



Issue #3

The Jump

a Unioverse™ Backstory

MALCOLM COULDN'T TELL HOW LONG it took for the blinding light to fade, only that it happened gradually. He was no longer in the transpod, that much was certain: he was now soaring through a vast array of swirling, interconnected constellations. Around him was a vortex of multicolored light, and he was following a gleaming white filament that stretched out before him.

While he couldn't pinpoint any singular sensation that made him feel like he was moving at high speed – there was no wind or sound – he felt like he was inside a hypersonic bullet train, careening through space, the lights around him a technicolor kaleidoscope.

Even more disturbing – discovered when he reached out to touch something – was the reality that he couldn't see himself. His mind told him that he was lifting his hand to look at it, but nothing was there. What had happened to him? What was this place? And where was he going?

Faced with a scenario that defied logic, Malcolm's engineering mind took over and focused on gathering data. The vortex was a vast, curving, and twisting tunnel with translucent walls through which he could see other vortices, intertwining and intersecting.

They formed a matrix of interconnected pathways, all of which emerged from a vast ocean of blue light that enveloped everything. Malcolm found that light familiar, and then he realized why: it was the same color as all of the alien tech he had encountered. The circles on the floor. The chair. Even the burst of light that had overwhelmed his brain.

Something about that ocean of blue struck Malcolm as odd: the surface roiled with movement. Not waves, though. Images. He focused on one small segment as he passed, and what he saw was almost impossible to comprehend:

An orange planet

gnarled trees that scraped the sky

large birds in clouds of ash

small fish in seas of flame

Aliens

like us

two arms, two legs

long and lean

The longer Malcolm focused, the more his other senses engaged with increasing intensity. He started to hear and smell and feel:

Rain on jungle canopy

an angry screech

a voice that sings a dirge

salt water breeze

sun-blasted sand

the heavy air

of a gathering storm

Wherever Malcolm looked in that ocean of blue, there were new planets, new habitats, new sights, new sounds. He saw familiar forms with unexpected qualities and colors: mosses and lichens, insects and invertebrates, reptiles and mammals.

The one constant in this array of imagery? Life. It was everywhere. Instead of being exhilarated and inspired by this revelation, though,

Malcolm found it all vaguely threatening. It was one thing to know that humanity wasn't alone in the universe, as the ship on Mars had proven. It was another thing altogether to feel completely surrounded by alien life.

As he tried to process what all of this was and what it all meant, Malcolm noticed that his vortex was narrowing and that there were other vortices, shimmering and pulsing with blue light, now spider-webbing from the multicolored walls and encroaching on his own.

Up ahead, one of them crossed paths with his; as he approached the intersection, time seemed to elongate. Then, when he entered the crossroads, it froze altogether.

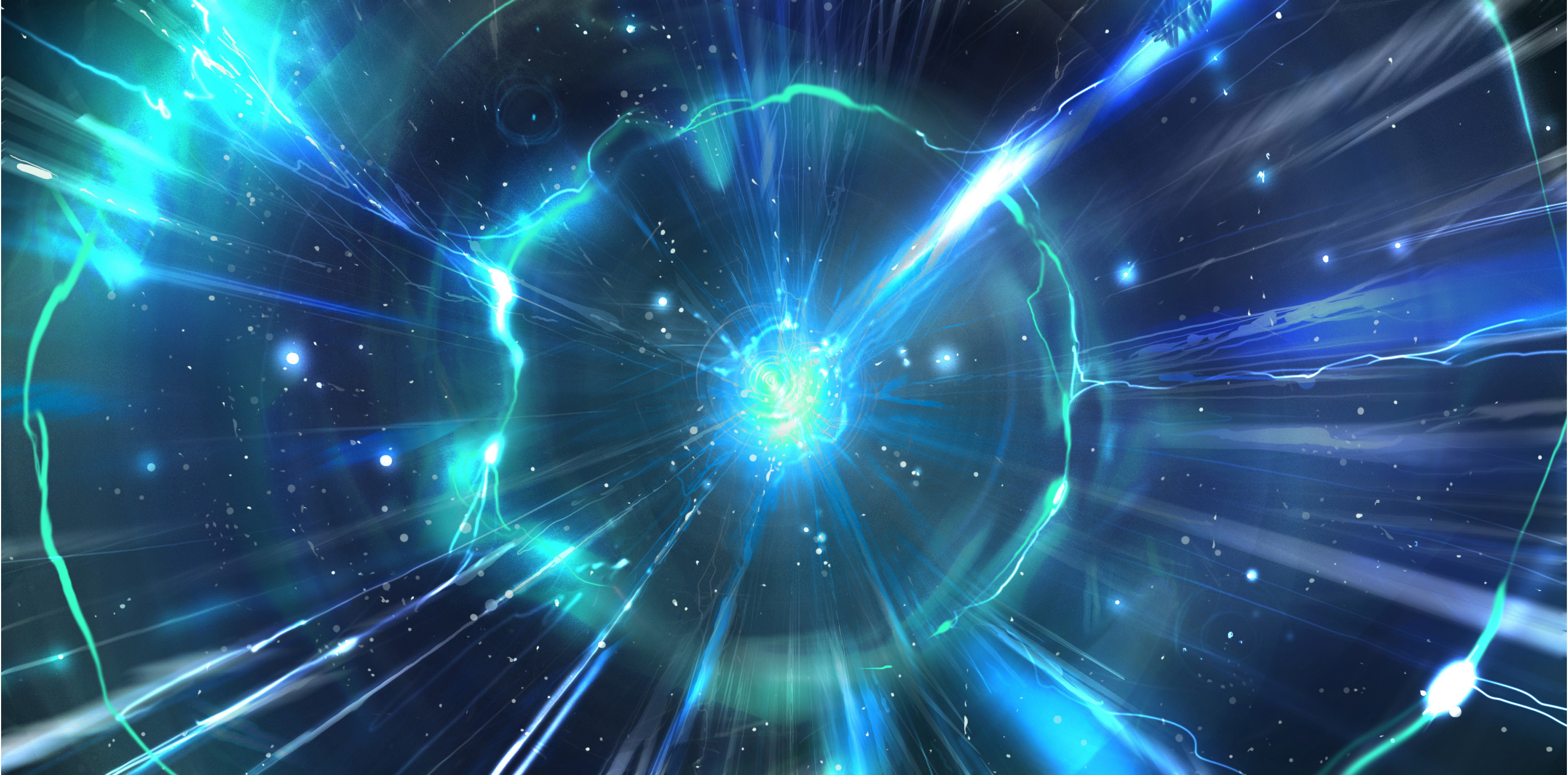
And there, in that place, he glimpsed the impossible:

An ethereal version of himself

aged and weathered

gray hair and beard

eyes that had seen too much



As he moved across Malcolm's path, following a single silver strand of light and leaving a blurred trail of ghost-images in his wake, the ancient traveler looked back at him, and somehow, Malcolm knew that expression. This other Orion was remembering the moment when he was looking the other way:

*the older man smiled
enigmatic and wistful
a welcome and a warning*

... and then the old man disappeared down his vortex as time sped up for Malcolm, who resumed his journey. A few moments later, he encountered a second intersection. This time, he saw:

*himself, middle-aged
decades in the future
tethered to a glowing umbilical cord
that stretched ahead and behind
he offers only a glance
in Malcolm's direction
troubled and full of worry,
before disappearing*

And then, a third encounter, only more disturbing:

*himself
not too much different from now
bruised and battered
fresh blood trickling
from a cut above his left eye
his injured twin
pulling hard against the silver cord
that was strained to the point of breaking
so shaken by what he had endured
he did not notice his other self
on the run from something or
someone*

What the hell had happened to him!? Was this a vision from a fixed future? Or was he witnessing other realities that existed outside his own?

Before Malcolm had a chance to think of an answer to any of these questions, his vortex plunged towards the ocean of blue light, weaving through a tapestry of other tunnels.

His journey, he somehow knew, somehow felt, was coming to an end. But he had no idea what would happen when he got wherever he was going.



When the tentacle-like cables snaked out of the alien chair and attached themselves to Commander Orion's helmet, General Alvarez called out to the soldiers stationed by the transpod.

"Get him out of there!"

But they couldn't. When they tried, they found that the pod was impenetrable. They had tested it previously with Orion inside the bubble, preparing for precisely this scenario; in those test runs, the surface had always remained gelatinous, permeable. *It must solidify to keep the process from being interrupted*, thought Alvarez.

The soldiers continued to press against the transpod, but it absorbed the force and rippled it out from the points of contact. They couldn't risk shooting it, and even if they had the equipment on hand to try to cut it, there was no time. What was happening to the Commander was unfolding too fast.

Orion's body began to glow. The monitoring equipment registered his rising heart rate and blood pressure, the spike in adrenaline and cortisol, and increased brain activity in the amygdala. Clearly, the Commander was feeling fear, despite his outward calm.

And yet, the monitor the General was looking at, which showed a close-up of Orion's face, revealed no pain, no confusion, and, at the end, unless Alvarez was mistaken, his expression was one of fascinated acceptance.

What happened to Orion at that point was similarly complex. His entire body slowly atomized over the course of a minute, maybe more. The General shared everyone's first impression, that Orion was being transported somewhere.



But as Alvarez watched the process unfold, that's not what it felt like. As he later explained to his superiors, Orion's body appeared to be converted into particles that floated away from the chair to be absorbed by the transpod. A flash of fireflies, embers in autumn air. Not a tearing away, but a release, a liberation.

As the glow around Orion brightened, the General noticed that the techs were getting antsy. They were worried: power throughout the room was fluctuating, and monitors were going black.

Lights started snuffing out, first at the outer edges of the room, then closer and closer to the transpod itself. He could hear the techs muttering through their headsets about how much energy the pod was pulling. They weren't prepared for this.

The gathered scientists, soldiers, and dignitaries grew quiet as everyone watched in wonder and horror, frozen in place. The transpod was now incandescent, all of the energy amassing there, building and contracting like a sun about to go supernova. And then it did.

BOOOOM!

All of the compressed energy blasted back out from the center, a tsunami of light crashing over everyone and everything. It was blinding, and the General could feel the wave move through him as all of the electronics in the room exploded in a shower of sparks.

Screams filled the room, first of surprise – and then, pain. When he could open his eyes, Alvarez could see a half dozen people on the ground, thrashing and convulsing, in the throes of grand mal seizures, and several others who were already dead. *The light washed over everyone*, thought Alvarez. *Why didn't this happen to all of us?*

Medics, there in case anything happened with Commander Orion, immediately sprang into action. Everyone else looked around with fear and wonder: within the pool of light radiating from the transpod, time folded in on itself.

Alvarez looked around and could see the alien ship not as they had found it, but as it was ages ago, before it had crashed. Biological. Technological. Operational. The General's mind wanted to say this was a hologram, an illusion, but his gut told him no, this was real.

There was shouting from the makeshift labs, and then the bio-machines, dead until this moment, rushed out, very much alive. They looked like they were searching – for what they should do, where they should go. As the light died out, though, they, too, faded, then collapsed when the room grew dark.

"Someone turn on a light!" shouted Alvarez.

It turned out to be an order impossible to follow. Every power source in the room – generators, batteries, the cables hard-wired to the grid – had been bled dry. Not a single light would work. They were going to have to sit there in darkness until help came.

"How bad is it?" Alvarez asked his lead tech.

"Bad, sir."

"Be more specific."

"Everything is fried. This isn't a temporary setback. We're going to need to start over from scratch."

"And if we want to prevent another catastrophic failure while keeping this thing running so that Orion can come back?"

"We're going to need more power. A LOT more."

"How much?"

"The spike I saw? Take what we had and multiply it by a hundred."

Alvarez knew that sort of construction would take months, maybe more than a year. He would have to deal with bureaucrats who saw Project Celeste as a failure, given the casualties and injuries and what had happened to the power generators.

He would make sure this was only a temporary setback, however; they would study what had happened to the dead and dying and prepare for the possible dangers of trying this again, and they now understood precisely how much power they would need to make this thing work.

The General, already envisioning the end goal, stood in the darkness and started formulating a plan.

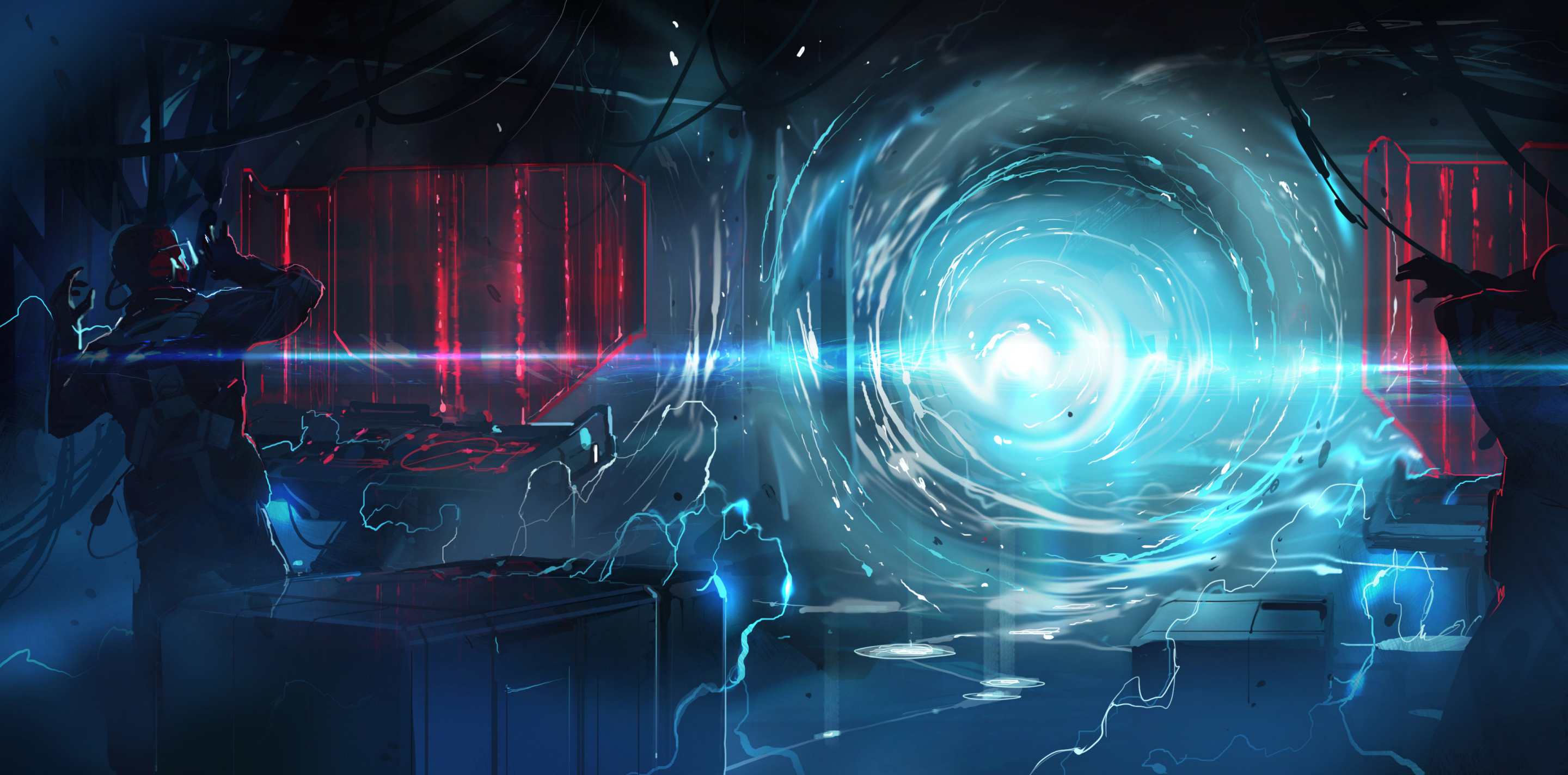
Wherever you are, Commander Orion, I promise, we'll do everything we can to get you back. So hold on. It's going to be awhile.



Malcolm opened his eyes. He felt trapped in the realm between dreams and waking, unsure of what was real and what was not.

Even though his vision swirled and warped, though, he realized that he was back inside the transpod. Was the entire journey a hallucination? Had the alien tech blasted his brain with electromagnetic radiation and induced a psychotropic state?

"G-G-Get-et-et in thhhhhhhhere!"



Wait, was that Alvarez shouting? Malcolm turned to look... and reality seemed to skip, to stutter, to lurch and lag. Sound distorted, slowed down, sped up. Every sense was overwhelmed: his nerves said the chair beneath him was burning his back but the air felt like silk on his skin, while the inside of his helmet smelled like a mixture of chlorine and summer rain.

Still clad in his space suit, Malcolm sat up and, as he had done during countless practice runs, focused on what he needed the alien technology to do. He imagined the transpod retracting into the floor, willing the walls to drop away.

Suddenly, he could feel the alien presence in his mind, conspicuously absent until now, and it was resisting him. The pod surface flashed red and the outline of a four-fingered hand appeared on the wall in front of him. The message was clear: stay where you are.

Feeling his panic rising, Malcolm ignored the signals, sending the same message but with more urgency: drop the walls. This time they did, and relief washed over him, at least until he realized that he was no longer inside the transpod on Mars.

Instead, he was in a vast, enclosed space filled with row upon row of pod stations. Whatever this place was – *wherever it was* – it was designed for a multitude of arrivals.

He attempted to stand. He was wobbly, like he had somehow shrunk inside his skin and was slowly filling out his body, and was forced to sit back down. For a few disturbing minutes, his brain sent mixed signals to his limbs: when he tried to move his left hand, his left foot moved instead.

Eventually, though, he regained control of his body, his mind, and his emotions.

Still, as he stood in the oval where his transpod used to be, Malcolm couldn't shake the feeling that he was not fully himself. His envirosuit and his gun, still at his hip, felt familiar, safe.

But everything else was off. These were his legs and arms, hands and fingers, but they seemed foreign somehow, as if he were a visitor within his own body. As Malcolm struggled to fight the feeling that he was a stranger in his own skin, a wave of vertigo washed over him, and he threw up on the floor. That helped; the nausea soon passed. Was this some form of extreme motion sickness? Or something different?

There were more immediate problems to deal with and mysteries to solve, though: this cavernous room was entirely empty. No signs of life anywhere. The only illumination came from recessed spots in the walls and the floor where he stood.

Strangely, the oval at his feet was red, which stood in stark contrast to the blue everywhere else. Another message to stay in place? If so, why? And what would happen to him if he didn't heed the warning?

In the dim light, Malcolm could make out enough detail that he was certain whoever had made the crashed ship on Mars had built this place, too. It had the same techno-organic design, a miraculous yet unsettling mixture of metal and living tissue. And although Malcolm couldn't explain precisely why, it just felt the same.

His orders were to recon and report, and in the absence of anyone reacting to his arrival, Malcolm decided that the only way to find out where he was and who had built all of this would be to explore. But which way to go? The floor lights seemed to indicate a path to follow, so that's where he would begin.

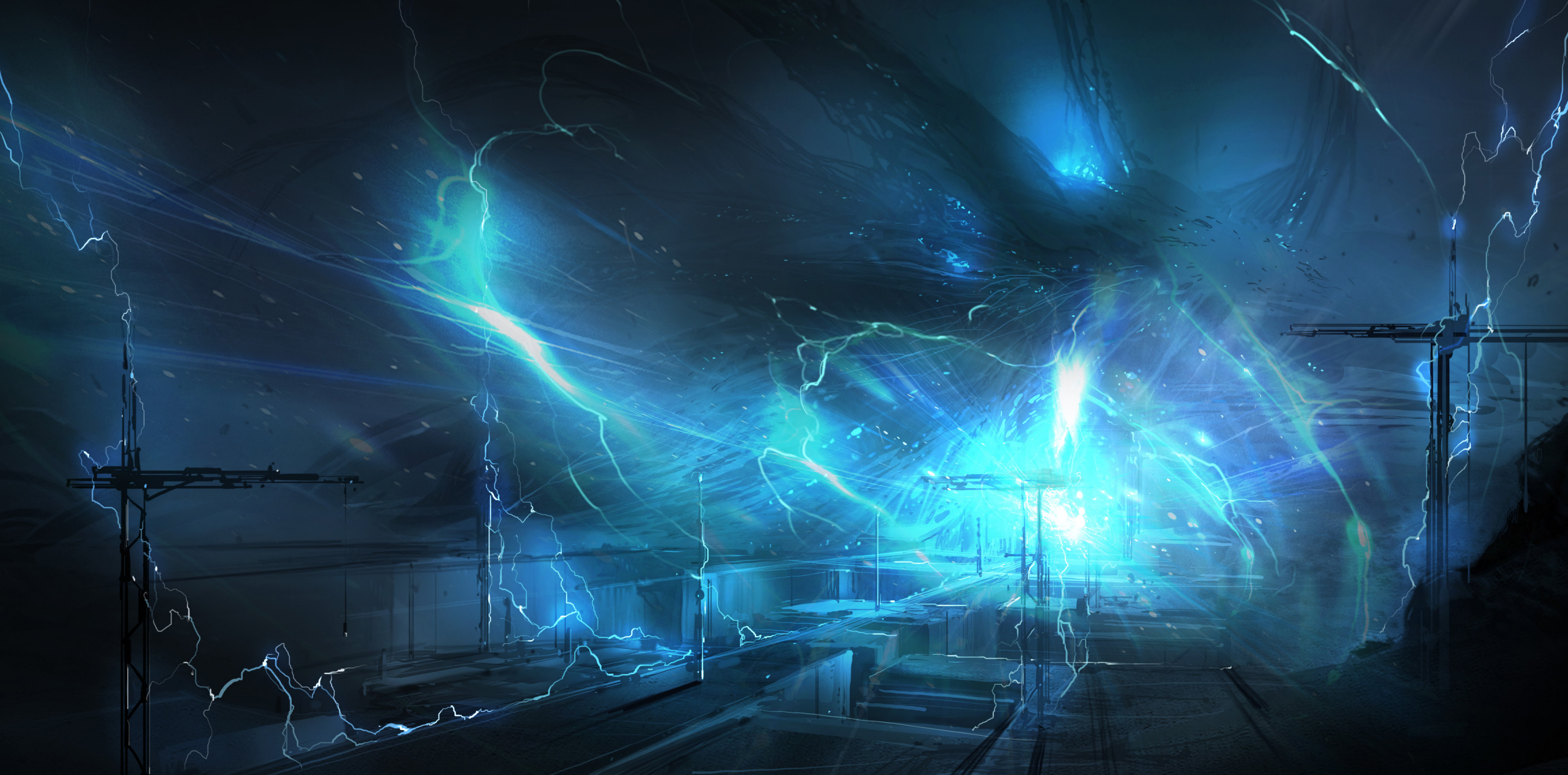
He staggered a few steps, each one a bit more balanced than the last, but he hadn't gotten far before he detected movement in the shadows. Malcolm froze.

In the darkness only a short distance away, half a dozen glowing eyes irised open.

One of the bio-machines he had seen on Mars was watching him. It towered about twelve feet off the ground, a large, central sphere supported by a number of mechanical tendrils. It watched every move that Malcolm made with those eerily impassive eyes.

There's one big difference between this thing and the ones on Mars, thought Malcolm, as he slowly drew his gun.

This one is alive.



Random Games presents

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