



Issue #7

The Traveler

a Unioverse™ Backstory

THE TERRIFYING ALIEN WARRIOR, armed and angry, had burst out of its transpod and ordered Malcolm to approach – or be hunted. He had no intention to do either; instead, he made a run for it. Malcolm raced to the nearest glowing blue oval on the floor, where a transpod chair was already forming in response to his desire to jump.

As he sat down, he realized that he had come here to save humanity, but was now reduced to saving his own skin. Nothing about this experience had yet gone to plan.

The pod coalesced around Malcolm and the tendrils attached to his head. Now that he was preparing to jump, though, he started to consider what he was about to do. He hadn't had the time to process his first experience through the surreal realm of the jumpspace.

What would it be like this time? Assuming he was right, he was currently a clone, so when he jumped to another planet, he would be a clone of a clone. What would that do to his body? And, more worryingly, what would it do to his mind?

There was no time for more questions, though, especially those without answers: through the pod, Malcolm could see the alien moving in his direction with the deadly grace of a predator. It held two swords in its hands, just as those ominous hieroglyphics had depicted him, only they were more intimidating now with their blade edges glowing gold. He had to leave. Now.

Malcolm focused his mind on the planet he had unlocked on the Astrograph. An interface he hadn't experienced last time suddenly appeared in his mind, displaying a pair of images: two different versions of himself, one with an overlay showing differences such as his healed cut from the Servitor. It must be asking him which of these bodies he wanted to jump into!

If the system “saved” a version of his body each time he jumped, then he could become who he was when he journeyed from Mars – or inhabit a clone of who he was right now. Fascinating.

Worried that if he picked the Mars version of his body, he would lose the memories of what he had experienced so far, Malcolm picked the current clone of himself.

That's when he suddenly understood how the alien warrior had ended up in full armor: Malcolm hadn't thought about it after his first jump, but not just his body had been cloned; the transpod had replicated everything he had with him, too. His envirosuit. The gun. Even the wedding ring on his finger. The system had recreated all of it – perfectly.

As he tried to keep his mind on his intention and destination, Malcolm was unable to focus, his brain swimming in the chemicals of fear, concern, and worry. Fear that the alien might sabotage his jump and leave him stuck in perpetual limbo; concern about what another jump might do to him; worry about what might happen while walking on the surface of a strange and distant world.

He could feel the presence searching his mind for clarity and purpose – and not finding it. Which only caused his mind to race even faster...

... what happened to his original body?... an Ori, that's a good name for it, or maybe Skori for original skin... does that version of him still exist on Mars? ... will another version of him be stuck here with the alien? ...

and

... a system that would allow for cellular replication, preserving every version of every being that ever jumped, would take a staggering amount of processing power and storage capacity and would have to be operating on the quantum level...

and

... does each clone have a consciousness, or is his Ori an empty vessel waiting for him on Mars? ... did it make sense to design a system that makes multiple versions of people, all with a replicated consciousness? ... would the creators of this miraculous technology want dozens of the same person running around? ... wouldn't that undermine individuality and the concept of a consciousness, a soul? ... did that even matter to the creators?

He didn't have time to think about these things! The alien was now standing right outside the pod, swords lowered, the gold blade-glow now gone. He looked in at Malcolm: his face was monstrous, terrifying.

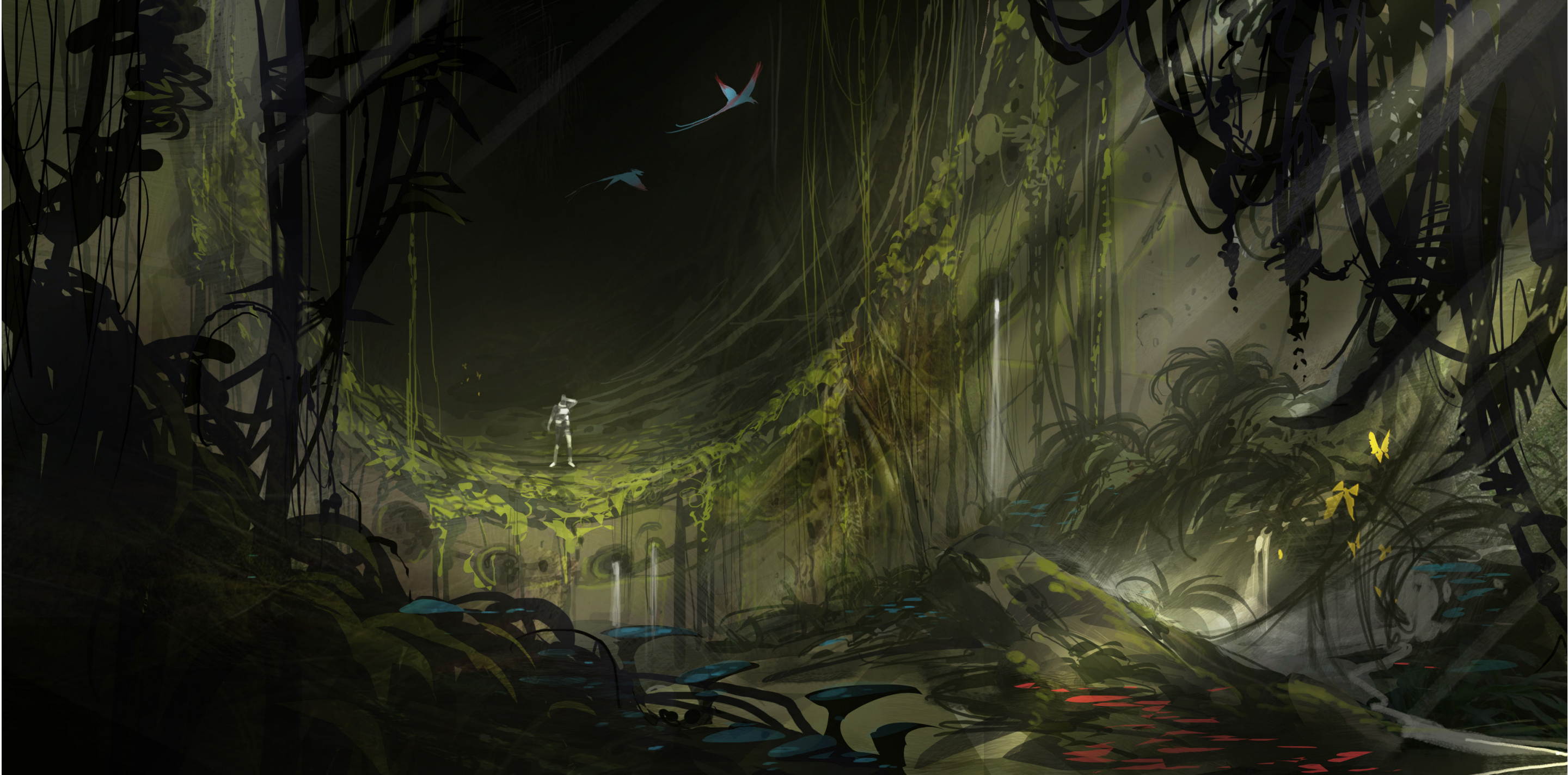
Malcolm welcomed the visceral fear that rippled through him; death at his doorstep had always brought him clarity. He was now ready to jump, and the presence felt it immediately.

Seeing the pod activated, the alien called out.

“PEL CHA'WOM CALIXO.”

The presence translated: *Upon your return.*

And the journey began.



Malcolm's second jump was much different from the first.

As he careened through a vortex surrounded by that vast blue ocean of memories and possibilities, he saw other beings moving through the jumpspace. Their paths did not intersect with his, instead criss-crossing above and below, occasionally moving parallel to his path for a stretch of space and time.

Studying these other travelers, Malcolm was shocked to discover that, unlike his first jump, these beings weren't other versions of himself. Instead, he saw all types of intelligent life, clearly self-aware creatures of different shapes and sizes, some of which strained his understanding of existence: bodies of vapor, colors that fluctuated between spectrums.

Were they in transpods now, too, transmitting their minds across the universe? Where did they come from? Where were they going? Were they jumping from world to world, wherever transpods were located, and avoiding the Hub because they knew it was dangerous, that something dire had happened there?

And then, out of nowhere, a vortex intersected with his – no, it merged with it. A woman, fierce yet serene, was inside it, flying right at him.

He had time for only one quick thought – *she looks familiar* – before they passed through one another, heading in opposite directions. For the brief moment during which they shared the same space, what Malcolm saw, what he thought he felt, was the elegant destruction of a supernova.



Malcolm heeded the transpod's red glow and four-fingered hand and remained inside the pod as he slowly returned to himself. He watched with keen interest as his body gelled; skin, nails, and fingerprints all formed in front of his eyes. His mind was adjusting, too, wrapping itself around his new body.

When the transpod cocoon retreated into the floor, Malcolm found himself in a much smaller space than he was expecting: only four transpods and a large rectangular device of unknown purpose in a round room that looked a lot like the partially gestated craft on Mars. Was he in one of those? Now that he thought about it, that made sense: when one of the motherships discovered life on a planet, it must birth one of these spaceships to land on the surface, creating a place to jump.

Malcolm realized that he would need a way to describe this system of exploration when he returned home, so for now he would call them Progenitor ships and Discovery Landers. While he thought he now understood how everything was connected, an important question remained: Where did the Progenitor ships come from?

As Malcolm walked down an illuminated hallway, one that he thought would lead to an exit, he passed a number of Servitors, none of which paid any attention to him. A little further down the curving corridor, in a large, otherwise empty room, he saw a number of the Servitors "growing" from the metal of the ship's hull, while more of the machines placed pieces of the blue crystal in a notch in the new Servitors' backs, powering them to life.

As he continued to walk through the ship, Malcolm passed a small alcove with a round aperture, like an oversized porthole, which had a glowing, gelatinous membrane within it, rather than a transparent substance like glass or plastic.

Through it, he could see Servitors tending to large clusters of the blue crystals; as he watched, the Servitor carried a pile of shards towards him and placed them into a receptacle on the other side of the window.

Could he take one, he wondered? Would the Servitors stop him if he tried? Malcolm decided to risk it: he reached out slowly, pushed through the membrane, and wrapped his hand around one of the crystals. The Servitors on the other side took no notice. *Perhaps this is a stash of these sources of power and light to be used by the inhabitants of the planet, as well as by jumpers*, thought Malcolm.

As he studied the crystal, a steady stream of newly born Servitors passed him, all headed in the same direction. His gut told him that they were leaving the ship, perhaps on a recon mission, so he followed. His instincts were right: he was soon at a round portal that opened out onto a vast jungle.

There, he watched in amazement as the Servitors instantly adapted to new roles: a half dozen of them expanded and merged together and floated up and away from Malcolm and the Lander. Once it had risen above the jungle canopy, several scouts broke away and headed in different directions while the primary Servitor, now the size of a zeppelin, hovered in place.

Down on the jungle floor near Malcolm, other Servitors separated into an array of smaller drones which looked like hummingbirds as they scanned the nearby flora with those blue beams from their eyes. *Adding and updating data for the Astrograph? Malcolm wondered. If they're going to explore and examine, then I will, too.*





Walking on a new world was an experience in contradictions. Malcolm's feelings swung from one extreme to the other. This place was miraculous. Dangerous. Wondrous. Petrifying.

Technically, this was the third planet Malcolm had been to, but Mars – generations away from true terraforming – was all thick domes and artificial air. Here, on a planet no human had ever seen, Malcolm was surrounded by the ruins of a civilization that had been reclaimed by a jungle that was at once familiar and altogether alien. Again, contradictions and extremes.

Malcolm wasn't an archaeologist, but the area where he had emerged from the Lander felt like a holy shrine in the middle of a once-glorious city. All of it was enshrouded in vines now, and there was no evidence that any inhabitants still survived. But at its height, this civilization had to have been the equivalent of, or superior to, that of humanity.

The skeletons of structures that had been built eons ago endured even now; any materials used on Earth would have long since fallen to dust. There were also remnants of what must have been an advanced transit system – perhaps magnetic levitation? – and the husks of large vehicles or machines.

It would take a lifetime to study just this one city, and undoubtedly there were many more like it. But Malcolm intended to stay only long enough to decide if this world could support an exodus from Earth, or at the very least be a sanctuary for him until he found a world that could.

One thing Malcolm wanted to examine more closely was what looked to be a massive, ancient Servitor, long since gone silent, that had seemingly been used as a temple. He could see stone statuary near every entrance; while worn down by exposure to the elements, the subjects were clearly humanoid.

What had happened to their species? Did they die out slowly, like so many ancient civilizations on Earth, or had they been killed off by invaders or illness?

Malcolm thought that the answers might be contained within the temple, but he couldn't risk an extended exploration right now. Perhaps someday, he – or better yet, a team of human scientists – would tell their story.

While Malcolm studied the temple from afar, he detected subtle movements in the undergrowth. He had seen a number of birds and insects since his arrival, but this was different. Moments after turning on his helmet visor's infrared scanner, he had confirmation: five heat signatures.

He switched over to a telescopic view that locked onto the animals, and there they were: sleek, four-eyed feline creatures with purple mouths full of sharp teeth and shimmering green fur that blended in with the leaves and vines of the jungle.

These were animals that Malcolm had seen in the Astrograph! His first impression had been that they looked like cheetahs, built for speed, but seeing them move made it clear that they were powerful, too, with thick ropes of muscle rippling beneath their fur.

As if that wasn't intimidating enough, these cats appeared to be communicating with one another verbally. Chirps and yips, but not what Malcolm associated with wild animals. This was the staccato cadence of language and conversation.

And then there was something about the eyes, an intelligence and awareness he had never seen before in anything other than humans and primates. Had they been responsible for the fall of the earlier civilization? Or perhaps risen up from the ashes of some unknown armageddon?

Malcolm's study of these creatures was abruptly cut off when one of the Servitors from the Lander approached the ancient temple. The cats quickly disbanded, heading in five different directions, swiftly moving to surround the Servitor.

When their attack came, it was coordinated and complex, with feints and false approaches, and the cats spoke to each other throughout. Malcolm knew he should retreat, but he was fascinated, compelled to move closer to see how this would unfold.

With surprising swiftness, a second Servitor crashed through the canopy and merged with the first. Despite their obvious intelligence and skill, the cats were no match for this new, larger Servitor, which swatted the animals aside, seemingly with no intent to injure or kill, but only to get them to retreat so that it could resume its work. This only emboldened the cats, which were intent on destroying the metallic intruder.

Malcolm got the distinct impression that this Servitor was the first they had encountered; otherwise, why attack something so clearly superior? If these creatures were wired for survival, as life as Malcolm knew it always was, they would have adapted and taken a different approach.

If this is their first battle with a Servitor, Malcolm realized, the Lander must have been dormant before I jumped here.

But the Astrograph showed me visual information about the planet. Either that was old intel, or the whole system had kicked into gear when I arrived at the Hub, and the Servitors had been scouring the planet, gathering data, ever since.

Either way, these cats don't much like their new neighbors.



As Malcolm moved closer, the action suddenly shifted in his direction. It was only a matter of time before the cats noticed that the Servitor wasn't the only interloper. If he wanted to stay out of harm's way, there was only one place to hide. So he raced for the ancient, overgrown Servitor.

The cats had retreated, temporarily as it turned out, and the Servitor had returned to the business of scanning the surroundings. With their adversary seemingly distracted, the cats renewed their attacks.

The Servitor unleashed a whirlwind of mechanical appendages – once again, meant to scare off and push away its tormentors – and Malcolm, who was crouched by a tree only a few meters away from an entrance to the temple, was whipped by one of the tendrils on the left side of his helmet. The polycarbonate shell shattered, and his head exploded with pain. A crimson mist sprayed into the air from gashes in his scalp and above his left eye –

– and when the blood hit the ground at his feet, the soil seemed to swallow it up.

Instantly, the attack on the Servitor stopped, and the cats turned in Malcolm's direction, as if they were tapped into the terrain and had just tasted his blood. They now wanted more. As the Servitor moved away, Malcolm pulled shards of the helmet out of his scalp and pressed his palm to the laceration on his brow to stop the flow of blood.

These things are predators, and they know that I'm wounded. I have to get out of here.

Malcolm watched warily as the cats called out to one another – it had to be language – and then fanned out to surround him as he backed up against the temple wall.

What could he do against a pack of intelligent, quite possibly sentient, animals?

A thought dawned on Malcolm, pushing through the cloud of conflict: *I can ask for help.*

Reaching out to the presence, Malcolm conveyed his dire need for assistance. *Send back the Servitor*, he thought. *Or you're going to have to start all over again with someone else.*

No response. On the one hand, Malcolm was angry and frustrated. The presence had wanted him to come here! On the other hand, though, if the presence was an overseer and not a guardian, then it wasn't going to intercede. He had gotten himself into this mess, so it was up to him to get out of it.

Malcolm reflexively reached for his gun, but remembered that it was broken. What else did he have? Only the blue crystal he had grabbed on his way out of the Lander. He pulled it out, and the eyes of all of the cats locked onto it. One hissed, the rest chattered. Malcolm waved the crystal around, hoping it would scare them, but instead, it just seemed to agitate them all the more.

Malcolm looked over at the active Servitor, which was collecting moss from a fallen tree. Could he somehow get its attention and bring it back into the fight? That's when his eyes caught on the crystal embedded in the machine's back. Hold on, thought Malcolm. What if...?

He grabbed one of the hanging vines that lined the wall behind him, eliciting a screech from the cats, and scrambled up to the roof of the temple.

He had only bought himself a few seconds – the cats were already working their way up and around to where he was – but maybe that would be enough. He was now on top of what had once been an immense Servitor. If it had been powered by the same crystals... yes! There it was!

Malcolm pulled aside some vines and wiped away a thin layer of dirt from the silver metal of the fallen Servitor to expose a rectangular notch. In it was one of the crystals, only this one was pale, lifeless, empty of energy.

Malcolm yanked it out and shoved in his blue one – and whispered a quiet prayer to Rayla and the kids. The cats were only a few yards away now and were inching closer. Either this worked, or he was a dead man.

There was a rumble deep below him, and the ground under his feet began to vibrate. The ancient Servitor awakened and lurched to life, its towering, colossal form pulling free of vines and roots. The blue light in the crystal drained quickly.

The machine would return to its slumber in minutes if not moments, but the cats didn't know that. They called out to one another – there was distress and confusion in their cries – and they escaped into the jungle. Malcolm swung down the vines and raced in the opposite direction, right past the smaller Servitor, which ignored him. *Thanks for nothing*, thought Malcolm, as he sprinted for the Lander.



Malcolm didn't have any trouble getting the transpod to work this time. There was no confusion or hesitation: he wanted, no, needed, to jump.

Yes, the hulking alien who had threatened him was on the other side, but he was willing to take his chances on the Hub, where there were plenty of places to hide, and he had only one adversary to contend with, not a pack of eerily intelligent predators.



When the interface came up, he was relieved to discover that he could select his original skin – Skori, he suddenly remembered – or the version of himself that had jumped from the Hub, both uninjured; the cuts on his head were deep, and he wasn't sure he would be able to stop the bleeding.

He just hoped he retained the memories of what had happened with the cats so that he didn't make the mistake of going back. He internally articulated his intent to return to the Hub and...

FLASH

he was his former self seeing who he had become, with the cut above his left eye

FLASH

images from across his life: a trout pond, cherry trees, Rayla and Duni and Niran

FLASH

he saw her again, the girl with the exploding stars in her eyes

FLASH

He was inside a transpod. Processing – gelling. His mind, maybe even his soul, seemed to remain behind in the jumpspace, lost in that ocean of blue, and it needed time to navigate those turbulent waters and come back to the here and the now and the him.

As he waited, he thought about what he had endured. Malcolm knew there was an important lesson to be learned here: the jumping system wouldn't guarantee safety, but it would put him in a position to succeed.

He got in trouble, not because the presence sent him somewhere dangerous, but because his curiosity about the cats and his desire to gather more information had put him in harm's way. He had gotten too close to the conflict and had paid the price. That was his fault, and his fault alone.

He knew there would be more jumps ahead, and he was starting to assemble a list of rules for himself, things he needed to keep in mind as he headed into the unknown. He would begin with two.

First, he needed to accept that the elements of the system – the Astrograph, the transpod, the jumpspace – wouldn't show him everything; it couldn't or wouldn't predict the outcome of events or guarantee his safety. But it would show him glimpses of his future (like that cut above his eye) if he paid attention.

Second, he had to be prepared for anything each time he jumped. The universe had billions of planets in it, and as he visited them, one by one, he would undoubtedly discover that all of them were filled with equal parts wonder and danger.

The transpod walls melted away without any thought or action from him. *The gelling process must be done.* He looked around.

No alien warrior. At least if that thing did decide to hunt him, he'd have a head start.

That's when he saw the two curved lines of gold appear in the darkness, along with the glowing eyes of a low-light predator. The alien had been waiting in the shadows.

Malcolm realized that he now had a third rule of jumping, learned during his encounter with the cats: trust that the universe would provide a path, and a solution would present itself.

So he waited for the alien to make the first move.



Random Games presents

a
UNIOVERSE™

Backstory

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