. And much to our surprise, no bureaucrats bothered us. Civilization barely knew we existed.

We who lived here were truly free, accountable only to ourselves. Individuals excelled in their own chosen fields of expertise, from mechanic to medical technician. We were a truly integrated village society, and it all happened without greed, without bribes, threats, force, fighting, punishment, or killing—without laws. It would never happen again in the history of this planet.

And the Hagions thought they could end that? Invalidate it with their *need*? Not in *my* lifetime, they wouldn't.

"It's all here!" Jaynah said, bounding back into the living room, a trail of computer fanfold flying behind her from her left hand. She went directly to Macro, who folded the sheets into a neat stack as he read them.

"It'll w-work. L-look, Rita."

The first page was cluttered with row upon row of mathematical equations. I understood nothing. "I'll have to take your word for it. What does it mean?"

"It's the complete formulas and diagrams for a compact laser pistol," Jaynah explained. "One power setting only, I'm afraid, due to its small size. But it will stun a human for an hour, maybe more."

I sighed. Didn't she—didn't Gilbert—remember that the Hagions had an exoskeleton? Didn't any of them remember *anything* of their feared enemy? "Stun, Jaynah? I need something that'll kill." The look on her face was that of utter horror. "I know, I know. Except for food and self-defense, it's against the codes. But this *is* self-defense. I have every intention of exhausting every other option before I resort to killing, believe me. But, killing is sometimes necessary."

"I will not build a weapon to kill. I will *not*."

Oh boy. I hadn't anticipated this snag. "Jaynah, please. For

the colony, for me. What if I am cornered, what if I have no choice but to kill or die? Wouldn't you want me to choose myself over a Hagion?"

"But, you're on their ship. It is not self-defense if you go to them."

"They force me to go to them. Remember? The Executioner? I must fight them on their own turf—that is the arena *they* have chosen, not I."

"I . . . I don't have any experience with such a situation. I don't know. . . ."

"That's right: You *don't* know. But I do. I was raised in a human society. I know very well. Make the weapon, Jaynah. It must kill." Saying nothing, she turned and left with the stack of print-out. I followed her.

"Wait. There isn't time to build it the conventional way. Are you able to visualize the device?"

"Yes, I can see it clearly."

"Then, quickly. Go eat something rich. You'll need the calories."

"There's something I need to tell you about—"

"Now! Time's short." I felt a twinge of remorse, snapping at her like that.

She returned with a saucer piled high with cream cheese. It wouldn't be digested quickly enough to contribute to the heavy energy output about to take place, but it would eventually replace her own reserves that were likely to be depleted.

"What are you going to use for your material?" I asked.

She swallowed hard, a grimace contorting her smooth young face. "A 'C' battery, I think."

"That's enough mass?"

"Sure. How many do you want me to make?"

"I hadn't thought about it. How big will it be?"

"About the size of a Bic lighter. That's what I wanted to explain. The design calls for a special hiding place. A body cavity."

I gasped with delight. "Of course! How brilliant of you! Inserted, it'll be put into phase when *I* am. Good thinking, Jaynah!"

I rummaged through a drawer below the aquarium and handed her four batteries. "This many . . . for now."

Jaynah moved to the center of the spacious living room. She took a few deep breaths as she tilted her head back and closed her eyes, right hand hovering over a battery in her left hand.

A dull infrasonic hum consumed the large house as everyone watched, riveted on her hands. Liquid lavender webs oozed from her fingertips, wrapping around the battery, making it pulse in a hot purple glow. Long strands of fluid electricity pulled in concentric rings around and through the battery, stretching it, reshaping it from the inside out. The sub-bass hum reached a chest-thudding peak and suddenly died, evaporating with the lavender filaments.

In her hand, Jaynah held a solid silver cylinder about the size of a lipstick. She smiled and held it up for all to see. Her stomach growled.

“That’s it? How’s it work?” I asked.

She pointed it at an apple perched atop a bowl of fruit on the dining room table. Her thumb slid up the cylinder and a sharp pop split the air. A faint cider odor laced the room.

The apple had vanished.

“Shit. Will it do that to a whole Hagion?” I said.

“Any part of it about the same size and mass.”

I warded off a vague wave of nausea. That thing could be messy in unskilled hands. “Well, you’ve sure as hell come through for us. Nice work. Now, how’d you like to explain to me how you turned it on? I don’t see any switch.” She handed it to me. It was totally smooth—no buttons, no seams, no opening on either end.

“Use your thumbnail. The friction sets up a chaotic vibration that builds and is released from the end as amplified light.”

I turned the device in my hand. “Christ, I can’t tell which end is which.”

“It doesn’t matter. It fires in the direction scratched.”

“Terrific. As long as no one’s scratching from the other end, huh?” I aimed at a banana in the bowl and scraped my thumbnail forward on the cylinder. A pop and the room was filled with acetone-like banana vapor. Wouldn’t the pentagon love to get a hold of this? Self-contained, portable, no moving parts. “What’s the energy source? How long will it last?”

“It’s recharged with light. It should last a long time--I’m not really sure.”

Great. I knew there had to be a catch. I sat at the table while Jaynah transmuted the other three batteries. She collapsed on the sofa shortly after finishing the last one. Anne brought her a quart of orange juice fortified with a cupful of honey; Jaynah guzzled it. As fantastic as it was, the neohumans seldom converted objects. It just took too much out of them.

It was three-thirty. I had to decide if I had the courage to attempt deceiving the Hagions. Macro would go back to the ship with me, but who else? Macro would be invaluable with his ability to derive correlations from dozens of apparently unrelated observations.

I considered each of the neohuman's individual talents. It would be difficult to anticipate what skills would be needed aboard the Hagion ship. Jaynah was an electronics genius, but she had probably done all she could do for now. Darwinia—formerly Tobey—and her background in evolution could be useful in many ways, but perhaps not immediately-- she was a bit testy today. Doron—of Alabaster's DNA packet, though skilled in empathic psychology, was physically delicate and could be at risk in an emergency. Bohrelia (Alexander) could help with understanding the physics, especially the ship's drive and transport system. But Bohrelia was blind. Not a good choice, unless I had no choice.

It looked like Macro and I would be going up alone. I inserted one of Jaynah's devices into my vagina; Macro put his in his anus. I insisted that Macro hold my hand from then on-- transport could occur at any minute. I hadn't even given serious consideration to what kind of bullshit story I would feed the Hagions when they found me with only one Benefactor. How would I convince them that only one neohuman would return willingly? Surely the Hagions knew of their Benefactors' passivity. They would be suspicious of this sudden surge of defiance. Maybe I'd try to convince them--

A sudden whiff of something familiar, but not exactly welcome registered in my nasal cavities. Turning my head in many directions, sniffing for the source, it hit me: The smell did not waft from any direction; it came from within my own head. Almonds. Now I tasted it: sickening bittersweet almonds.

Oh God! Why didn't they come for me? Were they just going to let me die? "No! It's killing me! I don't want to die!"

Marco gripped my hand tighter, then let go to hold me by the shoulders. I felt drained, like the life force was oozing out of me. My knees gave out; I stumbled into the kitchen counter, dizzy, gasping. I saw my pink face in the chrome toaster, a swimming reflection of a dead woman. My eyes. Something was wrong with my eyes—the pupils. *Not the same size! Not the same!* Macro hugged me tightly. Voices crowded in around me, speaking words I didn't understand. I thought I heard a plaintive meow, felt a warmth curl around my leg.

A roar devoured the inside of my head as the hand of eternity closed down on my throat, hurling me into a black wall.



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