

She rode the elevator to the top of the tower again today. Looking out at the sunset from inside the glass box she flipped her long, dirty blond hair out of her face. It was a daily ritual, this ride up the tower. And every day her heart hoped again that it would be different.

She arrived at the top and walked down the short hallway. There was nothing up here but broadcasting equipment and weather observation. She stood in front of the supply closet, the same closet she had stood before day after day. She whispered a small prayer, the same as she always did and opened the door.

Within was nothing but cluttered equipment. Cabling hung in spools from a rack in the corner. Tools covered shelves along the sides. She knew ever spec of dust in this closet by now, every tool, every bit of wire or spare computer board. Silently she closed the door again and returned to the waiting lift not bothering to stop a tear from rolling down her cheek. She was thankful that this door was so far away, for the long journey to the ground gave her time to cry, and then compose herself before anyone could see her.

Everyone knew why she came here, but they were all too kind to say anything. It had been almost a year since she had arrived in this place, this place not her own, and she had made friends here, built something like a life here, but it could never be home. She put on a smile and returned to her so-called life.

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It had been months since that first accident with the machine. Greg sat in the lab, numbers flowing across the screen in front of him. Steve and Martyn both sat at there stations. It was important work, but it was hardest on Greg.

“Damn it,” Greg exclaimed, his fist hitting the desk. “Why doesn’t this make sense?”

Steve, used to these outbursts walked over. “Because nobody has ever done it before,” he said matter-of-factly. Ask most people and they will tell you that what we’ve done here is impossible.”

“Impossible or not, there has to be a way.” Greg got up and began to pace. Martyn, sat quietly at his station surrounded by monitors trying not to get dragged into yet another confrontation.

Suddenly Greg spun around and aimed an accusing finger at Steve. “How the hell can you be so calm about all of this?”

Steve shrugged. “That’s easy. I’m not in love with her.”

“Damn it,” Greg exclaimed again sweeping a cup full of pencils to the floor which hit with a satisfying clatter. “Why was she in here? Why was this thing even running? We had no idea it would even be safe.”

“No we didn’t. And the fact that it attached itself to the door was unforeseen as well.” Steve placed a kind hand on Greg’s shoulder. “It’s not your fault.”

“I know,” Greg said sulkily. “I just wish...”

“Greg, you’re doing everything you can. You and your team have been through that door, what, fifty times in the last months. Sure, most of them are worthless tries, sure, only a few dozen have given us anything we can even write off as research, but the point is that you’re still trying.”

Greg slumped back in his chair. “The problem is that the data doesn’t make any sense until we know how the telemetry is being calculated. It’s random, there’s no way to know what, where or when we’re going to find on the other side.”

“True, which is why we keep trying. But think about it this way, we can re-create the experiment, and we know how to maintain the portal. Greg, we’ve done the impossible here, we’ve compressed spacetime.” Steve thought for a moment. “Correction, we are compressing spacetime on a regular basis. You walk back and forth through that door just like any other door, and yet on one side you’re in a different time, a different place. Think about how amazing that is. If we work out the telemetry, we’ll be famous.”

“I don’t want to be famous, I just want to get her back.”

Steve knelt on the floor to look Greg in the eye. “We’ll get her back bud. Trust me, we’ll find a way.”

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Dave, Greg, Natalia and Shamir all stood in the lab as they had done many times before. The dark haired beauty that was Natalia had been brought on the team after the first few failed attempts to communicate with those on the other side of the portal. A language arts major she spoke seven languages and had been invaluable time and again.

Shamir was a history major, specializing in cultures, again a vital part of the team, at least when they encountered humans. More than one expedition had ended with the team diving back through the portal hitting the kill switch.

Dave was, well Dave. But he was good in a fight and loyal as hell. He was in it for the adventure and the noble ideal of Greg as a knight out to rescue the damsel in distress.

The four stood in prepared silence. No words were necessary. Martyn rolled his chair back from his desk.

“Ready?” He asked. Greg only nodded, determined to try his latest telemetry algorithm.

Martyn typed in the startup command and the room shimmered with the now familiar power. A faint glow opened around the locker door they always used. Nobody knew why, but the portals only worked with doors. The other side was also always a door. It was enigmatic that a random exit point would have that level of consistency, but it made as much sense as any other part of the project up to this point.

Greg opened the door.

The four looked into an odd room, like an old library. Stonework and large open windows could be seen overlooking a distant but beautiful landscape. They stepped through.

“Ahh, Hello.” A man greeted them but his appearance was quite shocking. The man looked every bit like a wizard, straight out of the *Lord of the Rings* or a Dungeons and Dragons game.

“Would you like some tea?” The man said as he busied himself in a corner.

Dave looked back into the lab. “Can you guys see him? This is really weird.”

“Yeah, he looks kinda cool.”

The protocol had always been to keep the portal open, even if the doors were closed, because they had no idea how to get back otherwise, and the first accident left them not wanting to risk anyone else getting lost.

“Sorry, I know you can understand me. I assume you have something resembling tea where you come from.”

Greg stepped forward. “You’re not surprised to see us?” It was common for them to startle people from time to time.

“No, I just supposed you’d dropped in for some tea, or a chat or something.” The old man brought out five cups and placed them on the large table. He swept away some papers and stashed them on a shelf.

“But, you can see the lab behind us?” Greg ventured again.

“Oh yes. Nothing I recognize. I assume you’re a long way out. Will they want tea as well?”

Martyn stifled a laugh. Steve graciously declined on behalf of them both.

“OK, one more time. Where are we?”

“Oh, this is my castle. Old thing, been around forever I’m told. But I like it. Keeps me in the mood so to speak.”

“Mood?” This was Natalia. “Vat mood?”

“Oh, being a wizard of course. One must wear the outfits and such when abroad, but I kind of got used to it after a time.”

“You’re a Wizard? There’s no such thing.”

“Oh, I assure you there is. I would have thought you’d know that, walking out of my broom closet and all.”

“Wait, what does that have to do with anything?” Dave asked.

“Well, obviously it’s wizards who open portals.”

Suddenly Greg was excited. “You know about portals?”

“Yes, of course. It’s what we do. Well one of the things anyway.” The wizard sat down and gestured for the others to follow suit. The teapot on the table piped hot steam as he poured out for everyone.

“OK, let’s say we don’t know an awful lot about portals.” Greg continued.

“Oh my, now that’s shocking. How did you get here then?”

“Let’s call it an accident.”

It was at that point that Natalia nudged Greg and whispered to him that the old man’s lips did not match his words. It was bothering her and she couldn’t figure it out. The wizard interrupted her whispering.

“Telepathy my dear girl. It’s a form of telepathy. I talk and you hear me in whatever language you speak, and vice-versa. That’s why I can hear you whisper, you still form the words in your head. My, my, you really don’t know anything about this do you?”

“No, we’re... New to the whole thing.” Greg continued to try and get sense from the situation.

“Well telepathy, this kind of telepathy, is quite vital to anyone who uses portals. You must know that there’s no guarantee that you’ll meet people you can understand. My my...” The old mage shook his head.

“So tell me how you make portals? Do you wave a wand and whisper secret incantations?” Shamir was feeling that the whole thing was rather foolish.

“Ahh, the quiet one. Actually no, you just, focus on it, bringing the two points together.”

“What, just with your mind?”

“Sort of, yes.” He glanced around the room. He then got up and grabbed the kettle in which he had boiled the tea. He placed it right beside Shamir.

“Now my boy, get your head down level with the table. Look at the kettle. If you focus on the kettle you’ll see that the teapot is out of focus. But if you look at the teapot the kettle is out of focus.”

“Ok, I see that.”

“Now close your eyes and try to focus on both at once.”

“Yes, I can do that.”

“Well there you have it. Two things at different ranges suddenly become clear at once if you concentrate like that. Same with portals.”

“But we can’t do that. We have a machine, and we can’t control the other end of the portal.”

“Machines. BAH. I have them all over the place. Give me a good book, that’s what I say.”

The wizard, who was called Aragad by the way, thank you very much, fell into a reverie while looking at Greg’s head. After a few moments he began mumbling to himself.

“Yes, I think it might work.” He got up and began shuffling through one of the larger bookshelves.

Shamir leaned across the table.

“Greg, if what he says is true, where is the technology? If he can travel through spacetime at will, where are the computers, the 3D imagery stuff, the cool tech?”

Before Greg could answer the wizard shouted from behind the bookcases “In the basement, where it belongs.” He poked his head around the heavy wooden casing. “I told you I can still hear you.” He winked.

Chagrined Shamir sat back down and spoke openly. “Then why do you look like the wizards from our literature?”

“Easy... I am, well, we are the wizards from your literature. All stories and legends have a grain of truth. We travel all over the place, sometimes we help out growing civilizations, sometimes we just pop in to have a look around. But we sort of adopt this kind of dress code. In civilized worlds they consider us quaint, in barbaric worlds they consider us mysterious.” He returned to the table with a stack of heavy books. “And let me tell you, more than one of us has made a tidy profit on import-export businesses.”

Natalia and Dave both laughed. Greg shook his head. Aragad opened a book and brought it over to Greg.

“Now from what I can tell, your physiology isn’t unlike my own. How many lobes does your brain have? I assume you only have one brain, correct.”

“Um... Two. Two lobes, one brain. Why?”

“One brain, two lobes, kind of like this then?” Aragad put the book down. All four gathered around to look at the drawings. The brain looked very similar to a human brain. It was slightly misshapen from a human perspective, but the major parts all seemed to be in the same places.

The team nodded thoughtfully. Steve, who had been listening from the Lab through the still open portal shouted “If you ask me, they have no brains at all.” Martyn threw something at him.

“Ok, if your brain is like this then we should be able to get you somewhere. But I warn you, it’s dangerous. Power does not come easily to those who seek it.”

“What do you mean?” Dave asked.

“Machines are great for some things. I like my coffee maker for example, but when you let them start messing about with really complex stuff like portals you’re asking for trouble.” Aragad brought forth another book. He opened it to a picture of a great sea monster. Its head was like a centipede but it had great arms and legs, obviously amphibious.

“This creature is an anomaly in the universe. It uses portals naturally to hunt its prey. It can suddenly be in front of you, or behind you and ‘chomp!’ You’re dinner.”

“Wait. Portals only open between doorways. How can it hunt with them?” Greg said.

“True, when we open portals they connect to doorways. This is because the universe is plastic and all sentient beings think of doorways in a common way. This creature doesn’t. In fact, we cannot

understand HOW it thinks, only that it evolved the ability to compress spacetime as a hunting mechanism.”

“That’s amazing,” said Natalia. “Vot kind of brain does it have that it can do this wonderful thing?”

Aragad puffed a little with pride. “I’m so glad you asked.” As you might expect, the brain is located in the head, here.” He pointed to the grotesque pincerred monstrosity. “Or rather, I should say the ‘primary brain’. Do you see this lump back here, like an outcropping of the spine?” The group nodded agreement. “This is the secondary brain.” He flipped the page to show a picture of a gland, a fat central glob with a number of ganglions hanging from a central point. It gave the impression of a fat spider.

“This gland is located in that secondary brain. It is difficult to harvest but if you can extract the brain while the creature is alive you can remove this gland and implant it into the hind-brain of one such as ourselves. That ‘old brain’ or ‘animal brain’ grows into these ganglions and adopts the gland as a part of itself.”

The team could only gawk.

“I’ll tell you a secret that all mages, wizards and the like know. All magic powers are the result of altering the brain.”

“And this works. If I did this I could control the portals, I could open a portal from anywhere to anywhere?” Greg said seriously.

“Of course. But.”

“But what?”

“It’s a dangerous creature to defeat.”

Shamir piped up, “Surely you have energy weapons and cool stuff like that to bring it down right?”

“Unfortunately energy weapons kill the gland. And trapping it is impossible because it just portals around the trap. You have to literally get on its back, strike the secondary brain until it is unconscious, remove the brain while the creature is alive and put it into a proper container.”

“Shamir, it wouldn’t be any fun if it were easy.” Dave said smiling.

Greg was still serious though. “And then the living gland is removed from the creature’s brain...”

“And surgically implanted in your own, assuming it doesn’t kill you. Yes.” The old man looked sad for a moment. “I did say it was dangerous.”

Greg stared down at his hands for a long time.

“You’re not really considering this are you?” Shamir said. “Come on, you’ll crack the algorithm, we’ll find her without cutting up your brain.”

Greg remained silent. Shamir became serious. “No, no way, you can’t honestly be considering this. Greg, come on, we hardly know this guy and you’re going to let him cut up your brain?”

“Oh, I won’t be doing it, there are specialists for that,” Aragad cut in.

“I’ll do it,” Greg said quietly under his breath.

“What?” The rest of the team said, even those still in the lab.

“I said I’ll do it. But I don’t expect you to come with me. I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Bullshit,” Dave exclaimed. “We signed on for dangerous shit when we agreed to be on your team. We’re here for you, right guys?” The others just muttered until Dave looked at them dangerously. “RIGHT GUYS!”

“Yeah, we’re in” Shamir said.

“Ver would you be vitout me?” Natalia piped in.

“For the record, I think your crazy,” Shamir added.

“That’s love for ya,” Dave said slapping Shamir on the back.

“It’s settled. What do we have to do?” Greg asked.

“Ahh, the vigor of youth. I remember when I said yes to the same quest. I was a damned fool, but overall I guess it worked out alright.”

The plan was to travel to the planet on which the great worm was to be found and undertake the dangerous three day journey to a sea where they were known to gather. Shamir asked why they didn’t just build a small hut nearby where they could open a portal. He didn’t like the answer.

The team returned home to gather supplies, Aragad suggested that they not rely on foreign food and water since you never knew how you were going to react.

----- Now we add the quest, the fight for the brain, Shamir getting hurt, the trip to the amazing med-tech facility, the implant of the gland, learning to port as well as a few scenes of Heather’s new life -----

As she had done every day for over a year, Heather rode the elevator to the top of the tower. It was the only real ritual or hope that she had left. The setting sun in the distance added to her melancholy mood. Once again she stepped from the glass cage, once again she started down the hallway towards the door. That same door she had fallen through so long ago, that same door that was her only real connection to home.

But today was different. Today as she stepped into the hallway she could hear people, voices down the hall. She feared to hope but broke into a run.

“Are you sure this is it? What were you thinking about when you opened the portal?”

“I was thinking about Heather and where she went. Why, do you think I should have focussed on her specifically? Who knows what kind of ruckus we might have caused?”

At the sound of her name Heather burst into tears and ran straight into Greg, bowling him over.

“Wow, looks like you found her,” Dave said, always the smartass.

Greg, arms around her stroked her hair while she cried. She cried for a long time to the point where everyone else was starting to look worried.

Before long Heather exhausted herself and sat up, her back resting on the wall. Greg got up and spoke softly to her.

“I’m here, we’re here, we found you.”

“Why did it take so long?” She gasped.

“Well it’s a long story. We fought though time and space for a long time trying to find a way to get to you.”

“Yeah, Greg even had to undergo brain surgery by aliens,” Shamir started. “They had this amazing thing that... Umph!” The last being Natalia elbowing Shamir in the ribs.

“But hey, we have time for all of that, you can go home now,” Dave said. “Hey, what’s that?” Dave ran over to where the elevator was. From there he could see the city stretched out before him. “Where are we? When are we? What is all of that.”

Heather, on firmer ground was able to reply. “Where is Toronto, when is the year 2116.” She managed, still weak from crying. Suddenly she burst out angrily, “I’ve been here for more than a year!”

“Holy shit!” Dave exclaimed as he turned to look at her. “A year? And you survived. Amazing.”

“2126?” Shamir exclaimed. “They must have some awesome stuff here. Can we see some of it? Can we check out the city? Can we... Umph. Hey, stop that.”

“You are insensitive jerk,” Natalia said evenly.

“Oh, right. Sorry Heather, it’s just that we’ve been through so much and Greg here wouldn’t let us stop.”

Heather looked up at Greg, her blue eyes still wet with tears. “You wouldn’t stop looking for me?”

“Nope. I couldn’t give up. Even killed monsters and had my brains cut open just on the chance that we could find you.”

“For me? Why?”

“Oh, that’s because he’s totally in ... Umph” Shamir said.

“Because you’re my friend, and friends have to look out for each other right?” Greg said extending his hand to help Heather to her feet.

“I can’t leave just yet. I have to say goodbye to some people. I have to.. say goodbye.” Heather told them.

Heather smiled at them all as she lead them to the lift and took them into the city that was not her own. She introduced them to her friends who were sad to see her go, but glad that her wish came true. Then there was Allan.

Allan thought of himself as her boyfriend, but Heather had no real feelings for him. Still, he gave her gifts and hung around as though he belonged. In some ways she was not sorry to leave him, even though there was a soft spot in her heart. Not unlike the way one feels about a lost puppy that follows you around.

Greg and the others didn’t fully understand this relationship when they met him though.

“So you’re leaving me eh?” Allen accused. “I love you so much, and you’re just going home?”

“Yes Allen. Home, where I belong. I have my family there, my parents, my brother.”

“Well, if I have to choose between you and staying, I have to stay.”

Greg came up to her and interrupted. “Heather. I understand if you want to stay. This guy obviously has deep feelings for you.” Shamir inhaled to say something and Greg shot him a dangerous look.

Heather shook her head. “It’s not that simple.”

Shamir had watched as long as he could.

“Damn it Heather, sure this guy might care for you, but what about the guy who loves you so much that he’s traveled though time to find you, fought dangers on worlds and in places we may never know again? This guy who is standing here asking for nothing but to know you’re safe and happy? This guy who wouldn’t give up, no matter what until we found you? What about him?”

Heather looked at Greg who now looked daggers at Shamir.

“Is that true Greg, are you in love with me?” Heather said.

“Yes,” was all he could manage.

“He can’t love you as much as I do though,” Allen said. It was at that point that Dave punched him in the face.

Heather went home with her friends. Her reunion with her family was joyful and a party was planned. Though in our time it had only been six months, it was a long time for her to have been missing and her family, fearing the worst, was glad to have her home. Everything seemed perfect but she dreaded the inevitable encounter with Greg.

The two stood apart from the crowd and watched the stars. Greg snickered at the fact that they had patio lanterns in the yard and thought of the song by Kim Mitchell. Heather drained her glass of wine trying to find the courage to say what she had to say.

“Thank you for finding me,” she began.

“It’s something I had to do.” Greg said to the stars.

“You really had alien brain surgery?”

“Yep. I can open portals anywhere I want to now. I have these glands in my brain.”

“And you did that for me?”

“Yes. I had no other reason to take the risk. But I’m glad that I did.”

“For love of me.”

“For love of you.”

“Greg, I don’t know that I love you.”

He turned to her and smiled into her eyes.

“I never asked you to. It’s enough that I love you and that I get to see your smile again. As long as you are my friend I have nothing more to ask.”

He looked at her a moment longer. “Are you sure you wouldn’t have been happier in the future?”

Heather dissolved into tears, her face buried in his chest, her fists beating on him. “I went to that door every day, EVERY DAY. I tried to tell myself that I could be happy there, but every day I prayed that I’d open that door and see the lab, see home. I’d given up hope a dozen times, and then you came, and you were real, and I’m really here.”

Greg wrapped his arms around her and stroked her hair. “It’s all right now. It’s all going to be just fine now.

Heather settled, wiped her eyes and composed herself.

“You’re a good man. I may love you in time,” her smile lighting up the night.

“And I will be here if that ever comes to be.”

With that he kissed her gently on the top of her head and they returned to the party.

#### Aftermath

Greg and the Lab team formed a research and development company. Using Greg’s ability to open portals into other parts of spacetime the company became very rich. They worked in secret for companies like AMD, Apple, National Semiconductor and others and we may never know just how much of our current technology is really re-engineered xenotech from other worlds. Heather did grow to love Greg in time and he never asked anything of her even though he and the team had gone through hell and back to bring her home.

They all lived very full lives.