



Issue #6

# ***The Warrior***

*a Unioverse™ Backstory*

THE HOLOGRAPHIC STAR MAP – which Malcolm had decided to call the Astrograph – had turned off, and the roof of the building was now closed. He was alone inside the empty structure, swallowed up by darkness.

In his years as a Navy SEAL, Malcolm had learned not to dwell on elements out of his control. The system had indicated that he could not return to Mars, and the presence refused to convey why. He couldn't change either of those truths, but there had to be things he could do.

When he had selected Mars, the system had shown him other possible destinations. Assuming that those planets weren't locked, should he jump to one of them? Or should he stay on the Hub until he figured out how he could get back home?

If he opted to jump, Malcolm's foremost concern was the system not letting him return, marooning him on an alien planet. He'd be Robinson Crusoe in space: trapped, isolated, alone, with no reasonable hope that someone would come save him. How could anyone know where he had gone? Mars might be locked right now, but maybe it was only a matter of time before it opened back up; wouldn't it be wiser for him to wait?

The six billion people left on Earth were all counting on him to return with news of what he'd discovered, and he shouldn't put that at risk by jumping to what could easily be a dangerous destination.

And yet, Malcolm knew he couldn't stay here for any length of time. His suit provided intravenous nutrition, but that would run out in a week, perhaps less, depending on how much stress he put on his system. He could put himself on reduced rations, but that wasn't a long-term solution.

Remaining here would be a death sentence if he didn't jump.

Of course, Malcolm was acutely aware that he had to think beyond his own fate. The ecosystems on Earth were experiencing cascading collapse after generations of abuse and neglect, and the terraforming process on Mars was taking longer than expected; the Red Planet wouldn't be green enough to sustain a significant migration from Earth before the environmental devastation that had wiped out half of the global population made the planet entirely uninhabitable. Malcolm's priority, then, needed to be finding Earth-like planets where mankind could relocate.

The Hub could serve as a temporary stop-gap; the vines growing everywhere suggested there was a water source somewhere, and this place had clearly supported a sizable population in the past. But long-term, mankind would need a place for billions, not thousands or millions.

The war-torn ruins on the Hub, though, were a stark reminder that this place, as miraculous as it was, would almost inevitably be the site of conflict. A nexus like this would have to be shared, and peace among groups is a fragile thing; eventually, one species would seek dominion over the others, and the struggle for power would make even a haven like the Hub unstable and unsafe.

No, Malcolm owed it to himself and everyone on Earth to use the transpod system to explore other planets, at least until he could return to Mars. Should that ever become possible.

What clinched the decision for Malcolm, though, was his belief that he finally understood the presence and its agenda. It brought him here to use the system, to explore the universe, to see what was out there. And if he did that, perhaps it would then let him head home.

*I will jump*, thought Malcolm. *Show me those other destinations.*

The top of the building opened up once again, and the holographic cosmos appeared all around him. Then an interesting thing happened: as he moved through interstellar space with stars in every direction, there was a steady stream of visual data that formed an orbit around him – data about Earth, about Mars, about Malcolm himself. Temperatures. Atmospheric combinations. Ecosystem compatibility. Habitats. Nutritional needs. Everything it would take to keep Malcolm alive.

And then there it was, a planet not too far from an orange sun. Data streamed next to the slowly orbiting sphere: in one place, video of jungles, plains, rivers spilling into oceans. In another, images of organisms and animals: plants, insects, reptiles, amphibians, mammals.

As the planet spun and different regions came into view, Malcolm could see no signs of advanced technology, no indications of advanced life forms. Indeed, this world looked like an unspoiled Eden.

For Malcolm, this felt like confirmation that the presence was actively shaping his experience with the system: it wanted him to jump, and so it was guiding him to a “safe” planet.

He was the first traveler in millennia; he had to believe the presence wouldn't waste this opportunity by sending him to a world which had an atmosphere toxic to human anatomy, or was hot enough to vaporize him the moment he stepped out of the transpod.





Where it once seemed to be only a benevolent overseer, the presence now seemed like an invested benefactor, singularly focused on advancing its agenda: to get him to use the system, to see what it could do, what it might provide. Once again, Malcolm found himself choosing to trust the presence, whatever its true intentions were.

With that in mind, Malcolm anticipated the questions the presence would want answers to — curiosity, intent, and commitment — and let it be known that he was prepared to visit this familiar yet alien world. The planet flashed, and Malcolm got the sense that he had somehow unlocked it.

The Astrograph disappeared and the room went dark once more. Light beams coalesced in front of Malcolm, becoming a small, three-dimensional replica of the building he was in along with a number of other structures whose design surprised him. They were totally different from the structures he had walked through on his way here; these new buildings were tall, narrow, and layered, with flared roofs that reminded Malcolm of medieval Japanese architecture.

Were these relics from a different era made by the species that constructed the massive Mayan-esque temples? Or did they belong to another alien civilization altogether?

Malcolm would soon have an opportunity to get a better look for himself: the holographic system was now indicating a path through this second region to another set of transpods. They weren't far, certainly a lot closer than the one he had arrived in. Malcolm mentally indicated that he understood, and the holographic map disappeared.

Knowing where he had to go and what might be awaiting him on the other side of the jump, Malcolm exited the building.

On his way out, he realized that this structure and the amazing map within it was there to guide him, to show him a safe path. And so he decided to call it the Lighthouse.



A Navitor had been waiting for Malcolm outside of the Lighthouse door and now hovered above and ahead of him, guiding him along the path that he had been shown.

The Servitors had been busy while he was using the Astrograph: the Hub now appeared fully functional, lit up, and ready to receive. Malcolm wasn't sure how to feel about that; while his solitude was unsettling, he wanted more time to get his bearings before he experienced an alien encounter.

What had most of Malcolm's attention right now, though, was the moon overhead. It had been dark before Malcolm went into the Lighthouse, but now thick ribbons of bright blue light ran through it, pulsing in a steady heartbeat that lit up the sky. The waves of light – reminiscent of the aurora borealis on Earth – were as beautiful as they were unnerving.

Now that he could get a better look at the sphere, Malcolm was even more convinced that the moon was manufactured. The shade of blue light was identical to the crystals that now illuminated the Hub, so they had to be linked somehow. Was the moon a machine of some sort, a battery that powered the transpod system?

The amount of energy required just to get a single transpod operational on Mars was enormous. What would it take to power the whole cosmic network? And then there was the question of how anyone could build something so massive. The engineer in Malcolm was overwhelmed by the impossibility of it all.

Shaking his head, Malcolm shifted his attention to the buildings near him. There had been an empty zone around the Lighthouse, as if it were a shared public structure to be treated with reverence, and the buildings closest to it had shown a curious mixture of architectural styles, the product of two cultures influencing one another.

There were small stone huts with hints of the temples, paired with sloped roofs made of wood. Malcolm already suspected that more than one species lived on the Hub at the same time, given the war-torn temples he had seen earlier, but everything he was seeing now was confirming it.

Had these two civilizations co-existed peacefully and then clashed? Did one arrive and ascend as the other fell? Or were there other areas not yet seen which had been home to even more species, and that the Hub was once the site of constant conflict?

As Malcolm continued to follow the Navitor, this new, second design style dominated: multi-level wooden structures built on brutalist stone foundations loomed high above, with sharp-edged overhangs knifing into the sky.

The geometry felt familiar yet uncomfortably alien to Malcolm, bending at surprising angles, designed for beings much larger than humans, and very clearly built to withstand endless assaults.







The buildings were ringed with obsidian walls that must have once flowed with molten rock; the lower levels were made of massive blocks of windowless stone and lined with rows of circular blades that held their edge even now; and the towers were dotted with narrow openings, presumably for projectile attacks from above.

There were also towering octagonal spheres, each with visually arresting angles and embellishments, spread throughout a regimented grid of roads and alleyways. Not for the first time, the Hub reminded Malcolm of the great American cities like New York and Chicago, where the landscape was segmented into culturally distinct neighborhoods.

A quick study of one of the spheres that was cracked open like an egg gave Malcolm the sense that these had been stadiums of some kind, possibly three-dimensional battle arenas. Or perhaps they were simply for altered-gravity military training. That would make sense: everything about this area of the Hub said that this species was singularly focused on war.

The shattered sphere was just the beginning of the destruction in this region. Whatever cataclysm led to the damage he saw on his way to the Lighthouse, this area of the Hub appeared to have been at the epicenter of the action.

Buildings had been scorched and gutted by fire. Some structures had been reduced to rubble. And the walls at ground level were defaced with carved depictions of brutal violence and covered with words in alien tongues etched with the jagged kineticism of spite and contempt.

Beneath the graffiti, Malcolm could make out pictographs that highlighted a singular warrior, monstrous, swinging twin blades, his long, snakelike hair trailing behind.



To Malcolm it looked like these glyphs had originally been made to honor this figure, but those who had attempted to destroy them clearly saw the warrior as an enemy, a killer, a demon. There was fear and hatred in the deep gouges that marred the stone.

The Navitor had moved ahead and now aimed its spotlight at the entrance to a building made of the Hub's sleek silver metal.

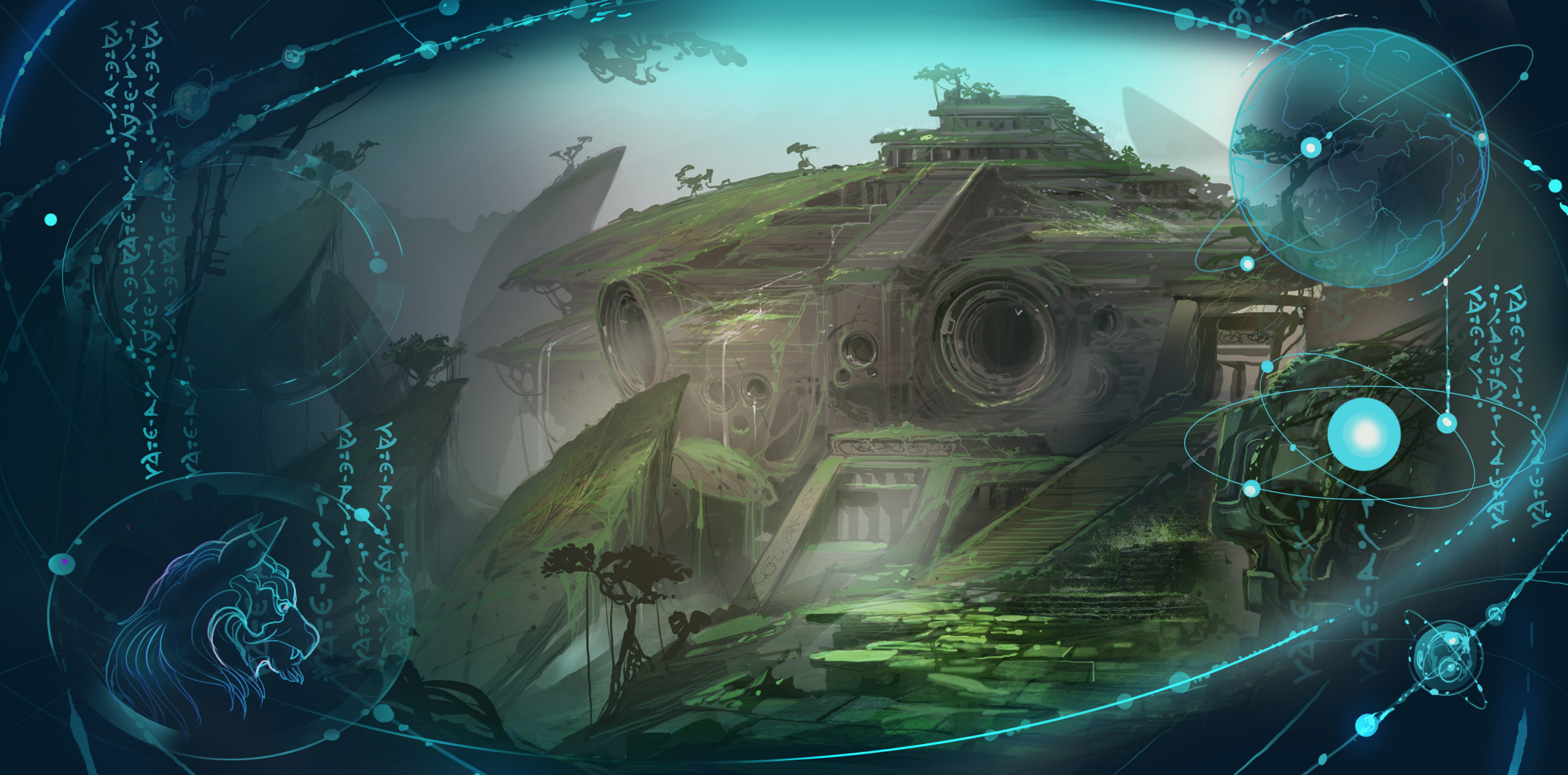
According to the map Malcolm had seen, that's where the transpods were located. It was time to see for himself how the pods worked when they were fully functional, as opposed to the jury-rigged system Malcolm's fellow humans had engineered on Mars.



The inside of this transpod station was strangely similar to the one he had first jumped into. Roughly the same size, same number of illuminated ovals on the floor. The battle that had been waged outside had not left this space untouched, however: part of the ceiling had collapsed, leaving large piles of shattered metal everywhere.

One mound of debris drew Malcolm's attention. Light was shimmering within it: an active transpod, its oval shape glowing and flickering! To Malcolm's eyes, it looked like it was struggling to operate. How long had it been trapped in this liminal state? And was there anyone inside?







Malcolm approached slowly, cautiously, and wiped dust from a small area of the pod's translucent surface. There was definitely a shape in there, humanoid, only larger, maybe eight to ten feet tall.

Malcolm wasn't alone.

He stepped back from the pod to consider his options. There were undoubtedly a number of transpods scattered throughout the Hub, and yet the presence had chosen to lead him to these. Was it because they were the closest? Or because there was another traveler trapped here? Was this some sort of test, to see what he would do?

Malcolm was convinced that the presence wanted him to jump, and that he was guided here for that purpose, but did the presence want him to help this alien, too? And what about the possibility that the alien was the presence, somehow projecting its voice, leading him here to liberate it?

Malcolm realized that what mattered most was his own moral compass: he couldn't just leave this being trapped in the pod. There were other reasons to help, too: the alien might have answers to some or all of the questions Malcolm had about the Hub, and maybe it could help him find a way home.

But in the end, his decision came down to what he would have wanted the alien to do for him. To be trapped indefinitely within the jumpspace? What would that do to a mind, to a soul?

Malcolm reached out to the presence and asked for Servitors to clear and repair the transpod. He didn't know if that would work, but it was worth a try. A few moments later, three Servitors entered the room.

Malcolm backed away slowly and let the machines do their work. It struck Malcolm as the Servitors effortlessly tossed aside large pieces of metal and wiring, that he had just gleaned some significant insight into the presence: it did not help the trapped alien of its own accord, instead waiting for a request from someone else to do so.

Perhaps that was a safeguard: the presence would not make judgments about who was worth saving; it left those choices to the minds and hearts of those who were on the Hub.

Before long, Malcolm was able to get a better look at the transpod, which now appeared to be fully functional. The pod itself was occluded, so he couldn't see the inhabitant's face or most of its body, but displays glowing on the surface were monitoring vitals, and the alien was definitely alive.

All the iconography was red, however, and when Malcolm touched the surface of the pod, the outline of a four-fingered hand appeared, an indication, he knew, that the alien's body was still forming. Malcolm was relieved – but also worried. He had just committed to a path with an uncertain end. But then, he had to take risks, given that his way home was blocked.

Suddenly, there was movement inside the pod. The alien twitched and stirred, but remained unconscious. Something about it caught Malcom's eye. Could it be?

He moved in closer and studied the alien's silhouette. Yes. It was undeniable: the alien in the transpod was the same one from the pictographs. The face. The hair. Even unconscious, every inch of the alien projected deadly purpose.

Which made Malcolm wonder: could this warrior and his people be responsible for the annihilation of everyone on the Hub? And then, when it had tried to escape, the resulting chaos and destruction trapped him here?

The walls of the pod suddenly dropped away, and the alien burst out, clad in blood-red armor, twin swords held high! Malcolm backed away quickly, never taking his eyes off the alien, which had stopped in its tracks, chest heaving.

Was it having a hard time breathing in the Earth-like atmosphere? Still recovering from an extended stay in the jumpspace? Or was this a ploy to get Malcolm to underestimate it?

“**HIZZ N'AKI CHUN**,” the alien uttered in a deep, guttural voice, staring at Malcolm. It was a look that demanded obedience and lacked mercy.

*You will approach.*

The translation of the alien's words had appeared in his mind, placed there by the presence. Malcolm didn't move. Seeking insight into the alien's intentions, he reached out to the presence to ask what he should do; surely, it knew this species and could offer guidance. But there was no answer.

“**KI HIZZ MEV RAKKOR**.”

*Or you will be hunted.*

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**Backstory**

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