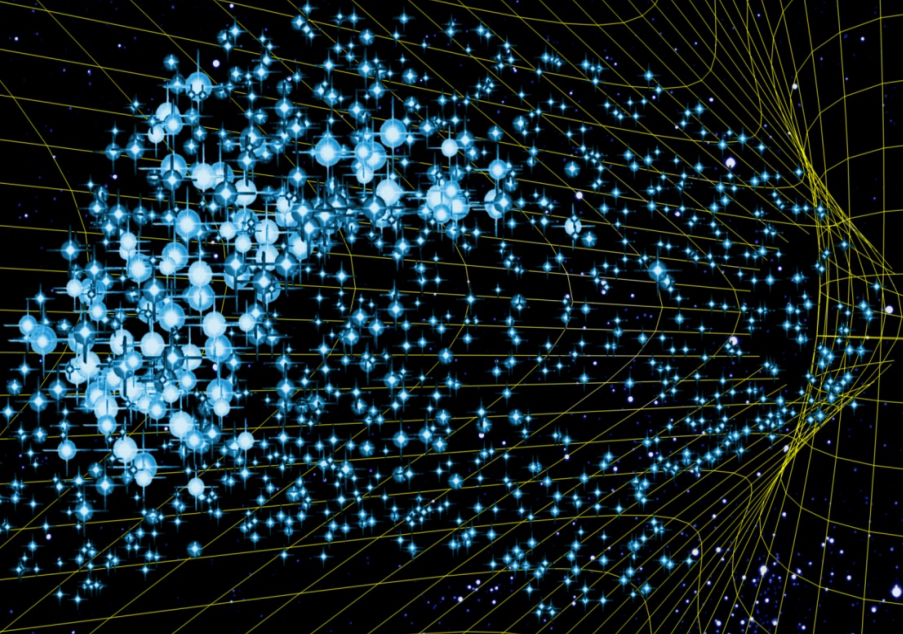


THE THRESHOLD

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WINDOW ONTO A NEW WORLD

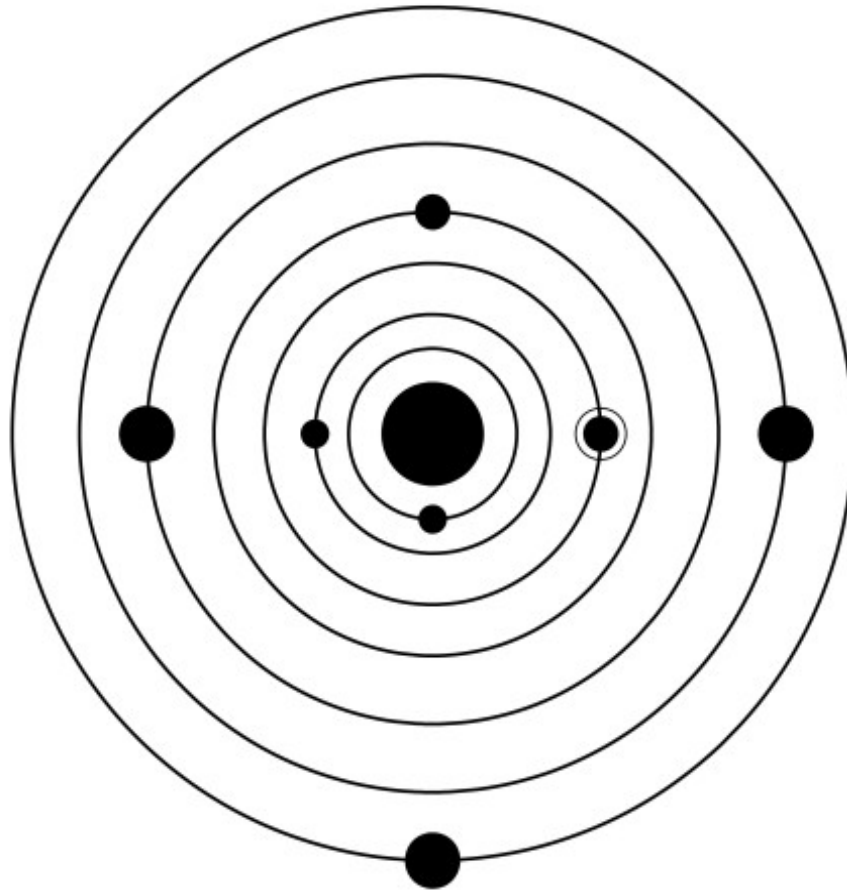


A NOVEL BY

CHRISTOPHER STEWART

2206 : WINDOW ONTO A NEW WORLD

BOOK I IN THE THRESHOLD



BY

CHRISTOPHER STEWART



PREVIEW EDITION – OCTOBER 2011

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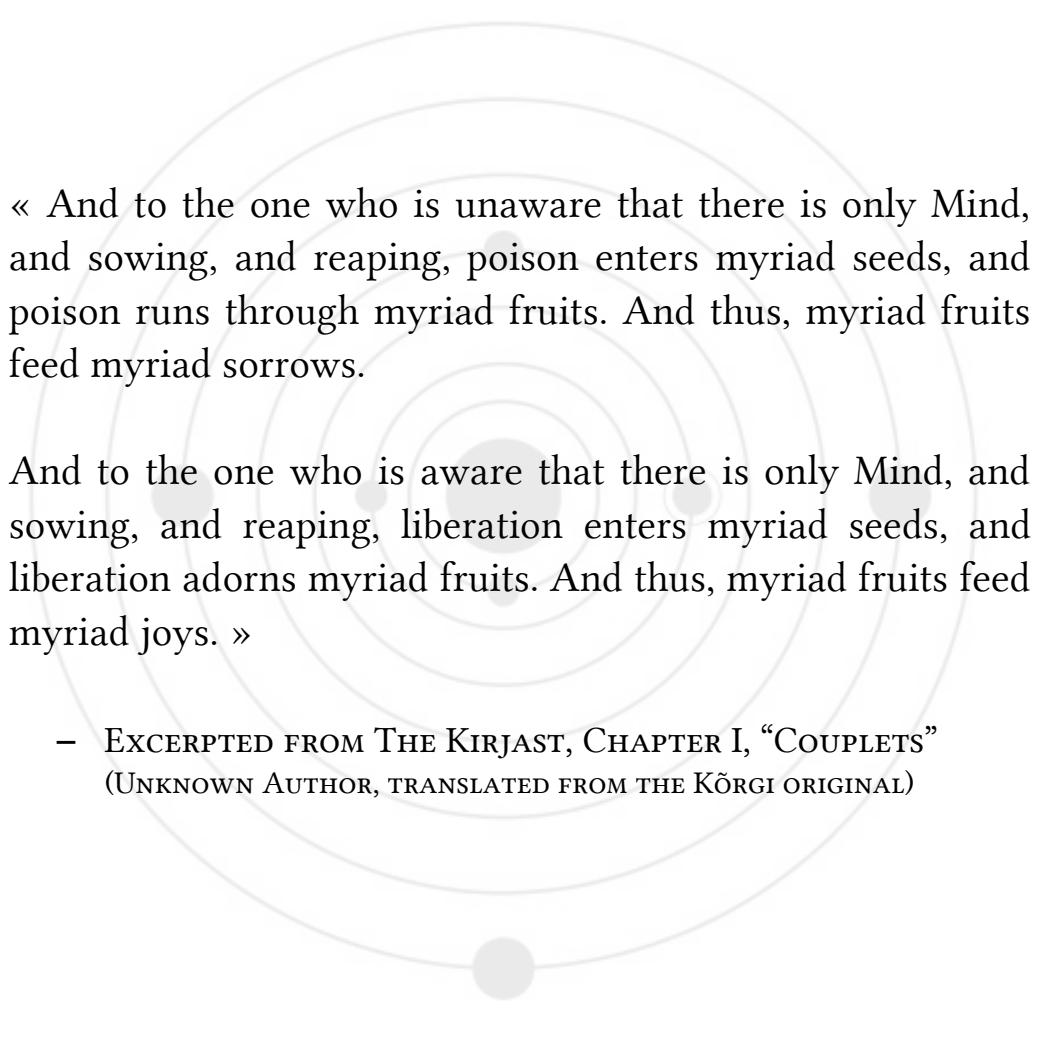


PREVIEW EDITION - OCTOBER 2011



THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION. NAMES, CHARACTERS, BUSINESSES, PLACES, EVENTS AND INCIDENTS ARE EITHER THE PRODUCTS OF THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION OR USED IN A FICTITIOUS MANNER. ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, OR ACTUAL EVENTS IS PURELY COINCIDENTAL.

This story is dedicated to dreamers who will never give up, to muses who haven't recognized who they are yet, to angels whose sacrifices are rarely acknowledged, and to believers whose vindication is on its way.



« And to the one who is unaware that there is only Mind, and sowing, and reaping, poison enters myriad seeds, and poison runs through myriad fruits. And thus, myriad fruits feed myriad sorrows.

And to the one who is aware that there is only Mind, and sowing, and reaping, liberation enters myriad seeds, and liberation adorns myriad fruits. And thus, myriad fruits feed myriad joys. »

– EXCERPTED FROM THE KIRJAST, CHAPTER I, “COUPLETS”
(UNKNOWN AUTHOR, TRANSLATED FROM THE KÖRGI ORIGINAL)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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THE THRESHOLD

THE CORE IDEAS FOR THIS SERIES first occurred to me around the beginning of the 1990s. At the time, I was completing an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering and I was very much into music, so I didn't write anything down. I merely let my imagination run away, and I shared what I could envision with my friends at the dorm.

In the few years that followed, I nurtured quite a liking for the works of Isaac Asimov. I recall reading “The Far Ends Of Time and Earth,” and being especially fascinated by “The End Of Eternity,” which was included in that edition. That particular piece is still a favourite of mine. It has obviously influenced the present novel, in the very least by prompting me to eventually note some of my old musings, and draw some sketches in my diaries. The tentative title was “Planet 3.” But I didn't dive in. In hindsight, I recognize that I should have, as the inspiration definitely was there, though I doubt I could have come up with a similar effort. However, the bulk of my attention was directed towards playing guitar and bass.

Flash-forward to the last week of October 2010. My attempts at attracting support to record my music are mostly fruitless. My laptop dies on me, I don't have the money to have it fixed, and I don't quite know how to go onward. Given that creative endeavours keep my spirits up, I decide to write an essay on Buddhist philosophy that's been nagging me for a while. In a little over one month, I'm done with the manuscript. Nonetheless, I'm pretty much in the same situation, so the question is, what should I do next ? I'm tempted to revisit a screenplay that I've nearly finished in 2009, but the version I can access is not the most up-to-date. On December 2, I finally attack “Planet 3.”

In the first few days, I put down about fifty pages of thoughts, guidelines, diagrams, timelines, outlines of characters, and the likes. Despite my old journals being long gone, I remember plenty of my early visions. As I figure out the chronology, I realize the span of the story, and then as I develop some of the arcs, I get interested in what leads to the events I had originally glimpsed, as some of the characters would say. Ultimately, a new starting point emerges. The chapters unfold, and it becomes evident that I won't be able to tell everything I want to tell in a single book. It's definitely going to be a series.



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WHEN I STARTED WRITING that part of the story which became the present novel, I only had a rough chronology, and a general sentiment of what needed to happen. Basically, I was just creating a context for the part I really wanted to share, and that I had originally intuited in the 1990s. My objective was to tell the entire tale in one book. Inspired by the “Dune” movie and miniseries, I knew the style and the depth I wished to give to the narrative. However, format considerations never occurred to me until later in the process.

To substantiate what I had outlined, it was necessary for me to explore the past of some of the characters. It also seemed mandatory to establish the events of a particular epoch, namely, the times surrounding the finding of an essential feature of that peculiar universe. I already had an interesting beginning, so I was reluctant to relinquish it. Ultimately, I figured that, if only to get the composition underway, recounting the story from an earlier point was the best way forward. Still, in doing so, I unwittingly determined far more than I had reckoned.

After the thirteenth chapter, in light of the ever increasing amounts of entries on the timeline and of items on the mindmap, it was clear that I would not achieve my objective. But having access to those visual supports helped me to work out how to subdivide the whole into sections that made sense both in terms of content and structure. It also afforded me to decide on an ending for the first volume.

This novel is not the novel I had set out to write. Little of it was planned ahead. I discovered most of the developments as I put them down on the pages. I simply trusted the beckoning muse and followed her. And I must say that I still recognize with amazement how she wove it all together. But isn't that the magic of the creative process ?



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THIS BOOK WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE without the contributions of the various generous spirits who have extended their assistance over the years.

I thank the oracles who persevered in offering their timely wisdom regardless of my frequent reluctance to accept it, the family members and friends who provided support in times of need, the musicians who channelled spiritual sustenance, and the artists of all disciplines who inspired me to explore the magical universe of creation.

I should also mention the countless spiders who warned me of potential danger, and the even more numerous flies who confirmed my bearings.

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PROLOGUE

I MUST ADMIT I WAS SHOCKED WHEN THEY CONTACTED ME to contribute to this document. After all, I knew none of the major actors of this astounding drama at the time, not personally anyhow. At first, I refused because of the memories I have associated with that year. But seeing how insistent they were, I finally gave in. I trust it's a necessary passage on the road to maturation. I suppose those areas of my psyche could use more love to heal completely.

When I asked why they wanted me to write about that year in particular, they argued that I was one of those who had actually experienced the effects of the crises. Whereas the others had only been remotely aware of the circumstances back then, mostly via the media, I had survived them. And I couldn't argue with that. My role seems so insignificant though, in comparison to theirs.

It's frightening what they can do with all this new technology. Apparently, they've pinpointed one specific weekend when many of the crucial conversations took place, between only a handful of individuals, and which ultimately gave rise to the world we now live in. I guess it's euphemistic to say that upheaval was in the air. It's fascinating to look at those events in hindsight, and realize how it could have all gone awry. And yet it didn't.

I wasn't involved in any of those exchanges. I only made my entrance a little later. I know it's a cliché, but had I known then what I've learned since, I wouldn't have done half of what I did. So, I imagine I should be grateful for my past ignorance. It could hardly have happened in any other way. Mysterious ways indeed !

In retrospect, 2206 was one of the worst years of my entire life. In fact, it was the worst. Still, everything started to shift around the end of that last quarter. I was about to turn 38. I'm not quite sure of my age anymore, with all that travelling. Not that it truly matters anyhow. My father had just died, and my mother and I were homeless. I recall finding a roof was nearly as difficult as finding a job. But then again, there were tons of people in our situation. The Chancellor was probably the most decried the Federation had known at that point. Economies were collapsing in the wake of the global financial crisis. The unemployment rate was skyrocketing. The climate of the whole planet was weird and threatening to get weirder. Our land became worthless because of it. Cynicism and individualism prevailed. I bet the Allenists were having a ball. It was the gloomiest period ever. Perhaps it's only when conditions go beyond the intolerable that we can collectively decide to react.

In my opinion, that epoch marked the height of the materialistic approach, and paradoxically, its distinctive characteristic lay in how it made increasingly evident that the system didn't work at all. It had been fundamentally flawed all along, yet it's as if around that time we acknowledged the flaws. And then the changes swept over us like a tsunami. It's amazing how quickly things can alter when everyone puts their shoulder to the wheel. We had become so concerned with the parts that we had forgotten the whole. The whole hadn't forgotten us though, and it reminded us spectacularly.

Basically, the idea was that everyone and everything was evaluated in terms of performance, productivity, and profitability. We were attempting to make every single process profitable, on the unfounded notion that if each part is profitable, then the whole will be profitable too. However, in doing so, we lost sight of the whole, which became less and less acceptable. So we ended up with a bunch of more or less profitable parts, that no more assembled into one coherent, efficient, satisfying whole. To use a crude analogy, it was as if every organ in our body were to be appraised according to its capacity to transfer oxygen to blood cells. Obviously, it can't work like that. The organs must be allowed to do what they do if the body is to function properly.

That mentality had become ingrained in our culture through our education systems. Its aim was to shape productive workers. We were trying to mould people so they would fit the materialistic conception of the world. No wonder so many thought they were growing crazier with each passing day. Hey, even I was in that lot then. Now, instead of trying to tell people what to do, we show them how to recognize for themselves what their role is and how they can fulfil it. We help people become better persons first and foremost, and then the rest follows naturally.

Our challenges are clearly very different now, but I believe we've made the choices that will afford us sustained peace and justice. And from these bases, anything is possible again.

Eugene Pettibone, Pioneer Three.



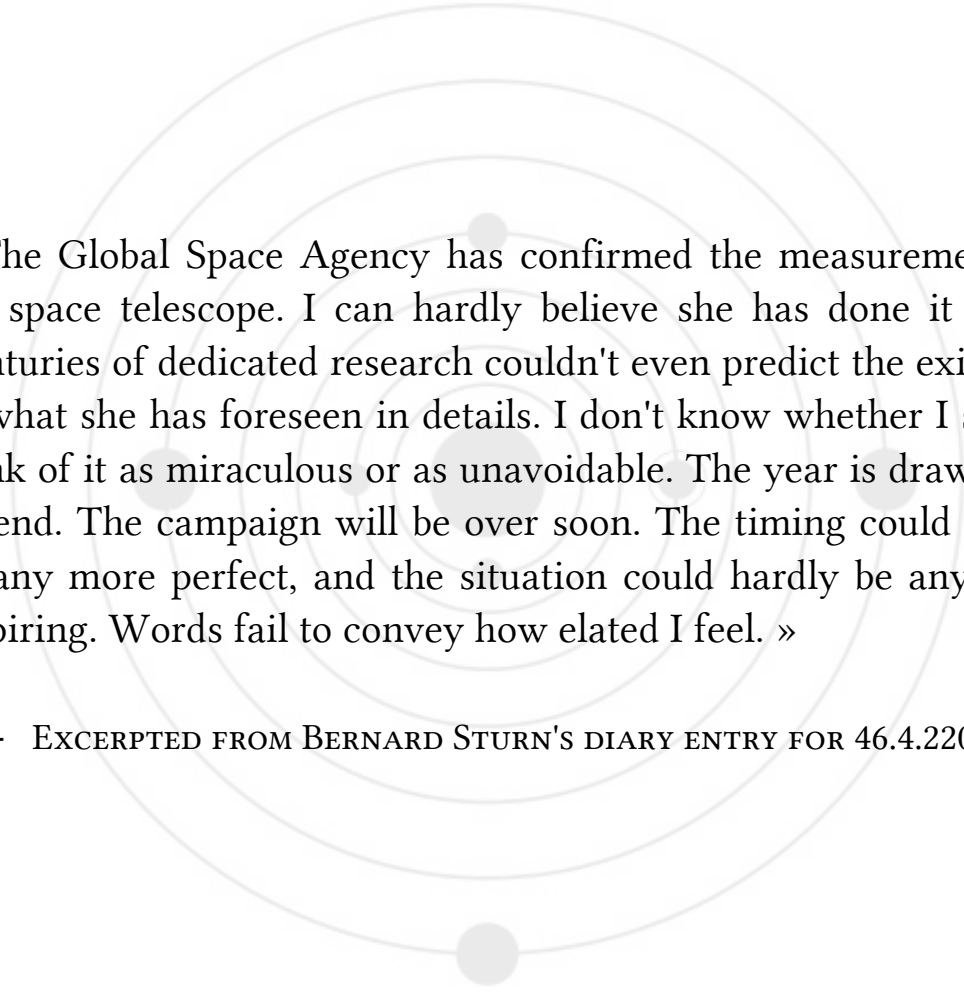
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BOOK I IN THE THRESHOLD

Chapter I

Homeworld



« The Global Space Agency has confirmed the measurements of the space telescope. I can hardly believe she has done it again. Centuries of dedicated research couldn't even predict the existence of what she has foreseen in details. I don't know whether I should think of it as miraculous or as unavoidable. The year is drawing to an end. The campaign will be over soon. The timing could hardly be any more perfect, and the situation could hardly be any more inspiring. Words fail to convey how elated I feel. »

— EXCERPTED FROM BERNARD STURN'S DIARY ENTRY FOR 46.4.2206

I. Homeworld

BERNARD STURN GENERALLY ENJOYED TRAVELLING BACK TO OVEL, and the present visit was no exception. The prospects of meeting dear distant friends in the flesh and taking an extended stroll in non-virtually-simulated nature compensated more than enough for the long days aboard the not so comfortable shuttle. Indeed, the chance of temporarily leaving the sanitized living quarters and equally bland scientific facilities of the near desert Veshtar represented a welcome source of relief. The opportunity of again tasting the delightfully luxuriant chaos of urbanized life on the motherland was a rare treat. All that combined made him forget about the official motivations for the journey. Or rather, under normal circumstances, he would not have minded them much.

A puzzling finding had made it necessary to advance the spaceflight by a few days, and the researcher had thus hastened to depart, with very little preparation time. The trips between the third and fourth planets usually coincided with their conjunctions, when the orbs approached their closest alignments, but even though the voyage had been a few days longer than usual, his enthusiasm was greater than usual too. This was a unique occasion. He was invited to comment on a discovery that was not as much singular as utterly unprecedented. And considering the promising changes looming on the political horizon, this was anything but routine business for the tall, dark haired, bespectacled man in his late forties. These were extraordinary times, and even possibly extraordinarily rewarding times, when he would at last witness the fruits of so many years of dedicated efforts bloom into full maturity. As an additional bonus, the rush had meant reaching Ovel just at the start of the weekend, enabling him to dine alongside some of his favourite people.

Carrying a travel bag over his shoulder, and closely followed by his automated suitcase, the minimal, strictly essential baggage he had brought over with him, the famous scholar kept walking in the direction of the doors which led to the main parking lot. The driver who was supposed to have been sent to greet him typically waited for him there. The casually clothed expert scanned the busy terminal of the immense spaceport in the hopes of locating the employee of the Global Research and Development Administration. But his gaze was irresistibly attracted to the darkening sky he couldn't miss through the huge transparent dome covering the vast open space. Sunsets were definitely to be counted among the small pleasures of being on the homeland. And though he could only distinguish a few of the brightest stars that heralded the nightfall, the sight easily rivalled those common to the world he had escaped for a too brief while.

As he again looked in front of him, amidst the many passengers who crowded the noisy area, the space engineer finally saw the person he was searching for. Standing by the entrance, dressed in the habitual black three-piece suit and wearing shades, the athletic, bearded, bald man was devouring one of his customary between meals collations, this time a gargantuan sandwich, which allowed the

pundit to confirm his identity from the distance. Waving at him, appreciating the gradually calming feeling that came from recognizing someone whose company had always been enjoyable, the former educator was glad and relieved to learn who would once more be in charge of his security over the weekend. After chomping at his hors d'oeuvre, Daniel Milton waved back in response and exited the hall via one of the many pairs of big sliding doors. The physicist hurried forward, zigzagging to avoid passersby. Valuing how the image of the archetypal scientist he nurtured afforded him unhindered progress despite his celebrity, he ultimately left the edifice.

- « Where do I take you, professor Sturn ? » respectfully asked the chauffeur in a deep bass voice after swallowing what remained of the snack, removing his sunglasses as the public speaker joined him outside the intermodal station.
- « Good to see you again, Daniel ! » genuinely offered the quadragenarian, smiling, « I'll go straight to my hotel room to shower and change, and then I'll be eating out with friends » he declared as both men loaded the luggage into the trunk of the two-seater, « you have no idea how much I love the fresh air of our good old ball of rock » he commented after taking a generous intake of Ovelian atmosphere.
- « Well, sir, the air on Veshtar must be really bad because here it's polluted as hell ! » the big bodyguard retorted, prompting another wide grin on the face of the obviously tired project manager who proceeded towards the door of the compact transport.
- « I know, I know » concurred the renowned specialist, « but at least it's not lifeless and insipid » he noted in a more serious tone, recalling the clinical dryness of the labs as he sat alongside his muscular helper who raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side in agreement.
- « How was your trip ? » inquired the attendant as he started the engine.
- « A lot busier than normal » observed the consultant, « which was very welcome given that Veshtar is not at its closest from here these days » he pointed out to emphasize the unusual duration of the journey, « but that was to be expected after the news about the discontinuity, I mean, the discovery of the Global Space Agency... surely you must have heard ? » he queried the giant.
- « Of course, of course » corroborated the hefty driver, « everybody's been talking about that since they announced it » he reported at once, « you can't surf the net without seeing anomaly this and wormhole that these days » he remarked in jest, « you can go ahead and call it discontinuity » Milton told his client, « I've been brushing up on my physics lately you know » he asserted with enthusiasm and a proud smile.
- « Oh, haven't you now ? » replied the notable, remembering that the younger man at his side had always been amazingly bright for a barely schooled mountain of muscles, which was refreshing to witness as it starkly contrasted and weakened the popular cliché.
- « You bet I have ! » stated the oversized gastronome, playfully smug, « I can even tell you all about what the GSA folks saw through their space telescope up there » he claimed as he withdrew his stare from the road for a moment to weigh the reaction of the other.

- « Well, why don't you then ? » challenged the expert, noticing his interlocutor was more earnest, and how the spark in his eye hankered for a chance to show off the newly gained knowledge.
- « Oh... sure ! Thank you sir ! » began the security agent, surprised, « so, basically, what they've found up there is a wormhole, that some have been calling discontinuity, and also anomaly... and it's like a tunnel connecting two locations in space that are very far from one another » he first explained, « using this tunnel, it's possible to travel back and forth from one region of space to the other in no time, well, in far less time usually » corrected the chauffeur, absorbed in his account yet keeping both hands on the controls and his eyes on the traffic ahead of him, « but the weird thing about this one is that it has no depth... it's not a tunnel as much as a window... a frameless window » he described with a chuckle, glancing at his passenger in astonishment, « it's as if the two regions of space are stitched together in this particular location » he hazarded pensively, « some say it's big enough to fit one of our stations ! Can you imagine ? » he exclaimed, again looking quickly at Sturn.

The doctor of physics simply grinned and made a face that asked his athletic helper if perhaps the fascinating story was making him forget who he was talking to.

- « Oh, well, I'm sure you can imagine » continued the embarrassed bodyguard after a brief pause, « but here's the really strange part » he announced, somewhat perplexed, « because of the distance that separates our galaxy and the galaxy on the other side of the window... clearly it's a lot older than ours and located much farther from the center of the universe than we are » he submitted in a garbled manner, « it moves away from us at a very high speed, because the universe is constantly expanding, right ? » Milton went on tentatively, « and so, time flows faster over there than it does over here » he finally declared, « well, as seen from here that is, because over there they don't see the difference » he stressed at once, « it's all about relativistic physics... but surely you know all about that, right sir ? » laughed the attendant, promptly assessing the expression of the renowned pundit.
- « Well, I must say I'm impressed » the former teacher answered, { *that's not quite it, but he has manifestly considered the situation... perhaps I better be careful not to discourage him* } he mused, undecided, « sounds like you really worked hard to figure this out, Daniel » he offered supportively.
- « Thanks sir ! » the bald giant responded with another even prouder smile as he pulled off the road and headed into the entrance of the towering hotel's underground parking lot, « I even made the calculations to double check the distance between the galaxies » he noted after the few seconds the turn had taken, « a little over four thousand megaparsecs » he confidently stated.
- « Hmm... okay » the scientific adviser intervened, reflecting that the younger man would have to learn the truth sooner or later, « first, I really must mention that we don't know at this point whether it's a wormhole or something else altogether » he dutifully emphasized,

« if it's a wormhole, it's very different from what we've been expecting » he maintained in an authoritative voice, stopping for a moment to let the information sink in, « second, if it were indeed a case of relative velocity time dilation, as many news sources suppose » the famous researcher observed, « time would actually flow slower, not faster » he asserted, puzzling his interlocutor, « don't forget that, as the name say, the velocity is relative, and thus the dilation would be reciprocal » he reminded the neophyte, « in other words, no matter which side one would be on, time would always appear to flow slower on the other side » the expert remarked, « and obviously this is not what is going on here » he calmly concluded.

- « What is going on then ? » inquired the baffled security enforcer after a while.
- « Well, the short answer is, we simply don't know » the scholar chuckled, « which is why we use vague terms such as anomaly and discontinuity to refer to this... phenomenon » he explained, unable to find a more precise word, « it's entirely possible that we've stumbled upon something that our current models of the universe haven't predicted » he eventually suggested, contemplative, « which is as exciting as it is disturbing » he commented with a knowing grin.
- « Hmm... and why is that ? » the chauffeur wondered following another pause, not quite certain he had made sense of the proposition.
- « Because it means there's something we've missed » Sturn chortled again, « yet, this can only lead to further discoveries » he submitted in an optimistic fashion, « and ultimately, to a better understanding of the world we live in » he finally affirmed.

While the quiet athlete was clearly bewildered by all that his passenger had just taught him, the physicist was more concerned by what he had seen, or indeed what he had not seen, as they had travelled towards the heart of Triton Aeolus. It seemed that with every trip, nature receded a little more from the scenery to make room for more buildings. Probably he had been too deeply engaged in the conversation with his bodyguard, but this time around, apart from some contrived landscaping alongside the boulevard, he hadn't noticed even a single tree during the short ride from the spaceport to the hotel. He could remember the time, not that long ago, when a lush forest was still standing tall between the outskirts of the capital city and what was now the nation's biggest intermodal station. However, over the years, the two areas had evidently merged into one dense jungle of concrete and steel.

Paradoxically, as the transport slowed down and halted in the lower levels of the parking lot, the space engineer could hardly recall when the garage had last been freshened up. In fact, had it not been for a few electoral posters sporting the chubby face of Edward Rogers, which added some colour to the otherwise mostly grey environment, the place would have looked exactly like it always looked, only dirtier, and possibly with even paler paint than on his previous visit.

As the two men stepped out of the vehicle to grab the scientist's baggage from the trunk, it

suddenly occurred to the dark haired quadragenarian that the Liberals had manifestly ensured that the only visible political placards were those of their party leader. And if it was somewhat odd given that both the city and the state had traditionally been Conservative strongholds, it was even odder considering that the establishment notoriously accommodated dignitaries and officials of the Federal Government almost exclusively. If the edifice had stayed the same, perhaps the times were changing.

« Tell me Daniel, have you been following the campaign ? » asked the pundit, « I've been trying to, but on Veshtar, as you know, the department is under Conservative control » he observed, waiting briefly as if to measure the weight of his words, « so it's very hard to know what is really going on over here » he continued, glancing at his interlocutor as the two of them walked to the elevator, « the perspective of an Ovelian citizen would surely be very interesting » he ultimately offered.

- « Well sir, I'm flattered » the attendant responded, « but I'm not sure my opinion would be much of use to you sir » he remarked, trying to dodge the interrogation, « I mean, no offence, but I really don't like to discuss or even think about politics and politicians » he explained, frowning, « they all seem the same to me » the oversized driver carried on as the lift's doors swiftly opened in front of them, « vain, corrupted, manipulative, deceitful » he enumerated, as if temporarily unmindful of who he was talking to, « I mean, I know some of your friends are politicians and all but, and again no offence sir, but it's really not my cup of tea » he declared as he rested the luggage onto the elevator's floor, frustration rising in him as he recollected some of the recent events in the political arena.
- « You know... » the bespectacled consultant replied following a momentary silence, while verifying that the lift was headed for the main storey, « that might precisely be why your opinion would be so much more interesting » Sturn suggested in the hopes of persuading his reticent helper.
- « Well, if you insist sir » the chauffeur answered, sighing conspicuously.
- « Actually I do, Daniel » the renowned public speaker affirmed with humour, « what do you know about that Coalition » he immediately proceeded, focusing his inquiry, « are there still rumours about it ? » he queried, although he was already aware of the facts.
- « Rumours ? » exclaimed the athlete, « it's more than rumours at this point, professor » he stressed, staring at the former educator to assess his reaction, « they announced it a few days ago » he asserted, incredulous at the other's ignorance of the matter, « I'm surprised you haven't heard about it yet » emphatically added the muscular gentleman as they both exited the elevator and entered the lobby.

The large open space had not changed much either, reflected the researcher as his bodyguard and him advanced towards the reception. The hotel must have been very profitable given its habitual clientele, but the management had obviously decided that renewing the decor was not at the top of the list of investments. Still, the vast room, and indeed the entire building, had a antiquated charm all its own.

« You know what, sir ? » resumed the bearded giant, having pondered the question, « this might actually be the first inspiring political news I've heard my whole life » he submitted half-jokingly, « with so much diversity of views brought under one roof, they won't – » he hesitated, wondering to which extent he could allude to the allegations of corruption that plagued the Conservative government in the presence of one of the most illustrious member of the RDA, « they... might be able to find better solutions to some of the issues we're facing » Milton hinted, adjusting his aim in mid-sentence, « a change could actually be very good » he ventured after a while, « it's not as if things are that great under the old geezer – » he noted, suddenly pausing in embarrassment, « I mean, our Right Honourable Federal Chancellor Ramsay, of course » he concluded, chuckling as he tried to guess the leanings of the scientist from his expression as they reached the front desk.

Apart from a barely perceptible smile, the physicist didn't respond, and instead busied himself checking in and getting his uDev programmed with the access code to his suite. In the meantime, his hefty attendant went straight for the bowl of complimentary mint flavoured chocolate candies on the countertop and filled the inside pockets of his jacket.

The imposing gastronome then turned around and scanned the area to see if somebody had noticed them walking in, and as expected he recognized two blond men dressed in that unmistakable shade of dark grey. Sitting in the lounge, not too far from the elevator, apparently working at their notebooks, they were manifestly acting as if they were not watching his passenger and him. Wryly grinning at the near twins in the distance, he nevertheless appreciated the tenacity of the unwanted individuals who were still harassing the scholar despite repeated warnings. He could imagine a few reasons why considering where the space engineer lived, and what was the nature of his endeavours. However, doubts remained as to their true motivations.

{ *Good thing I refused* } thought the bald driver, recollecting the time when the Syndicate had attempted to recruit him, only a few weeks after the Administration had hired him. Although they supposedly frowned upon agents who came from the military, they had approached him to serve as security specialist, stressing that his thorough experience would definitely benefit their underground organization. But he had ultimately declined because of their own reputation.

« Guess what, sir ? » began the oversized chauffeur, « two clowns from... how do they call themselves again ? The Civil Servant Syndicate ? » he mentioned mockingly, « looks like there's two of them waiting for you over there » he announced, motioning with his head in the direction of the duo of unmissable bureaucrats, « want me to handle them sir ? » he asked eagerly, his eyes even more bright than usual.

- « No, no, thanks Daniel » promptly replied the researcher, first in a serious tone, « please don't hurt them » he then chortled, to the dissatisfaction of his interlocutor, « it's okay, I

can deal with them » he ensured, reflexively squinting as if to increase the sharpness of his stare as he peered around the vast open space to locate the pair of undesirables, and, finding them, nodding at them in feigned respect, much to their annoyance, « help me to my room » the quadragenarian requested after a few seconds, « and then give me about one hour to get ready » he instructed while proceeding towards the main lift, « those two guys will surely come for a visit, but I'll personally make sure that they don't stay long » he hinted, smiling at the disappointed bodyguard and tapping him on the shoulder, « then you drive me to the restaurant, and you have your evening off... do we have a deal ? » he offered the younger giant.

- « You bet we do sir ! » Milton cheerfully declared, « and may I be so bold as to enquire where you'll be eating ? » he carried on in a humorous manner.
- « Oh ! Of course, of course, my good man » answered the former teacher in a playfully aristocratic voice, « tonight your beloved patron will be dining at Briskin's mind you ! » he went on with an equally caricatural air of complacent superiority.
- « Oh, Briskin's ! Where the decor is second to none ! » joked the bearded attendant as the door of the elevator opened, « a most excellent choice, if I might add, sir ! » he concluded in the best faked connoisseur impersonation he could muster, and the two men burst into laughter as they entered the lift, unable to contain their amusement any further.

If the prospect of working for the Research and Development Administration had been more a deterrent than an incentive when he had decided to leave the University, the doctor of physics could nevertheless appreciate the distinctive advantages that accompanied the prestigious position. Having to reside on Veshtar had been a harsh price to pay at times, yet in return it afforded him numerous privileges, such as the possibility of travelling for free all over the Federation and lodging in some of the best hotels on the planet and onboard space stations, as long as it involved some official reasons or another. The generous expense account allowed him to eat at the finest restaurants, and enjoy the most sought-after entertainment performances, artistic presentations, and sporting events. It often bothered him that the Administration also took care of his safety, however it meant one less worry, and a significant one at that given the important rise in criminality that was plaguing many Ovelian megapolises.



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