



Issue #5

The Map

a Unioverse™ Backstory

AFTER A LONG, ARDUOUS CLIMB, Malcolm was back where he had fallen. He studied the edge of the expanse and found signs that there had once been a pathway here, a bridge of carved stone, only it had long since collapsed or been destroyed.

Malcolm considered his options. He could search for another way across, but doing so with only his helmet light was unwise. He had noticed a peculiar vine, reminiscent of kudzu, growing on most of the buildings. Maybe he could use it somehow? And then there were the long alien cables that Malcolm thought might serve as a neural network for all of the alien tech. Some of them criss-crossed the chasm, connecting the station's gleaming silver structures. Could he climb on them?

Instead, Malcolm chose another path altogether: he was going to test the presence. If it passed, he would continue; if it failed, he would turn back.

Actively mirroring the thought process he used in the transpod, Malcolm focused on his intention – to follow where the presence wanted him to go – and his commitment to his course of action. Then, he visualized what he needed: a path to the other side of the chasm where the Navitor hovered in place. *Maybe the presence didn't respond to my pleas for help when I was hanging in the chasm because I didn't tell it what kind of help I needed.*

Nothing happened. Malcolm grew frustrated. Why did the presence bring him here, only to then ignore him? Maybe he was being too presumptive, too eager to assign humanity to something that wasn't human, as well as overestimating his importance as the one who had awakened the station. But then he heard some distant scratching which quickly grew in volume and intensity.

Suddenly, the chasm was alive with activity.

Thousands of small, spider-like Servitors appeared on both sides of the expanse, each trailing a thin, dark filament. Working from both ends, they moved in an eerie dance – up, over, and around each other, weaving their filaments together to form thick ropes, which in turn were combined into larger webs.

Within minutes, the pair of small armies had met in the middle, connected the two halves, and disappeared back down into the darkness. Alone again, Malcolm was left looking at a narrow bridge that, when he tested it, would easily support his weight. The presence had heard him!

As he crossed over the chasm, Malcolm realized that what had just happened completely altered the dynamic between the presence and him. He now had irrefutable proof that this psychic connection was a two-way communication channel: it could send him suggestions and would, in certain situations, respond to his requests.

So Malcolm reached out with his mind and started asking questions. Was the presence alive? If so, was it somewhere on this station? Was the Navitor leading him to wherever it was? Was the presence trapped in this empty station, and needed Malcolm to rescue it? And the big question at the heart of it all: Was the presence part of the missing race that had built all of this, a lingering voice, a ghost of a time long forgotten?

The response was complete silence. Despite his frustration, Malcolm looked up at the Navitor and thought he finally understood: the presence wasn't interested in educating him so much as putting him on a path to educate himself. *I can work with that.*

Whatever the answers were to his growing list of questions, Malcolm felt that this journey was no longer about exploring the space station.

The presence had an agenda, and Malcolm was on an undefined mission, not just for humanity, but also for whatever species the presence was. Whenever that mission had started – the day the team detected the crashed ship on Mars, or years before, as it set the dominoes of discovery in motion – the mission was his now, and the presence was counting on him to see it through.

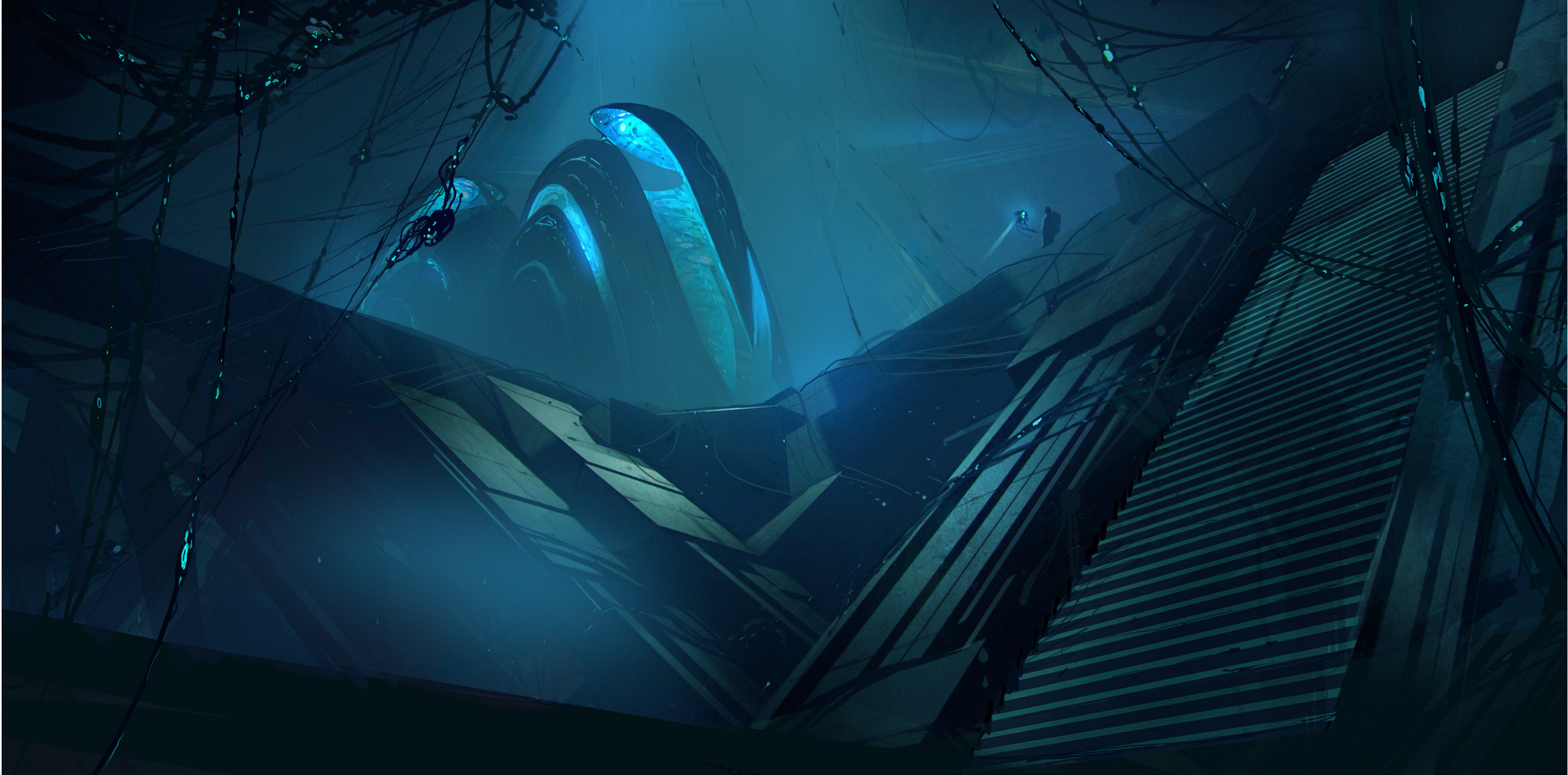


As Malcolm walked through the extensive ruins, his envirosuit displayed a message on his visor: the atmosphere in the station was now ideal for a human. 78% nitrogen, 21% oxygen, 18 degrees Celsius. He hit a button on the side of his helmet, and his visor lifted. He took a tentative breath. The air tasted stale, but it felt good on his skin. Had the presence altered the conditions in the station just for him? It sure seemed like it had.

How big was this place? And in the span of a few hours, it had altered everything so that it had the atmosphere of Earth? How was that possible? The best terraforming equipment mankind had invented would take years to make a space this size habitable!

And then a half-formed thought coalesced into an incipient plan: with Earth almost uninhabitable and Mars generations away from sustainable, this station could be the haven that humanity needed to survive.

Malcolm once again considered the possibility of returning to the transpod and jumping home. While the station wasn't teeming with sentient life that he could learn from, maybe that was never the point; instead, this place was an ark, a lifeboat for mankind as they sought to evacuate their dying planet.



While the station couldn't possibly handle the migration of billions, it could buy them time, provide a new path, and allow them to avoid extinction.

His mind made up, Malcolm turned around. His suit's systems had been tracking his movements, so he was sure he could find his way back.

As soon as he called up the mapping system on his visor, though, the presence stopped him in his tracks, sending a message that was much louder and more insistent this time.

It wanted him to keep climbing. What's more, there was a promise embedded within the message: where Malcolm was headed, he would get the answers to his many questions... and discover the secret to the salvation of his species.



With the atmospheric mists thinning out as he went up level after level, Malcolm had caught glimpses of stars in a sky high above him, but he hadn't had a wholly unobstructed view – until now.

The celestial dome was teeming with stars, and looming very close by was a large moon that glowed with what he assumed was sunlight on the far side. Something about the moon felt odd, though; it was too round, too perfect, like some sort of Dyson sphere. Perhaps when there was more light to work with, he could get a better look.

Ignoring Malcolm's momentary diversion, the Navitor had moved on and was now headed for a distinctive building shaped like a parabola, glowing with blue light, with elaborate shapes carved into its many translucent surfaces.

As Malcolm approached, the central segment of the building lifted, revealing a doorway.

He took a step toward the entrance, but stopped when he noticed that the Navitor wasn't coming with him. Instead, it flew over to a Servitor hovering nearby and docked in a notch on top of its torso.

Two parts of one system, thought Malcolm. *Interesting. How many other parts are there? And where do those small spider-like Servitors fit in? Do they live inside the larger Servitors? Or do they reside deep in that chasm, waiting until they're needed?*

Adding these questions to his list, Malcolm entered the building.



Malcolm wasn't sure what he expected to see inside, but he certainly didn't think the building would be empty. The cylindrical space was open, airy, with a pathway leading into the middle of the room. Lights on the floor indicated that he should walk out there, so he did.

As Malcolm arrived in the center of the room, the presence returned and started searching Malcolm's mind. Did he comprehend the concepts of galaxies and planets? Did he understand what transpods were? And was he ready to jump? Despite being mildly confused – *Did the system ask the same questions every time?* – Malcolm answered in the affirmative, then waited for something to happen.

But nothing did.

Maybe things work differently here, thought Malcolm. And so, with earnest conviction, he expressed his answers aloud into the empty space: “Yes! To all of it, yes!”

As his words echoed off the walls, Malcolm realized that, despite his doubts along the way, he had come to trust the presence. He had faith that it wanted him here, that it wanted to welcome humanity to this miraculous place. It would give him answers to his questions and show him how he could save mankind – just as it had promised. And then it would send him home to share all that he had seen.

The roof above him unfurled like a flower blooming, and Malcolm could see the stars above, only bigger and brighter, pulled closer through some sort of optical effect.

Hundreds of unfamiliar constellations were now outlined and highlighted, all moving slowly across the dark dome of the universe. It was beautiful – and yet a powerful reminder that he was a long way from home.

Once the roof stopped moving, beams of light emanated from the floor around Malcolm, and a holographic image swirled around him and layered itself on top of the stars above. Soon, streams of visual information – moving and static images – appeared next to some of the celestial formations that flooded the room.

Was he being shown what the planets near those stars were like? Was this whole system some sort of interstellar map? It certainly felt like Malcolm was being invited to pick a destination. In response, he visualized Mars, the crashed ship, and the transpod.

That's where I want to go.



Suddenly, the holographic display around Malcolm took him on a visual flight through the vast expanse of space. It was a swift, kinetic journey, and within moments, Malcolm could see the Milky Way racing toward him. He plunged within it, then moved to the edge of an outer arm. There, he entered Earth's solar system and hovered above Mars, finally descending down to the surface of the planet.

Malcolm could see the mothership, the smaller spacecraft inside, and, when he got close enough, even the transpod that had sent him here. He told the presence, *Yes, this is where I want to go! Send me home!*

He held his breath. Home. Duni, Niran, and Rayla – only a jump away. The President and the General, too: What would they think, Malcolm wondered, when he shared his news of an offered Eden? Yes, the space station was only a partial solution to humanity's problems, an extension of Mars rather than a replacement for Earth, but it was a stepping stone, a new beginning.

This place wasn't an end point, but a nexus, the hub of a vast intergalactic transportation network that could provide mankind with not just one new home, but many. Possibly millions.

The Hub. Yes. The space station now had a name that would endure through the end of the Second Cycle.

But then, when Malcolm reached out and touched the transpod – an act he felt would unlock it – all of the map iconography turned red. The message was clear: the transpod on Mars was not accessible. The holographic perspective then pulled back to show a number of other possible destinations within the Milky Way galaxy.

Malcolm reached out – *I don't want to go anywhere else!* – while repeatedly tapping the transpod icon on Mars with increasing urgency. But nothing changed.

Frustrated, Malcolm shouted into the room. “Why can't I go home? What's the problem? Am I doing something wrong? Please, help me! Tell me what to do!”

There was no answer. Malcolm was dumbfounded. The presence had guided him here with the promise of answers, but instead, after telling him he couldn't go home, it refused to respond. On the precipice of completing his all-important mission, it had abandoned him.

Malcolm couldn't help but feel betrayed. Had he been naive? He was now at the mercy of some kind of divine presence that he could no longer trust, a being whose intentions were inscrutable. It had a mission for him, that much he knew, or, more accurately, felt whenever it crawled around in the corners of his mind.

But that mission, it seemed, had nothing to do with Malcolm returning to Mars.





Random Games presents

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