

Amantarra

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By way of an appetiser prior to the publication of Amantarra, here are the first five chapters.

1.

Valheel

Artullus sat in the Great Library of Valheel. The vast domed room was almost empty save for a few who sat at the long tables in isolated silence. On the table in front of each was a flat console rather like the ink blotters of old, three dimensional images floated in the air above them. Artullus removed a clear crystal from the receptacle to the right of his console and the images in front of him vanished immediately. The crystal fitted into the palm of his hand, he rolled it from one hand to the other several times and then held it up to the light. He turned the crystal slowly as he waited for Amantarra to make her appearance; colours danced in each of the facets. He thought about his time on the high council and the subtle changes he had witnessed over the millennia; changes that had affected friends, colleagues and council members alike. Were he and Amantarra the only ones to have noticed them? He did carry a certain amount of guilt; after all he was the leader of the council when the decision was made to create Valheel.

The light blue walls of the domed circular reading room were lined with crystals identical in shape but smaller than the one which Artullus was holding. Each crystal contained the complete knowledge of any subject you could think of. The Bruwnan had reached the limits of what is technically possible in Euclidean space millennia before their ascension into the ethereal beings they were now; and all of that knowledge, plus history, art and everything else was contained in this one room. Artullus closed one eye and turned the crystal so that he could see only red light and then turned it the other way so that the colour changed up through the spectrum to blue. Behind the crystal Amantarra appeared in the entrance to the library. Artullus placed the crystal on the table in front of him and waved to her.

'Amantarra, it is good to see you,' he said as his daughter arrived at his side.

'Thank you father, and how goes your research into the history of Bruwnan technology?' Her question had a slight air of amateur dramatics about it, as if it had been said for the benefit of other ears.

Artullus picked up the crystal from the table as Amantarra sat next to him. 'It's complete.' He held it up to show her.

'How much did you manage to get on there?'

Artullus looked around to see if there was anyone close by, and then leaned in close. 'All of it,' he said.

Amantarra looked around at the crystals that lined the library walls. 'All of this,' she whispered, 'the whole thing?' She looked amazed.

'It wasn't easy. I had to use some of the same techniques used by the city to store its data, so the sooner it's out of here the better.'

'What about the Primary Key?' Amantarra whispered.

Artullus indicated the crystal with a nod, 'and only here,' he said quietly. 'How go your plans?'

'I have primed the Ja'liem, the humans are ready for the next genetic phase, and I've left a trail of breadcrumbs for Elleria,' said Amantarra in hushed tones.

Artullus sighed. 'It's been three hundred thousand years since I had this conversation with your sister.' Artullus held the crystal up. 'I wish I had managed to send her off with this information. We might have heard back from her then.'

'Saranythia didn't need it; she was always the clever one.'

Artullus shook his head. 'I fear for her, she was always far too adventurous.' He was silent for a moment, lost in his thoughts about Saranythia. 'Whatever she was trying must have failed.'

'As soon as it is possible for me to do so I will seek her out.'

Artullus nodded his thanks. 'Amantarra,' he handed her the crystal; 'it's time.'

'How many are left?' asked Amantarra.

'Difficult to tell, the city's sensors are being fed false information, but I've analysed the energy flows and by my estimation there's only a few thousand of the original ascended left.'

'Then now is the time,' said Amantarra.

Artullus reached into his pocket and produced a ring. 'You'll need this,' he said, as he handed it to her. 'It uses the same technology as the weapons the Guardians of Valheel carry. Initially it will disrupt the protective field around the Node Zero allowing you to access it directly. Once the ring is fully interfaced, it will change the operating parameters of the Node allowing a reversal of the energy flow. The Node will be

very vulnerable once you have removed the protective field and it is vital that it receives no shocks until your task is complete.'

Amantarra placed the ring on her finger and held it up so that the light caught the single large red stone.

'Good luck Amantarra. I'm going to leave Valheel so that the plan cannot be extracted from my Avatar. If you are successful and you have enough time to complete your work, then we will meet again. If not, then this will be our final goodbye.'

They stood and embraced. Amantarra sat back down and watched Artullus make his way towards the exit. He waved from the doorway and then left, heading for the portals on the plaza which were the only way in or out of the city. She sat for a moment mourning the absence of her father and contemplating the implications of her next move. Amantarra looked at the crystal in her hand and then surreptitiously placed it in her pocket. She stood and made her way towards the rear exit of the library. In a few moments, as the crystal left the library, the alarm would sound.

Behind her the blue door to the Great Library of Valheel stood open. The low chiming of an alarm could be heard coming from inside. Amantarra was running from the door towards the entrance of one of the arcades that led to the Blue Plaza. She reached the entrance to the arcade and a quick look confirmed that it was empty, Amantarra slipped round the corner.

The glass roof of the arcade was supported on arched metal columns that met in a point at the top, making it look like the ribcage of some enormous dead beast. Amantarra ran quickly but cautiously along the arcade towards the circular plaza at the base of one of the centroid towers. This is too easy, she thought. As she neared the end of the arcade she slowed, moved closer to the wall and hid behind one of the columns.

She felt the lump the crystal made in her clothing; so much time; so much knowledge; so much dangerous knowledge. The data it contained had not been easy to collate. Artullus had risked a lot to compile this knowledge and she had never dared believe that it would ever be completed.

She chanced a peep around the column. The arcade was still clear. Amantarra sprinted to the next column. She was now only two away from the arcade exit. Again she looked around the column and out across the plaza.

There were two of them.

They had just appeared around the side of the blue centroid tower in the centre of the plaza. She pressed her back into the column and closed her eyes.

Seconds passed.

Opening her eyes, she looked up and through the glass roof of the arcade at the towers of Valheel that arced overhead. The city of Valheel was built on the inside of a sphere some two kilometres in diameter. At the centre of the sphere was a spherical chamber which housed Node Zero, Amantarra's next port of call. And the only way to reach Node Zero was up one of the four centroid towers; red, green, yellow or blue. She both hated and loved the geometric purity of the city; if you drew a straight line between the bases of the centroid towers it would form an equilateral pyramid. There was purity in that, that Amantarra liked; but she hated what it represented, to her it meant constraint and she mourned the passing of her people's ability to think creatively. She studied the buildings on the other side of the sphere, from her current position she could see the base of the red centroid tower with its circular plaza and four arcades identical to the one she was in now. The smaller buildings and towers that made up the city looked like toys on the far side of the sphere. The light issuing from their windows was steady, unhindered by atmospheric disturbance; Valheel had no atmosphere; the city and its inhabitants were constructed of pure energy. Strange, she reflected, why is it that as ethereal beings, we have the need to set these boundaries for ourselves, constructing virtual cities and, she looked down at her body, shells for our consciousness. Perhaps leaving our corporeal existence was a mistake, one which will always haunt us.

Amantarra breathed out slowly in a silent sigh of relief; they hadn't spotted her. But now she had another problem, they were between her and the base of the tower; she would need another way round. She contemplated a new route; but whichever way she went it would take longer, and the longer it took the greater the risk of detection. Perhaps the guards' would make their way down one of the other arcades. Intelligent though they were, they did not possess an independent conscious, they were not Bruwnan or even Radgarc; they were constructs of the city itself, Avatars, known to all as the "Guardians of Valheel".

Which was a bit of a joke, there was nothing to guard against. No, as far as Amantarra was concerned they were there to suppress.

The column in front of her rang as a pulse of energy struck it; she looked down from the glass roof at the impact point. A small round section of the metal had been replaced by a green grid of construction lines which in turn rendered into glowing orange hot metal. Amantarra remained still behind her column. This is taking the virtual boundaries too far, she thought. Weapons! Beings that do not need physical form do not need boundaries, never mind weapons to enforce them. The weapons did not kill; they couldn't, it was impossible to kill a Bruwnan, they'd left their physical forms behind long ago; the weapons disrupted the avatar placing a copy of the occupier's consciousness under the control of the city. That, thought Amantarra, would not be a good thing given what she was about to attempt.

Amantarra risked another look. The two guards were heading her way across the blue paving of the plaza. It wouldn't be long before there would be more coming from the library side of the arcade and she would then be completely trapped. Two more shots struck the column she was hiding behind but did not penetrate.

A volley of five or six wild shots some hitting the far wall, most travelling further down the arcade, but one shot shattering the glass in the roof above Amantarra. She lowered her head as the glass rained down evaporating into a multitude of green construction grids that tumbled and spun in the air turning back into shards as they fell. From the change in trajectory and wildness of the shots, she realised that the assailants must be running to get a better angle on her.

Time was running out.

She shook the glass from her hair and looked up. The entire glass panel had gone and for the first time Amantarra noticed the nicely spaced anchor points that attached the column to the wall. She didn't need to think about it; in an instant she was halfway up the column using the anchor points as handholds. Two more shots, both struck the wall halfway between her column and the next one with some accuracy, they'd obviously stopped running but hadn't got the angle right yet.

At the top Amantarra rolled over the parapet wall dropping down a short distance onto the flat roof. The wide roof curved round to the next arcade, its only feature was a large spire at the halfway point. The distance to the spire was too great; she would never be able to run to it in time.

Two more shots very close. Amantarra's column rang with the impact.

Then she could hear them below; they were in her last hiding place.

'Up,' said a voice.

She could hear one of them start to climb and she tucked herself close into the parapet wall.

Perhaps they won't climb onto the roof, she thought, perhaps they'll just look, and seeing no one climb back down.

A hand appeared over the parapet just in front of her, it was holding a weapon. Forget plan "A" hiding and hoping; without thinking Amantarra sat up. In the same movement she grabbed the weapon and pointed it at the guard's head. Smooth featureless metal with strips of black where the eyes should be, it was a face that was incapable of showing surprise. Amantarra had always thought that the design of the guardians lacked imagination. The guardian looked from his empty hand to Amantarra's face as if he was trying to work out what had happened. Amantarra looked at her reflection in the black plastic eyes and wondered if the automaton had any concept of the meaning of surprise, or for that matter any inkling of what was going to happen next.

The best form of defence is often attack.

Amantarra pulled the trigger removing the top half of the guard's head leaving only the un-rendered green construction grid outlining his cranium; and true to the rules governing the city his avatar immediately shutdown, falling onto his climbing comrade and knocking him to the ground. Amantarra leaned over the parapet and finished the job with a shot to the chest of the second guard as he sprawled on the ground.

She quickly slipped back over the parapet and down the side of the column. As she reached the ground the shattered glass vanished and the roof reappeared as the system automatically cleaned up the damage, it wouldn't be much longer before the guards vanished and were reintegrated back into the system. She grabbed the second guard's weapon and with one in each hand, ran to the arcade exit. She scanned the plaza; there were no more guards. Head down she sprinted towards the domed structure at the base of the tower which housed the distribution crystal.

She was about three quarters of the way across when an energy pulse whizzed past her. She immediately jinked left, left again and then right. Several more shots, that were close, but not close enough,

impacted on the wall of the tower in front of her. She'd suspected there would be more guards approaching from the other end of the arcade and apparently they had now arrived.

The base of the tower was set slightly below the plaza. Amantarra crouched at the base of the short flight of steps that led down to it and returned fire. There was no way, she thought, that she would be able to hit them from this range, but at least it would delay their attempt to cross the plaza. The shots did stop them; they knelt in the entrance to the arcade and returned fire with considerably more accuracy than Amantarra. She stood and ran, following the curved wall round to the entrance. The guards' shots followed her progress, hitting the wall behind her.

The door to the tower was set back in the wall. Keeping low, she tried the large double doors, they were locked. Amantarra took aim at the lock and fired. It took six shots but eventually the lock evaporated back to the underlying green construction grid. Amantarra went partway back up the steps, took careful aim and let off three more shots towards the four guards who were just venturing out of the arcade.

Unbelievably, and more through good luck than skill, she actually managed to hit one of them. The other three guards dropped low to the ground and returned fire. Amantarra was about to turn and go inside when she saw another figure appear in the entrance to the arcade. It was unmistakably Tyrus, Valheel's Enforcer.

Tyrus raised his arms straight above his head and a large ball of blue white energy formed between his hands. Throwing his arms forward he hurled the ball in Amantarra's direction. As the energy rapidly crossed the plaza it passed through one of the guards destroying him completely. Amantarra dropped and rolled down the steps as the ball of energy struck the wall to the right of the door causing a large section of it to vanish leaving only the green construction grid.

Amantarra did not wait for a second shot; she was already pushing the doors open and making her way inside. She was in a short corridor. To her right was the top of a flight of stairs that disappeared down into darkness. Ahead there was another set of double doors, Amantarra ran to them. The doors weren't locked and she pushed them both open to make a grand entrance.

Inside, the curve of the domed roof ran around the perimeter of the circular chamber. It terminated at its highest point with a circular hole which was the base of the centroid tower itself. There were no columns or any other supporting structures for the tower. Nor were there any intermediate floors in the centroid tower, it was clear all the way to the Node Zero chamber. In the centre of the floor a pure white

beam of energy from Node Zero a kilometre above, terminated its journey on the faceted surface of a clear crystal set on a low, wide plinth. From here, the energy was distributed to this quadrant of the city. It was where the essence of the Euclidian universe met the virtual existence of the city of Valheel; without this energy stream, and the ones from its three siblings, the city would not exist. Surrounding the plinth were four long curved benches that looked like they were made from black marble. Amantarra couldn't believe that anyone would want to sit and stare at the energy stream, but obviously that was what one of the designers had imagined. Cantilevered out from the wall of the wide circular tower was a spiral staircase that wound its way up to the Node Zero chamber. The last section of steps descending from the hole in the roof to the chamber floor seemed to float in the air without any visible means of support. The entire length of the tower was illuminated by the energy beam making the blue walls and staircase glow.

The tower itself was translucent and she could see the yellow zone of the city above her as she started to climb. It was a long way up, but it was the only way. At least her body would not get physically tired. She was about five turns up when a pulse of energy flew past her. The shot struck the underside of the stairs above her leaving black radial burn mark. Amantarra kept running; the more time they wasted down there, the longer she would have in the chamber. She could hear raised voices; it was Tyrus voicing his concerns over using a weapon this close to the beam.

Amantarra had climbed another two turns before she could hear them on the stairs below her. She could always wait and pick them off as they drew closer, knowing that they probably would be reluctant to return fire. She dismissed the idea; having them closer was the last thing she needed, and she couldn't risk one of Tyrus' fireballs. And so the climb continued. Amantarra, free from the fear of ambush, unlike her pursuers, managed to increase her lead.

Twenty minutes later Amantarra arrived in the one hundred metre diameter sphere that was the Node Zero chamber. Node Zero itself dominated the chamber, almost filling it, there was a gap of only ten metres between the rounded totally black multifaceted crystal and the curved floor of the chamber. Each centroid tower was capped with a series of arches like those making up the arcades' far below, they terminated around a ring through which the energy beam from Node Zero passed as it started its journey down the tower.

One of the facets was perfectly aligned with the ring at the top of the arches. The chamber resonated with a slowly changing harmony as the energy levels in each beam rose and fell. Energy, Amantarra needed a lot of it, but she also needed to store it, because what she was about to do would cut her off from the source for a long time.

The Bruwnan had left Euclidian space half the age of the universe ago. They moved their minds to a different set of dimensions where they fabricated this city, this reality. A reality built on rules applied by an artificial intelligence and sustained from energy derived from living organisms. This meant that the Bruwnan were not divorced from the Euclidian universe, they were completely dependent upon it. Without it they were just thoughts in the void. They had constructed a network of thirty trillion nodes to concentrate enough energy to construct the city of Valheel where they could condense their consciousness into shadows of their former physical forms. The Bruwnan could no longer have any tangible presence in the Euclidian universe, but they didn't need it because they had tools to exercise their influence there.

Amantarra wasted no time, and tucking the weapons into her belt climbed one of the arches to reach Node Zero. At the top of the framework she made herself as comfortable and secure as possible by wrapping her legs around the metalwork. Node Zero was just above her; she tilted her head back and looked into the crystal. There was no surface reflection, there couldn't be, the Node was not an object it was the interface between all the dimensions the city operated in and Euclidean space time.

Amantarra reached into her pocket with her ring hand and produced the clear crystal. Raising her hand she pressed the red stone on the ring against the surface of the Node. The black crystal felt cold to the touch like polished granite. Moments passed and nothing happened. Amantarra was just beginning to doubt if the ring was doing anything when the stone changed from red to green and her hand started to slip below the black surface. Amantarra pushed harder, forcing her hand and the clear crystal she was holding into the Node.

The consistency of the Node had gone from granite hard to treacle. She could feel the vibration as the energy from thirty trillion worlds coursed around her hand. There was a slight flickering of the light levels as some of the energy was diverted away from the city, back into the Euclidean universe where it had come from, and into a construct of Saranythia's design. She could sense the mass growing, but mass soaked up a lot of energy and it would take several minutes to complete at this transfer rate.

Three guards arrived at the top of the tower. At first they couldn't see where she was and made their way towards the tops of the other towers to see if she had started down. Amantarra watched until finally their legs became obscured by the curved outline of Node Zero.

It was several minutes, several precious minutes, before they reappeared at the base of the framework.

'There,' shouted one of the guards.

They levelled their weapons at her, but lowered them when they saw that the force field had been penetrated; it was just too dangerous to use them in this place with this much energy about.

Amantarra pushed her hand further into the crystal and the lights visibly dimmed throughout the city, plunging some of the buildings into darkness momentarily. Lowest down the pecking order for energy, for a split second the guards were replaced by green construction lines as the city adjusted to the drop in power. Amantarra used the opportunity to retrieve one of the weapons from her belt. The guards looked around the chamber as if that held the answer to the dropping light levels. Amantarra could sense the increase in the growth rate of her construction. Shouldn't take too long now she thought.

'What are you doing?' one of the guards asked.

Amantarra did not answer; she just closed her eyes and concentrated.

Even with her eyes closed Amantarra could sense him as he arrived at the top of the stairs. Tyrus, Valheel's Enforcer. To Amantarra he was the epitome of the rot and corruption that centred on the council and reached out now to infect every aspect of the Bruwnian existence.

The guards stepped back as he approached.

Tyrus calmly took in the scene. Looking from the weapon Amantarra was holding, to the hand she had embedded in the black crystal.

'Remove your hand from the crystal,' said Tyrus calmly.

Amantarra opened her eyes and looked at him. He was smiling at her with one of those self-confident little smirks that she really annoyed her. She hated his arrogance. Amantarra raised her eyebrows as if to say "yes, can I help you?" He was a servant of the Bruwnan after all; and again she found herself questioning why the council had given the avatar such power. It was way beyond anything the Bruwnan themselves had.

'Remove your hand from the crystal,' repeated Tyrus. There was more impatience in his voice now, Amantarra relished it. She smiled at him to try and annoy him some more.

'When you have removed your hand, you can tell me what you are doing.'

He hadn't expected her to comply and was doubly surprised when she did and the lights suddenly brightened. The clear crystal and the ring were no longer present. Amantarra used the distraction of the light levels to retrieve the other weapon from her belt and pointed both of them at Tyrus. Amantarra knew that if she did fire at him, he would only reappear again a short while later, but the temptation to annoy him was quite strong. She decided not to fire, mainly because she wanted him to witness her next move.

'Don't fire in here idiot; you might hit the node!'

"Idiot", thought Amantarra, this servant is out of control.

'Really, that's strange,' said Amantarra pointing one of the weapons at the black crystal; 'because hitting the node is exactly what I want to do.'

Tyrus opened his mouth to speak as Amantarra fired.

The city and its avatars vanished instantly casting the Bruwnan out into the void. In that brief moment of nothing there were voices, Bruwnan voices, the complaints of the city dwellers as they were cast out. And then they were gone. She thought about them for a moment, but didn't dwell on them for very long. It would be an age before a new Node Zero was constructed and Amantarra had work to do; and a new home to occupy.

2.

Euclidean

Of the billions of planets in the millions of galaxies that Amantarra controlled, this one had always been her favourite. In the centre of a vast continent sized jungle of massive silver barked trees, there was a hill shaped like a truncated cone. No trees grew on the hill which had an artificial symmetry about it that made it look completely out of place in the forest. Its slopes were covered in long golden grass which blew in the wind that swirled around its upper levels forming ripples that ran round and round across its surface. The top of the hill was flat, and whether by design or coincidence, was level with the top of the surrounding forest canopy. The centre of the hilltop was occupied by a large, white, domed building; which in construction resembled the Great Library of Valheel. It was the only building on the planet.

The building had a single arched entrance with heavy metal doors. Standing with her back to the doors stood what appeared to be a female Bruwnan; which was strange, as the Bruwnan had not existed in this form for half the age of the universe. She was looking out across the tops of the trees studying the light and dark contrasts in the canopy as the orange light from the setting sun streamed in from her left.

Although very similar to humans, the Bruwnan, particularly the females, were tall, slender and graceful in their movements. Her skin was almost pure white with just a hint of pale blue; it reflected the orange light as the sun disappeared slowly down behind the trees. She had her long blue hair tied back into a pony tail; it moved along with her flowing white clothes as the wind revolved around the domed building. Sapphire blue eyes set above a small flat nose glinted with a certain amount of excitement in the setting sun. To the right of the sun, just visible in the orange sky were the crescents of two of the three moons. The third moon to Elleria's right was almost full in the fading blue half of the sky.

Elleria was Amantarra's Radgarc, and when she needed to take physical form to perform her duties she occupied a Bruwnan shaped shell of Saranythia's design. The shell was a facsimile of what the Bruwnan had once been. It was Bruwnan shaped and had five senses, but there were no internal organs, the shell was

hollow and only lasted a short while, its only purpose was to provide a physical vessel for Elleria's consciousness.

Every Bruwnan owned a Radgarc, every Bruwnan had created one; they managed the energy flow into the city of Valheel from the Nodes created by each Bruwnan. In Elleria's case she managed all of Amantarra's Nodes. Radgarc's differed from the Bruwnan in that they could take physical form in the Euclidian universe and they drew their energy directly from the Nodes they managed; they were not tied to Valheel for their energy as the Bruwnan were. Tyrus drew his energy directly from Node Zero making him very powerful indeed, but then he was an Enforcer, the defender of Node Zero, his role was to protect not to manage.

Managing Nodes was interesting enough, but the best part of all, the part Elleria always looked forward to, was the activation of a new Node, because that meant she could take physical form for a day. And today was an extra special day, because the activation was going to take place on an extra special planet. Amantarra had spent longer developing the life here than she had on any other planet that Elleria knew of. It was the only planet that Amantarra had encouraged Elleria to visit with her as she developed that life. Elleria had visited as often as she could; but not as often as Amantarra, who had in the past, often spent years at a time here. Unlike Elleria, Amantarra could not take physical form, the rules of Valheel; Amantarra's power source; denied her the resources to be able to do that. Elleria had no such restriction as she drew her power directly from the Nodes she managed.

Elleria had hoped that Amantarra would be here to witness the activation of the Node and its connection into the network, but she wasn't. She comforted herself with the thought that there was still time; she hadn't yet started the merging process, and it would be a full rotation of the planet before it was ready to connect the network. Elleria looked down at the small clear crystal in the palm of her hand and then back out across the treetops. Half the sun's disk had disappeared below trees deepening shadows in the canopy. In the trees closest to the hill there was movement high up in the canopy and although the Ja'liem kept to the shadows Elleria knew they were there. She didn't need to use her Bruwnan senses to detect them, they were always there. The Ja'liem filled the forest in their millions, they were everywhere.

The Ja'liem, as Amantarra had named them, were small black furred primates with a splash of colour. They were short and stocky in stature with short rear legs, broad shoulders and long arms. They

walked on all fours, particularly when running through the canopy, but often they could be seen walking upright along the wide branches. Their faces were drawn out to form a bear like muzzle containing large teeth and impressive canines. The males had a single purple stripe that ran from between their eyes over the top of their head and down to a tapered point in the centre of their backs, the females had two orange stripes that followed a similar path. Over the millennia Elleria had occasionally glimpsed exceptions to the stripe arrangements, but these were rare events. The exceptions were always large males and they invariably had all three stripes. Elleria had observed; on the two occasions that she'd seen one; that their behaviour was different to the others, they had a calm almost distinguished air about them, and the others were deferent in their presence. The last time she had seen one was over fifteen thousand years ago and at the time she had asked Amantarra about the three stripers, whether they were occasional mutations or if they were always present in every generation but just tended to remain hidden; her reply was; "when the time is right, you won't need to ask the question".

Elleria thought about Amantarra's answer as she watched the Ja'liem gather in the trees around the hill. Although this behaviour was unusual it probably wasn't unexpected, this was the first time Elleria had ever taken physical form on this planet; the creatures were probably just curious. In all her previous visits she had drifted through the forest with Amantarra like a phantom, sensing the forest by measuring the interference between these dimensions and the ones she normally occupied, detecting more detail but less substance. The five senses in the shell she now occupied were quirky but somehow more comfortable; they were similar to the ones the avatars in Valheel received. She breathed in deeply, taking in the smells; felt the wind on her skin, you didn't get that in Valheel; and sound was so much better when you actually heard it instead of just interpreting the pressure waves. This was why Elleria liked activating a new node.

The Ja'liem were starting to make quite a racket and it was then that Elleria realised just how many had gathered in the trees around the hill. In the past, as she had studied the creatures with Amantarra, she'd been able to distinguish a number of their calls, the most common being "hello", "follow me" and "predator". The last one produced the most electrifying response, with the Ja'liem scattering in all directions. The rest of the time they just seemed to be chattering and chirping just for the sake of making a noise, like they were doing now.

In the fading light with the sun just peeping over the top of the trees the creatures were hidden in the shadows, Elleria had to use her normal senses to detect them. Those at the edge of the forest closest to the hill were sitting on the thick branches, packing them out completely and more were arriving at every moment. Pushing the field of her senses further out, the forest was alive with the Ja'liem. Running over the branches, jumping from tree to tree they were all heading for the hill. Elleria was shocked; how did they know I was here? And why would I create such curiosity? She watched a few of them as they ran, leapt and swung, never making a mistake they moved easily through the trees. How often had she wished she could join them, they looked so free.

The sun was a sliver of deep orange just above the forest canopy when Elleria saw him. Sitting directly in front of the entrance to the building flanked on either side by enough space to give at least a dozen Ja'liem a seat, given how crammed the others were, sat a three striper. The three striped Ja'liem sat silent and still while those around him shouted and screamed. He was staring directly at Elleria looking in every way the king of the Ja'liem. Elleria looked back at him, his stare wasn't aggressive, it was more observational, judgemental; and he didn't flinch or look away, he just sat there, waiting.

With a flash of green light the sun disappeared below tops of the trees and the forest instantly fell silent. The effect took Elleria's breath away.

They were all watching Elleria expectantly now.

In the silence Elleria turned and walked towards the entrance to the domed building. She pushed open the huge double doors and entered the Node chamber. The interior of the building consisted of a single large space. The walls and the underside of the dome were white and glowed with an inner light. On the floor in the centre of the space, was a black multifaceted crystal, otherwise the interior of the building was completely empty. The doors closed behind her with a dull thud which rumbled around the circular space, the sound dissipating with each circuit until it was no more than a murmur.

'I am Elleria!' she shouted, listening to the reverberation as the sound rolled around the room, 'and I am Amantarra's Radgarc.' Elleria liked to play with these quirky senses. She liked the way that you only got this reverberation when you stood near the wall of a Node chamber, if you stood in the middle the effect simply didn't exist.

'So Quirky,' she shouted, for no other reason than hearing own voice.

Elleria waited for the sound to die and then walked to the black crystal. The crystal, the top of which reached Elleria's waist, was smaller but of the same dimensions as the one in the city of Valheel; or at least it would have the same dimensions once Elleria's task was complete, at the moment it only had three.

Elleria rested her left hand on the black crystal and held the small clear crystal up in front of her on the palm of her other hand. The small crystal contained the instructions that would turn the large crystal into a Node. The process of merging the two crystals took the same time as it took the planet to spin once on its axis, in other words a single planetary day.

She closed her eyes and started the merging process simply by picturing the two crystals coming together. Opening them again, she watched the small crystal boil red for a moment. When the crystal had cleared again she placed it on top of the black one. Once the merging process had started, both crystals only needed to be on the same planet; but, reasoned Elleria, if you put the small crystal on top of the larger one, then at least you knew where it was.

Elleria turned her back on the Node and walked to the entrance. To the left, the sky outside was flame red as the light from the sun caught the high clouds. The red gave way to a deep blue and finally, to Elleria's right, black where one or two of the brighter stars were beginning to appear. The Ja'liem, still sitting in silence, watched as Elleria stood at the edge of the hill. There didn't appear to be any more arriving and she wondered whether this was the entire population. Nor did the Ja'liem show any sign that they were about to leave. If only, Elleria thought, she knew how to construct a shell; she could become one of them and sit out the day's vigil in their company. She pictured what it would be like, running through the trees. Would she take on more aspects of the creatures if she spent time with them? It saddened her to think that it probably would never happen.

She made her way down the hill towards the floor of the forest. Once there she entered the forest. This was one of the highlights of being corporeal; you got to explore a real world. As she walked around the bases of the giant trees, she could sense that a large group of the Ja'liem had broken off from the rest and was shadowing her as she moved. The three striped one was amongst them. It made Elleria glow with importance.

*

On another world in another galaxy, Amantarra looked down at her new home. Physically it was human shaped, male to be precise, well-muscled and lean looking. Amantarra considered male to be the best option for the construct, given that the social structure seemed to be male dominated. Shape was where the similarities between humans and the construct ended; the vessel Amantarra occupied was solid. Solid and densely packed, in its newly created state the construct weighed just over five hundred kilograms. It was storing a lot of energy, and with Valheel gone she would need it. Over time the mass would diminish as it was converted to energy, the insides liquefying to maintain the bulk, but that time was a long way off.

The increase in the volume of bird song and a golden sky to the east heralded the coming dawn. Amantarra's naked form tingled with goose flesh from the fresh breeze blowing across the plane. It had been a long time since Amantarra had experienced the joy of an additional five senses. Although interesting, Amantarra preferred the Bruwnan method of measuring the interference between dimensions, it was so much cleaner and lacked the disadvantages; he made a mental note that if it didn't improve soon, he was definitely going to turn off the sense of smell.

In front of him, to the south, a grass plain sloped gently to the east; this was bordered on the west by a forest, the trees yellow and orange with autumn's embrace. A thin layer of mist formed a band halfway up the trees cutting them in two. The night hunters had gone, settled down for the day. Half a dozen deer had ventured out of the forest and onto the plain. They alternated between grazing and watching for predators their heads bobbing down to grab a mouthful of grass and then up again, ears twitching as they chewed. Amantarra watched them as he contemplated his situation. He estimated that he had about thirty thousand years to conclude his experiment before Valheel was reactivated and he wondered if it would be long enough.

The sun peeped over the horizon and the trees appeared to burst into flame as the golden light struck them. The deer looked up and round, startled by the sudden change in light and then relaxed, returning to their grazing.

Behind Amantarra was a cliff face, he could sense his creations as they slept in a cave set into the rock. There were twenty three, a family group, five of them were fully grown males who would not take kindly to waking up to find a stranger in their midst. Amantarra turned to look at the cave entrance, it was

low and wide, a narrowing gap under a slab of sloping rock. Large stones had been piled up at the lowest side to reduce the width of the entrance, and the remains of last night's fire smouldered just inside the open portion.

How could he make contact? Amantarra walked to the entrance. They would obviously be alarmed at his presence and he didn't want to dominate by killing one of them, his mission here was not to rule, but to enhance genetically, with some teaching thrown in for good measure. He picked up a stick of charcoal from the fire and made a decision; the smell emanating from the cave was enough to clinch it, and he turned off his sense of smell and set to work.

The flint tipped spear came out first, followed by a head with long black hair tied back with a band of animal skin. It was one of the younger male adults. He looked round the entrance to the right, checking for ambush, and then to the left where he suddenly realised that he'd found it. Yelling he leaped from the entrance; Amantarra could hear replies to the warning from inside. The young male positioned himself behind Amantarra as the other males emerged from the cave; unsure, he held his spear defensively. Amantarra ignored him and carried on working.

The males dressed in a variety of furs and skins formed a semi-circle around Amantarra and bolstered by each other's presence started to shout and jab their spears at him.

Amantarra confused them by continuing to ignore them.

Slowly, as they realised that the perceived hazard was not as high as they had previously thought and that the stranger didn't seem at all concerned by their threats, the shouts subsided and curiosity took over.

One of the males looked behind, across the plain and then back at the stranger. He said a single word, which Amantarra did not recognise, and the others nodded and agreed. One of the females emerged and gasped, not because Amantarra was naked and the largest male she had ever seen; although that contributed; but because of what he was doing. On cliff face there were deer trapped in the rock, two of them. The stranger's hand worked quickly to trap a third.

Amantarra sighed and wondered how long he had suppressed the artistic side of his being, this was so liberating he wished he had done it sooner.

They were all out of the cave now, females, children and the elderly; standing in silence as the image formed on the rock. With the third one finished Amantarra turned and offered the charcoal to the young male who had first emerged from the cave. Not because he looked the most artistic, he just happened to be the closest. He looked round, as did the others, at the oldest female. A matriarchal system observed Amantarra. That could be useful.

The old woman grunted to acknowledge their questioning looks and without any sign of fear she walked towards Amantarra. She moved with difficulty and her progress was slow. The others waited silently. Standing next to Amantarra she looked up him and down; grunted some more as she indicated that he should move out of the way. Amantarra obliged and took a step back away from the cliff. The old woman studied the drawings closely for a few minutes and then turned to face him.

Amantarra thought she was going to speak, but instead she just waved him aside; it would seem that Amantarra was always in the way. Taking a step to the right Amantarra turned and followed the gaze of the matriarch out across the plane. The old woman squinted as she tried to force her old eyes to see the deer there. The others watched her intently.

The old woman didn't like change; it was often the precursor to disrespect. And as she couldn't physically demand respect these days, change was to be avoided at all costs. As far as she could remember, it had been a while since she'd seen a live one; the drawings on the wall were a good likeness. But this was dangerous stuff, where would it all lead, this trapping of deer in the rock. Perhaps she should just send him on his way. But what if he wouldn't go? He was at least a head taller than everyone else here and well-muscled, as an enemy he could cause a lot of damage. And what was he offering? Deer in the rock, well what use was that. Physically he would make an excellent contribution as a member of the tribe. No, perhaps she shouldn't take the risk. And as she started to err on the side of "no change", a new train of thought entered her head. The thoughts were along the lines of; this man isn't a stranger, I've met him before, in fact I've known him nearly all my life, he's just been away for a while. We should welcome him and learn what he teaches. She couldn't think why she hadn't remembered these things before.

'Hah,' she said giving up the struggle to see across the plane.

She turned to the young male and nodded. Winning the support of someone was much easier when you cheated, reflected Amantarra.

The young male stepped forward and took the charcoal from Amantarra.

The process had started.

*

The sun was setting again as Elleria climbed back up the hill towards the Node chamber. She was surprised to see that the Ja'liem were still sitting silently in the treetops. She realised that with the exception of the troop that had followed her, they must have been waiting here all day.

Elleria reached the doors to the Node chamber and turned to face the forest. The sun was just above the canopy, the moons were pretty much in the same places as yesterday. The creatures were still sitting silently. And back where he had been yesterday was 'three stripes'. She turned, pushed open the doors and crossed the floor to the Node.

As she reached the black crystal it momentarily glowed with an inner light. The merging was complete.

'What we have before us,' said Elleria loudly as if addressing a lecture theatre full of students; 'is a completed Node.' There was no echo; the sound seemed dead in the centre of the chamber. 'The Node is now protected by an energy field. A field that only it's Radgarc can penetrate. That's me, by the way, in case any of you were wondering.' Elleria loved the sound of her voice. Not because she felt she had anything important to say, but because she just didn't get to hear it very often.

Placing both hands on the completed Node Elleria tested its status. It was already starting to receive energy from the biomass on this planet and the flow rate was strong. She waited until the Node had finished unfolding back into the other dimensions which it now occupied.

'So far so good,' she said out loud for no other reason than hearing her voice; 'now to connect it to Node Zero.' There were never any problems with Node activation. Closing her eyes she initiated the connection.

Done... Elleria waited for the transmitting signal.

She wasn't getting one. Strange, she thought, it normally only took a few moments.

Elleria waited a bit longer... seconds passed.

This had never happened before. She reset the connection and tried again... nothing.

She checked the crystal, it was merged and the energy it was receiving was starting to build up inside the crystal. The problem must be with Node Zero in Valheel. Elleria was a bit stumped, it had never happened before and the only thing she could think of doing was to contact Amantarra.

'Amantarra, there's a problem,' she called into the void.

There was no reply.

'Amantarra, are you there?'

Still, there was no reply.

Elleria scanned the void for Amantarra... she wasn't there, which was impossible; there was nowhere else for her to be. Regardless of whether she was visiting Euclidean space or not, part of Amantarra never left the void. She scanned the void again... there was something else missing. Valheel had gone. No, she thought, that can't be. She scanned the Nodes that she managed; they'd all lost their connection back to the city and the energy was building up inside them. What had gone wrong? Had she caused this? The question worried her. She hadn't done anything out of the ordinary, activating a new Node was routine. She stared at the crystal, trying to think what to do next.

'By now you will have realised that there is something wrong with Valheel,' said a voice behind her. Elleria spun round. It was Amantarra, or at least an image of her. 'For reasons that I cannot go into,' continued the recording, 'I have deactivated Valheel.'

'Deactivated Valheel,' repeated Elleria silently. How do you deactivate an entire city?

'This is a temporary situation and Valheel will rebuild itself, but the process will take several thousand years. Your role in what happens next is crucial and the less you know the safer you will be.' Amantarra sighed and then continued. 'Elleria, there is so much I wish I could tell you but can't, there is too much at stake. I have left you another clue; it's one only you would be able to interpret and when Valheel is restored, you will find it in my quarters. In the meantime disconnect all the Nodes from Node Zero so that they don't reconnect when Valheel is rebuilt. Finally, and most importantly, discuss this with nobody.' Amantarra looked pensive; she lowered her head as the image faded.

'Amantarra,' said Elleria, 'what have you done?'

3.

Immortality

Since Amantarra had first drawn the deer outside the cave on the day that Valheel was destroyed, she had watched the ice retreat and followed the tribes north out of what would become France; hunting mammoth in the spring as they migrated across the vast plains that would become the North Sea. After spending several thousand years in Europe, Amantarra joined more tribes as they made their way east. Visiting every continent on the globe more than once, for a thousand lifetimes Amantarra journeyed, never stopping in one place for more than a few years; always moving on, and constantly changing form.

Amantarra had been all skin colours and both genders, but she generally found it easier to move on as a male. And moving on was the key to staying hidden. You couldn't have the traditional laid in bed, surrounded by family, the priest is on his way, type of death; because being immortal, you would outlast every family member sitting round the bed and would probably get through a few priests as well. No, the disappearance had to be plausible. Sometimes you could just walk off into the sunset, walk far enough and you'd would never be found; and in seventy or eighty years there would be nobody left to find you. This method did sometimes leave a few loose ends and Amantarra tried to avoid it whenever possible. Posing as a travelling merchant or entertainer Amantarra could return to the same villages several times a year for many years, until an apprentice had been trained and Amantarra could move on to new pastures.

There was also aging to consider. The physical process of growing old wasn't a problem, the body; the construct, Amantarra occupied was programmed to do that anyway. The problem was that being immortal the body didn't die, it just kept on aging; and given that there weren't many two hundred year old people around, it was wise to change bodies occasionally. So every forty years or so Amantarra would dissolve the construct and use the energy to create a new form.

It was in Laon, Picardie, North-East France, during the October of 1868 when sixty-two year old Pierre Marets, a migrant farm worker; decided that it was time to move on. Amantarra looked in the mirror

and the ravaged, baggy eyed, grey stubbled face of Pierre looked back. The next shell Amantarra occupied would need to be slightly modified for the next stage of the plan, not to mention younger and better looking.

Her conditioning of the human race wasn't complete but it was close. Amantarra wondered how much time she had left as Pierre stroked the stubble on his face. From the moment of its destruction thirty two thousand years ago Node Zero had been regenerating. All that Valheel was, all that it had been, was recorded into the fabric of the universe; it only lacked the focus of a Node Zero to reanimate it. From the smallest flicker of energy coaxed down a path of least resistance a new grain was constructed. Other grains followed binding to each other as they sparked into existence to build the intricate structure that reached back into the dimensions of Euclidian space to form a new Node Zero. Once formed the Node would rebuild the city starting with the four rings above the surface of the Node, through which the energy would flow, then the supporting arch structures, the Node Zero chamber, the centroid towers and finally the city itself. It would still be some time after that before the city was complete and fully functional. Amantarra knew this would happen, the destruction of Node Zero had been necessary to buy time, it was just how much time it had bought that was not known.

*

'Bonjour Pierre,' a voice rang out across the square in front of Laon Cathedral as Amantarra crossed it in the early morning. Pierre turned; it was Father Benoît one of the young priests standing in the doorway of the cathedral. Pierre turned towards Benoît and raised a hand to acknowledge the priest. Pierre liked the priest, liked his enthusiasm, his selfless commitment to helping the community and his single minded optimism that one day he would witness a miracle. Benoît had told Pierre of his ambition to witness a miracle in an attempt to gain his trust and lure him into the confessional. Benoît displayed the qualities that Amantarra had been developing in the human race for millennia.

'Salut Père Benoît, ça va?' replied Pierre.

'Pas mal,' replied Benoît as he turned to go back into the cathedral.

"Not bad", it wasn't one of Benoît's more upbeat greetings. Perhaps he was reflecting on the fact that despite revealing his one ambition, he still hadn't managed to get Pierre into the confessional yet.

Pierre had insisted that he had nothing to confess, but the young priest simply wouldn't believe him. "The journey of your life is written on you face," he'd told Pierre at the beginning of the year when the priest first arrived at Laon. "Believe me Father, it isn't," Pierre had informed the young priest. And now it was too late; with the season over and the harvest in and stored, Pierre, like all the other migrant workers would be moving on to find work over the winter in the larger towns. At least that is what Amantarra let them believe; when Pierre moved on this year he would not be coming back.

It had taken all day, but the large bonfire Pierre had been building in a field to the north east of Laon was complete. Pierre stood back and admired his handy work. Constructed of old wood and dry straw liberally coated with lamp oil it should produce a nice intense fire. Pierre used a lighted taper made from a rolled up newspaper and lit the bonfire at several points around its base. Within a few minutes the flames were reaching over two metres in height and the roar from them was the only thing you could hear. Pierre took a last look around... there was no one to be seen.

The roaring of the flames stopped abruptly plunging the world into absolute silence as Pierre stopped time. The flames stood motionless like a light sculpture. Pierre placed both his hands into the frozen flame and a moment later stepped forward to stand in the middle of the fire. The intense yellow of the flames faded and Pierre's body crawled with a blue light. The flames, translucent and pale now, quickly faded to nothing. A number of pictures made entirely of light appeared in the air in front of Pierre. Without hesitation he touched one of them and the pictures vanished. Pierre raised his arms and focused all of the energy he had absorbed into a single point. From that single point a sphere grew until it was two metres in diameter. The sphere sang with a very quiet high pitched sound and as Pierre took a step towards it the sound dropped through the octaves to much lower level. Pierre stepped into the sphere and ceased to exist.

Father Benoît had been walking along the lane two fields away when he saw off to his left the flames from the bonfire. Pierre was there, standing next to it. As he walked, his view of the scene was temporarily obscured by a large tree. He wondered why Pierre had built a bonfire so big and decided to have a wander over to ask him. The scene was only hidden for a few seconds, but when Benoît emerged from the other side of the tree both the fire and Pierre were gone.

The tunnel into which Pierre had stepped linked two points in time. Amantarra had selected the maximum jump forward in time of fifty years because she sensed that the humans were almost ready for the next step, and perhaps another fifty years would just about do it. The energy reclaimed from the construct known as Pierre Marets was being used to build another. This new construct would have the capability of reproduction because the next two stages required the production of a human that was traceable across time.

When Amantarra had set off through the tunnel in 1868 she hadn't expected to arrive in the middle of a battle. But now, in October 1918 that same field just outside Laon was the front line. The Germans had held this territory since the beginning of the war, but in the last two months they had been pushed hard by overwhelming allied forces. It was the beginning of the end of the war. The Germans were in full retreat; they were fighting now to stay alive.

Night had almost taken over from dusk, the last of the light showing as a pale blue strip on the western horizon, when William appeared stark naked and beautifully silhouetted just in front of a hastily dug British trench. The German machine gunner reacted instinctively and with an accuracy born of years of self-preservation. William was thrown back into the British trench, the process of constructing his new body disrupted.

'Get him out of here and back to the medics,' a corporal was screaming. The corporal, who had been hoping for a quiet night, didn't need any naked lunatics distracting his men; the whole front had just opened up.

The image of a naked man in the middle of a battlefield haunted the German gunner for years, not the least of which because nobody believed him.

*

Field hospital, Notre Dame Cathedral, Laon, Picardie, North East France, October 1918

The war was almost over, but for the men of the medical core and their officer who were stationed just behind "the thick of it", it didn't seem that way; for them, it was business as usual.

Captain Robert Fortesque, the doctor at the field hospital, was slumped in a dilapidated easy chair outside the twelfth century cathedral. He looked up at the oxen that looked down from the twin towers and made a mental note to find out why the cathedral was decorated with life sized oxen.

He hadn't slept for twenty-seven hours, his mind was beyond sleep but he felt should make the effort while the opportunity presented itself. His Sergeant, Billy Fairweather; who hadn't slept for a similar length of time; had complicated the situation by giving the Captain a package from home which, amongst other things, had contained pipe tobacco. And now the Captain couldn't decide whether to smoke a pipe full or go to sleep.

He'd already decided not to read the accompanying letter from Aunt Gertrude as he had difficulty focusing on her hand writing. And besides, she always wrote about the same things; problems replacing the staff that'd joined up to "see off the Bosch", organising church events and so on. Aunt Gertrude's life was nothing if not predictable, and whilst he always welcomed news from England, he did wish that Aunt Gertrude would get out more.

Robert was sat in the small square outside the west front of the cathedral under an impressive rose window. In contrast to the location of the last field hospital he was stationed at, the war had not touched this little part of France.

In the last place the town had been shelled quite heavily and a lot of the buildings were in ruins. Robert remembered the remains of a shop, the sort where the owners lived in the two floors above. The front wall of the building had collapsed exposing the upper rooms, the private spaces of family life laid bare; exposed to outside gaze. To the left of the shop was a café; its broken sign hanging lopsidedly from a wrought iron wall bracket. "Café de Paris" announced the sign; it's peeling paint evoking memories of lost glasses of red wine in the lazy summer shade outside the café. A path, wide enough for two carts to pass, had been cleared up the main street; the rubble piled up on both sides against the broken walls.

Robert shuddered; the late afternoon October sun was pale and there was a chill in the air outside the cathedral. Robert surveyed the peaceful square, remembering holidays in France before the war. Laon at least, remained untouched by the war. Had he once visited this town? Robert couldn't remember.

He looked down at his hands resting on his blood stained apron, his butchers apron as he referred to it, and realised that he'd already filled his pipe with tobacco... he couldn't remember doing it.

*

'Captain,' said Sergeant Fairweather. 'Captain Sir,' he tried again a little louder.

Sergeant Fairweather was a regular soldier who'd joined the Medical Core in 1901 after a two year stint in the Transvaal fighting the Boers. He'd seen the medics work first hand after being wounded and had been interested enough in what they did to ask lots of questions, which got him noticed by the Medical Officer, but he had been more interested in the fact that nobody was shooting at medics. His wounds were severe enough to take him off the front line, so he volunteered for the medical core rather than leave the army. Captain Fortesque was the fourth Medical Officer he had served under and the only one he had ever liked, he wasn't a snob like the other officers; he didn't demand respect, he earned it. The Captain had given him a book to read, "Dracula" it was called, said it matched the gothic mood of the place they were stationed in. The Sergeant had read it twice and thought that Captain Fortesque was right; it did match the mood of the place; although he didn't know what "gothic" meant, but he assumed that it had something to do with vampires and the un-dead. But that wasn't the point thought Sergeant Fairweather; the point is how many other officers would have loaned a book to an NCO.

Sergeant Fairweather did not like to wake his officer, not after the last wave of wounded, he wanted to let him sleep on; but he had no choice.

'Captain Sir.'

Robert stirred, he couldn't remember falling asleep and for a moment in the darkness he didn't know where he was.

'Sorry to wake you Sir.' The Sergeant was squatting beside the chair holding an oil lamp close to his face.

In the low yellow light, the enormous moustache, and the strong smell of nicotine and sweat suddenly registered with the Captain. 'More wounded Sergeant?' he said sitting up in the chair.

'Just one Sir; looks bad, machine gun to chest. Strange Sir, but the story is that he just appeared in no man's land out of thin air.'

Robert gave the Sergeant a look that said you're much too worldly wise to believe stories like that.

'You shouldn't believe everything you hear Sergeant.'

'No Sir.'

The Captain stood up, looked curiously at the pipe in his hand, knocked the tobacco out of it, realised that he hadn't smoked it, cursed under his breath and put the empty pipe into his pocket.

'Lead the way sergeant.'

'Yes Sir.'

'What time is it?' Robert asked as they made their way through the stone entrance of the cathedral.

'Nearly eleven o'clock, Sir. I saved you something to eat, but I thought it best to let you sleep.'

'Thank you sergeant,' said Robert, who couldn't remember the last time he ate, but hadn't felt hungry until the Sergeant had mentioned food.

In the Nave all the pews had been cleared out and the wounded lined the floor, some on low beds, some on mattresses, but most on only a blanket. Apart from the occasional cough there was very little noise; most here were too ill to complain about it.

The Sergeant led them through the Nave and round the screen that had been put up in front of the altar.

Robert remembered his school days; altar, from the Latin *altaria*, meaning; burnt offerings altar. He recalled one of his headmasters "you'll burn in the fires of hell" sermons. Robert wondered what his headmaster would make of the fires of hell if he could see what he'd seen these last few years.

The stone altar was now the operating table, and Robert felt that its current use was more closely related to the sacrificial meaning of the original Latin name. He hated this bloody war. From the position that he viewed it, up to the elbows in blood and entrails, there was no hope. Robert had become a doctor to make a difference; but here, stood at this altar, from which a message of hope for mankind was supposed to be issued, there was nothing he could do to make a difference. Robert felt helpless, all he could do was stop the bleeding and hack off dead limbs. And despite his efforts, in half the cases all he was doing was delaying the inevitable and prolonging the agony. The other half didn't fare much better, blinded, limbless, lungs burnt to hell, they were changed forever; how would they earn a living after the war?

Sergeant Fairweather hung the lantern he was carrying on a hat stand near the altar and lit another.

Laid on the altar was a young man in his twenties, he was naked. There was severe trauma to the chest where he had obviously caught the full force of machine gun fire as the gunner had swept his weapon through an arc. His eyes were closed and he did not appear to be breathing; despite that, the young man's skin looked pink and flushed with blood. Apart from the holes in his chest, the absence of any movement or a pulse, he looked a picture of health. Sergeant Billy Fairweather had taken one look at him and thought him dead; but that was only an opinion, it wasn't a fact until the medical officer said it was.

The sergeant held the lamp he had just lit close to the young man's chest as Robert examined the wounds. There were five bullet holes in an almost straight line and it looked like he'd lost both lungs and his heart.

'There's not much blood,' said Robert. 'And where's his uniform?'

'That's how he came in Sir...' Billy paused; 'Captain, Sir?'

Robert continued to examine the body; but when Billy didn't finish his question he looked up.

'What is it Sergeant?'

'That's what I was saying before Sir, they said he appeared in no man's land close to our lines... from nowhere... and naked, Sir. He fell back into our trench when he was hit. Sir, how can anyone just appear out of nowhere?'

Robert thought his Sergeant looked a bit spooked and wondered when he'd last slept. He decided to give him something to do, to take his mind off this tall tale.

'Get a blanket Sergeant, let's give the man a bit of dignity; it looks like he's laid there ready for autopsy.' Which, Robert thought to himself, is probably fitting.

The Sergeant placed the lamp on the altar and went for a blanket. Robert again checked the man's neck for a pulse; he couldn't get over how healthy he looked... as he suspected, there wasn't one. Robert sighed, another one that couldn't be saved.

The Sergeant returned a few moments later and covered the corpse's lower half.

'Would you hold the lamp again Sergeant,' Robert was fascinated by the fact that there was no blood. He examined the chest wounds more closely. There wasn't a trace of blood, nothing on the skin surrounding the wounds, and nothing in the wounds. Robert placed a finger into one of the bullet holes; there was no blood on it when he removed it.

'Give me a hand to turn him on his side so that I can examine his back.' Sergeant Fairweather placed the lamp on the altar and pulled the young man's shoulder towards him. Robert bent down to examine his back. There were five exit wounds; Robert could see the Sergeants tunic through the holes, but again, no blood. They lowered him gently back onto the altar.

'Nothing we can do for this one sergeant,' said Robert. 'The absence of blood is very curious though, it's almost like someone has drained him of it.' Robert instantly regretted his remark but it was too late.

'Drained of blood Sir? You mean like in that book, Dracula?' said Sergeant Fairweather looking up at the huge stone columns that disappeared into the ink black darkness; which for Billy, now held the watching eyes of a vampire. Sergeant Fairweather hadn't been a nervous man until he'd read Dracula, but now this place gave him the willies.

'Don't worry Sergeant; there are no puncture wounds on his neck,' said Robert gesturing towards the man's throat. The sergeant looked at where Robert was pointing; there were indeed no puncture wounds. Billy exhaled a huge sigh of relief and allowed himself to relax.

'Bonsoir, anything... I can... do?' said an elderly priest in broken English who had seen the corpse and felt that he was better suited for the current task than the medical officer.

'Father Benoît, I didn't see you there,' said Robert. 'Yes, unfortunately I think you can do more for him than I can. Oui Père, le homme est mort.'

The corpse's eyes flicked open.

'Bloody Hell!' exclaimed the Sergeant jumping back and crossing himself as the corpse lifted his head. 'Sorry father,' he added glancing at the priest and then back at the corpse. Robert opened his mouth but was too shocked to utter a word.

Amantarra was disorientated, the building of this new construct had been disrupted and she was struggling to gather her wits. Slowly, slowly she thought; the body is almost ready. There were two men in uniform stood one either side. One of them had spoken... sworn... "Anglais", thought Amantarra still shaking off the ghost of Pierre. Directly to the front was a priest. Amantarra wondered how bad the construct must look to warrant the attentions of a priest. She recognised him, his build and features were

older, but it was unmistakably Benoît; still here after all these years. Amantarra wondered if he remembered Pierre Marets, but decided that she would not be asking him.

And there was something else; it was as obvious to Amantarra as a brick thrown into still water, the ripples from its activation bounced back and forth, crisscrossing each other through the dimensions making the whole of space, time and beyond ring like a bell. There was a new Node Zero, although it was still weak and the reconstruction of Valheel had not yet started. Fifty to sixty years, that was how long she estimated she had. There was a lot of work to do and a limited time in which to do it. Time to get started thought Amantarra.

'Hello,' said the corpse; 'my name is...' Amantarra paused to recall the name; 'William Godbert.' William propped himself up on his elbows and looked around at his surroundings. 'What am I doing here in the cathedral?' He noted the wide eyed, ashen expressions on the faces of those stood around him.

The officer pointed at William. 'Your chest,' he said.

William looked down.

'Oh dear,' he said.

4.

Hidden treasure

Easter holidays Friday 23rd April 1976

Reginald Scribbins, a small wiry, balding man, known to his friends as Reg, and to the pupils of Penshaw Grove Secondary School as "Captain Cardigan"; was cycling from his house to the school. It was a journey of no more than 200 metres; or as Reg used to joke, "That's just up the road in feet and inches"; but the plain, black, forty year old bike came with the caretaker's job. It was the job's only perk, and Reg certainly wasn't going to waste it.

Over his faded greyish blue boiler suit he always wore a faded greyish green cardigan. Button less, the cardigan billowed out behind him, like the cloak of a superhero; an image that had earned him the nickname he was completely oblivious to. Not that the kids ever called him Captain Cardigan to his face; Reg had a certain amount of implied respect because his broken nose seemed to indicate that he might be slightly intolerant of adverse comment. But that wasn't the case; Reg was a quiet unassuming man who felt that he knew his place in life. And the broken nose, well he certainly didn't get it fighting.

It was 8:30am when Reg glided into the yard at the back of the school. Perhaps glided wasn't the right word, it would be more accurate to say that Reg stopped peddling, and the bike continued to move forward, twitching gently due to the slightly buckled wheels. Planning ahead, Reg applied the brakes early. The brakes groaned, the bike shuddered and twitched with more enthusiasm, but the speed remained more or less constant.

Reg was a man who liked to think the same regular thoughts; it was easier on the brain. For example, whenever he shaved he thought about waxed moustaches and monocles; he didn't have either, he didn't want either. No, Reg thought about waxed moustaches and monocles because of something he had planned to do as a teenager. Unfortunately the closest he came to achieving his teenage ambition, was at the

time, a bit one sided; and would in any case have been a big disappointment for Reg, had he known all the facts. Reality rarely lives up to dreams.

Anyway, at about this point in his journey to work, with the bike now twitching violently and trying to throw him off, Reg always had the same thought, and that thought was; that he really must do something about these brakes.

Halfway across the yard, with the brakes full on, enough momentum had been lost for Reg to dismount and trot alongside the bike slowing it down to walking pace. He stopped outside a dark red door, removed his bicycle clips, and unlocked the entrance to his secret underground lair.

Reg propped the bike against the wall just inside the door and hung the bicycle clips on the handlebars. Then he turned back to the door, locked it, then checked that it was locked, twice, and finally he rattled the door just to make sure. This was Penschaw Grove, you didn't leave anything unlocked. The two metre high steel gates to the yard had been left unlocked a few months back, and somebody had stolen them.

Reg descended the long flight of stairs into the warm darkness of the boiler room. Two large gas boilers rumbled and fizzed as he turned left and through the door at the bottom of the stairs.

He switched on the light, the emphasis here being singular. There was only one. Fixed to the underside of the concrete ceiling, the fitting was cast metal, round, and had been designed to withstand heavy wear and tear and last for... well probably until the end of time. The original glass front was missing; this had failed to live up to the promise of the rest of the fitting. The fitting itself held one bulb; it was a good bulb though, despite being only forty watt. It had been purchased from Woolworths in 1940, which meant that over its thirty-six year lifetime it had given out more light than a typical one hundred watt bulb. They knew how to make light bulbs in those days, despite the war. Makes you think, thought Reg; another of his regular thoughts.

As Reg made his way past the boilers to the old desk in the corner he referred to as his office, he contemplated changing the bulb for a brighter one; but he knew its history, he was a part of that history, and once again, he just couldn't bring himself to do it. Further proof that regular thoughts; as opposed to regular thinking, which was far too creative for Reg; saved a lot of work.

Reg always felt safe in the boiler room. Since his first unofficial visit as a teenager, he'd felt a presence there, a good presence. Some would say that the sensing of presences, ghosts if you prefer, was all in the imagination. Perhaps this was true, perhaps he did only imagine the presence of a guardian angel these days; but there were two factors that tended to indicate the opposite. One, Reginald's complete lack of imagination; and two, his rescue from certain death during his first visit to the boiler room had never been explained.

The floor around the boilers was always swept clean, but the corners of the ceiling were populated with ancient thick black cobwebs, which harboured an unknown and presumably very large species of spiders. Over the desk, a few stray strands of cobweb danced in the convection currents as Reg sat down.

There was very little on the desk in the way of clutter. There was Reg's official clipboard; it was a special magic clipboard, which had the ability to double Reg's importance when picked up. Other items included a pen, a pencil, a tape measure and a big bunch of keys. Last, but by no means least, was an item which represented Reg's only ambition; a coupon for the football pools. Reg filled a coupon in every week without fail; and dreamt of a quiet life in the country sipping beer from a champagne glass; or whatever it was that rich folk drank their beer from.

He picked up the clipboard from the desk, and felt a surge of power. The clipboard contained a list of jobs that could only be done when the kids weren't at school, it had been written by the headmaster; this affiliation with power increased Reg's importance further, possibly even quadrupling it. Reg held the clipboard so that it caught the light, moved it closer to his face, then away, closer, away; he repeated the exercise a few more times, then gave up, put the clipboard back on the desk and reached into his top pocket for his glasses.

The boilers continued to rumble and fizz masking all other sounds as Reg picked up a pencil and used it to point at each item on the list in turn. There was a pencil line drawn through each item indicating that it had been completed. He stopped at the last item on the list, number eight, the only one not crossed off; Reg tapped the pencil on his chin, thought for moment and then ran a pencil line through the headmaster's copperplate writing. He'd done that task last week before the kids had broken up for the holidays. That was the list complete. What could I do today, he thought? Reg's mind was a blank, but that was nothing new. Then something unusual happened. Reg couldn't decide whether he saw the image of

shelves first, or whether he said it out loud first. The important thing was that Reg had had his first idea in years.

'Move the cupboard out of the old music store and replace it with new shelves,' he said out loud. He could have sworn that he heard a whispered reply, which sounded like "yes, now is the time," mixed in with the fizzing sound of the boilers. He shook his head; you could hear all sorts of strange noises when the boilers were on.

Beside the desk was a collection of essential janitorial equipment.

Item one; the emergency vomit kit, which consisted of a bucket of sawdust with a small hand shovel sticking out of the top, a stiff brush and a small dustbin.

Item two; a bigger brush.

Item three; an old shopping bag containing even older tools.

Item four; a mop and bucket.

Item five; a large bottle of disinfectant. Sorry no, scrub that, item five was a large, empty bottle of disinfectant.

Disinfectant was rarely used.

Was disinfectant rarely used because there wasn't any? Another question would be; is the reason there wasn't any disinfectant, because it was rarely used? Reginald considered these to be important philosophical questions, and he avoided thinking about them because they put his brain into a sort of loop, which meant he couldn't concentrate on anything else.

Job nine, his own idea that no one else had thought of; Reg felt his chest swell with pride; may require the use of item three, the bag of tools. Moving cupboards sometimes required the removal of doors.

'Time to get started,' he informed the spiders and anything else that might be listening down here.

Picking up his bag of tools and the keys from the desk, Reg moved with a sense of purpose. It was Friday and he only intended to do this one job today, so the quicker he got it finished the sooner he'd be away.

In the wall between the boilers was another door. The paint was cracked with age and dry heat, the wood was worn round at the corners; but the hinges were oiled and well maintained. Reg opened it, and put the switch down that was just inside, illuminating a chain of equally spaced lights which disappeared off

into the distance. The service tunnel which ran under the entire length of the school was Reg's secret rat run, and was the only way to get to the science block in the centre of the playground without going outside. The heating pipes lining one side clicked constantly with the heat. Throughout the tunnel there was always some part of the pipes that was either heating up or cooling down.

Above ground the long school buildings were constructed in a warm brick with sandstone trimmings and window frames. Despite being only two storeys high, the building was twice as high as all the houses in Penshaw Grove. From a distance it looked like an ocean liner sailing on a sea of slate roofs and trees. The school buildings formed a rectangle which was enclosed on two opposite sides by long classroom blocks, north and south; linking these at main entrance end, was the admin block; and at the other end, where Reg's yard was, the sheds. The sheds were just covered spaces in the playground bounded by three walls. They served as shelter when it was "precipitating down"; one of Reg's jokes, it was the only long word he knew. In the centre of the playground was another large two storey building, this was the science block and dining hall. The science block was joined to the sheds by the toilets, making the playground 'U' shaped.

There were a few design oddities, no doubt related to the era in which the school was designed. For instance, the corridors which linked the classrooms, and ran the full length of each of the main buildings were open to the outside. They were, more or less, just covered walkways, with a series of arches opening onto the playground. Amazingly, they had radiators in them, which attempted to heat the corridors in the winter. It was an attempt that was doomed to failure.

The toilets were also open to the outside. An idea no doubt intended to cut down on the smell. This also failed. The toilets however, were not heated. The architect obviously considered this a frippery, and in the winter, they froze; yellow ice covering the floor. When the thaw started, the toilets were the last place you wanted to slip over.

Reg set off down the tunnel with his tools. Halfway down he turned left into another tunnel which ran under the playground passing beneath the science block on its way to the other classroom block.

Reg turned the lights out in the first tunnel and instantly regretted it, because he couldn't find the switch for the cross tunnel. Actually, what would be closer to the truth was that he instantly regretted it again; this was one of those habits that Reg just couldn't seem to break.

The pipes clicked in the darkness as Reg ran his hand down the wall on a voyage of discovery; a hole in the brickwork, a spider's web, a hot pipe bracket and finally a light switch.

Reg decided to leave the lights on when he reached the bottom of the stairs which led up into the science block; he didn't know why he was so conscientious when it came to saving electricity, after all he wasn't paying the bills, not on the wage he got.

Opposite the bottom of the stairs was a steel door, the words "Air Raid Shelter" had been chalked on it. Reg didn't go in there at all; there were too many childhood ghosts. He turned his back on the door and climbed the stairs.

He opened the door at the top of the stairs, the keys jingling as he turned them in the lock, and entered the cloakroom. Then round the corner and up some more stairs to the first floor. At the top of the stairs next to the door to the chemistry lab, was the door to an old store which hadn't been used for a long time. Reg unlocked it and went in; remembering that the last time he'd been in here was ten years ago when he had painted the walls magnolia. Ignoring the shelves full of old brass instruments along the left wall, he went straight over to the cupboard on the opposite wall, and opened it.

Good, it was empty, that's one job less, he thought.

Reg got a good grip and heaved at the cupboard. There was a cracking sound as layers of paint that had accumulated over the years, gluing the cupboard to the wall, submitted to Reg's efforts. After half an hour and with a bit of a squeeze, Reg had managed to drag the cupboard into the chemistry lab next to the store, without removing any doors. This was going to be a short day, he thought, as he walked back to the store slightly out of breath; things were looking up. He stood in the doorway looking at the pile of dust that had been under the cupboard, pity he hadn't brought his brush instead of his tools.

The wall where the cupboard had been was a completely different colour. Reg recognised it; the whole school had been this dark green colour when he'd been a pupil here. The ghosts from the past sent a shiver down his spine.

He wondered how many times the room had been painted since the cupboard had been put there. It was certainly there when he was at school he thought with a hint of sadness, he didn't like disturbing things that had been in place a long time.

In the centre of the patch of different coloured wall was a grill, which for the first time in years was capable of passing air. The dust encrusted cobwebs now blew gently through the grill; Reg watched it for a moment before deciding to fetch his full brush and pan set.

That's when he noticed it.

Behind the grill, as the cobwebs moved, something caught the light; something silver.

5.

Prophecy

The new Node Zero, following its programming, had spent several millennia connecting to its list of Nodes to build up a reserve of power before commencing the construction of Valheel. Then when enough energy had been accumulated, the Node had constructed one of the four rings that would eventually sit at the top of the centroid towers. Starting with a small ring the Node had added further concentric rings, each new ring absorbing the previous, until it had reached its finished diameter. The ring provided a focus for transferring the energy from Node Zero into the dimensions in which Valheel was to be constructed. Once the first ring was complete, the other three followed, now there was a means to transfer the energy. The supporting arch structures grew out from the rings terminating in the spherical shell that formed the Node Zero chamber. The four, kilometre high centroid towers, complete with the long spiral staircase that ran down each, grew out from the Node Zero chamber. With the low energy flow, progress was slow.

Each tower was closed off with a floor in the centre of which was created a clear crystal that would distribute the power to each quadrant of the city. A thin, pure white energy beam stuttered into life, traveling from Node Zero, down the centre of the spiral staircase and into the clear crystal. The primary power distribution infrastructure was now complete. In time, as energy became available, the thin beam would grow in size, but for now it was no thicker than a hair. Even as construction proceeded, Node Zero continued to connect to more Nodes, steadily increasing the power supply.

The floor from each centroid tower grew outward until the surfaces met to form the spherical shell on which the zones of Valheel would be constructed. Once the great sphere had been completed, it thickened, forming service tunnels and more power distribution structures. Then the buildings started to grow from its surface. Throughout the city lights started to shine from the windows as each building was completed. Fifty-eight years it had taken to complete the city; a single flash of light in the long night of Node Zero's construction.

The plaza's and buildings stood empty. Valheel was complete but unoccupied; there was one last process to complete before the city was activated. The contents of the buildings, the furniture, the crystals in the Great Library, the data processes of the city, the position of the Guardians, were all restored to the exact point they were in just before Amantarra destroyed the original Node Zero. Humanoid shaped green construction meshes appeared motionless in the plazas and buildings. One by one, each of the meshes was rendered into the form of a Guardian of Valheel. Then at some invisible cue, the Guardians all started moving at the same time.

The city paused on the threshold of opening it's portals to the Bruwnan.

At the top of one of the buildings in the same blue quadrant as the Great Library of Valheel; was the council chamber. The room was circular, high ceilinged and lit from the floor by lights that ran around the perimeter of the room. Two banks of empty seats formed an aisle that ran from the huge double doors to a dais which was almost twice the height of a Bruwnan. Standing motionless at either side of the door were two Guardians of Valheel. Seated behind the dais and looking down on a single figure standing on the floor in front of it, were the five Bruwnan avatars of the high council.

Seated in the centre chair and wearing a white sash was Consul the leader of the council. He glanced to his right at the red and green sashed councillors' who nodded, and then to his left at the yellow and blue councillors' who gave a similar response. Consul looked back down at the figure on the floor of the chamber.

'Tyrus; summarise the situation,' he said.

'The rebuilding of the city is complete. You five, as you were before, remain the only true Valheelians,' said Tyrus. 'The portals are closed and none of the Bruwnan who had not been erased by us prior to Node Zero's destruction have gained access to the city.'

'Let's keep it that way,' said Consul. 'There is no doubt that in destroying the old Node Zero Amantarra has advanced our plan to rid the city of the Bruwnan to its conclusion. Despite the fact that they have not been erased fully, they are quite powerless while they remain locked out of the city. However, the question of why Amantarra chose this course of action remains.'

'Describe the sequence of events that led up to the destruction of the previous Node Zero,' said another of the council.

'The alarm was sounded when the avatar belonging to the Bruwnan known as Amantarra removed a data crystal from the library. Analysis has shown that the crystal contained the entire technical library, all the science and engineering of the Bruwnan. It had been collated over a long period of time by Artullus under the pretext of research so as not to arouse suspicion. Artullus left Valheel just prior to its destruction and he is not one of the Bruwnan currently attempting to re-enter the city. He is therefore untraceable. After the alarm was triggered, we attempted to disrupt the generation of Amantarra's avatar by force, but we failed in our attempt to gain control. After a brief chase Amantarra was finally cornered in the Node Zero chamber. She had acquired several of the disruption weapons from the Guardians pursuing her and used one of them to destroy Node Zero.' Tyrus stood waiting for the next question as the council considered his last statement.

'And there is no question that the act of destroying Node Zero was deliberate?' asked Consul.

'None whatsoever,' replied Tyrus.

'Again the same question arises; why? Why take the data and why destroy the Node Zero? Would anyone care to speculate?' he asked looking to either side at the other councillors.

The red councillor to his extreme right spoke. 'The data would be of use to an intelligent corporeal species who had reached the point in their development that they may potentially seek a share of the energy that powers Valheel.'

'Such a species does not exist, it would have been detectable from the lower energy yields coming from the Node on that planet,' said the yellow councillor to Consul's left.

'If the planet had a Node,' replied the red councillor.

'If Amantarra has created such a hidden species and the knowledge in the crystal is to be used for its advancement, then clearly this poses a threat to our plans,' said Consul. 'The destruction of Node Zero may have been simply a means of buying development time.'

'There is also the possibility that Amantarra has created more than one species capable of utilising the knowledge,' said the green councillor to Consul's right.

'The assumption must be made that this is the case and that there is more than one species. We must discover the nature and extent of this threat before we eliminate it.'

'Gentlemen,' said the blue councillor, 'we have another more immediate problem.' The others turned to face him. 'The Primary Key was reset to its default value during the rebuild of Valheel. I've just searched the library for a copy of it and its missing. It looks as though it was deleted some time before the destruction of the city. This means that although we have the same power that we had before, we have lost the means by which we got that power. We can no longer make major changes or repairs to Valheel. In respect of our defence, we can upgrade the guardians, but only up to the limits of their original specification and we cannot create new ones.'

'This has halted our plans,' said Consul, 'Amantarra must have a copy of the Primary Key in the information she stole. This information is vital and must be retrieved. I assume that Amantarra is not amongst the Bruwnan currently seeking access to the city; that would be too easy.'

'That assumption is correct,' said Tyrus, 'but her Radgarc is.'

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Every portal Elleria had tried was closed and she thought she was never going to get into the city. Elleria was patient, and although she didn't want to, she had reached the point where she thought she should give up. Just few moments more she thought, just a few minutes and then I'll have one last go. As she waited she wondered what had caused Valheel to disappear in the first place and, given the current problems she had gaining access, if it would ever be normal again.

She tried again... nothing.

Eventually she'd had enough and was about to disconnect from the portal when it suddenly opened.

Finally, she thought, but was immediately presented with another disappointment as there now seemed to be a delay; it was taking far longer to get through the portal than normal. Elleria waited assuming that there may be teething problems with the new city. Finally her patience was rewarded and her avatar materialised on one of the round portals that were set into the floor of the circular plaza at the base of the Green centroid tower.

Elleria started to walk across the plaza towards the arcade that led to Amantarra's quarters. She could see the windows to the apartment on the fourth floor of the building. The lights were on, but that

didn't mean anything, the lights were always on in Valheel. She entered the arcade she'd been heading for and it suddenly struck her how quiet Valheel was, she hadn't encountered a single Bruwnan, Radgarc or Guardian. Very unusual, she thought. Perhaps the city wasn't fully restored yet and things would pick up later. Exiting the arcade she carried straight on, the entrance to Amantarra's building was on the right a short distance up ahead.

After making her way up to the fourth floor, Elleria found the door to Amantarra's quarters was open. She assumed that Amantarra was expecting her and walked straight in, but it became quickly apparent that the apartment was empty.

The main room was white walled and minimal. Four large comfortable chairs arranged around a single low table occupied the centre of the room and, apart from a desk, there was no other furniture. It was exactly as Elleria remembered it with one slight difference. On the wall facing the door there were two square windows. Hanging on the wall between and either side of the windows were three large paintings. Elleria always knew that Amantarra was interested in art; she'd often remarked that she'd suppressed her artistic tendencies for the sake of science and engineering. Elleria was therefore quite surprised to see the artwork here in the apartment, particularly as they were all signed "Amantarra". This had to be the clue that Amantarra had mentioned in her message.

All three paintings had identical matt black backgrounds. The first painting on the left had a single broad brushstroke of purple paint running from top to bottom. The stroke was unrefined and no attempt had been made to tidy it up, it was just a single line of paint with the background showing through in parts. The word "One" was written in the bottom left hand corner in the same colour. The second painting between the windows had two equally crude orange brushstrokes running from top to bottom and the word "Two" written in the bottom left hand corner. The third painting had two orange brushstrokes either side of a single purple one. These strokes were neater than the ones on the other two paintings, some effort had gone into sharpening the edges and making sure that the background did not show through. The three blocks of colour also had dark purple shadows making it look as if they were raised off the background. Written in the bottom left was the phrase "Three holds the key".

"One, Two, Three Holds the Key". Elleria recited to herself; she didn't really like abstract art, but there was something vaguely familiar about these paintings. It didn't take long for the image of the primates

to pop into her head. These paintings were an abstract representation of the Ja'liem, and it would only be obvious to someone who had actually seen the Ja'liem. But what does "three holds the key" mean?

'I've never really understood the Bruwnian fascination with art.' The voice was behind her. Elleria spun round. Standing in the doorway was Tyrus. 'Especially this abstract stuff,' he continued while indicating the paintings behind Elleria. 'What do you think?'

Elleria had never liked Tyrus, in fact she couldn't think of anyone that did, he was very arrogant and seemed to consider himself a cut above The Bruwnan and their Radgarcs alike. His smug attitude always gave Elleria the impression that he had a hidden agenda. There was always the fear that she would become entwined in whatever it was that he was up to and possibly carrying the can for it. As a consequence, she just didn't like being near him. Elleria noted his attempt at trying to ingratiate himself with her and wondered what he really wanted. Still, regardless of that, some sort of reply was warranted. She considered a few choice retorts along the lines of "you can go now" but decided that perhaps she should play along. After all, it couldn't be a coincidence that he was here and Amantarra was not. Before she could speak Tyrus continued.

'The Council are trying to trace the whereabouts of Amantarra, and we have come here to ask if you can help us,' said Tyrus before Elleria could think of a civil answer.

'We?' asked Elleria.

There was movement in the corridor outside and the five members of the council entered the apartment in silence. Now this is definitely not a coincidence, thought Elleria as she watched them form a line behind Tyrus.

'Ah,' said Tyrus in mock surprise as if they'd just happened to be passing Amantarra's apartment, 'the high council.'

Elleria eyed them suspiciously. 'Right on cue,' she said with more than a little hint of sarcasm.

'As Tyrus was saying, we are trying to trace the whereabouts of Amantarra,' said Consulul ignoring the sarcasm.

'I'm sure she will be arriving in the city shortly,' replied Elleria. 'Now that it's back, I mean. What happened to the city anyway?'

This was met with silence and Elleria got the distinct impression that although unheard, a suitable reply was being discussed. She looked at them again, strange that they were so silent; it was a simple question, so surely the answer didn't need to be worked out. Tyrus seeing her studying the council offered her an explanation on their silence.

'You may have noticed that some of the cities facilities are still down. Avatar generation is a bit hit and miss at the moment,' he said.

The councillors' avatars looked fine to Elleria and his remark smelt like distraction.

'There was a fault with Node Zero,' said Consulul at last; 'but we have taken steps to protect it now. Amantarra was very close to Node Zero at the time of the fault, which is why we are concerned about her. Can you help us trace her? Do you have any information about her whereabouts?'

What was Amantarra doing way up there in the Node Zero chamber? Why would the Node need protecting if it was faulty? Elleria put all the pieces together. Amantarra's message said that she had deactivated Valheel, so she must have done something with Node Zero. Elleria didn't need Amantarra's warning not to discuss her actions; she didn't trust this lot in any shape or form.

'Well the truth is that I lost contact with Amantarra when the city disappeared and I've heard nothing from her since.' Which was the truth, but Elleria had deliberately left out the part about Amantarra's message in the Node chamber on the planet of the Ja'liem. Elleria breathed a silent sigh of relief that her Avatar was protected from the cities systems and her thoughts remained her own.

'Yes,' said Tyrus, 'we only ask because we're concerned for her.' He walked over to Elleria and placed his hand on her shoulder. 'You can understand that can't you.'

'Yes, I can. I'm concerned too,' she replied as she glanced down at Tyrus' hand where it rested on her shoulder. This mock concern was way out of character. Tyrus saw her look and removed his hand.

'I'm sure she'll be in touch soon, now that the city is back,' said Elleria.

'Well if she does, be sure to ask her to get in touch with the council.'

'Yes of course,' lied Elleria.

'And now, if you would excuse us the council have urgent matters to attend to,' said Consulul.

Elleria watched them turn and leave Amantarra's quarters. That ended suddenly, she thought. From the way the entire Council and their Enforcer turned up, Elleria thought she would be answering questions

for hours. Elleria was too relieved that they'd gone to be worried about the shortness of their visit; but to avoid encountering them outside again, she studied the paintings for another five minutes before leaving the apartment. When she was sure that it was safe, she headed back down to the Green plaza and its portals so that she could leave the city. Elleria knew where she was going next and she only hoped that Amantarra was there waiting for her with an explanation.

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Elleria materialised on top of the hill in front of the heavy metal doors of the Node chamber. She was back on the planet of the Ja'liem. She didn't need to take physical form; she could just have arrived as a phantom like Amantarra would have to. But Elleria felt that this was somehow a special occasion and she'd enjoyed her last visit here in physical form so much, that it wouldn't have needed much of an excuse to take it this time.

She looked out across the treetops in the early morning light. A small group of Ja'liem were playing a chasing game, scampering through the branches at speed; oh how Elleria wished she could be so free. She watched as the animals disappeared deeper into the forest.

But where was Amantarra?

Had she misinterpreted the message in the paintings? Was there even a message to interpret? Elleria turned to face the doors of the domed building. If there was an answer it would be in there, she thought... or not... there was something on the ground in front of the metal doors. Elleria walked towards the doors for a closer look.

Neatly placed in front of the doors was a flat console exactly like the ones on the Great Library of Valheel. Elleria picked it up and examined it. It looked old and worn; the ones in Valheel were created by the city and so always looked pristine, but this one looked as if it had been left out in the rain. Elleria turned the device over; she'd never seen a console in the real physical universe before. She supposed that at one time the consoles' did exist in the real universe, before the Bruwnan abandoned their physical existence. Tucking the device under her arm she stood close the doors of the Node chamber. The building sensed her presence and the massive metal doors silently swung open.

It was thirty two thousand years ago that Elleria had seen the message from Amantarra. The Node itself was glowing brightly with the stored energy it had gathered from the life on this planet over the same time period. There was nothing else in the chamber, no further messages or paintings on the wall and no Amantarra. Elleria took the console out from under her arm and looked at it again. Finding a console on a planet was very unlikely; in fact, Elleria decided, this was probably the only console in the entire Euclidean universe and therefore Amantarra was definitely trying to tell her something. She speculated that it was something that Amantarra did not want the High Council to know about. The paintings had led Elleria here where she would find the console. Was the console another clue? It didn't look like the thing would actually function; so did it mean her to go back to the Great Library of Valheel? Elleria didn't think that likely.

'So, what's this for?' she asked the Node because there was nothing else to address the question at. As Elleria expected, the Node remained silent. It was, she reminded herself, only a valve. Then it occurred to her... the Node instruction crystal would fit into the console. Perhaps Amantarra had left additional information on the crystal.

She quickly walked over to the Node. The instruction crystal was where she had left it over thirty-two thousand years ago. This was it...it had to be... the moment had come... what information might it hold? Elleria could hardly contain her excitement. Holding the console in the crook of her left arm she picked up the crystal and dropped it into the receptacle on the console. Elleria held her breath and prepared herself for what she hoped would be a revelation. The console flickered for a moment and then disappointingly went back to being completely inert. She tried again; taking the crystal out of the console and this time carefully placing it into the receptacle. Again there was little more than a flicker from the console. Perhaps the console was damaged, she thought, or lacked power; either way it meant the trail stopped here. Useless, she thought, as she removed the crystal and placed it back on top of the Node.

Elleria looked around the chamber, other than the Node there was nothing; and as the doors had been sealed shut after her last visit, there wasn't even a dead leaf on the floor. Elleria resigned herself to that fact that there were no answers here and turned back towards the door. Something on the ground just outside the entrance caught the morning light. Curious, Elleria walked towards it. The object sparkled in the light as she approached. Whatever it was had not been there when she entered the building. She was

halfway across the floor of the chamber before she realised that it was a crystal. Elleria ran... a crystal she thought, this must be the one the console was intended for; but who had put it there?

Outside Elleria picked up the crystal and looked around. As she expected there was no one to be seen, but that didn't matter because now she was sure she held the answers to all that had been going on with Amantarra in her hand. She paused, holding the crystal just above the receptacle... teasing... savouring the moment for posterity; this would be the moment she remembered, the moment just before the truth was revealed... until finally, she dropped the crystal into the console. It made a slight ringing noise like the clinking of glasses, but otherwise nothing happened...the console didn't even flicker this time.

'I give up,' she said out loud as she resisted the temptation to hurl the console at the wall. There didn't seem to be any answers here; only frustration.

The light level in the Node chamber suddenly dropped and then went back up again. Elleria turned and looked back into the chamber. She waited... and again the light coming from the walls dimmed and then went back up again. Curious, and not quite sure what else to do, Elleria walked slowly back inside the Node chamber to see what was happening. She hadn't got very far into the chamber when behind her the double doors closed with a loud metallic sound that reverberated around the chamber. Shocked by the sound Elleria spun round. She could hear the locks clicking into place as the chamber was sealed. This should not have happened, the chamber doors should never close when there was a physical presence in the chamber because there was no way to open them from the inside. The surfaces of the chamber flashed blue as the Node force field reactivated. Now not even a Bruwnan could enter the chamber no matter what dimensions they existed in; or, for that matter leave the chamber.

Elleria realised she was trapped. Her mind raced, not to find a way out, because until the doors reopened there wasn't one, but to try and reason why this might be happening. This chamber was now completely isolated from absolutely everything else in Euclidian space and beyond. That meant that it was completely free from the attentions of the High Council. Perhaps Amantarra was hiding here, perhaps she was about to put in an appearance. It could be the only explanation.

'Amantarra, are you here,' said Elleria loudly, but there was only silence. 'The chamber is sealed,' she tried optimistically. Elleria waited a few moments... nothing. So what else could this mean? Why trap me here?

The console she was holding in her hands suddenly burst into life producing a complex three dimensional image of lines and colour that visually made absolutely no sense whatsoever. Elleria recognised it immediately, it was a data file. More precisely it was a data file containing the template for creating a shell. A shell like the Bruwnan one she was currently occupying.

Elleria placed the console on the floor of the chamber, sat crossed legged in front of it and watched the ever changing patterns of the data file. It was impossible to tell from what she could see what form the new shell would take. There was only one way to find out.

Elleria placed both her hands into the image that floated above the console. The image stopped changing; as Elleria suspected, the file would only be accessible by its intended recipient, which with any luck would be her. The image started to change again as the file accepted Elleria as the recipient and transferred the data into her current Bruwnian shell. Once the transfer was complete the image above the console vanished. There was the briefest of pauses and then Elleria's current shell vanished leaving the chamber empty. The force field flickered for a moment and then the light level in the chamber dropped to near darkness.

Elleria found herself sitting on a large branch of one of the trees overlooking the hill the Node chamber was on. She felt different. She looked at the black fur on the back of her hands.

She was different. She was Ja'liem. There was more; Elleria quickly realised that this was not just the hollow shell of a Ja'liem, the construct had substance. She could sense internal organs and blood pumping. Her stomach rumbled, Elleria was euphoric, was that what hunger felt like? Amantarra had provided her with some sort of Radgarc, Ja'liem hybrid.

Stretching her limbs she felt the strength in them. She tried walking along the branch, her body tingled with the unfamiliar fur, but the coordination was all there. She jumped and spun round on the spot and ran back toward the trunk of the tree. She jumped at the trunk and digging her claws into the bark climbed up and round to the left onto the next branch. Not only was the shell coordinated but all the climbing techniques were programmed in. Elleria scampered along the branch heading for the next tree and at the optimum point leapt to the right landing perfectly on the branch of the adjacent tree. Elleria had

wanted this for so long. This must be a gift from Amantarra. She ran and jumped to the next tree, then another and another. Elleria had never felt so elated.

'Thank you Amantarra,' she shouted.

'Who's that... who's there,' came some unexpected replies. Off to her right a male and two female Ja'liem appeared around the trunk of a tree some distance off.

'Hello,' shouted Elleria, as she quickly moved towards them easily covering the distance in three jumps.

'Yes, hello...' replied the male a little curtly as Elleria arrived next to them, 'but who are you?'

Elleria was so caught up in the excitement of being a Ja'liem and having the freedom to run and jump through the trees; that it didn't immediately register with her that she was holding a conversation with the male. Then the realisation dawned on her.

'You can talk!'

'Of course I can talk, what a ridiculous thing to say,' replied the male grumpily. 'Now who are you? Don't you know that its bad manners to enter another territory without an invite.' The younger of the females giggled at the male's grumpy attitude and Elleria could see from the family resemblance that she was obviously his daughter. Quite how she made this distinction she didn't know; up until now all the Ja'liem had sort of looked the same.

The older of the females gasped, 'Aarlam,' she said indicating Elleria's head; 'look.'

'What, I...' a sudden look of realisation came over his face. 'Oh my gracious me; I do apologise,' he said. 'Please, please, you must come with us immediately.'

Elleria was thrilled at the almost instant acceptance; and as they started to make their way through the branches she felt a sense of belonging that she had never known. Leaping from branch to branch, occasionally jumping and grabbing a higher branch to swing up a level, they weaved their way through the dense forest; always gaining height and always moving roughly in the same direction. She would occasionally see other small groups of Ja'liem off to either side several trees away, but they paid no attention to their passing. Elleria got the impression that this was a route that was well used as the male leading them showed no hesitation in the path he was taking. She was also amazed that she had no problems in keeping up with them; this shell that Amantarra had given her was perfect.

The forest rolled by with very little variation in the types of tree; they were nearly all of the silver barked type that surrounded the Node hill. Occasionally there was a red barked tree that on average seemed a little taller than the silver barked variety. There were parasitic plants growing in the hollows formed by forking branches and creepers that enveloped the trees in a lattice work of black vines all the way up from the ground.

At one point in the journey Elleria found herself running between the male and the two females. She heard the two females talking.

'What does it mean Mother,' said the younger of them.

'I don't know. That's why we're going to see The Librarian,' replied the older female.

After twenty minutes of travelling they had steadily climbed up near the top of the canopy where the silver trees bore their small, round, orange fruit. The forest was abundant with it and the smell of it started to make Elleria hungry. She grabbed some as she passed and pushed it into her mouth. It tasted delicious.

They hadn't been travelling near the top of the canopy long when Elleria could see that they were heading for a massive red barked tree that was larger by a quarter than the surrounding trees. There were a lot of Ja'liem in the trees surrounding the giant red, and Elleria realised that as they passed, more and more of them were tagging along behind. By the time they reached the giant red tree they had quite a following.

Aarlam halted on the branch of a silver tree adjacent the large red.

'Wait here,' he said and made to go. Pausing, he turned back to Elleria and added, 'please.' He nodded to himself as if he was satisfied that that was the correct protocol and then jumped over to a branch on the giant red tree and made his way into the canopy. Soon he was lost to sight in the dense foliage.

Elleria and the two females sat in a group facing each other. The Ja'liem, who had been following them as they had approached the red tree, had now formed a semi-circle in the surrounding trees around Elleria and the two females. Not one of them had attempted to join them on the tree they were on and with the exception of an occasional whispered conversation they were silent and watchful.

Elleria turned to the older female. 'What are your names?' she asked. The older female looked initially surprised at the question and then took on a look that seemed to indicate that Elleria had done her a great honour.

'Ishimaall, and this is our daughter Esamally,' replied Ishimaall proudly.

Elleria turned to Esamally and smiled. Esamally smiled back and shuffled closer to Elleria.

Something moved on Esamally's back just behind her shoulder. Elleria reached out and pulled the tick from Esamally's fur. Esamally immediately moved closer to sit with her back to Elleria. The Ja'liem in the surrounding trees gasped and whispered. To Elleria it just felt natural to groom Esamally.

'You do us a great honour,' said Ishimaall, 'it is we who should groom you.'

'Nonsense, this is very relaxing... and besides, these ticks are quite tasty,' replied Elleria as she placed another one in her mouth. Amantarra had thought of everything.

'I heard you saying we were going to see The Librarian,' said Elleria while searching for another tick.

'Yes,' replied Ishimaall.

'So, is that the library?' Elleria nodded towards the large red tree.

Ishimaall looked puzzled. 'I don't know what a library is,' she said.

'It's a place where knowledge is kept.' Elleria chased a different, faster moving insect through Esamally's fur.

Ishimaall shook her head. 'I don't know of such things. This is the place of The Librarian.' Elleria decided not to ask any more questions; the place did after all just look like a big tree.

As Elleria continued to groom Esamally she became vaguely aware of a presence. It seemed to be in a slightly elevated position in the giant red tree in front of her. She stopped what she was doing and looked up; there was nothing there, just the leaves moving gently in the breeze. The presence she'd felt had gone. She checked her normal Radgarc senses... but again there was nothing. Ishimaall and Esamally seemed perfectly relaxed indicating that they were either unaware or unconcerned about whatever it had been. Elleria went back to grooming... and there it was again. As she focused with her new Ja'liem senses of touch and sight to search Esamally's fur, in the grey area between her old and new senses there was something there, something that did not want to be seen. The sensation was illusive, like movement seen out of the corner of your eye. When she concentrated on grooming with her new senses, she could detect a slight disturbance in space time; as if whatever it was could hide from her five Ja'liem senses and hide from her Bruwnian senses but showed out in the differences between the two.

'Here's Aarlam,' said Ishimaall breaking Elleria's train of thought.

Aarlam came bounding out of the foliage of the red tree, jumped over to where they sat waiting for him.

'Is she to go in now,' asked Ishimaall.

Aarlam shook his head. 'No, The Librarian is coming out.'

Ishimaall looked surprised. 'Are you sure,' she asked.

'He's here now,' said Esamally.

Walking slowly out of the foliage of the red tree was a large male. As he drew close to the end of the branch he was on Elleria could see that he had three stripes, a single purple stripe with an orange one to either side of it. The Librarian looked powerful and muscular, he was half as big again as Aarlam and he moved with a delicate grace that belied his size. Moments later he was sitting in front of the four of them. Aarlam, Ishimaall and Esamally all looked down and avoided looking him directly in the eye. Elleria didn't think that they feared the large male; they just seemed to be showing deference to him.

The Librarian studied Elleria closely for a moment, looking her up and down and then he stared deep into her eyes. Elleria returned the stare.

'Elleria,' he said. 'It's so nice to finally meet you. I'm The Librarian of the Ja'liem.' She was so surprised at hearing her name that she did not answer immediately.

'Yes... thank you,' she said eventually, 'but how did you know my name?'

'That was easy,' The Librarian indicated Elleria's head, 'you have three purple stripes.'

'Ah, that's what Ishimaall meant when I first met her,' realisation dawning on Elleria. 'Still doesn't explain how you know my name though.'

'It's all to do with the prophecy. I've told the story to every Ja'liem as soon as they were old enough to understand. I've embellished the story over the years, but the essence of it is that one day a Ja'liem with three purple stripes will appear. Her name will be Elleria and she is to be shown the way to The Librarian who will pass on a message.'

Elleria thought that this posed more questions than it answered. Perhaps now was the time to start getting some answers.

'Librarian.'

'Yes, Elleria.'

'I studied the Ja'liem for a very long time,' she looked down at her body, 'not in this form though; and in all the time I studied you, not once was there any clue that you had a language any more complicated than a few calls and warnings, never mind one that included words like "embellish". It was only when I took the form of a Ja'liem that this language of yours was revealed. Up to that point my impression of you, as a species, was one of a simple animal; no offense intended.'

'Perhaps that's the point. To outsiders we are animals and our language is hidden.'

'But why, why hide something like a language?'

'Let me give you some background on the Ja'liem; it may help.'

Elleria nodded.

'The philosophy I have always taught, what I have been required to teach, is one of harmonious coexistence with the forest. Things like writing, art, the worship of deities, anything that would leave physical evidence of our intelligence have all been... not suppressed, but discouraged. The whole philosophy is about not attracting attention. So our society is based around the telling of stories and that is how I pass on the information I get from the dreams and visions I see. I have not however, had a vision since just before your last visit here when you activated the Node. If you remember, you drew quite an audience. And in that last vision I was given the prophecy.'

Elleria looked him up and down.

'That was a long time ago. How long do the Ja'liem live?'

'On average a Ja'liem can live up to about fifty to sixty years, barring accidents. Aarlam here is forty-two and I can remember the day he was born, as I can with everyone you see here.'

Elleria was amazed. 'But you look younger than Aarlam,' she said.

'Yes, I was one of the first of my species and was chosen to be The Librarian when I was in my prime. With the position of Librarian came a shield, and while I have changed and matured over the millennia the shield has kept me fit and well. It's also impossible to kill me, as many a predator has found to their cost. But with Amantarra's Shield came the responsibility to guide the Ja'liem and prepare them for your arrival.'

'Amantarra's Shield, you know of Amantarra?'

'Of course, she is the source of my visions. Part of the prophecy that she gave me is a message for you.'

Elleria laughed. She could see now how all the pieces fitted together and how everything had led up to this point. 'You know I once asked Amantarra about the three striped Ja'liem and how you didn't see many of them about. Now I know that the reason is that there was only ever one... you.'

'So in answer to your question "why hide a language"; it's hidden because... how did Amantarra put it... because we exceed the intelligence parameters required for the Node network. She didn't want the council to eradicate us, not after all her hard work.'

'How would they find you? You've never been connected to the Node network and it's impossible to track a Radgarc or a Bruwnian. The universe is just too big a place to play hide and seek in even for Bruwnian technology.'

'Perhaps Amantarra just likes playing games,' said The Librarian.

Elleria scratched under her arm; she suspected that she'd already picked up some sort of parasite that was more mobile than a tick. 'Don't get me wrong Librarian, but while it is pleasant to be able to converse with a species other than the Bruwnan, why create one with this much intelligence in the first place?'

'Amantarra told me that we were a stepping stone to another species, one that uses technology and therefore cannot be hidden so easily.'

'Again, why create a species that uses technology?'

Esamally reached over and removed something from Elleria's side and the tickling sensation stopped.

'Thank you,' she said to Esamally.

'Perhaps the message I have for you will help answer that,' said The Librarian.

'Perhaps it will.'

'Now,' announced The Librarian in a loud voice, 'I will fulfil the prophecy.' He leaned forward and whispered a long string of numbers into Elleria's ear; and then added, 'there's more to this than meets the eye.' Then he stood up on his hind legs. 'The prophecy is fulfilled; Amantarra Ja'liem,' he announced. All

the Ja'liem who bore witness celebrated by jumping up and down and shouting "Amantarra Ja'liem" and the surrounding forest soon echoed with similar celebration as tribe after tribe responded to the call.

Elleria sat looking confused. The numbers appeared to be an encryption key; but what were they supposed to unlock? 'Was there any more to the prophecy?' she asked.

'Why, does it not mean anything to you?' The Librarian sat back down.

'Well it looks like an encryption key, but what it's for I don't know.'

'Alas I have no knowledge of what an encryption key is; remember we are a species without any understanding of technology.' The Librarian thought for a moment, recalling the vision in which he was given the prophecy. 'There is one thing; an action that goes with the final part. It's the only thing I can think of that I haven't done.'

'Show me,' said Elleria.

'Give me your right hand,' said The Librarian reaching out to take it. Holding her hand with his left he repeated the final part of the prophecy. 'There's more to this...' as he said the word "this" he patted the back of her hand with his free hand, 'than meets the eye.' The Librarian let go of her hand and sat back. 'Was that any good?' he asked.

Elleria thought about it, going over the action and the phrase in her head. 'Yes,' she said. 'There's more to this shell than meets the eye. There must be more data hidden within the file for this shell.' Elleria applied the numbers to the file. 'Yes there's a set of coordinates and another shell design. There are some instructions as well... I have to... that's unusual.'

The Librarian leaned forward and placed a hand on each of her shoulders.

'Elleria,' he said 'It's time for you to leave.'

And it was with both a sense of loss and gain that Elleria said goodbye to The Librarian of the Ja'liem and vanished into the air.