

Something Very Special

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BASED ON THE HARRY POTTER BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

“We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the universe. That makes us something very special.”

-Stephen Hawking (as are all subsequent chapter quotes)

Wands, it is commonly known, are not strictly necessary if one is to perform magic. Nor are words, for if a witch or wizard is powerful enough, magic can be shaped with the mind alone. And of course, there are all manner of enchanted artifacts—rings, amulets, and the like—that allow the user to accomplish magic without a wand. Alan Baker was not a particularly powerful wizard, and conscious enough of his own absent-mindedness not to rely purely on artifacts, lest he leave them somewhere. And yet, Alan Baker had no use for wands.

If one were to *prior incantato* his outdated, duct-taped rod of walnut wood and dragon heartstring, its most recent use would have been the enchantment of the long-lived neurons in Alan's own mind. This enchantment, possible only for those who were capable of seeing themselves as a complex amalgamation of neural impulses, allowed him to bypass both wands and words. Alan did this, not for show, not for power, but because wandwork distracted him from his reading.

Unfortunately, there was no legal spell to get rid of barflies.

“Hey- hey mate, you gotta- gotta minute to-“

Sobrius, Alan thought, placing one hand on his neighbor's forehead without looking up. He pondered whether or not to cast a silencing barrier, even in violation of the Leaky Cauldron's safety code.

“Thanks,” said the now-sober man, “Readin’ more of that Muggle trash, I see.”

Alan closed his eyes and counted to three, but when he opened them, the man was still there. Alan lowered his “Muggle trash” in defeat, meeting the baggy, bloodshot eyes of the wizard sitting across from him.

Alan leaned forward, placing his hands steeple-like on the table. “Mr. Fletcher, do you know why time turners don't send you into space?”

“The sky, y'mean? Cause they're fer time turnin', not apparation.”

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Alan had to take a deep breath. “No,” he replied, “If time turners weren’t anchored to anything, the Earth’s rotation alone would be enough to ensure a time traveler’s demise. But someone at the ministry was clever enough to anchor them to a carefully guarded object that never moves relative to the Earth.”

“Fascinat’n,” slurred Mundungus, whose eyes had glazed over once it became clear that Alan didn’t actually have a time turner on him.

“But time turners are still very limited,” continued Alan, more to himself than to Mundungus, “They can’t go more than seven hours back, and not forward at all, and only in increments of one hour, and they only work on Earth... no, they’re very clumsy, if one truly pauses to think about it.”

“What’s yer point?”

“My *point* is that while wizards are slowly stagnating in their backwards remnant of the Dark Ages, Muggles are making progress, ever reaching for the light. Do you know that they don’t need magic to craft a hand of living silver?”

“Bah,” was Mundungus’s only reply, “You’d be best mates with that Weasley nutcase at the ministry, you would.”

Alan stood up, silently casting an *infantes gelata* to check for paradoxes. “I don’t know why I bother with you,” he sighed, “you’ve just wasted another two minutes of my time. Perhaps I bother because I have time to waste.”

And he twisted, as if to apparate, but instead faded out of existence with a distinct *vworp*. The air swirled in the wake of his departure, blowing back Mundungus’s straggly ginger hair.

“Muggleborns,” the short wizard muttered, then turned back to his drink.

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Thirty minutes earlier, Alan lounged contentedly within his quieting barrier, stirring his cup of tea absently and rereading one of his favourite Muggle books. He wondered, vaguely, which planet held the nearest sapient life, and what their magic would look like...

CHAPTER ONE

DESSERT BEFORE DINNER

“I have noticed even people who claim everything is predestined, and that we can do nothing to change it, look before they cross the road.”

It was a mundane home, even by Muggle standards—the lawn was tended, if carelessly, and there was a garage, even if nobody could quite recall a car emerging from it. The man living there was friendly, on the rare occasions he spoke to the neighbors. It had been noted (but not with any particular interest) when his girlfriend moved in a few months prior. And if anyone noticed that the house wasn’t connected to the Muggle power grid, nobody had said anything.

It was a mundane home that Alan walked up to in the brisk evening air, whistling a soft tune to match the soft light of the street lamps. It was a mundane home, at least on the outside.

“How was your day, *mein Schatz?*” Ava’s voice wafted from the dining room. Her English was flawless, but she addressed Alan in German sometimes. It reminded her of when they had first met at Scarab Academy—he in Talamh House and she in Lasair—and the two would sit in the library, documenting the slight peculiarities in her spellcasting that resulted from pronouncing incantations with a German accent. Even then, science had drawn the two together.

“Excellent.” Alan shed his coat and his reserved personality as he entered the room, “I’ve finally worked out the subtleties of timeline-splitting, and you won’t *believe* what I found out.” He picked his way over chocolate frog wrappers and crumpled blueprints on his way to the table, where Ava slouched in a rolling chair. She had clearly been absorbed in another one of her programming projects, for her laptop displayed many lines of the MagicJava language she’d developed, and there was a scorched ring on the table where an automated *Protego* had contained the disastrous results of a compiler error.

(Alan had learned some rudimentary coding from his girlfriend, but was still more comfortable crafting new spells and enchantments with his hands, in the familiar rune circles that Ava called an “abhorrent affront to visual programming languages.” Understandably, she handled most of the complex spell construction.)

“Reading Hawking again?” Ava asked as Alan set his book down on the table. He planted a kiss on her forehead and sat down next to her.

“Yep,” he affirmed, “Although that Fletcher bloke called him trash earlier today.”

Ava shook her head, “Hawking’s sexism gets to me, but trash is a bit harsh.”

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“Somehow, I doubt Fletcher was thinking along those lines,” Alan chuckled, “It would have taken me ages to get so far without this book, though.”

Ava’s glance held an implicit question. Alan put off his own curiosity about her work and stood up again.

“All right,” he said, “I’ll demonstrate, then I’ll tell you about my day.”

Alan set a mental timer; Ava started recording with a few keystrokes. “In one minute, I’m going to travel thirty seconds back in time, which gives me half a minute to explain this. Once my future self appears, he will cast either red or green sparks. I will take note of this, and when it’s my turn to travel back, my sparks will be the opposite color of his.”

Ava nodded. “Which will split the timeline in two, creating one reality with green sparks and one with red. Haven’t we agreed not to split the timeline?”

“Yes, but the split isn’t as permanent as we thought before.”

Vworp.

Alan’s doppelgänger stumbled out of the future, met his own eyes—always an unnerving experience—and switched places with him. He snapped his fingers, and sparks flew. As the colors faded and the previous Alan prepared to jump to the past, his slightly older self raised his eyebrows in Ava’s general direction.

“Now, my love... what colour were those sparks?”

“Red, of course.” Her brow furrowed. “N- no, green, perhaps. I’m not sure. Both seem right. They were a distinct colour, I recall that much.” A pause. “Does this mean what I think it does?”

“Oh yes,” Alan replied, “The timeline splits, but it merges again if the two parallel realities are similar enough. Apparently the different memories held in your mind aren’t sufficient to keep the two timelines apart. So when they merge, you get both sets of memories. And it’s happened to you before, right? Just like it’s happened to me, and everyone else. I suspect that this implies time travel is more common than we thought.”

Ava leaned forward; her blue eyes were bright with curiosity. “How different can the timelines be before they can’t merge anymore?”

“A few degrees centigrade, a centimeter or so of movement—more if the the moving object is of uniform material, and much more if it’s a liquid or gas. I haven’t figured out any more than that, but I suspect that you’re clever enough to craft a spell that will facilitate the merging.”

Ava bit her lip thoughtfully, glancing at her laptop, then looked back at her boyfriend. “In your demonstration, though... an event can’t cause itself, so you must have gone back at some point without seeing any sparks or future-self. Why don’t we remember that?”

“I believe it works like a probability distribution,” Alan replied, “On my first time, no future self appeared, but I went back anyway and cast green sparks. But I don’t remember doing so at all, because that was just one instance, compared to infinite instances where I *did* see my future self come back. The time loop iterates over and over again, burying the initial conditions that spawned it.”

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“So if you only cast green sparks every fourth time instead of every other time, we would remember the red ones more strongly?”

“Precisely.”

“And a merging is just a split in reverse, so if you traveled back from *now*, the timeline would split from your perspective and you’d be seeing red sparks in one and green in the other.”

“I suspect so, but if I tried confirming it by experiment I couldn’t remember.”

“Try drawing the memories from your mind with magic, then examining them?”

“Brilliant.”

“And if you then made a permanent change in the past, like... like shifting the table over a foot, but only if you saw red sparks... then...”

“Depends. If seeing my second future-self caused me to not go back a second time, then the whole demonstration, dual timelines and all, would split once more, but in the other split, the red and green timelines wouldn’t re-merge, so there would be three parallel timelines... and if I went back anyway, despite seeing him, then that time loop would overwrite the original one and result in only two.”

Ava sat in silence for several seconds.

“I think,” she said slowly, “that if we are to embroil ourselves in any time travel shenanigans, then I will practice summoning graph paper.”

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It wasn’t until they were eating dinner that Ava brought it up—it had troubled her since Alan’s demonstration, but she didn’t want to put a damper on the discovery.

“I’m glad that you figured this out,” she said in between bites of corn, “But you really shouldn’t have risked splitting the timeline before you knew what would happen.”

Alan, reclining in his chair, shook his head. “I was hesitant, but there was no other way. Besides, I tried it on a patch of air first. Nothing that would cause the timelines to be any different. But tell me,” and he leaned forward in anticipation, “How’s your side of the project coming?”

“Ach, it’s so close,” she said, “But there’s no way for me to reliably gather position data on the extraterrestrial bodies.”

“Wait, is that all?”

Ava frowned. “It’s a big problem, *mein Schatz*. My computer lacks the power to-”

“No no, I realize that. It’s just that the Muggles have been collecting a fair bit of data themselves. We could even pull some from the future.”

“And it’s stored on the internet somewhere?”

“Yes, I can give you a few sites to start from after dinner.”

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Ava pushed away her plate, *scourgifying* the half-eaten meal. “Dinner’s over. What are the sites?” Alan noticed her familiar expression; he thought it looked like lightning was dancing behind her eyes.

He scribbled down a few URLs. “Can MagicJava get data from the Muggle internet?”

“I’m almost offended that you even have to ask that,” she grinned, “I’ll pull it from as far into the future as I can go without the Muggles changing protocols on me. Should be a few decades at least.”

“Perfect.” He smiled as she grabbed a keyboard from where it hung on the wall and started writing code. He could feel her peculiar brand of magic on his skin. It felt different from normal spellcasting—more like a powerful magical artifact at work, but with layers and layers of complexity that left his magic-sense tingling.

Alan took his time finishing his dinner, as Ava surrounded herself with more and more virtual displays. She typed a few commands on her keyboard, and prodded six dots seemingly at random. The displays grew fuzzy, flickered, and collapsed to a small point of light.

Alan looked up questioningly. “Did it work?” he whispered. Ava held up a finger, staring intently at what could have been a *lumos* suspended in midair.

The point of light burst into a host of figures, interlocking circles and lines that shot through the air; they resolved themselves one by one into stars and planets, galaxies and black holes, nebulae and supernovae and everything in between.

Ava, lit by billions of revolving points of data, let out an excited “Ha!” that turned into a full-blown bout of laughter, and Alan was reminded that she was descended from the man upon which Mary Shelley had based her famous mad scientist. His own face was frozen in wonder; only his eyes darted back and forth from the beauty of his lover’s mirth to the beauty of the data surrounding her.

With a wave of Ava’s hand, the room was lit only by the ceiling light once more. The couple locked eyes, both rather breathless, and it was Alan that got the first words out.

“Wow,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“You have the data now?”

“Yeah.”

Neither one of them was quite sure what to say after that. The last puzzle piece had been handed to them, they needed only to place it and the universe would be theirs to explore. But there was a nagging feeling, some massive object seen out of the corner of the mind’s eye... Ava managed to put it into words first.

“With great power comes great responsibility,” she murmured, “Alan, are we obliged to be heroes now? Will we feel guilty forever because we haven’t helped everyone we could help?”

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Alan ran his hands through his long hair, pondering. The moon was faintly visible through the thin curtains, and it now seemed close enough to touch. The mantelpiece clock turned future into present and present into past with every tick.

“No,” Alan finally replied, his voice quiet and hesitant, but calm, “Every time we remember something two disparate ways, or whenever you and a friend remember the same event as drastically different... that’s strong evidence that there are already time travelers altering history all around us, saving people, fighting evil... and they’re braver people than us, I’m sure. Being that kind of hero is hard, but it does come naturally to some people... not us, though. We’re scientists, and that’s a whole different type of heroism. Perhaps, some day, we can be the wise old couple for some worthy hero, and we should definitely help out wherever we can, but... no, I don’t think we’re obligated.”

Ava nodded, reassured but still somber, and asked the final question—the question that had been on her mind all throughout this evening of many questions.

“Where do we go first?”

The words hovered in the air like a snitch, shining yet elusive.

Alan shrugged. “I can’t possibly answer that, and neither can you. Let’s let the program choose a random life-supporting planet for us. I’m sure we’ll find plenty of fascinating things wherever we go.”

Another nod, slow and thoughtful this time.

“I’m going to need one of those Muggle energy drinks for this one.”

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The *taptaptap* of keys was quiet, but it filled the otherwise silent bedroom. Ava liked the sound, liked the tactile response; it was the only reason she still used a physical laptop for her otherwise ethereal programming. She smiled to herself, relishing the warmth of Alan’s sleeping figure nestled against her side. The clock read 2:00. Soft moonlight and the glow of the screen lent a diffused aura to the room.

Magic was in the air.

CHAPTER TWO

ANAPHORA

“To confine our attention to terrestrial matters would be to limit the human spirit.”

A vast and fiery nuclear furnace launched photons through the reaches of space; they hurtled trillions of kilometers at breakneck speed, then filtered gently into the bedroom as shafts of dawn sunlight.

“A car, do you think?”

“Blurghhhhh... car what?” Alan slurred out the words, still half-asleep.

“To enchant, *Schlafmütze*. It’s not safe to just jump from one planet to the next; we need to travel in something to protect us.”

He rolled over, groaning. “Did you... did you sleep at all?” he mumbled into his pillow.

Ava cast her boyfriend a sidelong glance, chuckling to herself. “Since when do you care about sleep?” she asked.

“I figured I’d get a good night’s worth, seeing as it’s going to be a rather...” Alan rolled back over, yawning, “...eventful day.”

“Well, would you rather it be eventful in a car, or a train, or a— a police box, or what?”

“Your choice. We just need it to have a door, right?”

Ava went expressionless, completely blank, as if her mind was so focused on an idea that it forgot to move her face.

“Alan, that’s perfect,” she murmured, “Just a door. A simple door, to anywhere.” He stepped out of bed, stretching, as she continued, “And it’ll be silver and polished wandwood and glass, how’s that?”

“Great,” he replied flatly, stepping into the bathroom, “Anything, so long as it can protect us from the atmosphere of Merlin-knows-where.”

Ava made a small noise of exasperation. “Didn’t Theo dump you in seventh year because of your lack of creative enthusiasm?”

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“Surely you’re not wishing he hadn’t,” came the dry reply. Alan returned from the bathroom; there was no noticeable change in his ever-present stubble. “You know I’m plenty creative. As for enthusiasm... give it a cup of tea and an hour.”

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One hour and one cup of Earl Grey later, Alan was not so much enthusiastic as incredulous. He leaned in the doorframe, observing Ava’s creation with raised eyebrows as she conjured and enchanted layers of metal, wood, and glass.

“When I said a door,” he mused, “this was not what I had in mind.”

“Muggles use them all the time,” she retorted, “Don’t pretend you don’t still have fun in them. Besides, it’ll act as a natural airlock if the enchantment fails.”

“You’re using a *revolving door* as a portal to all of time and space-”

“Yes.”

Several sentences died on Alan’s lips before he settled on, “I love you, have I ever told you that?”

“I love you too,” replied Ava, blushing slightly, “Now go double-check that all of our magic will be cast relative to our own inertial reference frame instead of Earth’s. We don’t want to vaporize everything for kilometers just by casting *aguamenti*.”

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Alan was beside himself.

“The time-trigger memory charm’s holding fine?” he asked himself casually.

“Like a charm. Erm, a successful charm,” his future self answered, “I can’t remember this conversation at all.”

“Good,” he replied, “We’ll use this system while interacting with ourselves, just to prevent any unnecessary timeline divergence. Be you in a bit.”

Infantes gelata, he thought. The paradox-checking spell resonated across all realities (just one, for now) in which he’d invented it, confirming that his timeline hadn’t split.

And then, *oblivate temporum*.

His timer went off.

Vworp. The time travel triggered a transfer of his memories of the last minute from himself to his future self. The last thing Alan remembered was starting a 1-minute timer.

“The time-trigger memory charm’s holding fine?” his past self asked him casually.

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The dining room table had been pushed aside to make room for the device—a tall cylindrical wooden shell, inlaid with silver symbols, divided into four quarters by a set of revolving glass panes. Two entrances, set opposite to each other, were outlined in copper and brass. It was

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majestic, and yet incongruous; any revolving door would look out of place without a wall to contain it.

Alan entered through one side, spinning the door slowly as he examined the interior. One of the walls was lined with storage compartments—drawers, cabinets, shelves behind glass—all made to fit flush with the wall so that the door could pass freely. Alan had fiddled with space a bit to ensure that the storage space was extensive, despite the thin cylindrical shell of the vehicle. The other wall, directly across from the storage area, was alive with displays and readouts; all data that could possibly be retrieved about the planet and immediate surroundings glowed in magical touch-response diagrams.

Ava stepped into the adjacent quarter, looking at her boyfriend through the glass. “You enter through one side, travel as the door is turning, and exit through the other. Doesn’t matter which way you go. If you stop turning the door to store something or look at readouts, the Anaphora will pause in the middle of her journey.”

Alan shot her a glance; a half-smile tugged on the corner of his mouth. “Anaphora?” he inquired. She waved her hand, magically inscribing the word above both entrances.

“It’s the name of two different grammatical devices, one to avoid repetition and one to take advantage of it. It seemed apt for a vehicle that could take one to wildly diverse worlds, and yet repeat the same experience over and over.”

“How very poetic,” Alan mused, “I like it.”

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The Anaphora’s maiden voyage was to be a short one—no movement at all, compared to the macrocosmic scale of their planned journeys. The couple locked eyes through panes of glass, standing in opposite entranceways.

“Ready?” Ava asked.

“As I’ll ever be.” Alan’s posture was as relaxed as ever, but his palms were sweaty as he placed them on the door and pushed.

The door spun—no, the door stayed still, and the universe spun around it—

—with dazzling speed, a torrent of matter and energy, a cosmic river parting around the stone that was the Anaphora—

—a stone that suddenly seemed very fragile, liable to be swept away by the current—

—and Alan pushed, slowly rotating the door around its central axis, glancing only briefly at the readouts by his side as the cosmos rushed past him—

—then the universe snapped into place, and the door was still.

Alan’s heart was racing. “You... you there, love?”

“Right here.” Ava’s voice came out shaky, from the other side of the Anaphora, but regained its strength as she continued, “Nice view though.”

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The howling wind and dense sheets of snow that it threw about seemed tame, compared to the whirling cosmic cyclone that had deposited them in the upper reaches of the Himalayas. Pinnacles of stone and ice were visible for brief moments; the sun had been reduced to a vague brightness behind thick clouds. But in the immediate area, the snow fell gently—that magically protected bubble of atmosphere was still and clean.

“Temperature’s fine,” noted Alan, taking a few careful steps in the snow, “I still wouldn’t like to test it anywhere near a star, though.”

“Yeah,” Ava agreed, “It doesn’t materialize if the safety charms can’t handle the environment. Should we try the moon next?”

Alan closed his eyes as she wrapped her arms around him from behind. The rushing torrent of everything between Here and There swam in his memory; it induced a dizzying sense of vertigo.

He blinked, swaying slightly and remembering to breathe. “Sure. Moon. Let’s go.”

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Visually, the lunar landscape was anticlimactic. Alan had seen pictures before, and he had been in the deserts of Earth; he had even looked through Buzz Aldrin’s memories once (although that is a story for another day). He knew to expect the pockmarked monochrome landscape, the harsh glare of sunlight with no atmosphere to filter it, the void of blackness above.

It was the stillness that got to him. After the second dizzying journey, the sudden lack of movement caused a sort of anti-motion sickness. There was no wind to blow the lunar dust; it settled at ankle-height and stayed for eternity. No sound permeated the Anaphora’s protective bubble. Alan could hear his heartbeat, the blood rushing through his ears, the rumbling of his stomach. He remembered reading about a Muggle who had built a silent room and found that almost nobody could last for more than half an hour—in fact, the Ministry had recently declared the reverse silencing hex a legal form of interrogation. Such decisions seemed... tiny, now.

Even though it was too bright to see many stars, even though Alan had no idea where their journey would take them, he squinted upwards and observed his mind utterly failing to comprehend the scale of the trip.

“It’s like when you’re on a beach,” his quiet voice sounded overwhelming in the void, “and you swim to a sandbar, and fancy yourself brave for venturing that far into the wild and dangerous ocean... and then remember that you’re bound for a deserted island in the middle of that very sea.”

The silence stretched on longer, until it became unbearable again.

“Have you... actually done that?” Ava asked, still looking up.

“It was a simile, love.”

She shuffled her feet, kicking up moon-dust that had lain dormant for millennia. It drifted down, becoming indistinguishable from the rest of the lunar surface.

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“The island wouldn’t exactly be deserted, then.” Her eyes were focused on something beyond the stars now; her voice was distant. “We’re looking for life, after all.”

“Is that our mission, then?” Alan asked, “To explore strange new worlds? To seek out new life and new civilizations?”

Ava smiled at the reference. “Something like that.”

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The bustle of Earth’s activity was a welcome relief. Anticipation saturated the air as Alan and Ava’s time-duplicates packed their belongings into the Anaphora, rushing back and forth, grabbing tools of both the Muggle and magical variety, calibrating sensors, duplicating their food supply, checking and triple-checking the safety features. After a single hour (or four, from their perspective), there was nothing left to do.

The couple watched their duplicates disappear, then winced simultaneously as the time-trigger memory charm returned three sets of memories to them at once. Alan sat down heavily on one end of a couch, and Ava slumped against him, breathing heavily.

“Think we forgot anything?” Alan asked.

“We can always pop back here and pick it up.” A pause. “Although, I’d actually rather not come back between planets if we don’t have to. It makes it feel less... less...”

“Yeah.” A nod of tacit understanding.

The mantelpiece clock ticked on, now three hours behind their biological clocks. Neither one made a move for several minutes, then Ava spoke again.

“It won’t be the same when we come back. I don’t know if it’ll feel bigger or smaller or more or less special, but it won’t be the same.”

“Yeah,” Alan said again. And then, “Let’s stop stalling. We can’t sit here forever.”

“A bit longer, please.”

Ava held Alan’s arm tight and closed her eyes, breathing in the scents of Earth.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Alan would often wish, in the trials to come, that his last thoughts before leaving had been more quote-worthy, like, *I will protect our love at any cost!* or, *For the glory of science!* or even something about small steps for a wizard.

But as he laid his hands on the glass door of the Anaphora, the one thought that came to mind was, *by Merlin, I can’t get that Star Trek theme out of my head.*

CHAPTER THREE

THAIÓN

“My goal is simple. It is a complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is and why it exists at all.”

A pair of humans, alone but for each other, separated by the revolving door that they pushed.

The man—a long face, eternally unshaven, fashionably unkempt, and yet with a bright intelligence lurking behind grey eyes, as if he were constantly on the verge of epiphany. His mouth tended to hang slightly open, hungry, it seemed, craving knowledge and breathing information.

The woman—light blonde hair in a messy ponytail, pencil behind one ear, neck craned forwards as though to better concentrate on what was before her piercing blue eyes. Her long-fingered hands were never still, always fiddling, always busy. Her movements were precise, sometimes aimlessly so, but not now, for she was pushing the universe itself.

And the universe, spinning, rushing in its entirety around the revolving door. All that was, all that would be, the background radiation of infinity. A dizzying sense of scale, a wrenching disorientation, a complete loss of reference and the breakdown of relativity itself.

Then the world snapped back into place. The door stopped turning. Alan opened his eyes.

Blackness—not an absolute lack of illumination, but the simple blackness of a moonless night. A thrill passed through Alan’s body as he noted the completely foreign pattern of stars in the sky. He felt younger, suddenly, like he was back in Scarab Academy’s sorting trials. A metallic scent wafted through the Anaphora’s protective shields; Alan became aware of the skittering sound of movement. Sparks flew in the distance, and for a brief moment, he received the impression of a colossal mushroom, covered in writhing filaments.

“Can you turn on the lights?” he whispered, “I want to see this.”

“Yeah, turning- turning on the emergency lights...” Ava’s voice sounded strangled, stressed.

“What’s wrong, love?” Alan turned back around, looking with worry at Ava’s face, lit from below by the Anaphora’s readout.

“I’m an *idiot* is what’s wrong,” she hissed, “Blind, stupid, *ein absolut dummkopf*—”

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“Shhh, shhh, we’re alive, aren’t we?” Alan put his arm around her shoulder, trying to decipher the lines of MagicJava. “Deep breaths.”

Ava inhaled several times. “It’s down,” she said, “The feedback loop that powers the Anaphora has just... stopped. And I’m an idiot, because I thought I programmed it to get back to safety if it detected a power failure, but forgot to run that subroutine off of the emergency power. There’s barely enough there now to keep the life support going, and even then, it looks like fresh air isn’t being summoned into the shield... Alan, something’s interfering with our magic on a fundamental level.”

Alan’s throat was dry as the implications sunk in.

Lumos, he thought.

Nothing. A panic was building in his mind, a nameless primal fear—

Avis. Ferula.

Still nothing. Alan’s stomach dropped and a chill draped itself over his body. He suddenly felt lost, alone in the dark without a lantern, far from home. A sense of impending doom drew ever closer—

In pure reflex to that dread, he shouted, “*Expecto Patronum!*”

It felt forced, difficult, like he was dragging the spell through molasses, but an ethereal silvery gibbon burst from thin air and hung from the Anaphora’s ceiling, casting its calming light over the scene. Alan blinked slowly, waiting for his heart to stop racing. When he opened his eyes, Ava’s african grey parrot was perched on her shoulder.

“Good,” he forced his voice to be steady, but his grip on his girlfriend’s hand was trembling, “Magic’s not gone entirely. Maybe wands would help?”

Out of habit, Alan thought *Accio wand*, and was surprised when it flew to his hand. This spell felt a bit more natural, or perhaps he was already acclimating to whatever was separating him from his magic.

Ava’s wand was in her hand, and a point of light was at its tip. Alan furrowed his brow, confused.

“Lumos isn’t working for me,” he said, after trying once more. Ava’s face was intent, concentrated. With tentative hope, Alan recognized the expression that signified an epiphany.

“This isn’t Lumos,” she murmured, “This is a spell that I scripted to excite the nitrogen atoms around the wand’s tip and make them give off their own light. My hypothesis is that we can’t summon anything, not even something massless like a photon.”

“But we can still impart energy to things that are already there?”

“Yeah. I don’t know, though... one would think the patronus charm violates the no-summoning restriction.”

“The patronus charm violates a lot of rules, though,” replied Alan, “It’s a different sort of magic, like the killing curse or the fidelius charm.”

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“True,” Ava conceded, “In any case, this calls for more experimentation.” The familiar talk of testing hypotheses was doing wonders for Alan’s nerves; it took away the sense of helplessness.

“Agreed. Shall we talk more outside?”

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The circle of light cast by the couple revealed just enough to pique their curiosity. The Anaphora had landed between two rock formations jutting from the ground—sandstone, Alan guessed—and the area was filled with a dry soil, as well as a moss-like substance of the deepest black. The wandlight reflected off of a few shining forms just outside its reach, which Alan could have sworn were moving. There were sparks every few minutes, once shockingly close and accompanied by a hiss and a pop, but the brief flashes revealed nothing.

The panic had subsided somewhat, especially since they had fixed the life-support to work without summoning anything (it simply performed a photosynthesis-like reaction to ensure a steady supply of oxygen). Both of them desperately wanted to explore, but by unspoken agreement they were first determining the effects the planet had on their magic.

“Most importantly,” Alan started, “Can the Anaphora go anywhere?” He *felt* his lack of magic acutely, like an arm that had fallen asleep.

Ava shook her head. “Like I said,” she sighed, “The feedback loop has stopped working. The system takes advantage of one of our first findings—that, unlike apparation, it takes an equal amount of magical energy for the Anaphora travel a meter as it does for it to travel a light year. Same goes for space.”

“Right,” agreed Alan, “But we couldn’t afford a fancy power gem, so we used a minor one, just a few millitelchines per second. And it draws energy from its own future to gather the massive amounts necessary for time travel, yes? We had that bloke jump-start it for the initial time jump, what was his name—”

“Aberforth,” Ava replied, “And he’s not around to jump-start it now, and even if he were, whatever caused the power supply to stop working in the first place would probably stop it from working again.”

Something about Ava’s explanation bothered Alan; there was some troubling conclusion that tugged on the corner of his consciousness, but he couldn’t quite place it.

“How long does it take to build up the magic?” he asked, shaking off the feeling, “We could store it, then discharge it all at once for the necessary jump-start. Or even better, to jump back to Earth and make the necessary modifications.”

“If we used all of the power gems, plus our own magic... we need just over a dozen kilotelchines... probably a few weeks. Our rations might run out before then. Worst-case scenario, we’re forced to take turns in a magically-induced coma to conserve food.”

“Hm.” Alan sat in silence for a while, listening to the skittering sounds and occasional deep thumps that emanated from the dark alien landscape. “I can’t apparate through time or space,” he murmured, “It’s like throwing myself against a giant rubber sheet.”

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“And transfiguration doesn’t work, either,” added Ava, “for whatever reason, the only spells that work are the ones that deal with energy alone, plus *Geistzauber* like the patronus charm.”

She levitated a pebble and set it spinning in her palm. Alan could tell that she ached to be doing something, making something, instead of sitting around discussing abstract concepts.

“It feels like camping,” she said, “Like that first time we went camping together, in the Black Forest, and our campsite was the only light in our universe. We felt so far from civilization then, so alone and small compared to the world... if only we could have seen ourselves now.”

Alan realized, for the first time, that this kind of philosophical musing didn’t come naturally to Ava. She felt comfortable around more tangible, concrete matters. But she reached outside her comfort zone anyway; it was her subtle way of accommodating him and his peculiar way of thinking. Alan smiled gratefully at the gesture.

“You know what?” he said, “According to the readouts, there’s a good six hours of night left, and it’s been a long day for us. How about you check over the code on our tools and we can start exploring first thing in the morning?”

Despite their predicament, excitement danced in Ava’s eyes at the prospect of exploration.

“Sounds like a plan,” she said, “Goodnight, *mein Schatz*.”

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The Muggle database had identified the planet as Thaion. Its thin atmosphere was toxic to humans, but harmless if not inhaled. Its average temperature was just above freezing, and its gravity around three-quarters of Earth’s. Its crust was rich in iron and silicon. Alan hadn’t been able to read any more before his curiosity got the better of him and he ventured outside.

“Oh, wow.” Alan would later wish that his first words upon beholding an alien ecosystem were more coherent, but he couldn’t manage much more for a full minute.

“Oh, *wow*,” he repeated.

Ava couldn’t get words out at all; she was grinning like a child waiting to unwrap Christmas presents.

The sun was bright, much brighter than Earth’s, or perhaps that was a function of the thin atmosphere. It shone upon a forest of sorts, a vast field of what looked like jet-black mushrooms. The tallest were a few meters high. Their caps were coated in a hard glassy substance; on their undersides, metallic veins converged on the stalk. Some of the stalks had sprouted pale green tubes that swayed hypnotically of their own accord. Each tube was about as long as Alan’s forearm, featureless but for a ring of spikes at its end.

Ava, who often tinkered with Muggle technology, got it first.

“It’s a solar farm!” she exclaimed, “They’re like trees, but they convert solar energy directly into electricity!”

Alan nodded slowly, comprehending. “So there’s no ATP here, just electrons flowing like blood cells through veins... they must have a way to transport nutrients as well, though...”

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Ava wasn't listening, she was rummaging through her bag. She held up a small electric light triumphantly and dashed to the nearest black mushroom-tree. Alan held his breath as she exited the Anaphora's shields, but the modified bubble-head and warming charm seemed to be working. He followed her, watching as she knelt in its shade. This one didn't have any of those swaying pale green tubes, but upon further examination, he spotted several holes that oozed a thick milky fluid—the equivalent of sap, Alan guessed.

Ava waved her hand over a hole several times, magically clearing away the sap and revealing a metallic filament that had been severed. She placed the electric light in the hole, making sure the two halves of filament touched the contacts. A dim glow lit the shade under the solar tree.

A laugh of pure excitement and wonder escaped her mouth. "Thaion, the planet that runs on electricity," she observed, "I've come to the right place."

Alan, meanwhile, was approaching a taller Thaionian tree. This one sported many swaying tubes, and as he approached, they swiveled in unison to face him. It was an unnerving effect, like he was being watched. In fact, at the end of each tube, there was a small black eye-like dot in the center of the spiky ring. Alan pondered this, then, keeping his distance, brought out what looked like a dinner plate. He muttered a few incantations, and the ghostly image of one of the tubes was projected above the plate. He spun it with a hand gesture, muttering more words to strip away the exterior and reveal what was within.

"Ahhhh," he said, "I see."

"See what? What do the tubes do? Are they a defense mechanism? I think that the holes are from where some of them were torn off, is that what happens?" Ava's questions were rapid, as though the curiosity bubbling within her had boiled over.

"Not quite." Alan carefully levitated a stone and used it to prod the nearest tube. It immediately detached from the tree and fell to the ground, where it slithered into the forest. The movement was so sudden that the two jumped back, startled.

"Parasites," Alan explained, examining the fresh hole in the tree, "They're not part of the trees at all. They have an eye at one end and a mouth at the other, with teeth all around both ends to help them climb and grasp."

Enraptured, Ava watched as the displaced Thaionian worm climbed another mushroom-tree, moving much like a slinky and affixing itself halfway up the trunk. She was distracted, however, by a slightly more distant motion.

"Alan, *look!*" she whispered.

At first, Alan had trouble understanding. A tree had somehow uprooted itself and started moving, but... no, this wasn't a tree at all. It had a similar jet-black canopy, but it seemed soft, rather than glassy, and beneath it were four spindly legs that carried the creature elegantly through the forest. As Alan stepped towards it, it froze and drew its legs together, blending in with the surrounding trees.

"Clever," he marveled, "I wonder, does it do that to attract the parasites and feed on them, or to avoid predators?"

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Ava had already scanned the alien and was examining it on her own device.

“It’s beautiful, the way it moves,” she said, “And it’s formed a symbiotic relationship, too. That black stuff on its back is a lot like Earth moss, it’s the same stuff that’s in the clearing with the Anaphora. The moss absorbs sunlight and gives the walker electricity, in return for the walker sharing the nutrients from its prey.”

“How does it eat?” Alan asked.

“There’s a mouth between the legs, right at the center. You should see it when it... *ja*, there it goes!” The walker separated its legs, sensing that the danger had passed, and continued striding through the forest. Now that Alan knew what to look for, he saw others of the same kind further away.

Ava was excitedly sketching the alien lifeforms in her sketchbook. The enchanted paper bled colour and shading into her pencil markings.

Alan took advantage of the lower gravity on Thaion to jump and see over the shining black forest canopy. His eyes widened slightly, which was as close to an expression of amazement as he had ever come.

“Love?” he asked, causing her to look up from her sketching.

“Yes, *meine Liebe?*”

“We should head north about nine kilometers. There’s a colossal structure there, looks like it’s teeming with life. The Thaionian equivalent of a watering hole, I think.”

Ava tucked her pencil behind her ear again. “How do we get there? We’re no good on brooms, and we can’t apparate.”

“I suppose we’ll have to walk,” Alan replied, “We can collect more data on the way.”

Ava’s gaze shifted upwards, to something behind Alan. He felt vibrations in the ground, the tremors of heavy footsteps.

“Or,” breathed Ava in wonder, “We could hitch a ride.”

Alan turned, looking at the approaching creature.

“Oh *wow*,” he said.

CHAPTER FOUR
REVERSED POLARITY

“Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change.”

“That’s impossible,” stated Ava flatly, “Nothing can grow that large, it would collapse under its own weight.”

“On Earth, maybe. But the gravity’s lower here, and we don’t know a thing about its biology. How tall do you think it is? Fifteen meters? Twenty?”

The gargantuan alien bore a passing resemblance to the walker from earlier in that it was covered by a broad carapace, which was coated with more of that black moss. Two head-like structures protruded from underneath, on opposite sides of the creature, blocky, brown, and beaked, streaked with rust-red soil—presumably from when it knelt to feed on dirt. Six legs, seemingly incapable of supporting such bulk, left a trail of round impressions in the ground.

And then Alan processed his girlfriend’s words from before.

“Wait, wait,” he said, “Are you suggesting we *ride* that?”

“Well, yeah...” Ava replied, “It’s heading in the right direction. And it’s got saplings on its back, I don’t think it would mind a few humans.”

Alan sized up the alien again as it knelt with its frontmost pair of legs, scooping up more dirt and chunks of moss. “You have this habit of phrasing crazy ideas so they make a scary amount of sense, you know that?”

“Thank you,” Ava smiled, approaching the alien, “And of course I know that. I asked you out, remember?”

By the time Alan had processed the self-deprecating nature of the remark, Ava was already on the creature’s back.

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Riding the alien felt like riding a patch of Thaionian ground that had woken up and started wandering. There was a thick layer of moss on its back, and when Alan curiously parted a few black clumps, he found a layer of metallic roots embedded in the broad carapace that they sat on. A wind had sprung up, and it wafted towards the couple the distinct odor of ozone—a smell that belonged in the squalid Muggle underground, rather than the ebony forests of Thaion. Here and

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there, sparse groves of the mushroom-trees had grown to a considerable height, and towered over their neighbors. Every so often, a pale green parasite-worm would dislodge itself from a tree and latch onto the creature carrying the couple, only to be brushed aside or crushed outright by one of its six legs.

“Hmm,” Alan mused, observing one such grisly demise, “The only organisms we’ve seen so far that gather energy from other organisms are those worm-parasites. All the other ones are more like plants, getting their nutrients from the soil and their energy from the sun.”

“Makes sense,” Ava agreed, as a small glowing model of a tree revolved above her hand, “These trees store energy chemically so that they can stay alive during the night, but they’ve evolved so that predators can’t access the stored energy. If one of the storage cells is attacked, the chemicals mix together and become useless. So there aren’t any predators, just parasites that feed off of the energy as it’s being transmitted, charge themselves up before they make the trip to the next food source. That sort of lifestyle couldn’t support anything much larger.”

“But that’s just the trees,” Alan rejoined, pulling up his own scanned model of one of the tree-like walkers, “Here, look—there’s nothing to prevent something from preying on this one. It stores its energy in chemical form too, pretty carefully guarded, but a precise enough alien could crack its shell and get at the chemicals without mixing them together. Or even a mosquito-like parasite, much more efficient than the worm ones.” Alan paused. “Now that I think about it, that’s probably why they mimic the trees.”

“And we’ve only seen a few aliens out of doubtless millions,” Ava reminded him.

The couple sat in silence for a while. Ava’s eyes darted over the Thaionian forest, picking out glimpses of fantastical scenes. What looked like a glimmering spiderweb was stretched from tree to tree, carrying precious electrical current to a hole in the ground, where no doubt some alien had hollowed out its abode. The body of another gargantuan walker lay prone on the forest floor, prey to a more malicious version of the moss—more royal purple than black. It had consumed not only the broad carapace, but the limbs and body of the creature, and the victim of this perversion of symbiosis was now decomposing under the moss’s velvety surface.

Alan’s gaze, meanwhile, was focused steadily on the horizon. The colossal structure that he had seen earlier was drawing nearer, and through his omnioculars he could spot several puzzling features. It seemed to consist of several stalks, skyscraper-high and tapering as they grew. Each stalk was topped with a sphere, a perfectly smooth orb that swayed high above the ground. They seemed so very unearthly, like something from a Muggle Dr. Seuss book, towering over the world as if they had been planted solely to remind Alan how far he was from home.

“Do you have any music?” asked Ava, barely audible through the thin atmosphere, “I left mine in the Anaphora.”

“Just the Pale Maiden’s house song in my pendant.”

“You still keep that on you?”

“Sentimental value,” he shrugged, “I’d lose it if I didn’t keep it close.”

“Huh,” she said. Alan wondered where Ava’s pendant—a graduation trinket from Scarab Academy—had found its home. In the back of a drawer, probably, or thrown away entirely.

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“Should I play it?” he asked.

“Yes please.”

So Alan drew from his jacket pocket a small pendant, in the shape of a golden scarab beetle, and muttered “*Sing the song of houses four.*”

The voice of the Pale Maiden, high and ethereal, accompanied the couple as their massive steed plodded through the Thaionian landscape:

*Talamh house, the house of earth,
Logic, here, is of high worth.
Learning, knowledge, science, math,
Talamh house will start that path.*

*House Egraithe, the house of air,
Organized as we are fair.
Leaders, planners, and much more,
House Egraithe will help you soar.*

*Fealynn house, the house of sea,
We will offer empathy.
Healers, both of flesh and mind,
Fealynn house is what you'll find.*

*House Lasair, the house of fire,
Creative minds to here aspire.
Artists, and inventors too,
Those who make, Lasair's for you.*

As the last verse of the song echoed into nothingness (despite the distinct lack of things off of which to echo), Alan sighed happily. He had needed that, more than he realized, for he was already homesick. The song stirred vivid memories of his first day at the School for Children of Abnormally Remarkable Ability and Brilliance, and the ordeal of the sorting ceremony.

“Remember the sorting ceremony?” he asked his girlfriend, “How you broke the maze trying to solve it and we had to wait while they fixed it?”

“How could I forget?” Ava replied, smiling, “And you were the first one ever to solve it by looking at which moving panels had moss on them and using that to extrapolate the path to the exit.”

Alan smiled too, reminiscing, and wondered aloud, “How do these aliens communicate? I haven't heard a thing, and I can't see any visual means... scent, perhaps?”

“Ooh,” said Ava, “Good question.” She gestured in the air, summoning back the glowing model of the walker that Alan had captured earlier. Both of them picked apart the magical scan. Their fingers swiped the air, expanding diagrams of internal organs and chemical compounds and organic structures, searching for a method of communication.

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“There.” Alan pointed to a small organ near the alien’s mouth. “You’re the expert on this, but it seems to me like it generates a variable magnetic field, too slight to actually attract anything.”

Ava waved away the diagrams drifting around her and peered at what her boyfriend had pointed to. “Yes,” she said, “I think that’s it.”

“I’m gonna see if I can pick up some electromagnetic pulses.”

“All right.”

With a sharp sideways swipe of his hand, Alan replaced the diagram with a live view of the surrounding area. The giant alien trod on at its center, and smaller ones were scurrying through the forest, pulsing blue as they emitted their magnetic calls. Alan gritted his teeth; maintaining the spell was more difficult than usual.

The image dissolved, and Alan found that he was breathing heavily.

“Inter... interference,” he said, “Something vast... vast and inscrutable, incompatible with our Earth magic. No more... no more electromagnetic scans.”

Ava looked concerned, then thoughtful. “I’ll write a program to translate the magnetism to sounds we can hear,” she suggested, “No long-range scans. Just a single point.” She ran her hands through Alan’s hair affectionately, waiting for his breathing to return to normal, then drew her ever-present keyboard from her pack and began tapping out code.

Alan looked up at a hint of motion. A balloon-like creature was drifting overhead. Several appendages dangled from an array of inflated sacs, with no hint of sensory organs. It was out of range of his cobbled-together magical scanner, so he followed its gently swaying descent with his omnioculars.

He jolted, nearly dropping the omnioculars, when Ava grabbed his arm. “Look!” she hissed, for the fourth time in as many hours.

Alan followed her gaze, and saw two aliens—approximately his height—with shining metallic exoskeletons. They were crablike in nature, six-legged and heavily armoured, and they circled each other warily. So quickly that Alan barely had time to see it, two glittering tendrils erupted from one of the creatures’ mouths (or at least, something that resembled a mouth). They struck the other alien’s shell and a shower of sparks was accompanied by a loud pop.

“Great Merlin, they’re *taser crabs*,” Ava marveled.

“*What crabs?*”

“A taser is a Muggle device that weaponizes electricity,” Ava explained, “But it can be avoided if you’re surrounded by something conductive, like those creatures’ exoskeletons.”

Alan turned this over in his mind. “But don’t all these aliens feed on electricity?” he asked, “Why would it harm them?”

“We feed on water; we can still drown in it.”

“Not if someone else spits it at us, though.”

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“It’s true,” pondered Ava, “A shock like that requires a lot of energy. They definitely don’t pick it up from the sun... so where?”

“Something to do with those, I bet.” Alan gestured at the sphere-topped stalks, now towering over them. The forest obscured their base, but he could sense movement through the trees.

“C’mon,” he continued eagerly, “Let’s get off and see what we can find.”

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Life—crawling, skittering, slithering, striding, plodding life. The base of the closest stalk was so thick that ten of Alan (not that he could so much as double himself at the time) could not circle its girth. The ground, rather than being coated with soil and moss, was an exposed vein of shining metal that stretched for perhaps a hundred meters. The sun was tinting the sky mint-green before setting, and the light glinted off of every metallic surface—a welcome relief after the blackness of the forest. Tiny creatures of vivid orange hopped from stone to stone. Several “taser crabs” and a dark grey serpentine alien had attached themselves to bulges on the stalk, much like the small parasites had attached themselves to the trees earlier.

“That explains how the aliens feed...” Ava frowned. “But how does the stalk get energy?”

“Seems to me like that vein of metal is charged with electricity. The stalk... huh.” Alan shook his scanner bemusedly. “More interference. It... it looks like as well as electricity, the vein is saturated with that incompatible magical energy.”

“That doesn’t make sense, though,” Ava’s frown grew deeper, “that’s not how electricity works.”

“Well,” Alan said, “clearly this planet has a strong magnetic field, which carries some form of raw natural magic. Magnetic fields are caused by electric currents within the planet, so isn’t it feasible that some form of electricity, accompanied by magic, might work its way to the surface through something conductive?”

“That’s not what I meant, though,” she countered, “For electricity to power something constantly, there have to be two connections. Two wires, or whatever. A positive and a negative. If there’s just one, the charges will equalize and power will stop flowing eventually.”

“Maybe... magic?”

“Maybe.” But Ava still looked unsatisfied as she observed the vein of metal.

“We’ll figure it out,” Alan reassured her. His brow furrowed in concentration for a second, and he looked up thoughtfully. “Hey, could we use this to jump-start the Anaphora? This planet’s magic is incompatible with our structured spells, but as a source of raw power it seems like more than enough...”

“Should be simple enough to find out.” Ava knelt by the vein of metal, shooing away a many-legged alien with two curled tails. She closed her eyes and waved her hand over the surface, concentrating while a purple light built slowly beneath her fingertips. She winced. Grimaced. Hissed in pain as sparks flew. She stood up slowly, examining her smoking hand.

“It’s possible,” she reported, “It’s like sticking a wind turbine into a river, but it’s possible.”

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“Is your hand all right?”

“Yeah. It only hurt for a second.”

“All right.” He held her hand anyway, fingers locking. “We’ll charge up a power gem, then once we figure out a way to bypass this magnetic field that’s messing with our spells, we can use the Anaphora again and it’ll start drawing power from its own future.”

Again, some fact of vital importance seemed just out of reach; some troubling conclusion nagged at Alan’s consciousness. But he knew the elusive nature of such thoughts, and didn’t look directly at it for fear that it would disappear.

While Ava drew a power gem from her pack, Alan walked further along the vein in the gathering dusk. At one end, one of the towering stalks had withered and died, its energy source stolen by a younger member of its species. Alan scanned it, and found to his pleasure that there was no interference—the dead organism was no longer saturated with Thaionian magic.

As he observed the scan, he noticed two arteries stretching the length of the stalk. One seemed to have been positively charged, one negatively charged. *But if the ground is always positively charged, then how does...*

Alan gasped, struck by an epiphany. A sudden vision of Thaion from without, all dark forests and jagged peaks and churning oceans—

“What is it, *Liebe*?”

“This is it!” he exclaimed in a rare fit of excitement, “These stalks are breathing, Ava, deep slow breaths, breathing electricity through the ground, because this vein reverses polarity every few days! The entire planet does!”

“Oh ho! Definitely possible, if magic is involved. But... that still doesn’t solve our problem.”

“Oh, but it does!” Alan paused, doing some rapid mental calculations. “If the electric field reverses, so will the magnetic field, and it’s not an instant reversal. For about one hour every Thaionian day, there won’t be any alien magic saturating the air, and we’ll be able to use our spells! We must have landed right at the end of one of those hours, then gotten trapped.”

“Yes,” said Ava, nodding slowly as a grin spread itself across her face, “Oh yes, that’s fantastic! That means... we’ve only got around half an hour until we can leave!”

“Do you want to?” Alan asked, serious again, “We know we can leave any day, so we could definitely stay longer and observe.”

“No, I want to leave,” Ava said firmly, “We can come back, but not until I fix the safety precautions on the Anaphora. It’ll scan both the past and future as well as the surrounding area, and if it deems the planet unsafe it’ll stop at a safe distance and give us what readouts it can get.”

She paused for a second. “But there’s one last thing I want us to do.”

“What’s that, my love?”

“I want us to listen. I finished that program I was writing earlier. Here.” Ava waved her hands gently over Alan’s ears, and he smiled as Thaion’s silence broke.

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Low hoots filled the air, accompanied by trills and scattered chirping in the dark. There were buzzes from the ground and clicks from the trees. Some animals were making more advanced noises. To Ava, they sounded like Muggle dialup internet. The top of one stalk gave a brief squawk and detached; it looked like the floating many-legged creature the couple had seen earlier.

“Seeds,” Alan breathed, “Balloon-like seedpods that land and seek out a new vein of metal, another oasis...”

Over the whole cacophony, tying it together and creating a harmony of sorts, was a hum—high, ethereal, and nearly tangible in its clarity—the hum of Thaion’s magnetic field, ripe with alien magic that had never before touched a human mind. Even as Alan listened, it began to fade. He opened his eyes, not having remembered closing them, and turned to Ava.

“I think we can apparate back now,” he said, “It might take two jumps... Love?”

Ava’s eyes were still closed, and she was breathing quickly. Alan could feel an aura of magic around her; it made his hairs stand on end. Something wasn’t right. His heart began hammering in his chest.

“Give- magic-” she hissed between clenched teeth. Alan clenched her hand and willed his own magic into her over the bond that they had forged, enabling her to combat whatever was affecting her. They had practiced this at home, lending magical energy to each other, and they had gotten it to nearly full efficiency. It was fun, then—it reinforced the relationship and felt warm and calming—but now it was only terrifying, as he felt himself grow weak and watched the slight spasms that made her twitch on the stony ground.

Finally, her breathing slowed her eyes opened.

“We need to go.” She maintained a white-knuckled grip on his hand. “Now.”

“What was that? A psychic attack? Who...?” he asked, already turning for an apparation. They apparated once, then twice, squeezing themselves through reality, and then they were in the Anaphora. Ava’s hands flew to the controls with inhuman speed. Alan’s eye was caught by a figure that paced around the Anaphora’s protective bubble, indistinct in the darkness and yet frighteningly familiar.

“Who...?” he asked again, frantic and confused. That blurry, nagging feeling in the back of his head was assuming an ominous and dreadful clarity.

Ava swallowed before she could reply. “Me,” she said, “It was me.”

CHAPTER FIVE
DISCORDANCE

“We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn't want to meet.”

By the time Alan realized he had been holding his breath, the Anaphora was already floating in the vacuum of deep space. No attack came. The only light was the soft glow of the readouts, and the only sounds came from Ava as she sat, trembling, on the floor. Alan tried to reach for her, encountered a glass partition, and pushed at it in vain for a second before remembering his magic. He apparated to her side and sank down to the floor, wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

“It’s- it’s going to be okay, my love.”

Ava drew a shuddering breath. “I know. I- I just, I’m just a little bit shocked.”

He laughed nervously. “A little bit, yeah. Sure. Just a little bit.”

“Alan...” Her nails bit into his palms. “Is-is that going to be me?”

Infantes gelata, Alan thought. The spell resonated, but there was a discordance. Somewhere, somehow, despite their best efforts to the contrary, the timeline had split.

“I don’t think it’s your future self,” he replied carefully, “I think she was from an alternate timeline.”

He could feel her shoulders loosen as she relaxed. “That... is good news,” she said, “That is very good news. What makes you say that, though?”

“Well, let me see if I have this straight. The Anaphora has a power crystal, that, over the course of weeks, builds up enough power for one time-jump.”

Ava nodded. “Two time-jumps, technically.”

“Right. So when it’s about to time travel, it uses stored magical energy to get that power from its own future. Then it has enough power for two time-jumps: one jump to get power again later, and one for us to use to actually travel.”

“Exactly.”

“And what if there is no power at any point in the future?”

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“Then it doesn’t work, and we avoid whatever calamity would have lead to loss of power. It’s an automatic safety feature that I didn’t even have to add.” Ava’s breathing had returned to normal, and Alan’s heart was no longer pounding.

“But what if it only has no power for *some* of its future?” he pressed on, “What if it has to search just a little bit further to find the power that it needs to jump? Would that affect anything?”

Ava’s head jerked upwards in realization. “By Jan Wier’s ruff, it would! The random number generator’s based on microprocessing cycles, so it would select a different planet. Is that what happened? Is that even a stable loop?”

“I believe it is. Going to Thaion resulted in a longer wait for power, which led to alternate-us going somewhere else, which led to a shorter wait for power, which led to us going to Thaion... the ratio of event frequency is finite, which means nothing gets overwritten. Two timelines, side by side. So no, I don’t think you’ve just seen your future self. More of an... alternate self.”

Ava shuddered. “But it was still *me*. How could I... why would I...”

“You weren’t necessarily in control of your own actions, my love. Do you mind if I pull up the Anaphora’s recorded footage?”

“I don’t mind. I might have to face her at some point, there’s no use avoiding looking at her.”

“We. We might have to face her. You won’t have to do it alone.” He squeezed her hand as the footage appeared on the curved inner wall of the Anaphora, starting from the time that Thaion’s magic-magnetic field had started to drop.

After a tense few seconds of nothing, they saw a figure apparate directly outside the Anaphora. It was undoubtedly some version of Ava, wearing the same clothes she was currently wearing, but also undoubtedly... different. Her posture was perfect, and she drifted through the air instead of walking. Her eyes were closed.

When Alan recovered from the surprise of seeing her in such a state, he noticed the finer details. There was a Muggle pistol at her hip; its tip glowed the distinctive green of the killing curse. There was no pencil behind her ear or stuck through her hair.

Other-Ava’s hands and teeth clenched suddenly as she began executing the psychic attack. She stopped drifting and dropped to one knee, devoting all her power to the onslaught. When that failed, she picked herself up and began pacing around the perimeter of the Anaphora’s protective shield. Her eyes were still closed; she felt for vulnerabilities with hands that bled tendrils of darkness that curled like smoke and hissed where it contacted the shields. But apparently she could still see, for her head snapped around when Alan and Ava apparated into the enchanted revolving door. She reached for her gun, but before she could draw it, the solar forests of Thaion were replaced by the darkness of space.

Alan closed the feed with a thought and glanced at Ava. To his relief, she merely appeared curious.

“Huh,” Ava said, “She seems... Demented? Imperiused? And I don’t know what she was doing with her hands...”

SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

“We need to know more,” Alan said.

“Yeah. Any ideas?”

Alan shook his head. “Not really. You’re the one who knows her better.”

“How much can we mess with time without overwriting our own timeline?”

“Ideally, we’d send something back that doesn’t affect anything until after now, thus causing us to send it back again. It would technically be overwriting the timelines, but I don’t feel like it counts so long as nothing changes.”

“Hm,” Ava said slowly, “I could send other-me a message in the past... after the destination has been selected but before we leave... and I could attach some code for her to run in the background... it would erase her memory of adding it, and introduce some sort of backdoor that I could use to incapacitate her now.”

“Would past-you really agree to run that code?”

“No, I suppose not. Hm.” Ava thought for a bit. “I think I would run it if it just let other iterations of me access my memories. How does that sound, *mein Schatz*?”

“It’s a start,” replied Alan, “So other-you in the past would run code that erased her memory of getting the message and running the code, then record her memories so that we can examine them and find out what happened?”

“Yes. And I’ll make the transfer undetectable. Don’t want her using it to find her way to us.”

“Yeah no. Definitely a good idea.” The two sat in silence for a bit. The infinity of space outside the Anaphora had not lost its wonder and beauty, but the danger was now concrete.

“Well.” Ava pushed herself to a standing position. “I should write that message. The code should be easy, I’ve already got all the libraries.” She summoned her keyboard from thin air and began typing.

“Technically,” Alan observed, “Other-you has already received the message. You could retrieve the memories before even writing the code to send them.”

“Why would I...?”

“Not saying you should. Just an interesting observation, especially since it doesn’t even violate causality.”

“Yeah.” Ava was only half-paying attention; she was immersed in code. Alan waited, watching her type. After less than a minute, she stopped.

“Done,” she said, “Should I send it?”

“Go for it.”

She took a deep breath, then dragged a few glowing icons suspended in the air.

“There. Sent. And... wow. Memories retrieved. This seems too easy.”

SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

“Time travel’s useful like that. There really should be a name for the whole psychological effect of time manipulation making a long and complex process appear to occur instantly. It feels a bit off, right?”

“Yeah.” She sat down, so that she wouldn’t fall over from the shock of absorbing all the memories. “I guess I’ll take a look now. You can’t share the memories directly, but you can watch and listen on the monitor if you want.”

“Cool. You ready?”

“I’m ready.”

And Ava remembered.

CHAPTER THREE

GEIST

```
void CodeFromFutureMe(){
    event e=Event.Get(Message.GetMessage("Message from future you").timestamp);
    memoryObject mems=MemoryObject(Memory.GetDependentMemories(e));
    Memory.Erase(mems, Memory.EraseMode.Continuous);
    mems.Clear();
    Signal.SetOverride("RetrieveMemories3k52b6l0",this);
    while(true,1){
        mems=Memory.Concat(mems,Memory.Range(Time.time-1,Time.time));
        if(Signal.Check("RetrieveMemories3k52b6l0",Signal.personalKey)){
            instance sender = Signal.Get("RetrieveMemories3k52b6l0").senderID;
            Signal.Send(sender,mems);
            return;
        }
    }
}
```

A pair of humans, alone but for each other, separated by the revolving door that they pushed.

The man—a long face, eternally unshaven, fashionably unkempt, and yet with a bright intelligence lurking behind grey eyes, as if he were constantly on the verge of epiphany. His mouth tended to hang slightly open, hungry, it seemed, craving knowledge and breathing information.

The woman—light blonde hair in a messy ponytail, pencil behind one ear, neck craned forwards as though to better concentrate on what was before her piercing blue eyes. Her long-fingered hands were never still, always fiddling, always busy. Her movements were precise, sometimes aimlessly so, but not now, for she was pushing the universe itself.

And the universe, spinning, rushing in its entirety around the revolving door. All that was, all that would be, the background radiation of infinity. A dizzying sense of scale, a wrenching disorientation, a complete loss of reference and the breakdown of relativity itself.

Then the world snapped back into place. The door stopped turning. Ava opened her eyes. And immediately, her face was lit by the grin of a child on Christmas morning.

SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

All was red-brown stone as far as she could see; rust-colored strata extended into the distance until they were lost amid the clouds of fine dust that were whipped into the air, glowing and sparkling in the intense sunlight of a massive star. Sun-baked peaks and spires twisted in physically improbably patterns, and upon closer inspection, some patches of stone were fixed in midair. In fact, entire islands were supported by nothing, casting stark shadows on the land below. Something metallic gleamed on a distant outcrop, and smoke was rising from some unknown source in a valley.

“Oh wow,” Alan said, emerging from the other side of the Anaphora, “Oh *wow*.”

Something moved in the corner of her vision, disappearing into a hole in the ground. Ava didn't get a clear look, but it had moved like a snake or a large centipede. She turned her attention back to the floating pieces of stone, anchored securely in the sky, not moving a centimeter even when the wind picked up.

“How do you think the landscape *does* that?” Ava asked.

“It looks like... the stone exists in more than three dimensions, and it's been eroded by things that are also higher-dimensional, so those floating bits are solidly connected to the ground but we just can't see the whole picture...”

“Ah yes, that makes sense. Which dimensions?”

Alan retrieved what looked like a dinner plate—the equivalent of a smartphone to Ava's central magic computer (Ava had been delighted to read about smartphones in a tech journal from the future). He murmured an incantation, and a loading graphic appeared over the plate. Several seconds later, it was replaced by a small replica of their environment. As Alan dragged his hands through it, the peaks and spires changed. Floating islands appeared from nothing and tendrils of stone rose to merge with them, only to dwindle back to nothing again.

“Looks like it extends through dimensions one, two, three, seven, eleven, nineteen, forty-three, sixty-seven, and one hundred sixty-three. Something wrong, love?”

Ava was staring at the scanner in concern.

“That's not right,” she muttered, “That took way longer to load than it should have. *Simple profile one*.” The shell command (spell command?) spat up a few lines of information on her computer's core processes. Even the most basic procedures had slowed down by orders of magnitude, and the power supply was struggling.

Ava swallowed; a lump of apprehension stuck in her throat.

“We should really try somewhere else, *Liebe*.”

“Why? What's wrong?”

“This planet's magic is interfering with ours. Try it. Try a spell.”

His face tensed in concentration, then his palm flared briefly with a white light.

“Ah. Yes. That was more difficult than it should have been. Are we in any danger?”

SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

“Not immediately, but I’m still not comfortable with this. There’s too much we don’t know, and trying to find out might endanger our lives. How about I rewrite the search algorithm to go through planets until it finds one with magic that’s compatible with ours?”

Alan nodded. “All right. When you of all people urge caution, I’d be a fool not to listen.”



Ava could feel the planet’s magic as soon as the Anaphora materialized. It was old magic, vast and powerful and engrained in every single particle of matter. It saturated the air like the fog that hung unmoving above damp soil. The immediate impression was of a moonlit night, but Ava then realized that the light sources were actually moving through the mist at some distance, diffusing their silver radiance like will o’ the wisps. One long light trailed far above them, seemingly flowing through the air, and another, although indistinct through the fog, appeared to be striding on four legs.

“Wish I could get a better view...” she whispered, entranced. At nearly the same time, Alan whispered, “Those lights looks familiar. Do those lights look familiar to you?”

“They do, now that you mention it.” Ava couldn’t quite tell why they were whispering; it seemed the sort of place in which one should whisper. The only other sounds were muffled dripping and rustling, as well as some distant alien call, somewhere between an owl’s hoot and a cat’s purr. The air carried the distinct impression that a summer thunderstorm was about to break.

Ava was reaching for her scanner to see if the glowing silver creatures were within range when a chill somehow crept through the Anaphora’s shields. She looked up, worried, and yet her mind was becoming clouded. *What was the command for checking the shield status? What’s coming? Something’s coming.*

I’m scared.

Her fear turned to dread, a cold dread that clenched her stomach with icy fingers and shoved it up against her lungs, leaving no room to breathe. She wanted to be as small as possible, to run and curl up under a blanket, but she couldn’t move. Alan was saying something from far away. His voice was something to hold on to, but it was so hard to hear...

She heard him shout a familiar phrase, and instantly her mind cleared. She looked around for the source of the attack, and saw his gibbon patronus launching itself through the air.

Dementors? Ava thought, sharp-minded again but still confused, *Here?*

The spell didn’t require a wand, but it required words. And a happy memory. *The smell of coffee and the crackling of a fireplace and the rustle of papers. A sharp pencil poking my hip.*

And out loud, “*Expecto Patronum!*” A spectral African grey parrot appeared and swooped around her head, driving away the primal fear. She was able to see the enemy now: a clot of blackness in the mist. It wasn’t humanoid, like the pictures of dementors she’d seen on Earth. Between her parrot and her boyfriend’s gibbon, the dementor-thing retreated.

“*How?*” she hissed, “*How is that here?*”

“I- I don’t know. I don’t know.” Alan was shaking.

SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

Ava summoned a bar of chocolate and broke off a piece for him. She took a bite as well, savoring the sweetness, letting it calm her racing heart.

“Thanks,” he said, chewing. There was a silence, then, inexplicably, he began smiling. “There’s only one explanation for this that I can think of.”

“Oh?”

“Look at the lights again. They *are* familiar. They’re patronuses.”

Ava looked again. Sure enough, the luminance was the exact same color, the silver glow recognized by so many witches and wizards. She couldn’t help but let out a laugh at the absurdity.

“Wild patronuses,” she said, her laughter driving away the last vestiges of dementor-fear, “We found wild patronuses! You realize what this means, right?”

Alan nodded excitedly. “Yes! Especially because this planet is in the same galaxy as Earth... it can’t be a coincidence. It can’t. This is revolutionary, Ava! Dementors and patronuses are descended from alien life!” Alan laughed. “By Merlin, what were the odds we’d wind up here?”

“Pretty high, in fact,” Ava grinned as she looked at a readout, “It looks like when I filtered the search to only include compatible magic, there were only seventy-eight planets left to choose from. And for some reason, they’re all in our galaxy.”

Ava made a note to investigate that later.

“It makes sense that there are so few,” said Alan, “Finding a planet with compatible magic is like finding alien food that we can survive on. There can’t be many options to choose from.”

“Yeah.” It occurred to Ava that they were still standing next to the Anaphora. “Shall we explore?”

“Oh yes.”



The planet’s official name was PSR B1620–26 b in the database (although it had been nicknamed “Methusela” due to its age of 12.7 billion years). Ava marked it down as “Geist,” after the German term *Geistzauber* for magic that dealt with the soul. It was an ancient and immense planet, two and a half times the size of Jupiter, and yet the high gravity didn’t seem to stop the lifeforms from flying or drifting or hovering. The most remarkable thing was its location; it orbited both a white dwarf star and a pulsar. By Muggle standards, it shouldn’t have been the slightest bit habitable.

The planet’s high gravity made levitation tiresome and they had decided not to risk missing anything by apparating, so it was slow going as the couple squelched their way through mud towards a bright cluster of patronus-lights that seemed relatively still. From the way the sounds echoed, there seemed to be an outcropping of some sort to their right, but the fog was so thick that they couldn’t make it out. The whole scene was lit by a dusky silver-blue luminance. It could have been the light of the globular cluster that contained Geist or the light of the alien life reflecting off of the low cloud layer.

SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

“The question is,” Ava pondered aloud, “Does all *Geistzauber* come from this planet?”

“I’d lean towards yes,” replied Alan, “It’s a distinct category of magic.”

“The patronus charm, the killing curse, the fidelius charm, the null hex, the unbreakable vow, dark rituals like horcruxes... what else?”

“Nothing Atlantean, I think. Some Native American tribes have a lot of spells that deal with the soul, and there was that tome they recovered in Vietnam the other week.”

Neither one of them was particularly well-versed in foreign spells—Ava worked exclusively in MagicJava at this point, and Alan could only think in English, so he couldn’t cast them with his mind alone. But that hadn’t stopped them from adding foreign spells to their databases. After all, Atlantis had not been the only ancient civilization to harness wild magic.

“Plus the thing that the Shaman Khel from the Maseed showed us when we went to Pakistan,” Ava added, “That was definitely *Geistzauber*.”

She found a series of stones in the mud and stepped onto them, scuffing her boots. Her parrot flew circles around them, and Alan’s gibbon loped by their side. Now that she was looking for them, she could see more patches of moving darkness as well as the silver lights. A swarm of tattered shadowy scraps fluttered around a light as it flickered and dimmed, but the details were unclear in the fog.

“Out of all the things that could come from another planet...” Alan mused, “It’s interesting. The soul is a distinct human organ, unless you count it as part of the brain. It evolved to help humans use magic, and it’s so complex that we’ve barely scratched the surface of its workings. How can alien biology possibly interact with it?”

“Well, think about magical creatures,” replied Ava, “They have completely different brains than we do, and different souls as well, and yet they can sense our emotions through them, sometimes even affect them. It’s a two-way path—the soul lets our brain interface with magic, but it also lets magic interface with our brain. So if the magic is compatible, I can definitely see how dementors can make us afraid, or how patronuses can be summoned with happy thoughts, or why you need true hate to cast the killing curse.”

“Yeah. When you put it that way, it seems reasonable enough.” He glanced at her briefly, and she must have been unconsciously squinting at the lights ahead of them, because he asked, “Is the mist getting to you?”

“It’s kind of annoying that we can only see what’s in front of us. But I don’t want to clear it.”

“Same here. I can *feel* how old this place is. Nearly as old as the universe itself. Call me irrational, but it seems wrong to disturb things. You know what I mean?”

“Mmm. I don’t-”

They both turned as a splash erupted to one side. A patronus had drifted over a pool of water and was now struggling to free itself from tentacles that dragged it downwards. Ava noticed, with some unease, that the tips of the tentacles were glowing *Avada Kedavra* green. The patronus lost its struggle, and the pool shone briefly before returning to nearly the same shade as the surrounding mud. Ava shared a concerned glance with her boyfriend.

SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

“Any way of telling our patronuses to stay by our sides?”

“They seem to be keeping close. That thing looked... dangerous. Are we safe?”

“So long as it can’t actually cast the killing curse.”

“Ah. Let’s hold off on examining it anyway. Although it’s interesting how it actually grabbed the patronus. I’d like to know why they’re so much more corporeal here than on Earth.”

They walked on in silence until they reached the cluster of lights for which they had been aiming. But these were no patronus-lights; these were the glowing tips of tendrils that sprouted from the dark mud. They curled at the end like fiddlehead ferns, and in addition to the main light at the tip, they sported a line of glowing dots along their stems. As Ava peered ahead, she could see thicker clusters of them growing in a marsh of sorts, collectively forming a glowing cloud of radiance as they blended together in the mist.

Alan was eagerly picking apart diagrams on his scanner. He cross-referenced a few organic compounds, pulling up molecule after molecule.

“What is it, *mein Schatz*?”

“I have a theory, and I want to test it by smelling this thing. The air’s safe. We can turn off the filters. Keep your oxygen on though.”

Ava gestured, and her ears popped as her modified bubble-head charm let in Geist’s atmosphere. It somehow *smelled* ancient. Somewhere between a damp, moss-covered log in a bed of autumn leaves and old cobblestones in a rainstorm. Alan ran a finger along the back of a tendril and raised it to his nose, inhaling and then exhaling blissfully.

Ava did the same. The tendril felt like rubber with soft fur, but she wasn’t prepared for the aroma of... the best she could describe it was *happiness*. Not that it made her feel happy directly, but suddenly all her fondest, most joyful memories were at the forefront of her mind—her Scarab acceptance letter, a campfire in the Black Forest, the first test of her MagicJava compiler, among dozens more—and she couldn’t help but smile.

“Happy memories for you too?” Alan asked.

“Oh yes. What are you getting at?”

“It looks like these are part of the patronus’s life cycle. There’s some sort of... embryo, I guess, in the glowing bit at the top. I don’t know if the tendril is a symbiotic organism that nurtures the developing patronus or whether it’s all one organism or something else entirely... but what matters is, this seems to invoke a state in us similar to the one we have to be in to cast the patronus charm.”

Ava chuckled at the implications. “You mean to say our patronus appears when we call because our happy memories smell like patronus eggs? Or patronus... young?”

“Exactly!” Alan was excitedly scanning his own patronus now. “On Earth, I’d imagine the reproductive process is a bit different—from what I’ve observed back home, it seems as though they feed off the magical energy of a witch or wizard who matches somehow—”

SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

“Which is why when the magic-user goes through some life-changing experience, they get a different patronus?”

“-yeah. And they’re in some semi-dormant state but they can still hear, which is why we need to say the patronus charm out loud, and then they come running like a trained pet.”

“Wait. How are happy memories related to this? I know that to a patronus, they ‘smell’ like this tendril thing here, which I’m going to call a patronus egg, but why do they only come if they sense it?”

“It might have something to do with dementors,” replied Alan, “Let’s see if we can spot one.”

It didn’t take long. A long, sinewy dementor swam through the fog using rows of waving paddles along its back. Its head—or at least its broad, flattened front end—focused on a patch of patronus eggs, and it accelerated towards them. It twined itself around one egg-tendril, obscuring the glowing tip from view, and when it shifted, the glow was fading rapidly.

“Dementors... eat patronus eggs?” Ava wondered.

With no warning, a bright silver light zoomed over to the feeding dementor. It was a jagged-looking patronus, all angles and spines, and in the face of its radiance the dementor quickly retreated.

The last piece of the puzzle piece fell into place.

“So *that’s* it,” breathed Alan in realization, “When we cast the patronus spell, we’re activating their primal instinct to defend their eggs from dementors. But there aren’t any eggs, our happy memories just happen to smell similar.”

“And because our happy memories smell like patronus eggs, dementors try to eat them... but there aren’t any eggs, so they drain our happiness instead... and if they get really close, they *do* eat the source of the scent, which happens to be a human soul... and that’s what we call the Dementor’s Kiss?”

“Seems right to me,” Alan affirmed, “But we’ve been doing an awful lot of conjecturing. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves with the hypotheses when we have the means to test them right here. We should get a better look around.”

He spread his hands flat as if he were carrying a platter, and a miniature representation of their environment started building from his palms outwards. There was a rocky outcrop nearby, and some sort of maroon-spotted thing that looked like shelf fungus was protruding from it. Perfectly spherical growths sprouted from the mud on the other side of the patronus-nest-marsh.

Ava saw it on the small representation before she noticed it in real life: a bright patronus, zooming purposefully towards the center. Towards them.

She turned, and nearly gasped in surprise as she saw its form. It was unmistakably a dolphin, an Earth dolphin, with an intelligence lurking in its ethereal eyes that immediately set it apart from the wild patronuses.

And then she *did* gasp as it spoke in a human voice. “Welcome, explorers,” it said, “Please follow the dolphin. My name’s Dennis Bishop and I’d be pleased to make your acquaintance.”

CHAPTER FOUR

UNSUSTAINABLE

```

class MagneticFieldToSound extends Castable{
  @Override
  SpellType GetSpellType(){return(0,9,1,Null,0,0);}
  void Cast(target tar){
    if(!sensory.GetAccess(tar)){return;}
    string[] ears=("ear_left", "ear_right");
    for(string ear in ears){
      position pos= bmap.GetPos(tar, ear);
      if(!interface.ScannerAccess(pos)){return;}
      // note to self: improve transverse to longitudinal conversion utility
      num mag=waveUtil.TransToLong(interface.scanner.BField(pos)).magnitude
      sensory.AuralStimulus(false,mag);
    }
  }
}

```

Alan and Ava shared a brief look of wordless shock. Thoughts were piling up against each other in Ava’s mind, even faster than usual. Elation that they weren’t alone in their discovery, disappointment that they hadn’t been the first—but above all, as always, curiosity. In that wordless glance, there was a tacit resolution to learn as much from the mysterious traveler as possible.

They looked back at the dolphin-patronus in unison, and it seemed to understand their resolution, for it began to swim through the air at a walking pace, following the rocky outcrop. The pair scrambled to follow. As they approached the maroon-spotted fungus that grew in circular shelves, the dolphin stopped expectantly.

Alan examined the fungus, slightly confused. “It’s got pores...” he muttered, “It looks like it might have something to do with that spellwork we saw in Pakistan... I don’t see how it could transport us though. Do we...”

Ava laughed as she saw from what Alan couldn’t from his slightly higher point of view.

“Nothing to do with the vegetation, *mein Schatz*.”

SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

She lifted the shelf-fungus-thing to reveal a spherical metal device, unmarked and with a single button on the top.

“Ah.” Alan said sheepishly, “A manually activated portkey. I see.”

“He must have them all over the planet,” Ava noted, “Shall we?”

He took her hand, and together they pressed the button.

A jerk, a blur, a brief disorienting rush, and then they were stumbling out of thin air and squinting in the light of Geist’s unclouded sky—not one star, but an entire globular cluster illuminating the atmosphere, stars so close compared to those of Earth that they seemed almost within reach. Their light shone upon a structure, not quite a castle; more like a castle-shaped university building. It had walls and towers and crenellations, crafted from various hues of stone, but also glass-covered walkways and satellite dishes and what looked to be a Muggle observatory capping the highest central tower. As a whole, it was breathtaking.

A voice echoed around the courtyard into which they had portkeyed.

“Magnificent, isn’t it? I built it up above the fog and clouds, highest point on the planet. Just wait until the black hole rises. Quite the spectacle.” Ava looked around for the source of the voice, and she found it to be a man reclining against a stone wall in the courtyard. Dennis, presumably. A sport coat was draped over his broad shoulders and his face bore an amiable smile. His neatly-trimmed beard was flecked with grey, but his hair was still black. He looked to be in his sixties—approaching middle age, for a wizard.

Except...

“You’re not a wizard.” Alan stated in surprise.

“Hope that’s not a problem for you,” Dennis replied. “Personally, it’s a source of pride. I built my magic from the ground up.”

Ava was legitimately impressed, and her curiosity was only further piqued. MagicJava had been difficult enough, and she’d already known magic at the time she started scripting it. To start with absolutely nothing, and work one’s way up to this...

“That’s, uh, really impressive,” she said out loud, “I’d love to know more.”

“And I’d be happy to oblige!” replied Dennis, “But first things first—come on in. I don’t believe you’ve introduced yourselves.”

“Ah,” said Alan, as Dennis led them through a sliding door and into a large wood-paneled lobby, “Sorry. I’m Alan, and this is Ava. We’ve been applying scientific principles to magic, and we’ve recently managed to get the Anaphora working. A time and space vehicle. This is actually the first planet we’ve gotten to explore.” The casual nature of the conversation jarred harshly with the fantastical concepts described, verging on irreverence and yet comforting so far from home.

“How fascinating!” said Dennis, “Have something to drink, if you’d like.” He pointed out a faucet on the wall, with a grid of buttons above it. “Also, do you mind if I examine this... Anaphora? From here, of course.”

SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

He gestured, and an interface sprung up around him—surprisingly similar to Ava’s own. She wondered if it would be rude to ask if he had a workshop, and if she could *please see it now*.

“Examine away,” said Alan, filling a cup with tea, “It’s not far from where you found us.”

As Dennis continued to use his interface and Alan drank, Ava spoke up.

“Excuse me—what’s that written in? I’m a programmer, and I developed a magic version of Java a while back, and I’ve never met anyone who’s even attempted anything similar.”

“Java?” Dennis frowned. “Object-oriented doesn’t seem like the right choice when you’re dealing with magic... I suppose that’s the inherent bias when you grow up using wands.”

“Oh,” replied Ava, somewhat embarrassed, “It’s more of a bias from before I knew about magic at all. I only knew Java when I got my Scarab acceptance letter. Um. What do you use?”

“Something more similar to Python,” Dennis explained as he rotated a representation of the Anaphora in his hands, “I call it Reticulated Python, or Retic. It’s more than a pun, though. The structure of the language is reticulated for ease of access.”

Ava felt out of her depth, but was spared the social discomfort of deciding a response as Dennis changed the subject.

“This *Anaphora* of yours is... problematic,” he frowned, “Wonderfully well-constructed, and yet the time-travel troubles me.”

“Is it unsafe?” Alan asked. Dennis hesitated for several seconds.

“Not in the sense of being an immediate danger to you specifically,” he finally said, “But yes, it is more unsafe than you realize.”

The couple shared a worried glance. “How so?” Ava asked.

“I’d be glad to explain,” said Dennis, “If you’re willing to hear me out.” As he spoke, chairs and a table rose from where they had been slotted perfectly into the floor. Ava admired how Dennis had used magic to craft the flawlessly-functioning machinery.

“Of course we’re willing.” The three sat down, Alan still sipping his tea.

“This might take a while to explain depending on how much you know,” said Dennis, “So I’m going to ask you a question first. What’s your definition of magic?”

Alan thought, then replied carefully. “Speaking generally, any action that violates conservation of energy or matter.”

“Oh, but I have a problem with that definition.”

“I suppose there are magical conservation laws too, yes, but when you trace the energy back far enough there’s no source. It just appears from nowhere. The limit is typically the rate of energy generation, not the amount of energy.”

“You’re disappointing me. If you had to give a name to the source of magic, what would it be?”

“Um. The Earth, for us at least.”

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“Why?”

“Earth’s natural magic is accessible through things that grow from it—plants, fungi, crystals, and the like.” Ava realized with some amusement that her boyfriend, startled by the interrogation, was quoting a first-year textbook almost verbatim. “The people of ancient Atlantis managed to impose structure on this wild magic. They gave it form, made it controllable. Set up a user interface, you could say. But the original limitations still stand; for instance, a wizard’s magic will grow weak if they live solely off of processed Muggle food, or food that has been created by magic—which is why food is an exception to Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfiguration.”

Dennis sighed. “I can see I’m getting nowhere with this line of questioning. I’ll spare you further suspense and cut right to it—conservation laws aren’t violated by anything, not even magic. All energy comes from somewhere.”

Alan breathed in sharply, almost a gasp. Ava leaned forward, curious enough to voice the implied question.

“From where, then?” she asked.

“The space in between universes!” he proclaimed, “There are countless universes distributed through all the dimensions, and it’s not just empty space in between them. They’re suspended in a sort of... extracosm, I call it. A soup of randomly distributed matter and energy. Patronuses and dementors feed on it. Every time you cast a spell, you tap into it. Every incantation, every enchantment, every hex and curse, all of it can be traced back to that one source.”

Dennis lounged in his chair, relishing the rapt attention that he commanded. “So that’s my definition of magic,” he finished, “Anything that draws its power from the extracosm.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, then Alan burst out, “But that’s wonderful! It explains so much about the laws of magic, and if my hypotheses—“

“No!” Dennis interrupted, “It’s not wonderful, it’s *tragic*.”

“Tragic?” Alan asked, “There’s something more to it, I assume.”

Dennis’s excitement melted away to reveal a grave expression; foreboding lay thick in the ancient air. “Let me show you the other side of the equation.”



Dennis led them deeper into his home. The metal and wooden furnishings were not ornate, but they were as spotless and polished as the Muggle laboratory equipment set up on the tables. Ava’s head was still buzzing with the recent revelations. She could scarcely imagine how Alan, the magical scientist to her magical engineer, was processing information that was surely more valuable to him than the philosopher’s stone itself. Dennis was explaining as they walked.

“...and so if conditions are favorable, a body of significant mass, like a planet, becomes a natural well into the extracosm, and life usually evolves to use the energy provided by that well. Every time a wizard casts a spell using their own magic, a temporary connection to the extracosm is formed through the Earth. I personally use the local black hole instead, although nowadays I try to keep the magic to a minimum—I only use it to construct non-magical items, and for very low-power functions.”

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“You’re worrying me with this talk of conserving magic,” said Alan, “Is the extracosm a limited resource?”

Dennis shook his head, “No, not like that. For all intents and purposes, its energy is inexhaustible and infinite.”

Alan relaxed somewhat, but still asked the lingering question.

“Why then? What’s this inherent danger in using magic?”

“When a connection is made to the extracosm, it leaves its mark on the... fabric of our universe, for lack of a better term. Wear and tear. I’m about to show you what happens when too much magic is used in a certain location—the outcome of one of my foolish early experiments, drawing more power than the universe could bear.”

Ava couldn’t help but feel that he had timed his speech to reach this point right as they reached an apparent dead end. The hallway simply ended in a wall of reinforced metal.

“What lays behind this wall is essentially a hole in the universe. If you have any magic that affects your environment, even passive magic, please exclude the ten cubic meters of vacuum behind this wall before getting any closer.”

Ava entered a terminal command, and Alan concentrated briefly.

“All right,” he affirmed.

Dennis waved his hand over the metal wall, and as it became transparent, it revealed a chamber of similar material. Suspended at its center was a deformed sphere of utter blackness, a void into which Ava could not look for too long without feeling the overwhelming need to open her eyes, despite the fact that they were already wide open. She looked at Alan instead, and noticed that he had gone pale, making his stubble stand out.

“That’s a perfect vacuum,” he whispered, “So too much magical energy in one place... creates a black hole?”

“More like a... a null hole, let’s call it. Slightly less dangerous because they have no gravitational attraction. Much *more* dangerous because they don’t decay and are absolutely irreparable; in fact, they slowly expand even without magic. The only strategy is to avoid their creation in the first place.”

“You’re serious about this,” said Ava quietly, “This isn’t some sort of joke.”

“I’m afraid I am.”

“And what- what happens on Earth?” Alan asked.

“Someone might conduct an experiment similar to this and create a small null hole, and all magical attempts to fix it will simply swell it until it engulfs the planet. Barring that, if magical activity continues at its current rate, it will gradually wear away the fabric of the universe until a null hole forms at the Earth’s core sometime in the twenty-second century, with disastrous consequences. If time-vehicles such as the Anaphora are in common use, it will happen much sooner. If nobody uses any magic, it can be pushed back another two centuries—five more if all magical creatures and humans somehow cease to exist. But the only way to prevent the creation

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of this null hole is to destroy Earth itself. The same scenario exists on billions of other planets, and if a critical mass suffer the same fate, our entire universe itself will fall apart.”

Ava couldn't speak. Magic, the wonder that had illuminated her life since one glorious August morning, was now a tainted thing. Resentment rose within her, an ugly wish that she could un-hear the information, that she could spend her days in blissful ignorance.

Alan spoke instead. He sounded at least ten years older. “What do we do? What *can* we do?”

Dennis shrugged. “The obvious course of action is to get rid of all the magic-users and magic-supporting planets.”

“Ah yes,” said Alan dryly, “Genocide is always the answer.”

But Ava took a step back involuntarily. Her throat was suddenly parched, and she had to swallow before she could get words out.

“Alan, he's being serious.”

“Thank you, Ava,” replied Dennis, “I really am. The vast majority of the universe has no magic, you know. You're a negligible minority.”

“No,” said Alan, still clearly unsure as to whether Dennis was joking, or perhaps in denial on a larger scale, “There- there has to be some other way.”

Dennis rounded on him, irritated. “You're a scientist,” he accused, “you should know better than to let your biases interfere. This means bad things for humans, yes, bad things for all the magic-using species. I'm willing to take that moral burden. But please, *please* try to stop being so self-centered and look at things objectively. Pretend you're of a species that can't use magic—they do make up the majority of aliens, after all. Everyone you know, everything you treasure, is threatened by the unsustainable lifestyle of a select few aliens who tried to circumvent the laws of reality and are making the universe pay the price. Would you really go peacefully to an undeserved doom which could have been prevented?”

Ava spoke up. “That's- that's not a fair description at all! According to what you just told us, magic-users have no more say in whether they damage our universe's structure than stars or planets that do the same. It's not our lifestyle that's unsustainable, it's our life itself!”

Ava regretted the words the second they came out of her mouth.

“That's not what I meant. I, ah-“

“True, though. I couldn't have put it better myself. Magic damages the universe simply by existing, and there's no way to prevent the damage without using more magic. The best option is to damage the universe one last time in the process of cleansing it.”

“But if the holes are expanding anyway, even that won't work.”

“It's true, the universe is doomed to die eventually just like any of us. But if all goes according to plan, it will undergo natural heat death long before dying from wounds of magic. And isn't that all anyone can hope for? A long and happy life, followed by a peaceful death?”

“A long life achieved by the murder of hundreds of trillions,” added Alan.

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“Agh, yes!” Dennis exclaimed, frustrated, “Murder is bad! I understand! But for every death, there would be countless lives saved. And if it makes you feel any different, less than one percent of humans would die. I wouldn’t kill any Muggles. I’d have to destroy the Earth, of course, but there are plenty of other habitable planets they could be relocated to.”

The idea of relocation sparked something in Ava’s mind. The part of her that wasn’t frozen in shock managed to respond.

“Wait, wait, you said there were other universes, and that it’s possible to reach them through the extracasm. So why does it matter so much if this one ends? If the end is drawing near, we can just move to a new universe and take everything important with us.”

“I’ve *thought* of that,” said Dennis, with the air of a patient and long-suffering schoolteacher, “But extrapolate. The collective species of our universe move to a new universe, destroy it with magic, move to a new universe, destroy that one... and someday, there will be nowhere to run. Like heat death on a grand scale. *All* the universes will have become part of the extracasm. That death of the multiverse is a fate to be avoided above all others.”

“But...” the words died on Alan’s tongue, and Dennis sighed. To Ava’s horror, she found herself unable to move, held in place by some unknown force—not magical, she noticed.

“I can see I’m the villain in your minds now,” he said, “And I’m genuinely disappointed. I was excited, briefly, to find fellow people of intelligence with whom I could save the universe. But you’re wizards. You’re just like the rest of your kind, willing to dig the graves of future generations rather than make the necessary sacrifice!” He paused, collected himself. “I’m not heartless, you know. I understand why you won’t join me. But if that’s the case, I’m afraid I can’t just let you go.”

Ava’s heart pounded in her chest, and she struggled to keep her breathing steady. She felt Alan try and fail to apparate, first through space and then through time. Dennis didn’t seem to notice, continuing his speech.

“I dislike time travel. It’s one of the most unsustainable magical practices there is, and I try to stay away from it. A few early trips to protect my past from meddlers, a few to collect some toys from the future. But space travel, if done correctly, is one of my great joys. Surely explorers such as yourself can appreciate my love of the diversity our wonderful universe has to offer. Which reminds me! I’d like to demonstrate some personal tech inspired by this very planet.”

“You’re insane,” Alan whispered.

“I’m sorry that you think that. You’re a selfish wizard, but you’re also a man of intellect, and you deserve a better place in the history books than those who doubted the methods of Pasteur or the theories of Galileo.”

Dennis pulled a metallic bundle from his coat pocket. At his touch, spindly appendages unfolded from it, leaving a flat disc which he placed on Alan’s forehead. The metal arms made contact with Alan’s sweating temples.

“In fact,” continued Dennis, as Ava watched her boyfriend close his eyes tightly in anticipation of pain, “I dare say you know more about time travel than I do. I need that knowledge, but I don’t need you. I’m sorry.”

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Ava, who had been struggling not to hyperventilate, suddenly found it difficult to breathe at all. She wished tears would come, so she didn't have to see every detail: Alan's chin quivering in fear, Dennis's solemn eyes that held such detestable sympathetic pain. The self-proclaimed savior of the universe reached forward and pressed his thumb to the device on Alan's forehead.

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Ava had to pause the memory transfer so that she could look at Alan—*her* Alan—take his hand, make sure he was there. It didn't help that that he was shaking, much as he had in the memory, but after a minute of holding each other in silence, she found the courage to resume.

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Alan's wristwatch dropped to the ground as the rest of him sublimated, releasing a violent flash of light and something more than light—

And Ava was somehow free of the force that had held her immobile, and the tears were coming thick and hot and entirely too late but she still knew where Dennis stood—

And her fist connected with something but it felt more like fabric than flesh and the swing was weak and unsatisfying and she had no strength for another—

And she didn't remember saying anything but when her vision cleared she was once again held fast, unable to speak, and Dennis was chiding, "Language, Ava, really. I understand why you're upset, but there's no need for profanity. Trust me, I'm grieving too. He deserved better."

Ava was not grieving. Grieving was burnt ashes, Ava was raw fire; her hatred and fury burned within her, blistering her lungs and searing what remained of her heart, so hot that she felt sure Dennis would spontaneously combust from its sheer ferocity.

But Dennis calmly picked up Alan's wristwatch, frowning at it. "Odd," he said, "Not even a scratch. It's definitely enchanted... let's not risk triggering any nasty surprises, eh?"

Dennis tossed the watch through the still-transparent steel wall, and it was swallowed by the null hole. He then collected the device that had been on Alan's head and put it on his own, wincing briefly as a light shone from the disc.

"Ahhhh," he breathed, "Useful information indeed. You really were a clever one, Alan... *infantes gelata*. Oh dear, two timelines... and they can only be merged again if they become sufficiently similar... well, it looks like I get to try out my other toy after all."

He glanced at Ava, and seemed to notice the ferocity of her gaze for the first time. It only gave him pause for a second, and then he put on a leather glove that trailed wires into some unseen device in his pocket. Wisps of black smoke curled from his gloved hand as he placed two fingers on her forehead, and even through her rage, Ava felt the chill of a dementor.

"Your instructions are simple, Ava. Find the alternate versions of yourself and Alan. Kill them as soon as you can after they travel to their first planet. I have some toys that will give you an edge in combat. When you're finished, come back to me and I'll let you join your boyfriend."

The memory dimmed, filled with roaring static, and was suddenly as dark and silent as the null hole that pulsed ominously under the ancient sky.

CHAPTER SIX

SCARAB

“Science predicts that many different kinds of universe will be spontaneously created out of nothing. It is a matter of chance which we are in.”

Alan took a few deep breaths, both to calm his shaken nerves and to remind himself that he could still breathe.

Hydrogen, he thought, *helium, lithium, beryllium, boron, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen...* He made it to gallium before he trusted himself to speak.

“You okay, Ava?” She was gripping his hand as though her hold were the only thing stopping him from drifting away through the Anaphora’s doors into the infinity of space.

“What the hell do you think?” she snapped, then, “Sorry. But no. I’m not okay. You *died*, Alan, and I remember it like it happened just now.”

Alan wasn’t sure how to respond, so he held her hand and said, “I’m right here, my love. I’m alive. You can feel my heartbeat, you can hear my voice.”

The Anaphora was still drifting. On Earth, it was easy to look at the sky and see a dome: all stars at the same apparent distance, a two-dimensional backdrop along with the moon and planets. But here, in the near-vacuum, it was somehow easier to see the stars as they truly were: blazing nuclear furnaces whose vastness was dwarfed only by the space between them, not pinned to a dome but suspended in the cosmos. The stars didn’t twinkle here. They shone, and to Alan’s wizardly senses, some shone with something more than light; they radiated magic, raw and alien and profoundly beautiful.

And slowly killing our universe.

After a few minutes of silence, Ava stood up. “I think I’ll make coffee,” she said, “You want some tea?”

“No thanks.”

“All right.”

More silence, only broken by the sounds of a Muggle coffeemaker. Alan’s thoughts were churning in on themselves, knotting and tangling into an unpleasant mass of uncertainty.

Ava took a breath, as if she were about to say something, and then turned back to her coffee.

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“What is it, love?”

“I was thinking... is he right? He’s unhinged, but is he *right*?”

Alan shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. Maybe, if everything he says is true. But I think that for some reason, he hates magic on a more personal level.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. At the beginning of the memory playback, I saw me, other me, say- well, the first thing he said was, ‘You’re not a wizard,’ which in hindsight was probably not the best thing to say. And then Dennis- I only picked up on this because I was watching it secondhand, I think- Dennis gave me this look for a second. Like he was being forced to make polite conversation with a blast-ended skrewt.”

“Huh. But I mean... he probably hates magic-users, cause, y’know... they’re killing the universe.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think we’re killing the universe?”

“I don’t know. But Dennis lashed out so quickly once we didn’t renounce our magic- I mean, it can’t just be for the reasons he said. There has to be something more.”

“We could... go back? In time? Maybe find out something about his past, how he discovered all this, whether it’s true?”

“That’s not a bad idea. It’s just- hmm.”

“What is it?”

“If we go back, we won’t exist in this time anymore. The only differences between timelines will be entirely under Dennis’s control, and if he realizes we’re gone, he’d be able to merge them and continue his plans. I guess we could just push some asteroids a few degrees off-course to force the timelines further apart.”

“Good catch. But let’s do that and go. I hate just... sitting here.”

“Sure. It’s good to keep moving. While I’m doing that, think about how we can deal with your alternate self.”

Alan closed his eyes, using the Anaphora’s mental interface to cast about for the nearest asteroid field. He could hear his girlfriend thinking aloud behind him.

“She’s still using MagicJava... I didn’t really know what I was doing when I wrote the core framework. I could redo that, definitely. Port the most important spells over to the new system... Magic++? It would certainly give me an edge, but I don’t know what new stuff Dennis gave her...”

“Timelines should stay apart now if we leave.” Alan said.

“Where are we headed?”

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“I was thinking the Scarab Academy library, before You-Know-Who destroyed half of it. It’s the most concentrated knowledge base I know of.”

“He’s not on the Muggle internet,” affirmed Ava, “Not after a quick Google search over the next few decades, at least.”

“Good to know. You ready?”

“I’m ready.”

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The Isle of Man is home to every kind of fog imaginable. Thick fog that smooths the jagged contours of coastal cliffs. Thin mist that heralds rain. Fog banks that roll in from the ocean like the ghosts of waves, splashing and swirling in slow-motion eddies, drowning the land beneath in white. Morning mist, evening gloom. Fog too resilient to be burned away by the sun, instead forming majestic shafts of light as photons lance through the vapor. Fog that carries the scent of salt and brine, or the lush aroma of damp earth.

And one special bank of fog, soupy-thick and milky-white, swirling slowly in a little-known valley, through which distant lights glimmer enticingly if one watches long enough. Those who journey into this fog will find themselves barely able to see their own feet, and then suddenly emerge, blinking in the sudden sun, unsure of how far they have traveled. Unless, of course, they have a Pass.

“Do you have a Pass?” one of Themselves asked (for the local species of fairylike beings refer to themselves as, well... Themselves). Its walnut-sized lantern cast a miniature halo of light in the mist as it hovered at eye level. To Alan, it appeared identical to its brethren. So far as he knew, Themselves were all the same gender and build, and the finer details escaped him.

Alan tore his gaze from the little fellow, swallowing a sudden wave of nostalgia. He’d forgotten the peculiar aroma that permeated the grounds, the eternal smell of grass after a summer shower, with something esoteric to it that escaped comparison but set his magical senses tingling. Generations of spellwork had saturated the air with magic just as thick as the fog.

He held up his Scarab Academy pendant. “We’re graduates. Just here to use the library.”

Themselves executed a lazy spin and resumed speaking upside-down. “No pass, eh? I’ll get the Maiden.”

Ava glanced at Alan as the little fellow’s lantern-light absorbed Themselves, leaving a glowing wisp that shot away into the mist. “Is that okay?” she asked, “I mean, shouldn’t we be trying to avoid contact?”

Alan shrugged. “I’m beginning to get an intuitive sense of actions that might make the timeline split. A side effect of all this mental time-magic, I think. This seems safe to me.”

“All right. I trust you.”

As the lantern-light approached through the fog, accompanied by a human-sized figure, Alan was reminded of Geist, the planet of the patronuses. But those memories were displaced by older, fonder memories as the school’s ghost and ethereal caretaker stopped in front of him. Her

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hair wafted about in an invisible breeze, dissolving into mist; her round spectacles glinted with some unknown, distant light.

“I do enjoy riddles,” she said softly, tilting her head and intoning:

*“A genuine couple, within and without
Both are the same, I conclude with no doubt.
How can this be, with no mimic or mime?
The answer, of course, is to travel through...”*

“...Time,” admitted Alan, “I don’t know why I bothered trying to hide it.”

“It’s a new riddle,” said the Pale Maiden with her characteristic gentle smile, “And I thank you for that. We’ve had our fair share of time travelers, but none so far who have dared to visit while their previous selves are enrolled.”

“We won’t be bothering them, I promise. We just need to look at the library before—”

He cut himself off, but it was too late. The Pale Maiden sighed.

“I won’t press you,” she murmured, “I lived through catastrophes, and died through countless more. We’ll recover. Meanwhile, I’m pleased that your research has taken you to such interesting places. *You may pass*. Now pardon me, I’m overseeing the trial of a new bone-setting charm. Some of us can’t be in two places at once.”

With that, the familiar figure melted away, becoming one with the fog.

“It’s interesting,” noted Ava, “that she knew what I’d be doing after school, even as she was helping me figure out where I wanted to go in life.”

“Huh. Yeah.” Alan was busy counting his steps, waiting for that magical moment—

The fog parted, scattered by a gust of warm wind, and the entirety of Scarab Academy was suddenly sprawled before them. The sight took Alan’s breath away, no matter how many times he’d seen it before.

The School for Children of Abnormally Remarkable Ability and Brilliance had originally been a tiny school for those interested in something beyond the standard magical education—just the central hall, with its majestic dome and four dormitory towers. As its reputation spread, it attracted not only eager children, but adult witches and wizards who wished to pursue their research in the presence of other scholars. And through some archaic enchantment, the school—now an academy—grew to accommodate the extra attendees. It sent basements into the ground like roots, and grew towers and buildings like branches. Because the Academy could not plan ahead, buildings were placed wherever they fit; they were attached to other buildings by a network of tunnels, bridges, and walkways that were rumored to have been the inspiration for a frustrated Professor Dijkstra’s famous pathfinding charm.

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Alan could see the architectural progress quite clearly. The central dome and towers were unimaginably ancient, from the time of Renard Ravenclaw—making them only a few centuries younger than Hogwarts itself. The surrounding towers were constructed in a more Gothic style, resembling cathedrals; slightly further out were some buildings plucked straight from the Renaissance, then an impressive array of Baroque structures, with domes that complemented the central one. Something terrible must have happened at that point, because the Academy hadn't needed to grow any new buildings until sometime much more recently. The outer ring of structures had a distinctly modern look; the towers were either art deco like the Empire State Building or plated entirely with windows, and the smaller buildings wouldn't have looked out of place on a university campus. These modern buildings were connected to each other, not with arched bridges or parapets, but glass-enclosed walkways.

Even considering the storage and laboratory space required for intense magical research, it was quite clear that the Academy was more of a village. Actual underage students made up a small percentage of those who lived there—consistently about half the population of Hogwarts, despite the Academy's size. But of course, the edifice of knowledge and progress attracted more than just students. Independent researchers found it convenient to take up residence next to their workspaces. Businesses flourished, selling equipment or coordinating large magical experiments. Many students simply stayed once they came of age, continuing to learn, and eventually passing on their knowledge. During his time at Scarab Academy, Alan had come to think of the school itself only being the central few buildings, because that was where all of his classes and classmates were. He hadn't realized for an embarrassingly long time that adults could keep learning and discovering their whole lives, even after school was over.

Ava's reminiscing apparently took a different form.

"See that?" she asked excitedly, directing his attention to a purple jet of flames erupting from a window of the Lasair dormitory (nothing out of the ordinary, given Lasair's reputation), "That's Kat's automatic de-gnomer backfiring! I *remember* that! Which means this must be the day that... Alan, is this on purpose?"

"First date that popped into my head," he said, doing a rather poor job of feigning indifference. "Let's get to the library before we muck up the timelines."

The couple made their way towards the library, favoring the research rather than residential areas to lessen the chances of some timeline-splitting interaction. Alan mused that such an interaction would be inevitable, if not for the universe's inherent tendency to avoid timeline splitting at the micro scale. They skirted a magically suspended body of water that filled three entire stories of one of the window-covered towers; within it, several mer-people were conversing with a witch who scribbled notes on a clipboard.

"It never quite struck me until I saw the rest of the wizarding world," observed Ava, "How very *Muggle* this place is."

Alan shook his head, "I remember Professor Winston complaining about how funding was always so low because the Ministry had such heavy anti-Muggle sentiments. I never really realized how bad it was until I left."

"Probably why You-Know-Who was so intent on destroying it, too," Ava added quietly.

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Alan said nothing. It remained one of the most terrifying experiences of his life—the sick plummeting in his stomach as the wards were triggered, the protective ring of fog becoming a deadly miasma crawling with unspeakable horrors and hooded figures, the helpless horror as he cowered in an Undetectable basement with the other underage students, listening to the muffled cracks and booms of the battle above. And the scene once he emerged wasn't pretty. The Dark Lord had been at the height of his power, and eventually, the Academy's most powerful spellcasters realized that the most they could do was cast a powerful charm that hid all the most precious equipment and resources away in an undetectable region of folded space along with the Academy's residents, so that once the Death Eaters had their fill of destruction, the Academy would have something from which to rebuild itself.

Alan's graduation ceremony had been held beneath a cracked dome, and the somber silences between speakers had been punctuated by the incessant, wounded groaning of the Academy slowly mending; it sprouted girders and bricks like scar tissue, healing stronger but uglier like a broken bone. The Phynodderie, a hulking, shaggy creature with eyes like coals, had been the tireless custodian of the Academy since its founding, working singlehandedly without rest to maintain the grounds. Nobody knew it even had a mouth until it was heard howling in misery halfway through the event.

It was enough to make Alan seriously consider splitting the timeline just to stop that day from happening. Sure, it would still happen in one reality, but if there was another where it didn't happen, that was good... right? But that would mean another Dennis, who, if his claims weren't mad, was an even greater threat than Voldemort. And the other timeline's Alan and Ava would be different, perhaps not as well-equipped to deal with the threat. His head pounded with the futility of it all.

Alan felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, and realized he had stopped walking.

"Hey." Ava's voice was level, and she made sure he met her eyes before continuing. "I'm sorry for bringing it up. And I want to do something just as badly as you do. But... we're already doing something, *Liebe*. Dennis Bishop wants to destroy all magic, including the Academy, and we're not going to let him. There are some unknowns, but we're working on that right now. And it's all going to work out. All right?"

He gave her hand a grateful squeeze. "All right." And as they resumed their journey to the central library, he continued, "Thank you, love. I don't know what I'd do without you. When things seem complicated and hopeless, you somehow make them seem so... simple. Achievable."

"It's a bit late to thank me for helping you with your final Artifacts project, but you're welcome."

Alan chuckled. "You know what I mean. Besides, it's a year early to thank you, if you think about it that way."

"True," Ava agreed, smiling.

A wizard with a truly impressive array of Artificer's monocles hovering about him held a door for the couple as they emerged onto a stone walkway high above the grounds. Alan felt a

slight disturbance in synchronicity, the briefest of timeline splits, but the feeling settled as the man hurried down the hallway, unintentionally pushed by the universe such that he fell into the same steps he would had he not held the door. It wasn't a conscious action on the universe's part, it was simply a state of lower temporal potential—similar to how a stone will naturally fall to a lower gravitational potential if dropped.

As Alan pondered temporal physics, Ava was staring wistfully after the man. More specifically, his expensive monocles.

“Wow,” she said, “I really need to get that Artificer's degree.”

“You could probably show them the Anaphora and they'd give you one on the spot,” replied Alan, “That's a feat of magical engineering if I ever saw one.”

Ava's smile grew more genuine at the praise. “You think?” she said, “There's some pretty impressive stuff here already. Like that clockwork dragon from second year, remember?”

If they had hurried, they would have already been at the library. But instead, they dallied, taking a roundabout route to the dome, walking casually along well-remembered paths and reminiscing about their years at the Academy. It was a relief to be under the protection of the ancient wards, not having to flee for their lives or confront unknown terrors. Exploring was fun, but it had taken its toll, and the couple were willing to take their time (for they had all the time in the world) recuperating before they set forth again.

But soon their wanderings began to feel like procrastination, and they started across the long bridge that stretched from the professors' living quarters to the library in the central dome. The dome itself was massive; a perfect stone surface that appeared as unbreakable as the Earth itself. But as solid as it was, it wasn't fixed in place; it was actually a complete sphere that could rotate freely, pushed by a magically animated bronze scarab beetle. The library was much bigger on the inside, a gargantuan spherical space where gravity always pulled outwards, like an inverted Earth. Students could generally find what they were looking for, with help from Themselves or various locating spells. But actually finding one's way was exhausting, especially with the anti-apparition ward, and it helped a lot to have the Librarian (so the students affectionately called the scarab beetle) spin the library around until one could enter in the correct section. It was, perhaps, an inefficient way of doing things. But even the most ruthlessly optimization-obsessed spellweavers didn't seem to mind.

Alan lost sight of the upper portion of the dome as they walked through a set of columns and down a flight of stairs. But the lower half was just as imposing, protruding from the ceiling high above the Great Hall like a full moon. A dozen walkways hung in midair, converging at the bottom of the ancient sphere. The stone was so smooth and uniform that he only noticed it rotating when he saw the Librarian's bronze forelegs moving steadily.

He had planned this more carefully than he let on, to avoid meeting his past self. It wasn't just that they entered the Great Hall at an hour that wasn't very busy—the students wouldn't take much notice of two people entering the library above them, even if they bothered looking up. But Alan, despite his spotty memory, recalled exactly what his past self was doing at this hour, on this day, and it would give the older couple all the time they needed to search through Dennis Bishop's records.

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They were halfway across the pathway, high above the students studying or eating (or both, in many cases), when it happened.

With no warning, Alan and Ava were knocked violently to one side. Alan was nearly toppled over the railing with the force of the magic. Instinctively, he looked to make sure that Ava was okay—and his heart nearly stopped as he saw a trail of green where they had been standing moments before.

A terrifying realization hit him, followed immediately by an even more terrifying one.

One, that was the green of the killing curse. He had been shunted aside by a spell-program that Ava was constantly running for the very purpose of avoiding unblockable curses.

Two, the school's wards couldn't stop a killing curse from being cast, but they could detect the spell forming and transport the caster to a secure cell before they finished casting. The assassin was most likely using some sort of artifact. Alan made the immediate connection to the pistol with an *Avada-Kedavra*-green tip that he had spotted on Other-Ava's hip.

She was here.

•••••

Alan and Ava sat, side by side, on a comfortable sofa in the Talamh common room. Ava would often come to escape the constant mayhem of Lasair. She loved her housemates and their creations, mayhem included; but the quieter, more studious Talamh house was much more conducive to studying.

Today, however, she had other things on her mind. She put down her mug of coffee and took a shaky, calming breath. Nobody else was in the room. It was now or never.

"Hey," she said quietly. Alan looked up from his paper at the sound of her voice. She continued, the words spilling out. "So, Alan. Do you, um. Do you want to do the dance thing? The blue moon ball? With me?" Ava wasn't sure whether she had to clarify that she was asking him out, but she could feel herself blushing and figured that said enough.

"Oh!" Alan looked up, struggling for words. "I, uh, wasn't planning on going, but if you are then sure! Yeah. I can come." His voice was enthusiastic, but his expression and body language were trepidatious, hesitant. Scared, perhaps?

There was a brief silence, during which neither one of them could meet the others' eyes.

"Or," said Ava, "or, I- I am trying to enchant a typewriter to never run out of ink by modifying the enchantment on an everlasting quill and I think I am most of the way there but we could maybe work on it together and maybe you are having some suggestions and I can not really dance anyway so..."

A smile broke across Alan's face as she was speaking, like dawn breaks across the sky on the first day of a long-anticipated journey.

And he kissed her. He meant it to be a quick kiss, just to make his feelings clear, but somehow her hands were in his hair and it felt nice, and he didn't care that her mouth tasted like coffee and she didn't care that a pencil-point was poking into her hip. Papers rustled as they

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shifted position on the couch, blending with the crackling of the fire in the common room fireplace. There was no place either student would rather be than right here, right now, with each other.

Then the alarm went off.

“Bugger,” swore Alan, disentangling himself, “Of all the times for a drill...”

“*Komm mit-* I mean, um, evacuate to Lasair basement with me?” Ava suggested, somewhat flustered, “Osterweil will understand if you are somewhere else, but Bhat will have my head if I am not there.”

“Okay,” Alan agreed. He would have agreed to anything at that moment, just to spend a few more minutes with her. “We can cut through the library catwalks and go down the Lasair tower.”

“*Fantastisch,*” grinned Ava. She took his hand, still blushing and somehow not caring.

And they took off towards the library.

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