



Issue #2

The Chair

a Unioverse™ Backstory

INSIDE THE PROJECT CELESTE BASE CAMP, Malcolm looked out at the husk of the alien ship towering into the dusty red sky.

Behind him, sitting in a leather armchair, was Dr. Jaya Madan, who watched him with eyes both keen and kind. Malcolm had met with the psychiatrist several times before, back on Earth, and that's where she was now. But here, in this room, everything – Dr. Madan, her leather chair, the area rug beneath their feet – was a hologram.

She may be all lasers and light, thought Malcolm, but she can't hide how frustrated she is.

"I won't pass you if you're not forthcoming, Commander."

"How will you know one way or another?"

"I'm good at my job."

"So am I," said Malcolm, trying to suppress a wry smile and failing. "And I'd like to keep mine. One wrong answer and someone else is heading wherever that ship goes."

Dr. Madan studied Malcolm. "Being that person means a lot to you."
"It must."

"Why do you say that?"

"There's a good chance I'm going to die."

"Does that bother you?"

Malcolm paused. "It bothers me that it *doesn't*."

"What was it you told General Alvarez?" Dr. Madan thought for a moment. "'It's inviting me to take a trip.' You described the voice in your head as friendly."

"First, it wasn't a voice so much as a feeling, a presence. And second, no, I said it *wasn't unfriendly*. Not the same. At best, it was indifferent."

"But you don't get the sense these beings have malevolent intent."

"Correct."

"So why do you think you might die?"

"Because everyone else seems to think so."

"Why are you so certain of that?"

"The gun, the pill, and you."

"Care to explain?"

"They found machines inside the ship. Part mechanical, part alien organism. The gearheads designed a gun that they think can punch a hole through their exoskeleton. But that probably won't matter. I mean, who knows what they can do when they're powered up?"

"You're a soldier, Commander Orion. Do an assessment. Can you hold your own against one of them?"

"No."

Dr. Madan flinched. That answer surprised her, thought Malcolm. She was expecting confidence.

"Whoever built that ship has a million years on us, Doc. If one of those things wants me dead, I'm dead. And it doesn't matter. There's no way only one of them is waiting on the other side. Which is why they gave me the pill."

"The neural implant."

"Yeah. Know how it works?"

"I know it's painless."

"That's what they tell you. Truth is, if the mission goes sideways, I trigger the neurotransmitters and *boom*, my cerebral arteries burst, and everything I am, everything I ever was, is gone."

"That's quite an image."

"And then there's you, doc."

"What about me?"

"There are two reasons I'm here with you right now."

"And those are?"

"First, for you to decide if I'm ready to die."

"Are you, Malcolm?"

Her use of his first name threw him for a moment. He knew it was intentional, a way to disarm him, to invite intimacy and honesty. And part of him wanted to open up, to talk about fear and faith, to share his doubts and dreams. But he couldn't. The mission was more important than the man. So he let the moment pass.

"Yes."

Dr. Madan watched him, silent and serious. Malcolm held her gaze, welcoming the scrutiny. Eventually, she nodded.

"I believe you."

"Good."



“You said there are two reasons we’re meeting.”

“The second is for you to try to talk me out of this.”

“And how would I do that?”

“You’d start by telling me there’s no shame in backing out now.”

“I’m sorry, Commander, but you’re wrong. I’m not going to do that.”

“I’ve done my homework, doc,” said Malcolm, suddenly irritated.

“Your A.I. programming is designed to offer an off-ramp in situations like these.”

“Only when I perceive there is a chance it will be accepted.

Otherwise, it’s a waste of time. And, if I may say so, Commander, you have very little of that left.”



Dr. Madan cleared Malcolm for the mission, as he knew she would. Sure, they could send someone else. He knew other astronauts had been vetted. But if anyone else had felt the presence, received the invitation to jump, he wouldn’t be here right now.

Inside the smaller alien spacecraft, which was now packed with monitoring equipment and the techs running it, Malcolm approached the pod, helmet in hand. It already knew he was here. Tendrils snaked up from the floor, intertwining, forming a familiar shape: a seat. And that feeling washed over him again: this is safe, it would take him somewhere, just let himself go.

He put on his helmet. Who knew what the atmosphere would be like wherever he ended up? He also double-checked the gun at his hip.

The logical part of his brain knew that the weapon, no matter how powerful, wouldn’t matter against an alien race that built an interstellar spacecraft. And maybe it sent the wrong message. He even thought about leaving it behind. But the brass wouldn’t hear of it. And if he was honest, he was relieved. It would give him something to do in his final moments, an irrational bit of hope before everything ended.

As he approached the seat, an iridescent cocoon formed all around him. His heart beat faster, and his breath grew shallow. He inched forward and the writhing tendrils stopped moving. The presence that had entered his mind when he got this close the first time was different now, clearer, and it spoke with a reassuring, otherworldly voice: *Trust... faith... jump.*

Malcolm sat down. For a moment, all was still. And then everything went to hell. The tendrils wrapped around his head and unleashed bolts of current into his brain. Every muscle in his body contracted, and his body thrashed. Pain erupted in every nerve and Malcolm watched in horror as his body pulled apart, cell by cell, for what felt like forever...

He blacked out. And when he came to, he was strapped to a table. Around him, moving in and out of the light, were strange forms, tall, round, scaly. Bulbous heads with six eyes. One of them studied his gun. Another approached with a strange device that emitted a beam that began to cut open his torso. It was somehow bloodless and painless, but no less horrifying for that.

The voice in his head was no longer reassuring; instead, it mocked him. *How easy it was to lure you here. How simple your species must be.*

Malcolm knew he had no choice. He mentally reached for the neural implant, attempting to trigger it. Nothing happened.

The alien looming over him said something in a guttural tongue. The voice in Malcolm’s head translated: *That will not work. You will live through this day and a thousand like it. We will learn from you, then add your planet to our empire.*

Malcolm screamed.

All of the aliens instantly froze in place, then dissipated like mist on the wind. The room melted away, revealing an empty chamber. A door opened and a tech entered, handing Malcolm a pill and a glass of water. A neural suppressor, said the tech. To make the worst of the pain and the trauma fade faster than it would on its own. Finally, his memories returned: this was just a holographic simulation, one of many, all part of the training before his actual mission. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.

The Virtual A.I. architects outdid themselves on scenario after scenario, using XR imagery to create photorealistic alternative realities. Sometimes the things on the other side of the jump were friendly, and he practiced rehearsed diplomacy. More often, though, they weren’t. For every benevolent alien race seeking to connect with sentient life in the universe, he encountered a dozen that wanted to study him, dissect him, torture him.

At last count, he had died 47 times.



Malcolm approached the pod, helmet in hand. He had known there would be a lot of ceremony around this event, despite the secrecy. But he hadn't been prepared for the video call from President Fuller. She had been earnest and intense.

This was history, of course, but it was more than that. It was one thing to have evidence that we weren't alone in the universe. It was another thing altogether to make contact. To meet those who could build this ship, to perhaps befriend them, that was the hope. And given that conditions on Earth were dire, the need.

Her final words were what lingered with him now. She had looked into the camera, tears at the edges of her eyes, and taken a deep breath. "The fate of humanity may very well rest on your shoulders, Commander. Please come back."

Camera drones floated silently above Malcolm. He was grateful that he had his helmet on, because the President's words had shaken him. The fate of humanity? Him? His pace slowed and he looked around at the people who filled the room. Could they sense his doubt? Or did they see Commander Malcolm Orion, caught up in the monumental significance of the moment? Look at how he's keeping his composure despite the dread and the need and the hope.

Malcolm did feel all of that. But what he felt most of all was the urge to stop, to turn around, to have a few more minutes before –
– *the presence was back*, resonating through every region of his brain.

It was uninvited, invasive, and yet, for some elusive reason, he did not fear it. He might even have trusted it. Was that what it wanted him to feel? Or was this the only meaning his mind could ascribe to this voiceless other?

As the alien technology wove to form a seat, Malcolm put on his helmet and watched the curved, glowing walls rise up from the floor to surround him. Worry was replaced by wonder, anxiety by exhilaration: he was in the middle of a miracle, and was overwhelmed with awe.

No matter what happened next, this single moment was worth it; he was inside an instant of infinite possibility, and he welcomed it.

This was the real mission, Malcolm knew. Not another one of the scenarios he had endured over the past year. Those had allowed him to see and hear and touch, but not one of them made him feel the way he did right now. His nerves hummed with expectation and exultation.

Whatever was about to happen was something, Malcolm knew to the core of his being, that no one on Earth could have dreamed up. As a sense of peace washed over him, the writhing of the tendrils came to a stop, and he relaxed into his seat. For a moment, there was nothing; even the presence in his mind had disappeared.

But then, there was a sudden power surge, the lights and the monitoring equipment flashed, pulsed and flickered, as the tendrils suddenly wrapped around his arms, pinning them to his sides. Long, thick bioluminescent cables emerged from the chair, latched onto his helmet and sent electrical signals into his brain. The actions were swift and aggressive, and he was immobilized within seconds.

Why? He asked the voice in his head. *Why would you do this to me?*
To anyone?

The only response was for the presence to go crawling around in his consciousness again. It was different this time, though. It was activating various parts of his mind, triggering memories, searching. It sparked recall of what he knew about space travel, constellations, galaxies, the universe.

It wanted to know his intentions. And it sought out his desire to make this leap, to travel into the unknown. There, it hesitated for a moment, registering his fear and doubt.

So Malcolm did his own searching, moving through all of the clutter of his mind – the President, the cameras, the gun and the pill and the doc – to what mattered most: Rayla and the kids. His intention was simple, to save them, to save the entire human race before Earth could no longer be home. He had to do this. For them.

The presence disappeared.

His field of vision flooded with light.

And then Malcolm was gone.



Random Games presents

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Backstory

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