

SEN &
SANJA
AND

THE CUBE OF RUNES



BORUT LESJAK

**SEN &
SANJA**
AND

**THE CUBE
OF RUNES**

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BORUT LESJAK

SEN, SANJA,
AND
THE CUBE
OF RUNES

BOOK ONE OF SEN & SANJA



STUDIO BLEST

SEN, SANJA, AND THE CUBE OF RUNES

By Borut Lesjak

SEN & SANJA series, book 1

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*To my children S.M.L., S.K.L., and D.L.,
who found me—through dimensions—
and helped me find myself.*

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PROLOGUE

A bright, silvery-golden flash woke Sanja in the dead of night. She struggled to lift her sleepy head and check on her older brother but Sen was sound asleep. A couple of disorienting seconds later, a growling and a prolonged rumble startled both siblings equally wide awake.

“What was that?” asked Sanja in a tiny voice. Her tone was so at odds with her usual playful spirit that Sen laughed out loud.

“Just thunder,” he replied matter-of-factly, turning over and adjusting his snug pillow. “Go back to sleep.”

Easier said than done. Sanja tossed and turned in her cozy bed, made fresh that night and still smelling of vanilla and jelly scented softener, and nervously awaited the next lightning strike. She nurtured a persistent dislike of thunderstorms.

It wasn't long before another blinding streak shredded the black sky in front of the panoramic bedroom window. Sanja coiled into a tight ball and tugged her pink, heart-covered blanket over her head.

Sen, two years her senior, smiled blissfully in half-sleep, anticipating the mighty roar of the incoming thunder with pleasant appreciation. He buried his face in the feather

pillow with a contented sigh, feeling safe and comfortable in his bunk bed high above his sister.

The storm was approaching quickly. The tumult thundered sooner this time.

Sen sat up abruptly a moment later. "What was that?"

"What?" demanded Sanja in a muffled voice from under her protective cover.

"Shhh!"

"What!" insisted Sanja in a disproportionately raised voice, her temper rising like quicksilver.

Sen strained his ears. It was hard to hear over the quick beats of his heart. "They're arguing." He crawled to the outer side of the bed where a slide was attached and swooshed down. He faced the door, his expression a mixture of worry and bravery, his lips pressed in a line as thin and taut as a tightrope. It wasn't the first night he had heard the fighting.

Sanja slipped out the door before her brother, her dark brown eyes troubled. She led the way, inching towards the stairway. Sen, a head taller than Sanja, tiptoed so close behind her that he stepped on the back of her bare heel, but she hardly noticed.

From a floor away, they couldn't hear much. Just stifled sobbing and a muted, "No ... no ... no ... please no ..."

Sanja exchanged worried glances with Sen. The color of their eyes matched; the siblings resembled one another in certain ways, but differed wildly in others.

Not again.

Neither of them spoke or moved. A familiar dread hit Sen's stomach. A familiar anxiety fluttered through Sanja, like the return of a monstrous friend. They had never confronted their parents before. They had stayed away. Sometimes they had hid.

But something was different today. In the storm, in the air, in their hearts.

A incandescent flash of lightning and a mysterious rustling

sound interrupted their deliberations.

Their dad burst out in pent-up frustration. "You leave me no choice. I must do this!"

"No, don't!" Their mom's voice was a siren-like wail.

No more hiding.

Sanja and Sen rushed down the stairs. As they rounded the corner to enter the living room, the thunder spoke, so momentous that the whole house shook to its foundations. Beneath the behemoth sound, a strange, ominous implosion was felt more than heard. The cacophony ended in condensed silence.

The children gasped.

Sen discerned random rainbow colors lingering in the thick air and smelling of mystery, and Sanja caught a glimpse of a ghostlike apparition, a dense shadow that slithered away like darkness when you turn on a light.

Then nothing.

Nothing but an ordinary living room, empty save for the everyday objects: Furniture and TV, heaps of books in spine-scattered disarray, plush stuffed unicorns and fairies resting peacefully, coloring books and pencils in grand abundance, and a medley of toys. Marbles, rubber bands, rocks and stones, individual Leggo blocks in lonely, defensive formations, and a red and orange striped toy circus tent, the size of two not very small children, staked out on a soft green rug in the center of the room.

"Mom!" cried out Sen.

"Dad!" Sanja cried out louder.

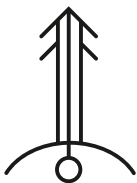
They began to look for their parents, but they weren't in the big room that served as the living and dining room, nor were they in the adjoining kitchen or the bathroom.

The siblings kept calling. They kept hunting. They tried not to panic, but both of them were scared. They searched every room on the second and third floor, but to no avail. After the fourth round of unanswered calls and the fifth

time checking under the living room sofa, Sanja slumped down on the rug and surrendered. Sen joined her.

Huddled together, sleep took them, the orange and red tent rising above them like a watchful sentinel, the lightning periodically illuminating their sprawled and exhausted bodies.

Eventually the storm retreated, casually and nonchalantly, into the morning.



— CHAPTER ONE —

HOW DARK GOES THE WORMHOLE?

Do you happen to know anything about magic?

I ask because not everybody does. And there are so many sorts of magic that one can easily get confused. Next to color magic, which also includes the well-known black and white, you have sound magic which can get quite loud at times, especially right before breakfast. Then there are taste and smell magics: imagine a vanilla ice cream enchantment, followed directly by a gross spell cast in the flavor of a fart. And if you combine that with a trumpet spell? I have been told it is spectacular. Well, depending on where you are standing. Touch magic is wielded for special occasions including tree hugging and animal petting, and is often combined with skin-loving ointments, pigments, pergaments, and other sentiments. And then we have intuition and belief magics, which are the strongest of all. Permitted practitioners of such spells are young children no more than ten years old, because adults are simply not ready for powers of that magnitude.

If you don't know anything about magic yet, don't worry. Sen and Sanja do, and I assure you, you'll have plenty of chances to learn with them.

In the morning, Sen and Sanja searched the house again,

floor by floor and room by room, but the reality was the reality. Their parents were gone.

They resorted to sorcery. They cast advanced spells of all sorts and scents to locate their parents—to no avail. Sometimes even magic doesn't work and nobody really knows why. The bright fear of the previous evening had morphed into a quieter anxiety, but also a dogged determination. They crouched on the floor in their bedroom to hatch a plan, Sanja wearing her favorite peach dress with pink butterflies and Sen in his battered jeans and old black vest.

"It's time for the Magical Arts and Detective Agency to get involved," Sen declared, solemnly donning his coal-black detective hat.

Sanja nodded approvingly. Oh, yes. They were both not only proficient wizards but also investigators, detectives, tracers, and sleuths, *par excellence*. Sanja specialized primarily in magic, whereas logic, logistics, and gumshoe work was more Sen's domain.

"We should enlist our own tracing services and employ our deductive and inductive powers to solve the mystery of our parents' disappearance," Sen continued.

He peered at Sanja through the magnifying glass he had bought after their first major case, as if she were the primary suspect. Her shoulder length blonde hair was finely brushed and framed her angelic face. Hers was the kind of beauty that was both natural and otherworldly. Her brother couldn't deny it, even though he failed to realize he possessed the same striking beauty. Sen, however, kept his fair hair short and unkempt. Both siblings were athletic and fit, as befits true quantum magical investigators. One never knows what kinds of mountainous adventures one will have to run up, or flee from.

"Don't you agree, Smirky Sparrow?" He used her agent code name, because the game was already afoot.

Sanja readily agreed. Oh, how she agreed. She was all green

from agreeing. One would almost think she was playing with her green onion color and smell spell, but no, she was simply agreeing with her brother.

“Aye aye, Serious Sloth,” she said, responding in code as well. They had each picked the other’s code name. She had chosen his not due to his lean frame, which was always folded around books and notebooks, but for his constant and concentrated concern for all things analytical and sometimes perfectly impractical. She modified *sleuth* to *sloth* because she did find him somewhat on the slow side, in her own humble opinion. Sanja herself liked to jump before she pondered.

“Before we go anywhere, we need to construct a traveling slash tracing machine for MADA,” added Sen. “The last time we investigated a disappearance, our lack of transportation was a real bummer. I’ve already given it some thought.” He rolled out a monumental pile of crumpled papers for Sanja to sit on. “Here are the blueprints and the redprints.”

Sanja pretended to study them, but was really concentrating on putting on mascara and lip gloss.

Sen swallowed a sigh. He knew what was going on, but like a true gentleman, said nothing. Instead, he discharged a silent stink-scented spell. His sister, with a frown of distaste, quickly gathered her wits about her.

“Yes, yes. Sure, sure,” she hastily responded, adding a final touch to her makeup. She tossed her blond hair with a studied yet casual gesture. Her eyes shone with satisfaction. “I am ready to depart now.”

“Not depart. First we must *find* the proper parts to build the machine,” corrected Sen kindly. “Without the machine, we can’t do doodlie squat. Our parents are gone forever. Vanished.”

“Va-voom,” Sanja added, under her breath.

“How do you think we can find them without a searching machine, and bring them back without a bringing machine?

It's madly impossible, I tell you, and quite irresponsible. Not to mention plumfestival."

Sanja gleamed. Then frowned. "But why can't we just use more plain magic to bring them home?" She played her fingers in the air as if preparing to cast a glorious spell. "Maybe a rosy retriever spell?"

Sen gawked at her. "Sparrow, you know better than to talk nonsense!"

"I really don't!" Sanja disarmed the spell and crossed her arms.

"Well, duh," Sen said with unparalleled patience. "We obviously can't use our magic against the solid probabilistic principles of quantum mechanical reality. We can only reveal or enhance reality, not twist and distort it by force." He could see Sanja wasn't convinced by the explanation, and to be honest, neither was he. "Besides, we already tried magic to directly get them and it didn't work." He shook his head. "No. We construct a proper machine according to the good old laws of physics and metaballistics."

Sanja didn't listen to her brother. She was way too intelligent and impatient for that. She re-armed the spell to find their parents and cast it defiantly. Sen didn't know everything.

The ultra-powerful spell inflated madly, then struck like a cobra. It hit the great quantum wall of impossible with a subliminal blast, elastically backfired, and exploded in Sparrow's hand.

She recoiled back, more shocked than hurt. Sen didn't comment, just looked at her. He knew his little sister well.

Sanja was fast when she wanted to be. Super-fast. "Fine. Good. We'll do this your way. I'll go downstairs and gather these smacky parts here," she said swiftly, pointing to one of the redprints, "while you scavenge for the other half. We'll meet right here in, let's say, twenty-seven minutes."

"Twenty-two minutes. When the big hand is here." Sen tilted his small hand at an angle to demonstrate the precise

position on the clock.

Off they went in a blur of frantic activity and clamorous spells that could be heard throughout the whole, semi-rural neighborhood. Three houses down, an elderly farm hound cocked his ear in earnest interest and gave an immediate barking response, while a murder of ravens flocked cawing and bickering to the cherry tree opposite the house to investigate.

In exactly two hours and eleven minutes the detectives reconvened in their bedroom office for a brief briefing.

Sen brought a heavy, green cardboard box filled with wooden toy planks, nuts, pink plastic bolts, a heap of old newspapers and magazines, inordinate lengths of string, some twisted rope, a half-eaten apple (for organic fuel), and a needle (haystack not included), all of which he unceremoniously deposited in the corner of the carpet. Sanja brought herself.

"We collected the necessary parts," observed Sen with closed eyes, "but now we need the know-how of connecting them all together in the correct manner if we want the machine to work." He gazed frankly at Sanja. "All I know how to do is insert AA batteries when it's done," he admitted.

"Oh, don't worry," Sanja replied airily. "Let's just leave the parts here and go watch cartoons. When we return I'm *sure* the machine will be built."

"By whom?"

"By machine gnomes! I saw them lurking around in the morning, just waiting for something to do, flailing their gigantic, oily ears. They've been pestering me to become MADA temps for months. I finally caved and trained them in supportive sorcery."

"Ah yes, the machine gnome temps." Sen had entrusted the bulk of the magic tasks to his sister Sanja, ahem, Smirky Sparrow. "Good call. What cartoons should we watch?" They ran down to the living room TV and both dived for the

remote. Sanja won.

At precisely and not a second more than one hour and oh, some amount of minutes later, they were startled from the screen by a staccato, gnomey sound. At first they thought it part of the cartoon, then realized it was coming from their bedroom office on the second floor, so they upped and checked.

On their colorful rug in the center of the room loomed the most incredible machine they ever had the privilege to witness. The machine gnomes temps who had apparently built it were long gone; they were of an especially shy sort.

The machine resembled a rusty old convertible car, or perhaps a shoebox, only put together from discarded bean tins. But it wasn't any sort of regular rusty old vehicle, oh no. It was a rusty old *spaceship* that also happened to double as a car for children under eleven and a half. Its rectangular frame was sturdy as steel and its three odd metal wheels impressed as stable, even though they were of various sizes and shapes. Yes, it was a paradox how the vessel could be at once streamlined and clunky, how it beamed so radiantly yet absorbed all the light, how it so perfectly projected its trustworthiness despite appearing on the brink of falling apart into a sorry mess of garbage-worthy garage parts. The only visible exception to the dilapidated constituents were the brand new, first generation intelligent Bi-Xenon HID Adaptive Headlights mounted at the bow and a little to the starboard side. They'd be able to see for night navigation, no problem.

Sanja bravely vaulted into the vessel that barely seated two not exceedingly huge kids and with a dramatic flourish turned the key she found already inserted in the lock mechanism. The machine coughed thrice, burped twice, and went silent. Sanja wasn't worried. She was fueled by an inner spark of curious confidence and an endless expectation of good things. She trusted her temps. She grinned at Sen with

a *you'll see* expression and tried again. This time the machine started properly. It emitted an eerie, haunting melody, it hummed a ghostly air, it offered up a wraith-like sigh, but mostly: it moaned.

It moaned like a finely calibrated ultra-spectral phantasm, and Sanja's grin widened, even though nobody in any dimension would believe a grin could get bigger than her original one.

But Sanja was special.

"I see it's a moaning machine and a working one at that," established Sen, jotting a serious note in the detective's cluebook he always carried with him. "We'll call her Old Miss Moany—for short, Miss."

He carefully secured the cluebook in his quantum investigation tracecase which folded into a backpack when he wasn't on the case. His other investigative paraphernalia were already stored in the tracecase: a pair of tweezers (unwitting courtesy of his mom), dust for fingerprint detection (hand gathered on the gravel road just outside the next village), a dozen zip-lock bags for hard evidence, an ordinary glass vial for liquid evidence, a snorkel for maritime providence, and—for lack of a real detective pipe which Sen was not yet old enough to smoke—a short piece of copper pipe so he could at least say he had one. He kept the magnifying glass ever ready in his breast pocket.

"It will take us to our parents, right?" asked Sanja.

"We can hope," Sen replied, tucking the tracecase under his arm.

"So let's go already!" Sanja demanded, motioning with a quick jerk of her wrist for Sen to join her in the other seat. Sen had the forethought to grab his favorite blue water bottle before he jumped in. That reminded Sanja to jump out and secure the stash of lipsticks she had nearly left behind. Easing back onto the worn, fake leather seat, she pressed the red button on the tiny tin console that invited her to PRESS

THIS BUTTON. Only it said DON'T right in front of that, too.

Oops.

The machine whirred and whizzed and volunteered a formidable moan before it disappeared into thick, ozone-rich air. Following the strict and causal rules of quantum engagement, it re-appeared a mere sideways second from instantly, just one floor lower, in the living room located directly below their bedroom. Which ... wasn't exactly what the tracers were hoping for, honestly, even though it did feel awesome.

Sparrow stared at Sloth. Sloth slowly shrugged.

She tried again and they popped up back in their bedroom. Sen opened his cluebook. With great dedication he recorded their progress, or lack thereof. Meanwhile, Sanja tried a few more times. She enjoyed the moaning sound on departure and the whizzing on arrival, but soon got tired of it and decided to exit the weirdly stuck spatial travel loop.

"Well, that was nifty," she commented, leaving Miss Moany and reaching for the TV remote without losing a beat.

Sen didn't protest. "Let's take some time investigating the mystery of why the machine isn't entirely working," he said, nibbling absent-mindedly on the peanuts he had found in his left pocket, his secret cache for any long haul investigation. He sat cross-legged on the couch and immersed himself in a thorough examination of the notes in his little black cluebook.

He'd figure it out.

Gloomy days squeezed by and the children grew grumpy.

Sanja sulked in her bed and sketched abstract pictures of her mom in dark red lipstick on the mirrors and windows. Sen thought incessantly of first, how to solve the missing parents puzzle, and second, of his dad cooking pasta carbonara, while his legs had him circling the moaning machine so

many times that he completely lost count. Many a cartoon was brooded over, and the re-runs were getting stale. The kids didn't bother going to school. At least the fridge was full and emptied only gradually. But when the choco pillows ran out one fine morning, Sanja issued a critical red alert: something had to be done, stat. They needed to put on their detective hats again and *keep* them on until the case was solved.

Before sitting down to draw up an official search and rescue plan, the siblings decided to scour the whole house one last time. Detective experience had taught them that clues could turn chameleon and hide in plain sight. They applied themselves meticulously, and this time, on the top floor, they discovered something new.

"Sloth!" yelled Sanja at over-the-top volume. She stared incredulously at the white ceiling, having noticed something she had never noticed before.

"You don't have to shout," Sen complained, rubbing his ears. "I'm right behind you."

"What the Speck is that?" She pointed to a square outline on the ceiling.

"Hmm," said Sen, perking up. "Looks like a secret doorway."

"A hidden passage to the attic!" Sanja invented an impromptu detective jig.

"We don't have one." He wasn't sure whether to be hopeful or disappointed, and decided, crazily, on both.

"We do now!" Sanja was unfazed. "Where's the gosh mucken ladder?"

"You mean the ladder we don't have to get to an attic we don't have?"

"No," Sanja said witheringly, "I mean that ladder." She snapped her fingers twice while whistling through her nose, and voila, the ladder appeared as if by magic. Because it *was* by magic.

"Oh, that ladder," Sen nodded sagely. He placed it under

the hatch, and climbed up. No handle was visible, so he knocked politely.

After a rush of mysterious air, the silent chords of a dramatic organ, and an elongated serpent's hiss, the doorway sprung back to reveal a passageway into darkness. The intrepid tracers did their zippiest to ascend into the non-existing attic while they still had the chance.

"Wow!" said Sanja even before her eyes adapted to the pitch blackness. "Just smell the nostalgia in here!"

"It's called nostalgia and I can't smell skunk," Sen retorted, sniffing the stale air. "Wait," he said, lighting up a magic spell himself, which he did sometimes so he wouldn't get rusty in wizardry. A colorful one too, like an aurora borealis strung on a heavenly Christmas tree. "Now, let's investigate!"

But as the superlunary polar brilliance illuminated the space, our quantum detectives observed with unexpected disappointment that the triangular attic was empty. Plain whitewashed walls and bare wooden floors furnished a big abundance of nothing. A frowny look of letdown drew itself across Sen's face.

"What's this?" Sanja picked something up from the floor that hadn't been there a moment ago. She was frighteningly adept at finding things that were not.

Sen held his breath as he took a closer look at the curious object in his sister's hand. It was a small wooden box—a cube the size of a small cauliflower.

"A lead!" exclaimed Sen. "May I see it?"

"No!" Sanja shrieked. "*I* found it!" Her fists grew tight and angry around the edges of the Cube.

Sen immediately understood the real reason for her reaction. He understood what was hidden underneath Sanja's fierce mask of anger. He knelt down next to his sister.

"I miss them too," he said quietly. "And I'm scared as well." He reached for Sanja's hand, and she let him. "Don't worry," he told her in a warm, reassuring voice. "We'll find Mom

and Dad. And I think this cube is a clue. Can I please look at it?"

She silently gave him the Cube.

The Cube was fascinating, to say the least. It appeared ancient and reeked of the unknown. It was composed of a hard, organic, rubbery material, an unknown species of knotted, dark brown wood, extremely pleasant to the touch and possessing a soothing presence. The edges were dotted with sacred geometric patterns of waves becoming ovals morphing into triangles.

The Cube's most outstanding feature was without a doubt its six circular, translucent crystals, each embossed into one of the surfaces of the Cube, and each containing a glyph-like rune. The runes were different shapes but similar in style, obviously belonging to the same arcane alphabet. Each rune was composed of subtle yet bold lines, as if drawn meticulously with a 4D ink pen the color of dark void. The runes were like unlit filaments trapped in transparent honey, waiting to ignite. A soft silvery-golden glow gently emanated from the core of the Cube through the crystalline panes.

However, every crystal on every side of the Cube was cracked, and the rune within, broken.

Each crystal was cleanly shattered into multiple shards, as if miniature tectonic shifts had ripped them apart, leaving small crevices on the Cube's surface like rough scars yet unhealed. Nevertheless, the Cube as a whole didn't give the impression of being damaged beyond repair. It merely seemed incomplete, like a lock missing a key, or a complex puzzle yearning to be solved, and the cracks were the clues.

With his legendary focus, quantum investigator Sen brooded over the Cube, not even noticing that Sanja had already left. He caressed the runes reverently, running his fingers over their wounds and carefully pressing them, but he couldn't slide any of the broken pieces together. The crystal material didn't yield to his handling.

At one point, though, as he fumbled with the Cube, he involuntarily pressed his right thumb against one of the crystals. An infinitesimal flash of ruby color accompanied a distant hollow sound, as if a potent electromagnetic device had been activated. Sen wasn't sure whether he had imagined it, and waited attentively for another sound, but all was silent. As he was about to give up, his palms touching the Cube tingled. He tensed nervously. What was that?

The tingling was a pleasant, soft electrical current. It escalated and spread through his arms into his heart where he experienced a flutter of excitement, which unfolded like a lotus flower into a brief yet vivid vision in his mind's eye.

His mom and dad were trapped within the Cube. The Cube shifted appearance and became a shiny white double spiral: an infinite wormhole. Sen watched as his dad turned into a golden sun and slid down the wormhole. Mom followed and became a silver moon, disappearing after him at the far end of the spiral path, into nothingness.

Shining like a rainbow, the Cube emerged from the wormhole and floated back into Sen's hand.

He blinked a couple of times and stared at the Cube. Before he could grasp what he had witnessed, he heard Sanja's distressed voice calling him.

He hastened down the ladder and the stairway. Sanja was talking with someone. Could their parents have returned? Sen's heart raced from more than just the exertion of speeding. But at the bottom of the stairs he saw a scene that snuffed his hopes out. It wasn't their parents.

His body cringed. He was awesomely shy when someone unknown was around, and he felt a forceful urge to hide and quietly retreat back up the stairs. But Sanja needed him. He swallowed hard, hid the Cube behind his back, and walked closer.

A tall and thin man clad in a gray, three piece suit was standing rigidly square in the center of their living room,

speaking in a clipped, flat voice.

“And who takes care of you now?” he was asking Sanja, who stared at him with wide, unblinking eyes as if hypnotized. When Sen appeared she snapped out of it and dashed away.

“Good day. And you must be Sen Star?” the man asked with a courteous smile. He was happy to converse with someone older and hoped for a more meaningful communication exchange than he had gotten out of the girl.

Sen fought with all his might not to flinch. “... Yes,” he finally choked out.

Clearing his throat, the drab, rectangularly shaped man replied with an exaggerated formality, as if needing to impress others was the nuts and bolts of his routine. “My name is Mr. Hatch and I am a special agent of Social Services.” He looked around the room, head held high, then back at Sen. “I’m here to inspect why two grade-school children, Sen Star and Sanja Star, have been absent from their classes since, let me see,” he consulted his field notes, “since last Tuesday, without a written note from their parents or legal guardians.”

Examining Sen from head to toe, he added, “Is there anything you can tell me about that?”

Sen avoided eye contact and tensely played with his sweater, but managed to respond after just a moment of hesitation, albeit in a low tone. “Our parents are away for a while. But we’re mature enough to take care of ourselves. We just didn’t have the time to go to school.”

Mr. Hatch’s eyes bulged as if this was by far the most incredible thing he had ever heard in his life. And it probably was. “Didn’t have time to go to school,” he repeated. “You simply *didn’t have the time, to go to school?*” He rolled the words out steadily as if trying to savor their actual meaning. The ultimate understanding eluded him, so he moved on.

“You do know in this country the legal age to live by oneself and be responsible for one’s own actions, is eighteen? How old are you and your sister?” The question was half rhetoric

and half double-checking, since he already had the details written down.

Sen earnestly told him and Mr. Hatch shook his head disapprovingly, his stern expression turning even more forbidding. “Now seriously, young man. No funny games. Where are your parents and when are they coming back?” He meant business.

Sen didn’t respond because he knew he didn’t have an answer that could possibly satisfy Mr. Hatch.

The agent checked his notes again and grumbled in dissatisfaction. “No known next of kin.”

An awkward silence set in.

With a sigh of extended, professional patience, the agent repeated the question.

Sen stood there acting disinterested, seemingly with a total disregard for the agent’s authority, when in reality, he was just nervous. To make matters worse, he started biting his nails, which to the social services agent was a blatant display of being both fatally bored and grossly impolite.

An eerie, prolonged, high-pitched tone sounded. The noise seemed to be coming directly out of Mr. Hatch’s ears, as if his head was a pressure cooker and his brain was done—well done. Drawn by the cartoonish racket, curious Sanja returned from the other room to listen. However, it shortly became apparent that the weird whistle did not originate in any part of Mr. Hatch’s anatomy at all, but had emerged from some nearby source.

“What was that?” asked Mr. Hatch, swiveling left and right.

The kids didn’t answer, because they didn’t know.

“Look, this will not stand, do you understand me?”

The agent’s voice was not betraying anger or even dissatisfaction. Instead, Sen and Sanja felt anxiety for a different reason; the certainty in Mr. Hatch’s voice indicated he had come to a decision. They could sense something ominous, some higher power shifting into higher gear and

making choices about their future with dreadful finality.

"I need you to come with me, please." The agent spoke quietly but without doubt. There would be no leeway whatsoever. This was it, and the children knew it. Mr. Hatch was not going anywhere without them today.

Time to panic.

Nah, they knew magic. Time to give this man the slip.

Sparrow gave Sloth an imperceptible nod. He silently agreed, slouching as though he had surrendered to Mr. Hatch's orders but in actuality, preparing for a bold escape.

Things unfolded quickly from that moment on.

Miss Moany was still parked in front of the TV, ready for takeoff, with Sen's tracecase already packed and Sanja's heap of lipsticks neatly secured in the door compartment. Swift and certain like a true detective, Sen jumped in.

The agent understood they were trying to escape, for he had decades of experience. Mr. Hatch motioned for Sanja to come with him, but Sanja was no spring chicken. Quick as a sparrow she ducked away and boarded the more-or-less trusty vehicle.

Sen froze.

He had been decisive mere seconds earlier, but doubts had caught up and he was no longer sure they were doing the right thing. They couldn't just flee from a social services agent. Sanja noticed him hesitating as Mr. Hatch calmly approached the old, rusty time machine from the portside.

"Sloth!" she said urgently, but Sen couldn't tell whether she meant to instigate him to action or caution.

In any case he couldn't bring himself to make a choice and act.

Sanja leaned in and slammed the red button with all her might.

Unaware of what he was dealing with, Mr. Hatch stood in front of the ridiculous car, wondering what it was about children and their toys. Irritated, he glanced at his watch. If

he hurried he could still catch his two o'clock appointment.

Miss Moany whizzed and hissed meaningfully, moaned magnificently, then vanished.

The agent didn't budge. His jaw seemed to lower slightly, but otherwise he didn't appear affected by the absurdity of the disappearance of his two charges. That was because he couldn't process it. Obviously they hadn't vanished into thin air, they had merely tricked him. The poor man's mind was unable to deal with the quantum-magical reality that had opened up before him—because he didn't believe in magic.

He stood still, considering his options.

Meanwhile, Sen and Sanja and Miss had routinely ascended to their bedroom.

"Oh, shucks," said Sanja to herself. "I almost forgot my Malchi." She slid out gracefully, palmed her favorite plush toy, and hopped back in again. "Now, let's get out of here!"

Biting his lip, Sen stared at her in contemplative silence. He was trying to forget the presence of the agent, who had thrown him off his game, and just comprehend the meta-mechanics behind the spatial travel of Miss Moany. More specifically, the navigational aspects.

"Looks like we can only go up, or down. Like an elevator," he concluded.

"Yep." Sanja nodded, unfazed.

The bedroom door opened triumphantly and Mr. Hatch stepped smartly in, brows knit in determination. Sen gathered his will and pushed the button and Miss obediently traveled through space, downstairs to the living room once more.

The agent was already on his way down.

"He's getting better at this," commended Sanja generously. "What shall we do now?"

"I don't know," admitted Sen. His sixth sense suggested he was close to unraveling the secret of Miss Moany's quantum spacetime travel, but he couldn't quite puzzle it out.

And then he saw it. Sanja saw it too.

"The tent!" both kids cried out in unison.

Through the flapping cloth of the toy tent that sat nearby, a dim red light pulsed. It throbbed slowly, like some kind of fantastic lighthouse. A beacon. The high-pitched tone they had heard earlier returned, resounding in sync with the frequency of the red light.

"It's alive!" Sanja cried.

"It's activated." Sen remembered the micro flash he had witnessed in the attic and connected the two color-coded clues. He narrowly squeezed Miss Moany into the tent on her three shiny metal wheels, then punched the red button one more time.

"Something's gonna happen now. Something completely different."

And it did.

A colorless spiral tunnel opened in front of their wonderstruck eyes, a wormhole through dimensions. Sen laughed aloud. It was the white spiral wormhole he had seen in his vision! Quantum magnetic pull was already working on Miss, who vibrated harmoniously, again and again, in tune to the wormhole song. A minor monkey wrench was thrown into the harmony of the hymn when Mr. Hatch stuck his incompatibly angular head into the tent.

A crackle of static.

"What's going on?" asked both Sanja and the agent at the same time, for opposing reasons.

Sen's response was directed at his sister only. "It's the Cube! In the attic I had a vision of this wormhole and I saw Mom and Dad disappear in it. I must have activated some hidden portal in our tent!"

"My tent," Sanja corrected, but graciously let him go on.

"Your tent." Sen held up the Cube. It was humming in perfect tune with the reddish light in the tent. "Anyway," he concluded.

“Excuse me,” interjected the agent, his voice colored with the first tinge of frustration. “Do get out of there and come with me this instant!”

“Time to see what this does *now*!” Sen smacked the red button.

The whizzing and whirring were the same as before, but the moaning was a full order of magnitude more powerful. The whole wide world turned wobbly and unreal; Miss was preparing for some serious travel time.

“Yeah!” shouted Sanja. She was up for the adventure. “No more Mr. Elevator guy!”

The reality began to phase out—or was it that Miss and her passengers were gallantly oozing out of it? Either way, it didn’t sit well with the agent. He made one last bold attempt to grab Sanja by the sleeve of her woolen pink jacket, but his hands grasped only air.

Before disappearing, Sanja swerved in her seat and extended her tongue. But Mr. Hatch barely registered her rudeness. He was occupied by the attempt to witness and process something that just wasn’t possible. He froze like a deer in headlights for a long time after the siblings were gone, scratching his temples in disbelief.

Finally he looked at his watch, as though at least being late for his next appointment would be a safe normality to return to, and hurried off.

On the other side of the wormhole, things had gone bad. Total blackness enveloped the bold detectives and their vehicle. They could neither move nor speak. The presence of darkness pressed down upon them, evil-feeling and dense and suffocating.

They couldn’t breathe.

After a while, the fear of the dark gave way to an even fiercer terror as they sensed something approaching. A thick, shadow-like being slid closer, emanating a heavy vibe

that curdled the blood in their veins. The vibe was a leaden mixture of directed rage, judgment to the point of contempt, and anguished sadness.

Time had stopped.

They were trapped in a state of horrible uncertainty, trembling from more than just the cold.

This feeling is familiar, thought Sen's frightened mind—and the insight saved him. The touch of the known, no matter how terrifying, is still easier to deal with than the perfect unknown, and Sen was able to breathe deeply and calm himself. He had broken the hypnotic spell of dread. He sought for Sanja's hand and threaded his fingers with hers.

"Sen," whispered Sanja. The warmth of her brother's hands flowed into her cold ones. "Where are we? Is there a creature—in the dark? What should we do?" Her usual smirky confidence was gone.

Sen embraced his sister the way his dad used to hug him every time there was a desperate situation unfolding, like that time when they ran out of rice milk unexpectedly. And by offering his brave support to Sanja, he felt supported as well. The sensation of warm love between them flowed both ways. Sen felt older, bigger, and braver than ever before.

"It's okay," he consoled his little sister, tapping gently on her back. "We'll deal with this together."

Gazing around to orient himself, he saw nothing. The darkness was impenetrable.

"I have no idea where we are," he said. "But we have Miss Moany, and I'm sure we can escape even without knowing our location."

Looking down towards the dashboard, Sen realized that finding the huge red button might be trickier than he thought. He couldn't see a thing. Fumbling randomly, he pressed all across the console, but succeeded at nothing other than making his fingers go numb with cold.

Meanwhile, the pitch darkness turned five point six shades

darker. Their eyes couldn't see a thing, yet with some inner sense Sen and Sanja perceived the dense cloud of foul vapor. It was the shadow-being they had felt before. It had been slinking closer and now materialized smack in front of them, intrusive and impudent, inspecting its potential prey.

"Shoo!" Sanja waved her hand defensively as if dealing with an aggressive wasp or a nasty mosquito. The intangible presence didn't budge. If anything, it felt to the kids as though it snarked or mocked them, certain of its superior power.

The shadow density rolled closer and wrapped itself around the siblings. Ice cold horror embodied them, globular, glacial, and hostile.

"Sen," gasped Sanja, "it's eating our souls alive!"

Sen nudged himself to remember that none of this was new to him—he recognized the sensation of biting horror and was able to put his back to it. He turned towards a warm memory that tumbled into inner view, of him and his dad building a bonfire behind their old house at twilight. The burning wood crackled. The smoke followed Sen wherever he moved. Through smarting, teary eyes, he admired the orange and yellow flames flaring high into the carefree summer sky. The memory caused his heart to fling wide. He inhaled deeply and the cold space in his heart filled with fuzzy inner light.

Sen's courage returned full reign.

"Don't worry, little sister." He hugged Sanja like a playful bear, shaking her body with affection and transferring some of his hopefulness to her. "We're okay!"

The more the ominous presence pressed upon them, the more caring was their embrace and the more their bodies generated the sheer warmth of life. The tracers became aware that the knotted fear in their bellies was untangling and lifting into their hearts, transmuting into unstoppable courage.

They laughed out loud at the sudden release.

The horrendous density shied away, retreating in distance and diminishing in size and potency. The blackness of their surroundings morphed into gray, a thick moor-related fog. Sen and Sanja could now discern the outline of an almost perfect ovoid shape of jet-black color, hanging precariously in the air, still in their vicinity. The malicious entity was apparently regrouping.

On an impulse born from her new sense of courage, Sanja exited Miss and carefully placed her foot on the mist where the ground was roughly supposed to be. She approached the oval cloud.

“Who are you?”

The shape trembled, perhaps disturbed or angered by her lack of fear.

Sen joined her and held Sanja’s hand. The simple gesture troubled the dark bubble of vapor even more and it receded, shrinking further into itself.

Sen felt sorry for the incredible creature and he raised his hands in welcome, speaking slowly and kindly, as if talking to a wounded animal he might have found in the forest. “Don’t be scared.”

Sanja realized that maybe the being was not terrifying, but terrified. She was moved, and moved to touch the critter.

The entity was shocked. A bright white light flashed through its central core. It didn’t know kindness. Its whole being shook and shivered.

“You can calm down now,” Sen said softly. “We’re no threat to you.”

“Or to anyone else,” added Sanja with a smile.

A sense of heart spread throughout Sen and Sanja’s bodies. Their fear was gone, transmuted into love by their valor.

A soft click unlike anything they’d heard before resonated through the space around them.

In that still dark place, a tiny red light began to shine.

The vibe of their rather nebulous location changed

drastically from one of anxiety and anger to one of peace and love. The darkness began to fade, the fog thinned, and Sen and Sanja saw Miss Moany, in perfect shape, waiting patiently.

Sen ran to Miss and retrieved the curious wooden cube. It was pulsing in tune to the vermillion light that blinked through one of the crystals. Mouth open in wonder, Sen observed how the two halves of the red rune, separated by a gaping crack the width of a pencil, shifted and slid together, then fused.

It had healed itself.

The blinking stopped, but the scarlet light of the rune remained bright and shining.

The rune was red and luminous and whole.

To Sen the marking resembled a tall spruce tree growing solid roots in the earth. Hmm, how had that happened, and why? Why had only one of the runes reassembled? He made a mental note to add a physical note to his cluebook so he wouldn't forget to contemplate the metaphilosophy and paraphysics involved.

A sudden tremor in the Cube reminded Sen of his experience in the attic. He closed his eyes and focused his total attention on the red rune. Like the last time, the tremor streamed up his arm and when it unfolded into his heart, another vision flared through him.

A medieval knight in shiny white armor helped a strikingly beautiful lady in a long gray dress stand up. The knight wore a bright violet sun on his chest as the coat of arms.

That was all.

Sen inhaled and gazed at his sister, returning to the present moment. He decided to keep the vision to himself for the time being. It didn't make much sense anyway.

Sanja looked around as the rest of the darkness dissipated. They were inside a palatial cave spanned with moist gray walls. Black stalagmites grew out of the damp ground and

blacker stalactites protruded invasively from the ceiling. The blob-like entity, roughly the size of a bathroom door, appeared black and opaque with no discernible features on its surface. It bobbed up and down as if nervously awaiting what was going to happen next.

“Would you like to join our prime investigation?” Sanja offered with her typical directness. “We’re Magical Arts and Detective Agency, or MADA, for short.”

Sen looked at her incredulously but Sanja calmly explained the unwritten rule. “If you don’t beat them, let them join you,” she recited.

Sen smiled. Good point. “My sister, Smirky Sparrow, is right. We’re open to take on consultants,” he said to the entity, “and you certainly appear to possess a unique perspective that could prove crucial to our current case. My code name is Serious Sloth.”

Sanja added, “We’re looking for our mom and dad.”

The entity seemed to deliberate for an inordinate amount of time. No doubt it was a big decision. Meanwhile Sanja produced her lipstick and applied it sporadically all over her body. Why limit the beautifying device to mere lips when there was so much body, she always thought.

“Well?” said Sen, biting on a nail.

The dark being sneezed. To Sanja, the slight shift in its bobbing movement seemed like a smile.

“YES!” it boomed. “WISH TO JOIN!” Its voice was male falsetto, disharmonic, and devastatingly loud. It sounded like an unholy cross between electrical zinging and magnetical humming, reluctantly reminiscent of the noise of chalk scratching across a blackboard.

The tracers put their hands over their ears for fear of going deaf or being sick to their stomachs.

“Welcome,” said Sen, nauseated, eardrums ringing, “but could you lower your voice? Our organs are, umm, sensitive.”

“Yesss. Sure,” whispered the blob of energy. It was a quick

learner. It also sounded perfectly human. Only, its inflection was eerie, hissing the s's and rolling the r's somewhat venomously, and leaving odd gaps between words, like the spaces contained entire, weird worlds.

Still, it sounded vaguely familiar to both siblings.

"What's your name?" asked Sen. He didn't know whether it was just his imagination or perhaps his sixth or seventh sense, but he could detect, quite incredibly, every change in the mood and expression of that black form, almost as if he saw its non-existent features in the murky darkness. Now it appeared perplexed, and took a while before responding.

"Not ... remember."

"Well, what *do* you remember?" asked Sanja somewhat aggressively.

A minute went by. Getting impatient, Sanja was already checking her pockets to find something else of interest to pass the time.

"No thing," came the late but decisive reply.

"You don't remember who you are? Or where you came from?" asked Sen. His normal shyness seemed incompatible with the creature. Instead, Sen felt a kind of protective responsibility towards it, the way he did with Sanja.

The blob of dark light shook its non-existent head.

"You don't remember anything at all," concluded Sen, and the black bubble confirmed that with a bob, which the kids took to be a vehement nod.

Sanja brightened. "Doesn't matter the snubbiest!" she exclaimed with heart. "We'll call you D because we found you in darkness!"

It was settled. D swayed like an aspen tree in a breeze, and to Sanja it seemed perfectly happy with its newly acquired name and friends. Instead of the ominous and evil vibe it had first vented, D had shifted into something far less violent, or perhaps it had just pretended to. A single, shiny dot of white light appeared and remained distinctly visible at the heart of

the oval blob that was D, contrasting against its otherwise perfectly black surface.

D jiggled and went still.

“What is it?” asked Sanja in alarm, thinking something was wrong with their new companion.

“D remember.” Its voice had changed since the last time it spoke. This time it was a deep base, still rolling the r’s like an approaching storm.

“What?” demanded Sanja.

“A’lem’ph,” it said, and with the word, a ghostlike lightning struck the white dot on D’s chest, turning it violet.

“Hmm,” said Sen. He considered the violet dot. It reminded him of his vision. A violet sun on a chest! But this wasn’t right. The shiny white armor was missing.

“What the Speck does that mean?” asked Sanja, peeved at the terseness of everyone else.

Sen had noticed that Sanja’s curious curse words were mostly in German, ever since she had started taking lessons. He should ask her how to say *detective* or *tracer* or *clue*. He dismissed the thought and refocused on the strange word, fixing his investigative gaze on D, but no explanation was forthcoming.

“Maybe it’s a code name or a password,” he concluded, taking an educated wild guess. And what was with that violet dot?

“Whatever,” said Sanja, impatiently scratching her nose and carefully smoothing her dress. “Shall we just go?”

“Where?” asked Sen, torn out of his deliberations. He was trying to decipher what the strange word meant, and was adding notes to his cluebook in a frenzy.

“Anywhere,” suggested Sanja. “Do we have a Schmetterling choice?”

“Maybe,” replied Sen, still deep in thought. “Or maybe not. The wormhole might still be open and lead further on, to Mom and Dad. Perhaps it’s not only bi-directional, but

bifurcatingly reusable and multi practical. Let's check."

He swiftly produced a quantum magnifying lens from his vest pocket to closely examine the dark shape he had located underneath Miss Moany, which to anyone else would look like an ordinary shadow. But Sen knew it was, in fact, a wormhole endpoint. Sure enough, in the center of its densest discoloration, he discovered what his tracer's intuition was leading him to: a nanoscopic violet dot!

"A-ha!" he announced with some satisfaction of the trade. "I bet my hat this wormhole is still hot—violet hot, to be precise—and it's causally connected to the A'lem'ph clueword, and who knows what else."

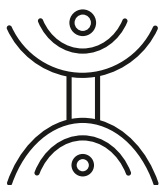
"Only one way to find out," cried Sanja with enthusiasm. She vaulted into Miss, usurping the driver's seat.

Sen didn't mind. He shotgunned in, then looked at D.

"What about D?" Sanja wondered aloud.

"D follow," it said.

Sanja pressed the start button—which looked suspiciously violet in the twilight of the cave—even before the echo of D's voice died. They moaned out.



— CHAPTER TWO —

HAVE METAL, WILL CLANK

As Miss ceased to moan, arriving safely, Sen and Sanja blinked breathlessly into the scorching brightness that spilled steadily everywhere they looked.

They found themselves inside a gigantic artificial building—perhaps an enormous anti-aluminum tent—with no discernible ceiling. Multiple levels, chapters, and stories were connected by various invariable staircases, some reaching so high that Sanja got dizzy looking up. The whole place shimmered and gave the impression of a futuristic, nightmarish fractal, straight out of an Escher drawing. The ambient vibe was nevertheless predominantly pleasant and peaceful. The quantum investigators of the incredible almost forgot to close their mouths from amazement as they adventurously left the presumed safety of their vehicle.

The metal floor gleamed with a subdued copperish hue and irreverently clanked under their feet. A constant whirring noise assaulted their ears and trembled in their bones like a million computer hard disks purring in insane unison. They smelled copious amounts of ozone lingering in the air and heard short electronic beeping blips that varied in pitch and volume. A haunting tune of technological heaven—or hell. If you listened carefully there was surely a melody to be inferred somewhere, but to both siblings, the sounds meant nothing, at least until Sanja heard a sparrow chirp in the

background. Her namesake bird allies were never far, and she acknowledged them silently with a grateful flutter in her heart.

“Where’s D?” asked Sen, scanning the complex. Sanja joined him in locating their newest case consultant.

“D here,” said a disembodied, high-pitched voice right above them. D’s energetic field was almost invisible in this loud and luminous realm. All Sanja could see of him was a dark circular spot hovering on top of Miss as if it was her strange inverted shadow.

Relieved, Sanja smiled her most festive smile and moved on.

“What the Speck is this place?” she asked in awe, craning her neck and swiveling her head to absorb it all.

“Beats me,” said Sen, but he was even more fascinated than his sister. He produced his cluebook from his tracecase and scribbled in earnest.

“Do *you* know?” Sanja turned back to D. “Have you been here before?”

“D not know,” was the only answer she got.

Sanja didn’t insist. She strolled on.

She saw metal machinery all around, working diligently. Huge, fully automated containers with steel conveyor belts rolled what seemed like nuts, bolts, and other spare parts from the left to the right, while elevator-like moving platforms carried even more of the same in both vertical directions. Gigantic, nickel wheels turned in many different gears and with unknown intentions, and cubical, spherical, and pyramidal machines with big blinking warning lights hurriedly and almost frantically moved their countless limbs, mainly to rearrange materials being transported. Most were products of technology beyond Sen’s comprehension, and Sanja didn’t even pay attention to them. All had one thing in common though—they were super shiny.

One thing that immediately caught Sen and Sanja’s profes-

sional attention to detail was that there were no other people present, though there were plenty of persons milling around, minding their own business. How was that possible? Well, they were all robots. Robots scurried here and there, speeding along the narrow, artificial alleys of the tin town, obviously on urgent errands to deliver or pick up something crucial. Robots of all sizes, colors, shapes and odors. Some of them smelled of pure metal, others like plastic, wood, or food. From one robot, which marched by like a soldier with its red coated aluminum torso stamped with medal-like platinum stickers, Sanja could swear that she recognized the fragrance of sunflowers. Was it wearing perfume?

“Did Mom and Dad even *pass* this way?” Sanja asked grumpily, of nobody in particular.

“Hmm,” said Sen. It was his favorite expression when he was engrossed in his cluebook. “Let’s try to find any clues relating to the code D provided.” He redoubled his detective duty. “What was it exactly: Aleph?” He directed the question to D up in the air.

“Aleph,” corrected D in a dispassionate tone of voice, switching to baritone.

Without further ado, Sen started asking around, surprised to find he didn’t even have to force himself to interact. He felt great being able to confront even robot strangers with lightness in his heart instead of sweaty palms and a clumpy stomach. It was his newfound courage.

“Excuse me, Sir.” He tried to stop a big cube on wheels that was passing by on the grand iron avenue, to no avail. The cubicle apparently didn’t have its sense of hearing, or politeness, turned on.

“Mr. Robot, hello!”

Sen addressed another person who didn’t seem in such a hurry as it was simply standing by on its two pseudo-human legs. It looked mostly humanoid except for its three heads and single arm. And it appeared to be made entirely of can-

dy, or maybe soap. Sanja couldn't resist licking its arm like a dog, just a little, just to investigate, only to spend the next few moments spitting furiously with a grotesque grimace on her face, while the bot stomped away indignantly.

"Blech! Super gross! Tastes like an amino acid," she complained, scrubbing her tongue with her fingernails.

Sen wondered how in the Schrödinger she would know what an amino acid tasted like, then forgot all about it as a perfect candidate to ask for directions zipped along.

"Sir! Do you have a moment?"

Sen bravely stepped right in front of the large tin can on disproportionately tiny wheels that was completely covered with signs denoting either a question mark or an "i" for information. A big map was mounted front and center on its metal belly. The map, however, was utterly useless because it depicted a holographic complexity that only a nuclear-powered supercomputer could begin to comprehend. Ironically, the *YOU ARE HERE* sign was clearly marked on the map in huge violet letters.

The mapbot stopped in its tracks like a high-society butler patiently awaiting orders. In his most mature and presentable tone, Sen explained they were seeking for something called A'lem'ph. The bot paused for a nanosecond before generating a largely positive response that sounded like a choir of artificial crickets.

"Well?" demanded Sanja, tilting her head towards her brother.

"Hmm," said Sen. "We need a translation device."

"You mean like those funky magical bracelets from *Yia and you?*" Sanja was incredibly fond of that series.

"Yeah, maybe ..."

"Wait a Schilling moment, let me summon a pair!" Without even a hand gesture she cast a doubly silent disharmonious sound spell that promptly manifested two delicate, golden wristbands. The straps had small screens attached and

looked like digital watches from a technologically advanced fairy tale. Sen and Sanja buckled them on.

Sen made a mental note to add them to their standard tracer's toolbox.

When he addressed the bot once more, it restated the exact same barrage of high-pitched sounds. The translation device on Sen's wrist pulsed nervously, emitting a beep and a mellow red light. Sen scrutinized the light and then the mapbot to figure out which one was at fault.

"Could you repeat that, sir? We still can't understand you."

The bot stayed silent.

An awkward moment passed but then the robot opened its speakers again and let out a formidable cry, like an amplified electronic banshee. Sen's translator device grew impatient and blinked furiously in progressively deeper shades of red and then flaming scarlet.

Smirky Sparrow knew what to do. She kicked the bot's shiny metal behind the way you whack a machine when it's not working for some reason you fail to understand. Weird how machines usually start to work after a proper thrashing. Rebellious little critters, Sanja liked to say.

Mapbot entered a brief state of shock—not just electrical but emotional—and made a rude noise. Things could have gone either way, but the bot duly recovered from its disturbed demeanor and promptly affected the pose of an obedient servant once more. It emitted a concise sequence of more pleasant tones and waited just the right amount of time to appear polite before it bowed its head and sped on its way.

Sen's translation device was content now. The light shone green and words emerged as if spoken by a professional radio news announcer. "The one you are looking for is currently unavailable. For further information dial 99-1. Have a nice day."

Sanja sighed. "Some big fat Schmetterling help that was."

Sen's frowny forehead betrayed he was thinking furiously. "What if A'lem'ph is not a code, but a proper name?" His voice carried the triumphant certainty that he had solved another clue from the quantum puzzle. "Let's find a phone and dial information."

But where to find a phone in a place like that?

Sanja waved her hands. "Time says boo! Let's use magic!"

Without delay she concocted another spell woven with assorted colors and loud twirping that confounded many web crawler bots for years to come. And *voilà*, an old-fashioned telephone with a revolving dial materialized in front of them on a silver platter that sat on a gaudy marble table.

Sen dialed 99-1 as per instructions and casually switched the relic of a phone to hands-free speaker mode. An automated responder asked for a phone number or a name and Sen quickly supplied that bit of information. After a terrifying click the line reconnected and the phone rang three times before a voice greeted them with a simple "Yes?"

"Hello. Can we talk to ... um, A'lem'ph, please?"

"Speaking," said the robot in a crispy male voice with a tinge of old British accent. "How can I be of service?"

Sen and Sanja exchanged glances with great anticipation, and some uncertainty. What to say?

"Well, sir, honestly, we don't know," Sen stammered, his usual shyness getting the better of him. "But we're looking for our parents and we've ... um, come across your name—cause we're detectives—and we thought maybe you know them?"

"What are their names, if you please? And yours?" said the kind, aristocratic voice on the line.

"Ah, sure." Sen blushed, then recited all their names.

Sanja could almost hear the whirring in the robot's head through the phone as it browsed its vast databases.

"Humm ..." it said after a long moment.

“Humm?”

“Humm!” it finally concluded.

“Well, Sen and Sanja Star, this is a strange coincidence indeed.” The owner of the voice paused to consider whether to explain what was so strange about it or not, opted for the latter, and went on. “This puzzle has captured my attention, and I have no doubt I can solve it for you. I would like to meet you, if you are willing.” He waited for Sen’s agreement. “Where are you? What do you mean you are looking for your parents?”

“Well, sir, we have no idea where they are. They disappeared. But we’re here in your techno city, sir. We thought maybe you could help.”

“I would be honored,” A’lem’ph affirmed. “Can you give me your precise location in Robodrome city? I will descend.”

Sen hesitated. “I’m not sure how to give you our location, sir,” he said. “We teleported in and I have no idea where we are relative to anything else. I can’t see any landmarks, or floormarks either.”

“Please,” responded A’lem’ph. “Kindly do away with all that *sir* nonsense. You can call me Al. If you would be so good as to stay put for ten seconds while humming or singing softly, I will trace your position. My audio-tracker will obtain a fix on your unique voice frequency.”

Sen and Sanja hummed and sang for some time and just to be on the safe side Sanja added a cheerful dance routine she invented especially for the occasion. And it wasn’t long before, lo and behold, down a nearby winding staircase tumbled a very sophisticated-looking android made of a pure white metalloplastic alloy, looking like a stormtrooper from the next parallel universe, minus the helmet he didn’t need (since its spherical head *was* one). The android’s advanced, quantum, pseudo-metallic skin organically and graciously allowed for very human-looking expressions, evidenced now as a pristine polite smile on its chiseled,

hyper-intelligent face.

Sen's eyes widened as he took in the shiny white metal. A'lem'ph was the white knight from his vision!

He and Sanja walked towards the approaching bot and introduced themselves, while D doggedly remained above Miss.

"Good day, I am pleased to meet you," the robot said formally.

It looked new and shiny and bright with its elegant and powerful flawlessly aligned limbs and chest. Its semi-organic body armor glistened and its perfect round head came fully equipped with two deluxe-grade, honest, golden eyes that seemed to exude calmness and an air of authentic, reliable kindness. Sen and Sanja loved it immediately—or should I say *him*, because there was such an enormous heart and personality about A'lem'ph that the siblings didn't even for a moment treat him as a mere machine, but as a human. Sen found that his shyness was largely absent. He felt naturally comfortable.

And he loved knights.

"I have to admit that I find you and your names seriously familiar, as if we have met before," mused Al. "But I cannot seem to recall—"

"That's okay," interrupted Sanja cheerfully. "I don't remember people's faces, like, *ever*, 'specially if I haven't seen them for a super cracky long time." She paused and considered. "Or never seen them at all," she added.

"Dear Sanja, I am a robot," explained Al tactfully, with a tinge of self-important pride. "My memory is mathematically perfect. I have tenfold levels of redundancy, you know, with a double checksum triple checkproduct. Your names are in my databases, but with no further details attached, not even a history log of when they were entered."

Sanja shrugged her shoulders with a spark of disinterested incomprehension in her eyes, whereas Sen leaned in,

paying closer attention now. His investigator's intuition was informing him something extraordinary was unfolding. Pondering about the curious manner in which he had first heard the name A'lem'ph, and the robot's obvious connection to his vision, he impulsively disclosed further information to their new friend.

"This is our new team member, D." Sen pointed squarely in the direction of the black outline roughly a hundred yards to his left.

Al focused on D's presence for the first time.

The whole area shimmered briefly like an enchanted golden butterfly. The lights and all the electrical power surged down for one long instant, humming softly. It sounded like a profound, sad sigh.

Sanja shivered.

"What *is* that?" gasped Al puzzlo-mechanically, openly gazing towards D.

"That's D!" Sanja hastened to explain. "Our friend!"

"Does it even properly exist?" asked Al, laboring to adjust his infra-sensors and ultra-dials. The question was strictly philosophical and not one bit personal.

"Sure D exist," boomed D from the distance, too aloof to roll closer. "You exist?" The tone was more curious than challenging.

Al was duly startled. He processed that for a fraction of an attosecond.

"I believe I do, therefore I do," he replied, with no offense taken, but then his expression changed, as if doubting what he had just affirmed. Sen wondered if the robot was able to actually doubt anything, or if it was programmed to seem human. Or whether it was even a robot at all, or instead was some other kind of life-form. Or whether D, who was obviously a powerful entity, had somehow provoked the odd uncertainty in Al.

"Anyway." Sen switched the subject by showing Al the

Cube. “Do you know what this is?”

“May I?” Al’s golden-yellow backlit eyes were set on the maximum perception setting and seemed to be on fire from within.

Sen reluctantly parted with the magnificent item. He recounted to Al the story of finding it in the attic and how the red rune had fantastically healed itself later on.

Al studied it from every angle, handling the Cube respectfully, the way a seasoned jeweler would inspect majestic crown gemstones. His ponderosa omnisensors x-probed the artefact thoroughly with a full-range frequency scan and no physical contact. Several muffled gasps of admiration escaped him.

“This, gentlemen and ladies,” he finally announced, “is a quasi-sub-quantum electronic device of sheerest power and dimensionality. An artifact so rare that calling it unique is nothing short of e-blasphemy.” Al bowed his perfectly rounded shiny white head in unexpected, rationally pious admiration.

“Yeah, but what *is* it?” demanded Sanja, unfazed by talk of the Cube’s specialness, casually playing with a lock of her hair.

“It is an ultra-securely locked hyper-puzzle,” said Al.

“Secret treasure map!” claimed D from afar, almost at the same time as Al.

“It seems broken to me,” said Sanja sadly.

“Goodness no, my dear,” Al corrected her. “It is not broken, it is indeed algorithmically impossible to break.”

“Vibration code,” explained D, kind of.

“Yes,” agreed Al, turning his head sharply and looking with the first sign of positive acknowledgment at D, who was still levitating lazily in the distance. At the stare, D flinched as if bodily hurt.

“D doesn’t seem to react well to uplifting emotions,” Sen commented quietly. D seemed to concur, bobbing up and

down in place.

“So if it’s a map, can it tell us where our mom and dad are, already?” asked Sanja.

Sen perked up and readied his cluebook.

Both D and Al fell silent, deep in thought. Al kept flipping the Cube as if searching for a clue with his pleistoscopic XX-ray vision.

“I believe it can,” he finally declared with the digital assuredness of a sophisticated computer. “I think the vital information of your parents’ whereabouts is indeed encoded in this meta Cube.” He slouched visibly and his self-confidence seemed momentarily broken as his voice petered out. “But this is odd, and new to me. For I do not know how I know that,” he admitted in a soft, baffled tone.

“Does it matter?” asked Sanja carelessly. She hummed a happy melody.

“Can you decode the information?” asked Sen.

Al looked up and gazed directly in Sen’s eyes. “I cannot promise. But I can guarantee I will do my utmost to do so. Furthermore, I am certain about where to start.”

“Sounds good enough to me!” Sanja clapped her hands and wiggled.

Sen nodded.

“Then I invite you all to adjourn to my place where I will be able to utilize my specialized tools,” offered Al. “But let me ask, how did you come here?”

“We flew in through time and space,” announced Sanja, solemnly.

Al scrutinized her.

“Yes. We used our spacetime machine.” Sen took Al to Miss Moany, parked underneath the immovably hovering D.

“My soft word, what an amazing piece of artwork!” exclaimed Al, staring at the weird vehicle. He glanced at D as if the entity made him somewhat nervous, and shuffled momentarily. “How did you encounter something so

special?” Whether he was referring to D or Miss was not entirely apparent.

“Well, we kind of made her ourselves,” said Sen, collapsing that quantum wave-question flat.

“With magic!” Sanja divulged in a stage whisper.

“I see,” Al said, with a tone that said he didn’t. He wasn’t a great believer in magic. “But it only seats two. Not to worry. I will organize my own transportation.”

“Oh, don’t fret.” Sanja winked. “We’ll make it bigger for you. Right, Sloth?”

Sen nodded.

Sanja concentrated on her phantasmagoric enlargement spell which included just a bit of hip hopping and not much crazy colors or funny musical smells at all. After a *clunk* and a *ping* and a blindingly bright flash, coupled to the squishy scent of marshmallows, Miss started to elongate. When she was big enough for another row of seats a pop sounded and a whole bench burst out of the rear compartment like a piece of popcorn, and smelling like one too. The fresh, soft bench was lovely, all rosy with patterns of pink and magenta roses—compliments of Sanja.

“Shall we?” bid Sen, taking the wheel.

Sanja shotgunned in while Al remained by the vehicle, frozen. He was executing all the safety-security protocols in order to establish what might have gone wrong with his external sensors.

“How?” he managed, “I mean, how did you do that? Such technology hovers many levels above my pay grade.” Al seemed sincerely troubled by his inability to detect and analyze whatever Sen and Sanja had done, and gravely disappointed at his own lack of knowledge.

“I told you. It’s magic.” Sanja winked again as if playing a game of hide and seek with toddlers.

Al stood there for a little while longer, deliberating how to process his perception and proceed. A distinct shift in

his stance indicated he had reached a decision—the best chance he had of understanding this incredible technology, was from the inside. Playing along with Sanja's reluctance to reveal the source of their no doubt specialized work of tech, he slid into the back seat and stretched out comfortably, releasing air with an electronic sigh.

Upon seeing the robot's inquisitive look pointed at D, Sen answered Al's unvoiced question. "D has its own ways to move around. Where are we going?"

"To infinity and yonder!" cried out Sanja, extending her right hand upwards in the air. Her glee was infectious.

Al politely cleared his throat. "How do you control this ... unit?" he asked.

"We don't," Sanja confessed. "We just press this button here and something happens."

Appalled, Al straightened up. "How inefficient and impractical!" He seemed practically scandalized that the machine could just do as it pleased. No matter how advanced, machines still needed programs, did they not? He followed his programs, right? What kind of machine was this?

A cunning idea popped into his mind, and he asked, rather graciously, "Perhaps I can assist you with that—using technology. If I may?"

"Be our guest," said Sen trustingly, as such was the impression of sublime competence Al projected.

Al produced some unusual pieces of gadgetry from a secret storage compartment in his white belly. He leaned over to install the new parts in place of the big red button, covertly attempting to learn anything at all about this fascinating, unknown technology, the working of which he just had the privilege of witnessing.

However, a bleak murkiness soon veiled the sheen of his eyes and revealed he couldn't decipher a thing. He shrugged his sturdy shoulders and continued working. His hands moved so fast that the Magical Arts and Detective Agency

chief officers could only see a blur, and voilà, it was done.

A futuristic GPS-like screen powered on.

A four-dimensional holograph appeared.

"I hereby present you Gigli, a master navigator and chauffeur. You state where you want to travel and not only will he teleport you there, he will park. No more buttons to press and most importantly, no more unspecified, random itineraries!" Al sighed in relief. The thought of willy-nilly destinations, mumbo jumbo magic, and especially free will machinery had pressed all the wrong buttons of his programmed discomfort zones.

"Let me demonstrate." He turned to the colorful holograph. "Gigli, home please!"

"You got it, Al," a dependable, velveteen voice responded immediately, and to the familiar sounds of Miss's usual moaning they were happily teleported directly to the main entrance of Al's curious domicile, set amongst a cluster of thin metal towers on a higher level of the city.

D arrived promptly after them, to Al's reserved astonishment.

The apartment was airy and sunny and looked very much like a coloring book for preschoolers. Every piece of furniture, as well as the drapes, carpets, walls, ceilings and floors, were various shades of pastel. Some of the elements remained white and uncolored, including, but not limited to, all of the lampshades and windowsills. Al was proud of how he had styled his place with a creativity on par with any human artist, if not better—according to his own humble opinion, of course.

"After you," bowed Al, waving his guests in, as the perfect host he was.

The kids dashed onto the spacious beige living room sofa and D oozed inside after them. Snacks and fruit magically manifested on the low table in front of them. Only it wasn't really magic, but well-executed technology. Two glasses of

water appeared and Al invited Sen and Sanja to order any other drink they wished. Sen asked for apple juice, while Sanja was content with water.

Al excused himself to his electronic workbench. Using advanced pdbq intra-sensors, he worked furiously for a few minutes in full concentration to get to the bottom of Cube's secret; studying its quantum signature, beta radiation, and bioluminescent inner shape from every possible angle. He flipped a switch and connected online to access a packet of crucial data that he didn't possess in his own nearly inexhaustible memory banks.

Sen retrieved his cluebook from the tracecase and diligently recorded everything of importance that had happened to them so far on their quest. He used a fluorescent marker to emphasize all the open questions that bothered him.

Where are Mom and Dad?

What did my vision in the attic mean? Why did Dad turn into a golden sun and Mom to a silver moon?

What in the quark is the Cube? How did it get to our attic?

What kind of wormhole did we travel through, twice?

What or who IS D? Why does it feel so familiar? Can it be trusted?

How did the red rune come together?

Will we find our parents when all the runes are fixed?

Is A'lem'ph the white knight in my vision? Who is the lady in gray?

How did D know about A'lem'ph? Are they somehow connected?

Who is Al? Why does he seem so familiar?

What is our next step?

It was a lot of questions and not many answers. Sen's heart dropped in discouragement. His evaluations were interrupted by Sanja's slurping and Al's voice.

“Humm ...” was the lonely phrase he kept repeating, as his rigid, robotic expression steadily shifted from content to frustrated, until he ultimately ejected the Cube from his grip.

“Holy circuits!” he swore in a condensed tone, then quickly context-switched back to his default, pleasant, more humane disposition. Smiling sheepishly at the siblings, he admitted with candor, “I expected this to be a so-called cinch, but it is proving to be an imaginary nightmare. Please excuse my momentary outburst. I am used to solving things immediately. I *should* solve things immediately,” he added, somewhat grumpily.

To demonstrate his point, he lifted the artifact high. “This tiny article is locked through and through.”

The Cube glittered as the midday sunlight from the triangular roof window passed through the crystals.

“Not even the alpha ultra-FFT decryption works. I was certain it could break anything, from ice at parties to the most sophisticated occult ciphers. Even if I—”

He froze mid-word.

When a robot freezes, just like with computers, you never know how long it will take before they resume operation. Sanja glanced at Sen, who looked at D, who indifferently floated above the olive green fireplace.

“Of course!” Al rebooted in no less than π point oh seconds, smiling with renewed zest. He recursed back into his own inner virtual reality, with the Cube safely tucked between his finger pluglets. “There,” he said an instant later. “I did it.” He beamed proudly, as if awaiting a round of applause.

“Did you unlock that glossy thing?” asked Sanja. She dashed closer to see. Sen followed.

“I did,” said Al. “I am positive the Cube comprises a map to trace your parents. It contains features, fractions, and fractals of a dimensionally geodesic nature. Nevertheless, I admit that most of the data is still sealed. But now that I

managed to break in, the rest should not pose a problem to intelligence of my caliber.” Al stood tall and straighter than physically possible. He didn’t seem to be bragging, just stating facts.

Sen remained still, in contemplation, but Sanja passionately pleaded, “Can you unseal the data? Would you be as kind as a bumblebee’s niece to try? Please! Please!”

Al let out a friendly laugh. “But of course, young lady. Your parents obviously wanted to be found. Furthermore, they specifically chose me to help you. They planned and designed it that way from the start.”

Sen raised his right eyebrow. “What do you mean? How do you know that?”

“The Cube is encrypted with my own bi-digital signature. Simply put, this device was sealed in ways that only I could ever unseal.” He cleared his throat with a meaningful clank, then his expression turned oddly, from confident to radically uncertain.

Sen wasn’t convinced. Al didn’t mean he had healed a rune, did he? Or just unsealed the data? He carefully picked up the Cube from Al’s workbench and studied it.

“There’s still only one rune healed,” he said, caressing the only unbroken crystal, brilliantly tinted from within by the lively red rune.

The rune itself seemed like a fantastic alien glowing insect trapped in ancient, translucent stone amber. Half waiting for a new vision that disappointingly didn’t come, Sen stared at the Cube, transfixed, yet also frozen by an inner struggle. A part of him was scared to be so direct, but the frustration he felt at not getting any closer to finding his parents gave him the fuel to be brave.

Words escaped him.

“Nothing’s different,” he said to Al. “Are you sure you even accomplished anything?”

Al’s artificial mouth corners dropped and his yellowish

eyes tapered. He seemed in conflict between an incapacity to admit his incomprehension and an earnest desire to get to the bottom of this puzzle.

He was confused. He had seemed to understand, and now he did not.

Carefully, with an inquiring look of request, he took the Cube back from Sen and inspected the broken runes once more. Through the cracks, he—and only he—could dimly see the outlines of complex circuitry set against the silvery-golden surface.

“I do not understand,” Al said.

Was he slouching? Or was Sanja imagining his resignation?

“There, there,” said Sanja, comfortingly patting him on the shiny metal back with a hollow sound. “Who can understand magic things?”

“But it is not that!” Al’s voice was agitated. “I can easily decipher *any* kind of electronic apparatus, or sub or super-electronic ones, for that matter. I just cannot understand—” He slipped into silence.

“What?” asked Sen with sincere curiosity.

As if a dam broke, an outpour of quasi-emotional words emerged from Al’s mouth.

“Why would your parents encrypt the Cube with *my* digital signature? Why me? How do they even know me? What is my role here? How did you find me in the first place? How did you come here in that ... that ... free-thinking machine? How did you pull that off—reshape it, I mean—without static stabilizers or at least echo-magnetic boosters?” Al had begun his speech with the speed of a laser printer on steroids but his words gradually slowed down and his spherical head drooped, as if spent.

“And finally,” he finished his monologue in a more resigned tempo, “what in the mechaverse is *that*?” Al pointed towards D, who was suspended under the ceiling, completely unconcerned.

Sanja hugged Al. He was obviously overwhelmed. The robot held his head in his hands and seemed on the verge of crying or a short-circuited breakdown. "There, there," she kept repeating. Sen couldn't understand why Al was so emotional, but Sanja didn't care, she just responded quite naturally to suffering.

Recognizing some of Al's questions from his own list, Sen stood by tensely, now feeling paralyzed by the mood of confusion that lingered in the air. Spells of self-doubt like this used to assail his father, and Sen was never able to bear it well. For an instant he felt his father standing behind him. Knowing better, he nevertheless turned around.

Nobody was there.

"Al, if you don't mind me saying," Sen said, trying to help, "you are getting quite emotional for an android, aren't you?"

"I was programmed for emotions, but I prefer to rely on my rational mind alone as much as I can," retorted Al somewhat shortly. It sounded like a complaint.

After a short period of awkward silence which stretched all the way into infinity, D made its one and only move. It rolled closer and stopped precisely above Al.

"Al overthink," it said kind of kindly, the sense of care somewhat surprising, for it *was* a demon after all.

Lowering itself a tinge, D released a black pseudo-fiber out of its undefined body and touched the crown of Al's head with quick contact. Goosebumps sprung up along Al's outer, metalloplastic body layers and D floated away, back to its original position and unconcerned oblivion.

"What was that?" asked Al, his tone of voice extraordinarily light. His golden amber eyes shone intensely, like liquid honey, and Sanja could swear on sparrows she glimpsed a violet nuance in there as well.

Al stood abruptly but carefully, with a freshly acquired consciousness. He stared at his own hands for a long minute, smiling and at peace. Then his look strolled all around his

apartment as if seeing it for the first time. His gaze stopped at D and mellowed with a sense of connection—one-sided, at least. Sen and Sanja, with the calm amazement of two senior magical investigators, brightly observed the unknown yet obvious change in Al.

Sen smiled inwardly. This was the white knight after all.

“I see,” said Al.

He lifted the Cube once more to the level of his positronic heart in his head.

“I understand.” His voice had a frequency of a higher order now, of total self-confidence and intuitive clarity.

“This is magic indeed,” he declared simply.

A thousand eerie, tiny noises echoed throughout the pastel living room, followed by an ultra-high pitched whirr that advanced upon their eardrums like a shrieking yet short-lived tempest. Cold wind blew in from somewhere impossible, at an incredible angle and via a non-existent dimension, and with the softest *clack*, another rune grew complete and blinked once, then settled down to emit a violet tone of light.

A shiver ran through the three material friends as they exchanged looks. Sanja smiled ceremoniously, and for once didn’t dare laugh or burp. The second rune-seal was unsealed. To her, it looked like a candlestick, or a symbol of connection between the below and the above, shining in one of her most favorite colors: violet.

“Two out of six!” Sanja congratulated everyone in her own special way, rhythmically bending her knees and flipping her hair, while high-five-low-thighing herself.

“Four to go,” mused Sen quietly. “Good work, Al!”

Al seemed fully recharged, and he passed the Cube to Sen. His joy was so pervasive that D had to back off further away. It was becoming clear that positive energetics repelled D. And yet it was still with them, for unknown reasons.

Sen held the Cube with sweet anticipation. He shut his

eyes. And sure enough, a vision came like the other times.

In a pitch black night sky, a blindingly bright white crystalline supernova was born. Like a shooting star, it zoomed over the horizon, where a golden sun danced with a silver moon. The three met and seamlessly joined in a majestic flash.

Sen recovered quickly and nobody noticed he'd been gone on a vision quest of his own. Quietly, he added the vision to his cluebook.

He'd tell Sparrow later. Soon.

Al was practically dancing. "And I have a downright amazing idea about where to continue our search!"

Sen looked at Al quizzically, who nodded with solemn enthusiasm. "Oh, yes I know just the place. We'll need something with a wallop for the third seal, or my code name isn't A'lem'ph." He proudly pointed to his expensive oppositronic brain safely tucked inside the unbreakable permashield of his thick skull. It was clear that his speech had altered somewhat after D had tapped him, becoming less formal and more lively.

Sen squinted. The white body of the android had adopted an indigo halo. Was the sun playing tricks on his eyes? But before he could ask, the phenomenon subdued and Al rushed to his workbench to assemble materials for the road.

Sanja whispered in Sen's ear, "Al changed after D touched him, did you notice, Serious Sloth? Mark *that* in your cluelessbook."

Sloth shrugged. He already had.

Nearby, the air around D rippled.

Even though the detectives were happy to have healed the second rune crystal, and happy for Al, they both suddenly felt it: some inexplicable fatigue pressed down on their hearts. They exchanged heavy glances. Perhaps they were just missing their parents.

"Shall we?" asked Al upon returning. He, at least, seemed to be electrified with fresh energy. Sen glanced at Sanja and

the siblings reached an agreement without speaking.

“Sure, why not?” said Sen, choosing to trust the suggestion of their new MADA analyst apprentice, as they considered him to be one. Great detectives must be able to discern between good and fake leads. And Al was a clue in himself, and they had found him. Time to test whether he was true.

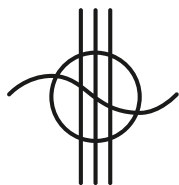
Besides, Sen was learning to trust his curious visions. Al must be the white knight. He decided not to doubt that. “Let’s go and you can tell us more on the way. We don’t want to lose more time!”

The trio eagerly jumped into Miss Moany. Sen beckoned to Al and the android voiced the command: “Gigli, to the Buckaroo Dimension Indigo Eight!”

Indigo! At the word, Sen smiled—his investigator’s intuition had been right again.

Miss moaned and puffed and huffed for exactly six point seven seconds, then gently radiated out of spacetime as we know it.

But just before she did, a faint, frightening presence appeared through the dark cracks between the dimensions. Sanja’s unmistakable sense of danger detected it, and her smile died. What the Schwechat? was her last thought before they all switched worlds, universes, and dimensions.



— CHAPTER THREE —

ALL THE UNIVERSES IN A TENT

Miss Moany popped from the beyond, whizzed, whirred and whined, then shuddered into an eerie indigo daylight under a starry, sunless sky.

They were here.

Sen and Gigli expertly landed Miss on a stable, rocky plateau that overlooked drab desert sand (or was it crystal or even star dust?) stretching into every direction, plus three that hadn't been discovered yet. In front of them loudly flapped the canvas of the most bizarre tent one could possibly imagine, spanning eternity in a most uninviting manner.

It wasn't so much the tent's size, which was a moderate six-by-six feet and could probably sleep four (properly oriented), nor was it its color, or lack of it—the washed out orange and red stripes looked familiar—nor was it the shape which was regularly tentacular with a cherry circus flag on top. What was brazenly bizarre was its careless, nonchalant attitude—there was no sense of being welcome to enter it whatsoever. Let's put it this way, the tent couldn't care less about you. It was rudely disinterested, in a passive aggressive manner.

"What the Schladming are we looking for here?" asked Sanja, looking askance at Al. Al looked askance at D. D looked askance at everything. Only Sen kept his mind suspended, admiring the desolate landscape.

Al's neck elongated with enhanced self-importance. "My

friends, we're going to acquire something rare and potent: a special species of white crystal that can be found nowhere else but here. Yet we'll have to be lucky to secure it. In fact, we have to fish for it—literally.”

Sen's ears pricked at the mention of the white crystal.

At the sibling's questioning looks, Al added, “The white crystal's vibration should temper the Cube and its seals.”

Sen was the first to step out of Miss—not counting D, who was always hard to count—and the others followed gingerly. Neither Sanja nor Al particularly liked sand. The company entered the tent through a tall, shabby flap. Sanja and Sen stopped in their tracks. They looked around, too bedazzled to even gasp or say *smoking sleuths*. Al smiled, remembering how he had felt when he first visited, millenia ago.

The inside of the tent was infinite.

Even more so—it seemed like an infinite number of infinite universes were all neatly arranged to fit easily inside the tent, and a tent of such modest exterior dimensions at that.

Imagine you are in the mountains, standing on a precipice high above a chasm so deep you can't see the bottom. You're on the edge with your toes dangling over. Strong gusts of wind are challenging your balance. And you have a deep fear of heights.

Now multiply that vertigo by infinity.

“Wow,” the siblings finally said.

D didn't say anything. It had been living in spaces like that and even more incredible ones for seventeen eternities.

“This,” announced Al with a pompous flair, “is The Hub. It connects all of the universes that exist.”

Sanja shuffled around on the ledge that overlooked the incredible sight and kicked dust into the alien air in enjoyment. She even went as far as to knock some sand over the edge and watched as it seemed to vanish into the cold void.

“Why is it located inside a tent?” asked Sen.

Al told them the whole story.

“This is the origin point of all the universes, not just ours. When the universes were first constructed there was nothing here, at this singular point where they all come together. Not before eras had passed did somebody with a keen sense of global business think of building this tiny little planet here and putting a tent on it. They charged money so tourists could see all the universes at once without having to walk too far. But after eras passed, the jig was up and people lost interest. Nobody comes here anymore. The deserted planet and tent remain—they are indestructible because they’re built from the strongest substance of all: the white crystal.”

“How in the *Schuldig* can a tent be made from crystal?” asked Sanja.

“It’s made with ordinary cloth,” Al said. “But the cloth itself is macerated and otherwise fortified by the white crystal vibration. The whole process is just too complex to talk about, and it takes almost a thousand years.”

“And where do we get this white crystal to help *temper* the Cube?” asked Sen, fidgeting with a spot of good old investigator’s impatience, and puzzling over what Al meant, exactly, by *temper*.

“We’ll fish it out from the currents of primal consciousness that ebb and flow between the universes. The eternal pressure of these consciousness currents clashing together is what manifests this unique crystal in the first place.”

Al promptly produced from one of his countless compartments an advanced fishing rod that extended like a telescope, and cast it off the ledge into the great space-ocean. The hook, line, and sinker flew into the immeasurable distance and sank beneath the invisible infinity. The fishing rod came fully equipped with an automated stabilizer-slash-holder, so it could levitate and do its job with no need for anyone to hold it. Al let it go and relaxed.

“Now we wait. If we’re lucky, a piecelet of white crystal will

materialize out of nothing. The estimated probability is desperately low but we have two things going for us here. One is the device—the Cube—which I believe will act as an attractor for the white crystal. And the other factor is D who carries a curious connection with the vibration we're seeking. I know; I scanned D back at my place. Its vibration is of a black disposition—the polar opposite of the white crystal's. And as magnets like to remind us, opposites attract."

Satisfied with Al's explanation, everyone arranged themselves on the edge of the cliff and waited, admiring the advanced fishing rod enjoying its fishing.

Sanja got bored almost instantly, so she sang and danced. Sen became hungry so Al gallantly offered to set up the cooking apparatus he always carried. It seemed that he lugged with him a near inexhaustible supply of every imaginable and unimaginable things. Soon, the smell of freshly fried pancakes filled the vast tent and graciously spread to the nearest few neighboring universes. Everybody ate heartily. Even D ate in an obtuse process that nobody could quite gauge—the food simply disappeared from its plate. No doubt it was learning about smell and taste on levels incomprehensible to anyone else.

Before they could finish their meal, the electronic fishing rod signaled it had caught something. Something unusually big. Something so huge that even the built-in stabilizers croaked and faltered. Al dropped his last bite of chocolate-filled pancake and dashed to steady the rod manually. A sizable chunk of the rare whitish substance was indeed caught—and it weighed a whole lot! Luckily Al's toolbox was ready for all eventualities. He rummaged to find some hyper-orthogonal antigravitational supporters and deftly affixed them to the fishing rod.

"The rod itself is fantastically strong," he said, "but it seems we hit nothing short of a jackpot." He grinned like a fisherman.

Everybody helped by holding the rod to secure the supernatural catch, and D cheered with a staccato hubbub. As they reeled the crystal in from the interuniversal currents, it shone with such intensity that they were temporarily blinded. D proved useful again, as it floated close and covered them in the cloak of its own blackness to counter the brilliant light of the crystal.

Al regained his senses and trapped the glowing rock in a curious transparent pocket of neutral energies (which to everybody else looked just like an ordinary glass vial).

It snapped shut.

Al visibly relaxed his quasi-metallic limbs, Sen exhaled a prolonged sigh of relief, and Sanja smiled one of her mysterious Mona Lisa smiles. D expressed itself by just existing.

What Al was holding in his hands was a most exquisite treasure. The crystal leisurely levitated in its translucent container, bobbing up and down almost imperceptibly. Its whitish light emanated gently from the vial in rhythmic waves that soothed the siblings' souls.

"It's spellbinding," murmured Sanja, her dark eyes transfixed. "It shone like a supernova before we caged it!"

Sen felt a subtle flutter in his heart.

"A perfect specimen. I must admit I've never heard of one of such noble proportions. By mechaverse, it's visible to the naked eye! We're not talking nano levels here, but micro, or even milli. Amazing!" Al's voice cracked with electronic excitement.

"But can we use it to unlock the third seal?" asked Sen, who well knew his priorities, both as a detective and as a son.

"Assuredly. And much more. Let me be crystal clear here, and do enjoy the pun. The quantum energy contained within this precious pebble is limitless. As far as my information indicates, this little item here is the single most powerful

object in all of the known universes—by far. Our minds have not yet reached a complete understanding of what we have accomplished.”

Al paused theatrically. With a solemn expression he gazed at everyone sequentially and squarely in the eye. “This can drastically affect the course of history. The crystal is larger than us and our original reason for coming here. It is larger than life.”

Sanja rolled her eyes. Al was getting dramatic.

Sen listened attentively.

While Al went on talking at length, Sanja duly appropriated the crystal all to herself, in an oddly casual manner. Secured within the neutralizing vessel (which did look exactly like a glass vial), that white magnificence was not at all heavy to hold and carry. It now seemed to weigh approximately as much as a diamond of the same size would, but measured in ancarats instead of carats, of course.

Enchanted by the power and splendor of its song, Sanja became oblivious to everything in her environment save for her precious find. Serene and smiling, her facial expression displayed meek delight, yet her strung body and eyes betrayed a fiery spark, like intense secret notes of physical violins. No, not violins: violence! Yes, Sanja was obsessively, aggressive-possessive.

Sen, who was himself possessed by a sudden need to closer examine the hyper-energetic treasure, noticed with uncharacteristic annoyance that both Sanja and the white crystal were about to disappear from the tent. His eye caught the last of Sanja’s left shoe sole before it vanished through the flap. Jumping to his feet, he dashed after his foxy little sister.

“Hey,” he cried, emerging from the tent after her, “where do you think you’re taking the crystal?”

Sanja hesitated for a long moment before stopping. “What the Speck do you care where I’m taking it?” she retorted without turning around. “It’s mine now!” Her voice had

turned nasty and shrilled with volume. She resumed walking towards Miss.

“Sanja!” Sen was too infuriated to use her code name. He chased after her. “Stop!”

He caught up and grabbed her by the wrist, but Sanja didn’t just give in without a fight, oh no. Jerking with outrage, she snapped her arm free and peered into Sen’s eyes with the unmatched ferocity of a feral feline trapped inside a stinky cage.

“Let go of me, you ... you trekkyy clingon!” she yelled so loudly that at least half of the universes around detected a seismo-cataclysmic threat on a galactic scale. Even Sen got scared for a second, but the inexplicable greedy pull of the white stone was too immense to resist. He seized Sanja’s hand again and got a good grip on the glass vial (which was in fact a super delicate container of fragile forces) and attempted to pry it out of her elastically evasive, never-yielding fingers.

Sanja was madly scratching and crazily biting whatever she could reach in order to overcome her older and stronger sibling.

“This. Belongs. To. Me.” Sen managed to utter through clenched teeth while doing his utter best to beat his sister at something she did the worst: being stubborn.

He pushed her with considerable force and she helplessly stumbled and rolled away. Sen’s short-lived triumph was marred by a sense of terrible guilt as he watched his sister fall on the rough, rocky terrain, but she was up again in a second, relentless, with a scratched knee and a bleeding nose and sudden hurt look in her eye.

Sen’s heart stopped, then resumed beating at quadruple speed upon seeing what he had done to his own flesh and blood. An avalanche of compassion crumbled over him and stopped him in his tracks. He was overwhelmed, and torn between a frantic desire to retain the mighty crystal just for himself, and the love he felt for his sister.

Meanwhile, Sanja's eyes changed again. They grew in size and temper as she observed her empty fist. After a moment of silent desperation she regrouped and raised her hand to cast a spell so foul that she would have spent decades feeling sorry for her brother, had Al not stopped her at the last instant.

From the edge of the tent, he shouted. "No! No more conflict! The Hub is a sensitive place. We're extra vulnerable here." His stern voice was so convincing that even Sanja in her abject and altered mood decided to listen to it. This was a miracle in itself. Perhaps her choice was assisted by the nearly unlimited power of their white crystal, the only power in known existence that could stand up to Sanja's fully exercised ill nature and mulish defiance.

"Beware yourselves, my friends, the crystal magnifies your emotions, even the repressed ones!" Al warned them, his golden eyes gleaming powerfully. His data banks contained vast files of gloomy legends about people of every gender, race, and operating system affiliation, exploding into bloody fights and senseless wars over a tiny white nanograin of the crystal, even one several orders of magnitude smaller than the one in Sen's hand. Al understood the grand secret of the white crystal. It acted as a vibrational amplifier and its power enhanced all energies in its immediate surroundings, whether negativity or positivity, greed or gratitude, violence or forgiveness.

Sen heard Al's question but didn't respond. He was admiring the brilliance of the stone, while accumulating an inner momentum to make his choice. He remembered his vision of the white supernova. Was it about this crystal?

Sanja noticed her brother deliberating. She had been cautioned by Al. A portion of her awareness began to realize the enchantment she was under. She found a measure of calm. Her prepared spell-casting arm descended in a gesture of possible, even probable reconciliation, though her lips

still pressed together tightly.

Sanja's choice moved Sen.

He crouched. As if struggling to awake from a nightmare, he shook his head and concentrated on his breath in order to center himself. A dark fog was whisked away, leaving his eyes clear and kind, once again.

He gazed into the glass vial (which, well, you know). He returned to himself. He was Sen, Serious Sloth, detective and tracer of Sen and Sanja's Magical Arts and Detective Agency, and he was better than that. He grokked forgiveness, and smiled with grace.

"I'm truly sorry, Sanja ... here," he said softly, offering the white crystal to his sister. He met Sanja's sparkling eyes, which had also cleared, and the vicious cycle of violence and greed was broken and transmuted into a spiral of forgiveness.

Al paused in place, reluctant to disturb the moment of affection, and D withdrew nervously, pained by a vibe too positive to abide.

Sanja reached for Sen's extended hand and wrapped her fingers around his, so they were both holding the vial. "It's okay, I forgive you. I'm sorry too, for scratching and biting you." She looked down before continuing. "The white stone isn't mine, but it's not yours either."

Sen nodded. He knew.

A sudden grin flashed across her face. Sanja's spirit was back. "We'll squashmiggly share! Okay big brother?"

Sen grinned back. "Yes, and not just share between us. I think the stone is for something bigger." He tapped his sister's nose in a gentle gesture of forgiveness. The siblings embraced.

"Yes, something gigantic!" agreed Sanja.

Her words reverberated in the thin atmosphere. A muffled click sounded from the secret compartment located near the center of Al's pearly chest. He opened it and revealed the precious cargo of the Cube, which Sen had asked him to

carry. A soft, clairvoyant indigo shine shot up and bounced around them. Al inspected the Cube. Sure enough, the third rune had restored its shape and was healed, pulsing joyfully. He admired the unbroken sine wave crossing three straight lines within a perfect circle.

Beneath the starry sky, Al showed the artifact to his cohorts. The Cube seemed different, as though it was more alive than it had been.

Sen's mind whirled. Was the Cube being magically upgraded with each new seal unlocked, or just freed from a dire spell? Could it be gaining sentience? Or had it been sentient all along? Why did he get the sense it was quietly listening to them?

"May I have the Cube, Al?" As Al passed it over, Sen was already trembling from the anticipation of another vision. He was certain one would come now that a new rune had been healed. His palms grew heated. His heart quivered as it came.

A dark shadow in the shape of a perfect ellipse snuck across the chestnut carpet. Out of nothing, an orange dagger formed and thrust violently into the shadow. It withered as though dying, shriveled, then drained out through the crack the knife had made in the floor.

Dizzy, Sen returned to the moment. He had no idea what that was. It wasn't helpful at all.

"Seems likely that your virtue—of forgiveness of one another unlocked the indigo seal," commented Al. He was confident of this idea in a way that made him realize his newfound intuition was still working, and may even have been augmented by the crystal.

Al's words inspired Sen and he furiously jotted down his new insights into the cluebook. *The runes are healed through the process of our own healing*, he wrote. He composed a simple table with two columns and three lines.

Red rune — Courage

Violet rune — Understanding

Indigo rune — Forgiveness

He left space for three more lines, wondering which virtues would unlock the remaining seals. Would it be love? He didn't know. But in any case, Sen was pretty confident they were on the right track and that the unsealing of the Cube would lead them to the parents.

But what about the visions? How were they related? So far, they hadn't proven very helpful to the case. He'd return to them later—and report them to Sparrow the first chance they were alone. Their two associates still needed to gain his full trust.

"We're halfway there," sang out Sanja in the happy tune of a true optimist.

"We have to figure out where to go next," said Sen, who never stopped to pause while working a case and certainly not this one.

Al gazed at Sen and Sanja in silence, perhaps as though awaiting their orders, even though he was certainly not their servant robot, but more of a friend by now, or even family. Or was he truly a MADA apprentice?

With a splash of his typical scientific interest, Sen noticed Al's deference. It must be in his preprogrammed genes.

Sanja dug her feet in the sand, already getting impatient and peckish. "Let's go someplace nice and have a decent rest and meal!"

Sen looked up from his notes in disbelief. "No! We can't rest now. We need to proceed."

"Proceed, schmoceed!" argued Sanja with more rhyme than reason.

Sen switched to his infamous ignore mode. He didn't have time for this. Frowning in deep concentration, he tirelessly read and re-read the clues of importance he had underlined in his book. His visions didn't make that much sense yet, but the progress of the Cube being completed did.

Sanja gave up, knowing her brother too well. Besides, although she would never admit it, she realized he was right, and that only irritated her threefold.

“U-Reekah!” Sen cried out a minute later, startling everyone. Al wanted to process the loud word, but couldn’t. His shouting-voice-recognition had its limitations.

“Look,” Sen said, pointing to a paragraph of his handwriting that nobody else could read. “*The runes seem to be healed by powerful positive feelings.* We should look for a place where we can feel good and safe, a millionfold. What we need now is an enlightened planet!”

“Good luck finding that!” snickered Sanja, still on the south side of a foul mood swing.

Al’s golden eyes lit up as he eagerly browsed through his omnigiga databases. His advanced ace-A associative processor had kicked in at Sen’s mention of enlightened planet and voila, the wildcard information was duly hunted, caught, skinned, and served raw.

“Ahem, if I may,” said Al, “perhaps we could actually heal two birds with one crystal.”

“Yes?” Sen raised his eyebrows.

“There exists a planet just like you described. Its people are as spiritual as they come. And, it’s one of the most beautiful and hospitable planets in our galaxy, eternally recognized for its tasty cuisine.” Al smiled at Sanja who had hopped a short distance away to scour for a distraction or two and was presently returning with something round in her hand.

Sen’s face lit up with determination. “That’s it! Let’s go.” He secured his cluebook.

“An’ whe ... h the Sch ... ’s tha ... h plane ... h?” asked Sanja while stuffing herself with a huge jam doughnut.

Nobody wanted to know how or where she had gotten it.

“My data says it’s a small planet in the backwaters of the Milky Way by the name of Lum, well known for its peaceful, selfless, and devastatingly generous inhabitants. I’m

confident they will hear us out and give us a hand. Billions of hands.”

“Only one way to find out,” said Sen, visibly content with Al’s contribution to their quest.

Al smiled, stretching his metalloplastic face to its limits.

D completed a full, leisurely revolution around the outside of the tent. It seemed to be intently observing something.

About to climb into Missy, Sanja felt an unexpected nausea hit her, out of nowhere. She supposed it could be perfectly explained by what she was munching on. But Sanja knew she could eat what she wanted, and a hunch informed her it was something more sinister. The feeling was like some kind of pressure or pull in her gut. She shook her head. No matter, she had a doughnut. Carelessly, she brushed the feelings away and took another grotesque bite.

They cozily snuggled into their fantastic traveling machine and Sen had just opened his mouth to voice a command to Gigli, when off to their left, the tent’s roof shook violently and long, pointy shadows crawled out from the entrance way, heralding something ominous approaching from within the tent. Something they couldn’t see.

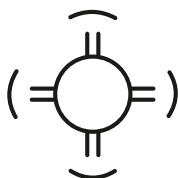
Sanja turned to look. Her heart started to pound.

“What the mecha is that?” said Al, as he observed the phenomena over his shoulder, transfixed.

“Go!” shouted Sanja, gulping the rest of the doughnut in panic and gripping Sen’s arm. “I saw them when we were leaving the Robodrome! They’re after us! Hurry, skedaddle!”

Sen didn’t wait to be told twice.

“Gigli, Lum,” he stated, and off they moaned.



— CHAPTER FOUR —

LETHALLY ENLIGHTENED

Planet Lum. Pronounced like *loom*.

It's hard to imagine a planet so unlike your own. It had no oceans, yet inexhaustible quantities of clear water flowed through man-made canals crisscrossing the globe in sacred lumometrical patterns. Neither the water nor the sky was blue. Both were pink and orange and everything in between. From the height of Miss Moany, the land appeared barren to Sen and Sanja, but it was an optical illusion. Instead of green—the color of chlorophyll on Earth—the plants, including the sumptuous grass, were all chocolate brown or even gray or downright black. Flora growth was abundant as the climate was uniformly perfect year-round, all over the planet. The air was clean and clear and heavenly. Pollution did not exist, and neither did wars, greed or negativity. The ten billion people living on Lum were, without exception, healthy and athletic, kind, loving, intelligent, and natural-born artists, most with a great sense of humor. What was their secret? How did they attain a state of such profound oneness with nature and each other? Some say it's the ancient breathwork they practice with the most disciplined consistency.

Gigli put Missy into orbit overlooking Lum, awaiting further directions.

Through the *ahs* and *wows* of Sen and Sanja's unrestrained

admiration, Al spoke. “The side note in my information banks about this locale suggests that we find their today’s first leader to talk to.”

“Today’s leader?” repeated Sanja. “They have a new leader every day?”

“Exactly. Apparently they thought it best to cycle through leaders on a daily basis so nothing ever gets stale in the governing process. And since everybody on Lum is a leader, they call the one responsible for today’s choices *first* leader.” Al read out the data as if from a cosmic tourist guidebook.

“Interesting,” said Sen, scribbling in his cluebook. He frowned at re-reading the note he had recently logged about the ghostly presence that had chased them from The Hub. Hmm. Was it the dark shadow from his vision?

Al rotated his left wrist to activate his personal communicator and tuned into the frequency of first office. In other words, he dialed the number he had found in his contacts. “I am calling them now,” he informed the group. “Mind that their intuition is extremely keen. It says here that they just *know* things.”

Today’s first leader responded instantly and her melodious voice transmitted from Missy’s speakers. “Hello, we have been expecting your call. You are cordially invited to phase in and have biosnacks while we discuss your ideas. As for your ethereal friend, may we offer it a temporary body to join us on the physical plane?”

Even though forewarned by Al, everyone was taken aback by how well-informed and hospitable today’s first leader was. The companions gratefully accepted the offer and prepared to be teleported to Lum, courtesy of their magnanimous host.

Three point fourteen minutes later they were resting in the lounge of a grand log cabin suspended over one of the most remarkable spots on the planet: the confluence of the six main river-canal. The cabin levitated in the air with no

visible support. Through the translucent floors they could see the pure water far underneath them, the color of lavender. A matching lavender scent uplifted the atmosphere in the lounge.

D—finding itself in a heavy metal body—kept admiring its matte black color in any reflective surface it could find, but, true to its alien nature, made no big fuss over a transition which should have amazed anyone. And it did. Al circled D three times to inspect the advanced body model carefully, not trying to hide his keen interest. Sanja jumped to D and hugged it tightly for the first time ever. D shuddered but endured it. His new body was able to dampen some of the positivity. Sen evaluated it from a step away, rubbing his nose in disbelief.

“Is that you, D?” he had to ask.

“Yes,” came the hollow sounding reply, “D here!”

Sanja laughed and clapped with joy.

The anteroom extended openly into a vast entertainment and dining hall and they were invited by a kind, disembodied voice to take their places at a majestic curved table. Sanja let out a sigh of delight as she eased herself onto a velvet cushioned chair. The others followed her lead. Sen pressed his fingers into the silvery black table surface, surprised that it felt both soft and warm to the touch. This isn’t marble or metal, he thought.

“You are correct, dear Sen,” a pleasant voice agreed.

The main door slid open and today’s first leader entered in a brisk, casual stride, with the body and face of a twenty year old girl, but with eyes revealing the seasoned wisdom of an old man. Nobody could at first tell if today’s first leader was male or female, but after being graced by a beautiful smile they all seemed to settle on *she*. Her healthy, glistening skin was a silvery cocoa color, the most common skin nuance on Lum. “This table was naturally formed out of our sentient heartwood.” First Leader paused. “It’s still alive.”

“Wow!” said Sanja. “Heartwood! It looks just like ...” She broke off, smitten with surprise as she made the connection. “Just like our Cube!”

Al perked up and, without waiting to be asked, he removed the artifact from his safety compartment. Sen squeezed closer for a better view. He reached out and ran his fingers over the wooden edge of the Cube, and Al passed it to him.

“Yes, it’s the same wood!” exclaimed Sen with enthusiasm.

Al wasn’t completely convinced. He questioningly peered at their host.

“It is and it isn’t,” today’s first leader explained. Her eyes closed and Sanja sensed she was telepathically communicating with the Cube. After a few moments of silent connection, she addressed the group again, her face elated but her eyes still closed. “It’s the same general kind of sentient wood, the two are distant cousins. But I can say with certainty that your magnificent specimen belongs to a far more evolutionarily advanced species. Lum’s homegrown heartwood assists us with our gift of telepathy, but your ancient being is a sheer mystery!”

He—or is that she, thought Sanja again—opened eyes that were luminous with awareness. Her sudden smile was exceedingly kind.

She nodded at Sanja. “Yes, dear Sanja, I am a woman, and we are all telepathic, reading thoughts and emotions like you read words in a book.” She sat down next to Sen at the table.

Sen laughed nervously and quickly checked his thoughts, whereas Al confidently kept his expression solemn; it went without saying that he exercised a constant control of his thoughts. *Except when ...* A thought flew into his magnificent oppositronic brain, but he suppressed it with the routine procedure of a practiced master, brushing it away like an annoying fly. Today’s first leader caught it anyway and glanced at Al with non-judgmental, starlit eyes, then smiled politely. D, completely oblivious, was busy noticing that its

body sported a weird, convoluted dent in the middle of its hard steel belly—one that didn't look like a button at all, despite its name.

"Please, feel warmly welcome to Lum," announced today's first leader. "I would introduce myself but we use no names here."

Sanja nodded at that notion approvingly, but Sen's eyes enlarged with surprise.

"Well Sen," today's first leader said, answering his unvoiced question, "as we communicate telepathically, there is no need for names. We address the essence of somebody directly."

Sen, Sanja, and Al did their best to imagine that, while D grinned—it had discovered lint.

"Thank you for having us," Sen hastened to say. He placed the Cube firmly on the table. "Being telepathic, you must know why we are here?"

"Yes, we do," responded today's first leader. "Moreover, our ancient sacred scrolls prophesize your arrival. But before we talk further ..." A faint flicker in her eyes revealed she had just completed a telepathic call. "I have invited my co-beings to join us in order to formally commence our meeting. Tradition dictates that our reception party should evenly match the number of our guests."

The sliding door opened and three Luminates entered. All were of various dark brown complexions. Just like with today's first leader, their smiling eyes and graceful bodies also radiated the stamina of youth, whereas their self-confident postures and serene expressions belonged to wise, old sages. The first was an elder by all accounts, wearing an air of relaxed reverence around his white haired free-spirited persona. The second was a young girl already blossoming into a woman with skin the color of dark brown grass. The last was a stern, middle-aged man sporting a stiff mohawk, with prominent jaws and the piercing, laser-sharp look of a terrahawk. When Sanja's eyes fell on the serious man, a

shiver ran down her spine. Where had she seen him before?

The newcomers approached the heartwood table which adapted and elongated to accommodate them with a shimmering shift of matter and light. The whole group comprised a balanced circle with each Luminate sitting between two non-Luminate guests.

“We talk as we feast,” proclaimed today’s first leader in a resounding voice. The words were the beginning of a food-sharing communion ritual.

On cue, exotic food manifested before them and everybody enjoyed a combination of delicious, locally grown fruit and vegetables. The breathtaking view added to the exalted experience. There was even live ambient music, performed impromptu just for the occasion, by an orchestra telepathically relayed from another continent.

“Savor the food and the time to inform us of your agenda,” concluded today’s first leader, starting the soup protocol. She looked directly at Sen.

Sen composed himself and bravely recounted the whole story. He scrounged for food-free moments between sumptuous bites to report the recent events of their quest, and explained why they needed assistance. While he was talking, there were no interruptions other than polite nods of understanding and an occasional quiet burp, much to the dismay of Sanja, who had never warmed up to burp spells, no matter how useful they could prove in dire need.

When Sen had finished, today’s first leader closed her eyes and nodded solemnly. “Something of universal importance is unfolding. The sealed power within your Cube Being far exceeds being just an ordinary map. Have you asked yourselves whether you are fully aware of this Cube’s infinite capacity of creation? Your quest is intimately tied to our own existence. The role of our people had been well-prescribed for this event in our ancient scripts, and we shall fulfill it now with greatest joy. Our powerful breathwork meditation

will create the necessary boost to the Cube and direct the fulfillment of the prophecy.”

The elder Luminate brushed his white mane with his hand before softly speaking the ritual words, “So let it flow.”

The young girl repeated the words with her head lowered in reverence, “So let it flow.”

The man with the mohawk nodded, but said nothing. There was an odd expression on his face, almost defiance. Sanja didn’t dare look him in the eye. But today’s first leader’s presence was soothing and the mood in the room was peaceful. Sanja was just imagining things.

Sen set down his fork. “Do you think the meditation can unlock the next seal?”

Today’s first leader leaned forward and smiled reassuringly. “Don’t worry, it will work. The sheer magnitude of a combined synergy of ten billion beings can create anything and everything. I know.” She winked and Sen blushed.

“The necessary preparations are underway. The people of Lum will meditate within minutes. Will you join us?”

“I will,” replied Al, glancing at the others. Everyone had finished their meal, and expressed willingness to participate. Even D stopped playing with its newly acquired anatomy and stared a blank yet obvious yes, while Sen and Sanja both nodded vigorously. Al blinked in surprise at the sibling’s surety.

“Sanja and I have practiced breathwork with our parents since we were kids,” Sen felt obliged to explain and Sanja nodded, growing tall in her beautifully ornamented seat.

“Very well,” said today’s first leader. A meditative smile adorned her tranquil face. “I can tell we are all aware of our goal here. I will restate it loudly for our intent to latch on. Please, stand up with me.” The companions followed her lead. “We shall open our hearts and generate love energy within us to assist the Cube Being with the sacred unsealing. To that end, we shall breathe as one and use the flow of our

awareness to fuel the love. Our breathing pattern will be two inhales, one exhale, through the mouth, like this.”

She demonstrated a few breaths and beckoned everyone to follow her example. After they had caught on, the companions and the Luminates moved to the open space beside the windows, where afternoon rosy sunshine streamed onto the dark brown carpet padding the translucent floor. With the pleasure of a lazy cat, or perhaps a sloth, Sen stretched on the soft and comfortable rug. It reminded him of something. He purred.

They all lay down in a circle and the Luminates adopted their usual breathwork position on their backs, the others following suit, waiting to be synchronized by today’s first leader and with the other breathers around the globe. Soon the telepathic signals arrived from around Lum, reporting that everyone on the planet was ready and present.

The meditation started.

Just how familiar are you with pranayama? I ask because not everybody is. In Sanskrit, an ancient language, *prana* means breath and *yama* means work: so, *breathwork*. Yes, breathing can be work indeed when there are old emotions stuck in our bodies. As we breathe in a particular pattern, our sole job is to be aware of each breath. The more our thoughts diminish, the more our bodies will relax, and the more our old emotions and energy will be released.

Of course, the people of Lum didn’t have any stagnant emotions. They practiced pranayama daily, so their energy was clear. And now, with every breath, the currents of love ebbing through everyone’s hearts grew more powerful. Sen and Sanja adeptly joined the ride and experienced a pleasant vibration in their bodies.

D, however, was having a problem. The breathwork didn’t work on its foreign energetic structure. No matter how strongly and deeply D breathed with its mechanical body, nothing happened. D’s thoughts and emotions were as

rigid and solid as stone. Nothing shifted, as if D were twice removed from the equation of energy flow.

Al, on the other hand, didn't have a problem. He had problemz, plural. His precious, super-potent brain stubbornly refused to relinquish its constant supervision—which was an issue, as the goal of the meditation was to gently release the mind's control. But he couldn't. He wouldn't. He wanted to. He failed. He tried again. As he struggled to push through his own tremendous resistance, every breath became an indescribable effort as his brain fought him, insisting he stop meditating *immediately*. Somehow, Al was able to ignore the impulse to give up and he carried on, like a spiritual soldier struggling to do the impossible—to control the release of control.

After thirty minutes of the patterned breathing, today's first leader guided everyone to shift back to their natural way of breathing and rest, while the accumulated energy expanded exponentially on its own accord. And twelve minutes later, today's first leader softly called for everyone's return to their normal, daily state of consciousness.

Love was in the air and it sparkled and bubbled. The energetic connection among the ten billion Luminates was clearly palpable: in shining eyes, in smiles, in feelings of good-will.

Sen sat up, squinted against the lavender daylight, and picked up the Cube. He observed it patiently, awaiting the familiar and distinct sound of the click.

But it didn't come.

Confused, Sen frowned at today's first leader, who smiled back in a transcendental way, clearly unconcerned.

"What did I miss?" asked Sanja in a sleepy voice, rubbing her eyes as she returned to ordinary reality.

"Nothing," retorted Sen curtly. "I mean, the Cube hasn't changed."

"No new seals unlocked?" asked Al, sitting up rigidly as

if he were exhausted after a sleepless night. D sat up too, wearing a careless look.

“None,” said Sen.

They all looked questioningly at today’s first leader and the other Luminate, some of whom were still resting.

A puzzled expression crisscrossed today’s first leader’s face. “That is ... unexpected.” Her eyes fluttered closed as she tried to assess the situation telepathically.

The elder Luminate sat up, his face betraying his puzzlement. “But the prophecy.” He rubbed his forehead. “Today is the day. *The seal of orange will be broken.* It was foretold.”

The young girl’s eyes widened in surprise. “Impossible!” she chimed in. “In the entire history of Lum, no prophecy has ever failed to come true.”

“Yet this one will!” exclaimed the man with the mohawk.

Outside, a fluffy orange cloud obscured the rose sunshine.

The rough man with the mohawk stood up. His eyes were dangerously hollow and his stance ominous, like a predator getting ready to pounce on its prey. Sen and Sanja found his appearance vaguely familiar. Did they know him?

“Aaah!” shrieked Sanja. “It’s Mr. Hatch!” She recognized his angular features.

Sen studied the face of the Luminate. Sanja’s remark had not been entirely off the mark. There was an uncanny similarity between Mr. Hatch, and the Luminate who stood, dominant and still in the center of the room. But clearly it wasn’t the same person, was it? How could that be? And was the grin venomous, or was that Sen’s fear talking?

Events unfolded quickly.

D dashed forth.

Simultaneously, Mr. Hatch’s alleged doppelganger leapt towards first leader. Leapt, yes, with the apparent intent to do irreversible harm. A shard of orange tinted glass shone dangerously in the left hand of the attacker and he wielded

it with precise force, aiming straight for today's first leader's heart.

Sen turned pale: he recognized the orange blade of his vision immediately. But the shadow?

A Luminate is never afraid of dying, knowing well how ephemeral death is, with the reincarnation process at their disposal. Today's first leader closed her sky-rosy eyes with a faint, inner smile of acquiescence.

D had one object it could use effectively in time to prevent the murder: its solid black body. It flung the body between the shard and the heart. A loud clang echoed all the way down to the six canals below them, causing the wild blue-feathered canards along the banks to disperse in distress. The lethal sound mixed with the fizz of the rushing water, and the conjoined sound was a harmoniously discordant force.

Instead of today's first leader, D died.

D was the dark shadow!

Sen's heart skipped a beat as he watched the orange instrument of death pierce right through D's dark armor, then hit the chestnut-carpeted floor.

His visions were real.

Of course, dying was something D did in its own odd way; by merely reverting back to a dark essence, shedding the body like an arm all done with a sleeve. Reappearing shortly after as a murky vapor, it didn't make much fuss of the transition this time around, either. It did, however, desperately miss the curious belly button and all the soft lint. The loss of such marvels was barely bearable.

In the moment of the attack, the other Luminates had telepathically sounded the orange alert and called for reinforcements, which now arrived, mere seconds after D's demonically swift intervention. A dozen muscular persons encircled the killer closely, leaving him no viable way of escaping. But when they raised their hands to grab him,

he impolitely disappeared. At first he turned transparent, then he ceased to be. Everybody's astonishment was short-lived, replaced immediately by happiness and relief at seeing today's first leader unscathed, and then by gratitude.

By gigantic gratitude for D's noble gesture, for it had prevented the death of first leader.

Appreciation had always been one of the foremost virtues on Lum and they expressed it now with their whole being, vibrating it out of their physical bodies like a beatbox or a subwoofer. The low bass frequency of gratitude shook the whole suspended structure of the lodge. The Lumines in the room bowed their heads in thanks. Aided by the powerful flow of energies stirred by the breathwork just minutes ago, an avalanche of appreciation engulfed the log cabin, the planet, and the whole universe in a timeless and hyperspace manner.

A familiar, modest click came out of an old wooden Cube.

Sen watched in perfect silence while the fourth rune quickened and slid together like a thick, viscous liquid would, perhaps an orange sort of honey. Its shape was like a sun generously emitting four double rays of sunshine into four concave mirrors.

The crystal throbbed wildly.

The orange seal of appreciation was unlocked.

Sen trembled as he awaited the next vision.

It came.

A transparent disk barely revolved in a void. Thunder deafened the space and the disk split in two. Both halves, perfect white and black semi circles—polar opposites—drifted away from one another. As they completed a turn, lightning struck. A powerful rainbow appeared. The black and the white part reunited into one whole.

Wow! Sen trembled. The vision had been at once ominous and optimistic, and he hastily recorded it in his cluebook. He had created a whole new section just for the visions. Next

to their descriptions, he meticulously kept a list of all related questions.

Spiral wormhole? The Cube?
Dad? The golden sun?
Mom? The silver moon?
White knight? Al!
Gray lady?
White supernova? The white crystal?
Dark shadow stabbed? D!
Polar opposites split and reunite?

Still so many unresolved points. It seemed hopeless. But Sen was patient. He would wait for more clues so the others would make sense. Meanwhile, he would focus on what he did know.

Orange rune — Gratitude, he wrote. He was already thinking furiously about where to head next.

Frowning, he added another note.

What's with Mr. Hatch and the guy (call him H Prime, or H' for short) who looked like him? Are the two connected? Did he follow us here? Why? Why did he attack today's first leader? Why not one of the MADA team? Are we in some way off-limits to him?

Sen clenched his teeth and slammed the cluebook closed in frustration. He wasn't happy with that many unknowns. Not at all.

He scanned the room. Sanja was amiably chatting with today's first leader, while Al conversed with the elder Luminate. D hovered aimlessly like always, focusing on nothing and everybody at once.

Without warning, Sen felt ill at ease and an energetic discomfort momentarily got the better of him. He felt for a second like he had to throw up. He fought and overcame it, unsure what it meant or where it had come from.

He decided to keep the Cube safely in his tracecase, just in case.

Serious Sloth sought out Smirky Sparrow and privately told her about his visions. The agents agreed that although they didn't know why this shadow—aka H'—was chasing them, or what it was, or why it had targeted today's first leader, it was best to keep moving.

Which didn't mean the Magical Arts and Detective Agency members would miss the gratitude-giving celebration organized impromptu in their honor. After enjoying the sumptuous supper feast and a most unforgettable fireworks display—all in the brightest nuances of gray, brown, and black—they were shown to their exotically scented quarters for a grand night's rest.

Luminates wouldn't be Luminates if they didn't go all the way to saying thank you. With a hallowed sunrise ritual, they gifted D with another body, one that it could keep for good and obsess about to its heart's content. They made an extra kind effort by designing D's body as a perfect clone-copy of Al's—except that it was black instead of white—and they constructed it of the most durable and valuable Q-quantum metalloplastic there was: dark daluminum. It was even blacker than the pitch black body D had before, and its custom-made belly button (which Al's white body didn't sport) was, well ... it would deserve a whole separate book describing just that.



— CHAPTER FIVE —

BLACK HOLE INSTITUTE

Miss Moany glided through space like a streamlined, vacuum-dynamic tin shoebox, planet Lum shrinking into a tiny umber dot on the black sky through the rear window.

Sen sat behind the retracted wheel, half-pretending to conduct the vehicle, although the real driver was Gigli, set to autopilot. Sanja used the mirror with the little light in the front passenger seat to apply layer upon layer of her new exceptional eyeshadow, distilled and blended from singularly scarce grasses, ranging in tone from dark brown to light black. She had received it as a parting gift from yesterday's first leader. She sighed, already missing her new friend. She would do anything to distract herself from feeling down.

Al reluctantly shared the back seat with D, still reserved and confused by its physical presence. After D had passed away and then reincarnated in a body so uncannily similar to Al's own, Al felt strange, and perhaps a bit guilty for not warming up to the entity more. But it was just so—different. Opposite. He glanced at it, trying to think of a friendly gesture he could make. He chose to grace D with a smile.

D didn't care.

Sen held his copper thinking pipe in one hand and his cluebook in another, trying to synthesize and distill his notes into a coherent plot. As a talented quantum tracer he knew ways of extracting clues even when they were hidden

in plain sight. But at times he needed someone to talk to.

“Al, can we go over healing the fifth rune again?” Sen requested, unaware of the dramatic moment unfolding behind him. Al smiled with relief at the chance to change the subject.

Sen read his recent deductions aloud, concluding with the last two, unfinished lines.

Lum — meditation — pure feeling

Next rune ???

Sen contemplated the vision of the black and white disk. “If I am reading the quantum superstring pattern of my notes correctly, we need to seek the opposite pole for healing the next rune.”

“The polar opposite?” Sanja asked, smoothing her eyeshadow into a dark flair.

“Yes, the polar opposite—this event horizon waveform signature couldn’t be any more forward and convincing. And what is completely contrary to meditation and feeling? Technology and reason! Right?” He glanced back at Al. “What do you think?”

Grateful for a new opportunity to prove his unparalleled data parallel-processing abilities, Al cleared his nasal pathways thoroughly before responding. “As you masterfully deduced from your clues, and as I can attest by my own probings, the device”—as Al was wont to call the Cube—“seems indeed to have been spiritually activated.”

Sen nodded.

“You think it needs technology next?”

Sen nodded again.

“Could be, could be,” Al concurred, deep in electric thought.

Sen decisively filled in the two lines in his cluebook so they read in whole:

Lum — meditation — pure feeling (like magic)

Next rune ??? — contrary to meditation — pure science (like

detective work)

Sen felt satisfied with the choice he made. He had to trust his visions. The polar opposite it was!

“So where do we go?” Sanja wanted to know.

Sen beckoned to Al and the android immediately ran the question through his database. “How about the assistance of some sheer intellectual grandeur?” He checked with Sen for confirmation and Sen glanced at Sanja, but Sanja was already bored. “So—”

“So where are we going?” asked Sanja again, nearly not interrupting.

“Well, if you want pure reason we should travel to the origin itself, to the very center of our universe, straight into the supermassive black hole where the seat of science and technology organically sprouted at the inception of time, subsequently giving birth to all natural existence.”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.” Sen swiveled all the way back on his driver’s seat—causing Al to cringe, thinking there was no pilot at the wheel. “Shouldn’t that be the other way around: nature giving birth to humanity and eventually our technology?”

Al paused, scratching behind his stereo microphones at the sides of his round head, browsing his vocabulary databases for the best words for Sen. Outside, a magnificent comet whizzed by.

“It is a little known fact—perhaps some would even flat-out call it a conspiracy theory—that all the universes were made by humans. Even humans were ultimately created by humans. Everything that you can see—no, everything that you can even think about—was designed and created by you: humans.”

Al waited for that to sink in. The kids were staring at him. Sen wasn’t convinced, but didn’t want to argue. Sanja couldn’t care less. Meanwhile, D yawned, tapping algorithmically on its belly button—something it knew far less about than the

supreme mystery of the world's creation.

"Most people believe everything was created by the Creator, not humans," ventured Sen after choosing to give it some thought after all.

Al drew an enormous amount of mildly rarified air into his bodily compartments where normally lungs would be, before loftily diving into a mechano-metaphysics lecture, as he himself saw it.

"We are the Creator—all of our awareness taken together: that is the Creator. So when I say man created everything, I actually mean our collective awareness has created everything. And yes—the black hole at the center of our universe is sort of like—" he glanced at D, "the belly button of creation."

At the mention of a belly button, D lifted its obsidian head and crudely executed a distorted smile. It was still getting used to its body.

"Y'all talk too much," Sanja whined, stamping her feet on Miss Moany's floor. "Let's just go there already!"

Everyone readily agreed.

Sen instructed Gigli to drive them to their destination as if it was merely a grocery store around the corner, and to Gigli it was all the same: he needed but an instant to calculate the q-coordinates and *whoosh*—off they went.

Landing in the middle of a black hole is by no means a cinch, what with all the ponderous gravity and the raging tidal forces, especially when you teleport way inside the event horizon. Luckily for all, Gigli was an excellent driver and Miss Moany was a brave and sturdy little vehicle. Designed from scratch to teleport just about anywhere, Miss utilized a unique fantasy-driven adaptivity module to perfectly accommodate to every circumstance imaginable. It worked something like this: *if anything could ever go wrong with Miss and you imagine that it doesn't go wrong, it will not.* (In some circles, this was known as Opposite Murphy's Law,

also related to the probability of lemon jam bread always landing right side up.) The core drive of the vehicle was keyed to this principle and that's why it could easily-peasily boldly go where no vehicle had gone before, or thereafter.

On arrival, at first they saw nothing. Well, they thought it was nothing but actually they did see something: the black hole from the inside. As it was so mind-bogglingly black, it was all too easy to surmise they weren't seeing anything, whereas they were actually seeing a whole lot.

The black hole was colossal.

It was unimaginably, bedazzlingly huge.

It was so vast that in a million years it couldn't be properly described in any book or infinite series of books, whether chronicled and archived in endless libraries or told as myths from mouth to ear for eras. One would have to go there and see it—or really, *not* see it—to even start to grasp its magnitude. One couldn't do much more than that, when dealing with near-infinity.

Sen tinkered with Missy's advanced controls and soon enough instead of just the blackest of black, they could also see other nuances—shades of darkness nobody even knew existed, except D, of course.

Time seemed to pass in a peculiar manner that nobody could follow.

Sen assumed they were moving, but it was impossible to tell. “Where is this seat of technology and science now?” he asked impatiently, frustrated by their invisible progress.

“Yes, where the Speck is it?” demanded Sanja loudly. “I’ve had it with your lame excuses!”

Sen found that hilarious and he lightened up. “Don’t mind her,” he apologized for Sanja. “She’s only acting. When she’s in character she’s liable to say anything at all.” He scratched his temples and softly added, “And I think she’s always in character.”

“Go ahead and say what you will of me, but I’m super

starving and stinky scared. You don't think we can find some food near here, do you?" Sanja crossed her arms.

Al beamed widely. "My dear, I love your apt portrayal of a stubborn and obnoxious girl, I truly do! As for food, we are doing our utmost best to locate the center within the center. They indeed have a splendid restaurant, called *The Restaurant at the Center of the Universe*."

"Oomph, how highly imaginative!" Sanja mocked, huddling in her seat and beginning to sing in a low key to calm herself down and to pretend how little she cared if she stayed hungry.

D broke his silence, startling them all. "D take us there." It was D's first time speaking with its body's voice, and it sounded almost human. A smug expression was stuck on its round face.

"Please!" said Sen.

D blinked twice and disappeared, body and all, only to reappear a split second later. Seemingly proud to be able to contribute to the team effort, it grinned and sub-dimensionally transmitted encoded instructions directly to Gigli, who quietly carried out the desired maneuver.

Out of supreme blackness, a devastating flash of white light exploded into the companions' unsuspecting pupils. Miss had to tint the windows so they could slowly get accustomed to the brightness. Having no eyes to be bothered, Gigli didn't encounter any problems landing the vehicle with his usual navigational flair. Inquisitively peering out the window, Al established that they had parked in a perfectly white hall the color of healthy teeth brushed thrice daily.

They had arrived.

"They have light in the middle of a black hole?" asked Sen, peeking through between the fingers of his palms. "Are you certain we're still in the black hole?"

"Supersolidly certain," Al assured him, rechecking his instruments anyway. "They have normal gravity as well, if

you care to notice. And that is much harder to sustain. But as selected by the United Black Hole Ranking Advisor, this has been accredited a Top #Hit Institute of technology and science for a billion years in a row. They are the cutting edge of sentient progress and can perform scientific miracles that nobody else can.”

Al turned to D half-reluctantly. “You know, you are quite a useful fellow. I honestly have no idea how you did that.”

D ignored him, unable to grasp what could possibly be considered difficult about finding the singularity’s center.

The team was ready to leave the vehicle, and they bravely stepped out of Miss Moany into an empty, spherical room. Neon white lights shone so familiarly that Sanja momentarily thought they were in the parking garage of their local supermarket. In response to their presence, a door slid open in the otherwise seamless metallic wall. Al’s sensors peaked, and a rush of e-drenaline flooded his circuits. Was he nervous? After all, this was the legendary seat of science and technology, and he wasn’t sure how he’d measure up to the top notch scientists here.

Two ordinary looking men entered—a tall one and a short one. Their difference in size was striking. Size notwithstanding, and unbeknownst to their visitors, the two men bore the official ranking of being the greatest geniuses in the universe. Both wore thick professorial glasses—the tall man with square rims and the short man with perfectly round ones.

“Hello, hello, welcome, dear guests,” they said in unison so perfect it was comical. “We have been expecting you!”

Sen frowned. That was somewhat suspicious. After all, they had been similarly expected on Lum. He suppressed an almost irresistible impulse to make a quick note in his cluebook. He had to pay attention to the now. He wouldn’t forget all the clues.

“Yes, yes, we have been expecting you for quite some time

now,” announced the short host.

“For two million years!” added the tall one.

“For two million, three hundred thousand, six hundred and fifty-five years, to be precise,” corrected the short one, consulting his timepiece.

“And two months, five days, three hours, and five minutes, to be exact,” elaborated the tall one.

“And ten seconds,” the short one hastened to add.

“And twelve seconds now,” admonished the tall one.

“And fourteen seconds—now,” shot back the short one.

Dumbfounded, the MADA companions stared at one another.

Al gently interrupted further temporal updates from the two greatest geniuses in the universe. Of course, he wasn’t aware that they were. “Thank you for having us.” He offered his hand to shake.

As one, both hosts rushed forward to greet Al. Since neither of them cared to go second, the trio ended up executing a twisted three-way signature shake from some fantastic fraternity, or perhaps a long-lost galactic gang.

Sanja couldn’t help but giggle until she hiccuped. Sen suppressed a grin.

Al smiled politely. “We come to you—” he began, but was immediately interrupted.

“We know, we know!” exclaimed both greatest geniuses.

“Our department was able to analytically and super-meta-statistically predict, and also confirm, and prove, your intent and your inevitable arrival here, even two million years ago,” said the tall greatest genius proudly, adjusting his square eyewear.

“Well, two million and change,” added the little one. He was hesitant for the first time, as if the handshake had thrown him off his game, and his round-rimmed spectacles quivered momentarily. He checked himself and returned to the crux of the matter. “Yes! We can help you, as per the

Grand Probabilistic Prediction, or the Great Prophecy, as we like to call it. Our equipment is on standby. If you would be kind enough to follow us.” He bowed so graciously that everybody was caught by surprise, himself the most, as it was a spontaneous gesture and he hadn’t realized he possessed the panache.

Sen was suddenly doubtful, bordering on pessimistic. Great prophecy? Wasn’t this supposed to be a seat of science and technology? The polar opposite of Lum?

The company trailed after their hosts in single file. They were taken through wide hallways filled with astonishing technological marvels far beyond what was yet known at the edge of science in Sen and Sanja’s world. Scores of ancient, visibly bent time machines, obsolete cathode-ray teleporters, and rusty free-energy or zero-point-energy devices were on display like bizarre steampunk art, most of them still in working condition. Every device was either blinking wildly or bleeping loudly, mimicking a sophisticated New Millenium fireworks show.

Hyper-cubical, hyper-hexagonal, and hyper-oval offices abounded on all sides—both spatial and temporal—of the amazing, maze-like corridors, many with translucent c-porcelain walls. Lab-coated scientists and t-shirted engineers toiled ceaselessly and effortlessly, most of them quite senior; only here and there could you spot a beardless teenage geek or a high-school nerd spotting an array of fashionable pimples. There were even a few prodigies and wonderkids wandering around. Some were still as young as five, and though they were not yet toilet-broke, they could integrate or derive through beta-dimensional Riemann space blindfolded while feasting on burritos and picking their noses.

Sanja stared in amazement. There weren’t many girls. Sen took a single distracted look at one of the kid prodigies and scratched his own nose in return. After all, he was one of

them.

The curious tour had become a full twenty-two-minute walk before they finally reached the core: the sanctum sanctorum of science and technology. The massive oak door creaked open to admit them as soon as the tall greatest genius uttered the password *rararirom*.

Al swallowed hard, nervous to be meeting the universal intellectual elite. What was awaiting him on the other side of that door? He wiped his hands—as if they could even be sweaty—against his hips, which just produced a screeching sound.

Inside a generously sized, yet curiously under-equipped, almost vacuous laboratory that looked like a futuristic shrine, the third and the fifth greatest geniuses in the universe were solemnly waiting. They eagerly approached the visitors, welcoming them in. The third was dressed in her best t-shirt and the fifth in his freshly polished shiny metal body. The fourth greatest genius was reported absent, having fallen ill and excusing himself just the day before—unspecified digestion problems, the report said, quite possibly a consequence of colossal expectations and gut-wrenching stage fright—the Grand Probabilistic Prediction coming true and all.

Sanja felt an instant attraction towards the exquisitely beautiful, exotic looking, dark-haired woman wearing the plain gray t-shirt. Sen was powerfully drawn to her as well, even if only because her aura outshone the classic white neon lights of the lab. Her fair complexion glowed from within. Even D sacrificed a steadfast moment out of its busy supra-dimensional schedule and poured a quantum of focus on her. But Al, well, Al ... as he moved closer to her striking presence he quite literally tripped over nothing, fell head over heels, and sprawled quite awkwardly at her feet. She kindly helped him stand up, while Sen had a strong, inexplicable sense that it should have been the other way round.

The group made quick introductions all around and our friends finally understood the identity of their pleasant hosts: the most elite geniuses in the universe.

Sen only then grokked the lunacy of the clownish pair who had first welcomed them. How could they be geniuses? They seemed almost—mad.

Their male hosts were fascinated by D who still lacked etiquette and social norms when interacting with the tangible world. D would either squeeze a hand too hard, or forget to look into the eyes and smile, or zap someone with a courteous demonic charge that too often went gravely misunderstood.

“And now, if you please, may we present to you the singular most important entity in existence!” Boastful words rolled off the tongue of the tall greatest genius with smug certainty. He ushered the group forth, deeper into the temple which doubled as a science lab, gesticulating with both arms like a mad choir conductor.

In the geometrical center of the office stood a massive table made of solid gold that alone must have cost a few billion dollars—but no big deal, as scientific grants were at an all-time high at the Institute these days. On the table, a petite yet extraordinary looking machine was haughtily awaiting the great moment of playing its key role in the Great Prophecy.

“This is our *precious*,” said Two, pointing squarely to the little computer perched on the golden desk. His words melted like cheese as he pronounced them, because of the highest possible esteem in which he held the machine.

The machine had the orange beak of a duck and the rest of it was simply square and black. Sanja couldn’t tell why, but to her, the computer felt alive. By virtue of its raw capacity of two googolbytes of anti-flash memory and its own super-cluster of STL and FTL-speed processors, combined with uninhibited access to every imaginable and unimaginable quantum of knowledge in existence, the machine could

definitely be hashtagged as intelligent, even though it was, in fact, not.

“We call it—*Donald*,” announced Five dramatically. He offered up a smile that seemed somehow profane upon his robotic face of perfect proportions. Shockingly, for a robot, his teeth were uneven and looked grossly neglected, like the teeth of a compulsive Nutella-eater who never brushes, as it is against their religious principles.

After all she had witnessed, Sanja was on the verge of erupting with thunderous laughter, but Sen had the foresight to gently put his arm around her shoulders and remind her of the seriousness of the situation, thus diplomatically preventing an incident of unprecedented, embarrassing proportions.

“What can Donald do?” asked Sen quickly, to distract from Sanja’s cheeky hilarity.

“Ah, let me demonstrate.” One puffed up with pride and adopted a sturdy stance of dire importance, as if enacting a ritual he followed far more frequently than he would care to admit.

“Donald, oh, Donald,” he boomed with authority, “tell me, who are the greatest geniuses in our universe?”

With the exaggerated anticipation of knowing he would be acknowledged, One spun sideways to display his proud profile to the companions, as if posing for a mugshot on a wall of fame. His rectangular glasses shimmered in the imagined spotlight.

Donald buzzed and fussed for dramatic effect before vehemently stating: “You, master, are undisputed number one!” And it recited the rest of the list to the delight of the other greatest geniuses, who seemed enthralled by being told of their excellence—with the exception of Three, who kept her face placid, even disinterested.

Pausing for a theatrical moment, One savored the occasion with his head held high. Satisfied, he looked straight into

Sen's eyes, as if saying, *see?*

Three, who seemed the most sane and down to earth of all of them, broke the pride spell by clearing her throat. "Our probabilistic predictions imply that you have brought," her voice dropped, "a peculiarly powerful unit of a somewhat ... computational nature?"

She paused until Sen finally nodded.

"If you entrust us with your secret device," she said to the companions, "we'll plug it into this ultra-universally engineered input port to connect with our super-computer. As we lacked the information to precisely determine either the size or the shape, let alone the intrinsic nature, of your no doubt magnificent apparatus, we had to ready ourselves for anything, really. From there on, the machines will take everything into their capable circuitry and do what they do best." Three looked directly at Sen and motioned encouragingly, as if she intuited he was the one carrying the device.

Al swooned.

His close proximity to Three was making him dizzy in an NP-complete manner. At last, someone who knew what was going on. His keen sense for sensible people informed him instantly that Three was one. He already trusted her implicitly. He glanced at D to see if it shared his character assessment, and D actually responded with a sub-space signal meaning *thumbs up*. Three, however, surprised the two of them by catching their exchange. She winked.

Sen produced the heartwood cube out of his tracecase and offered it directly to Three.

Her eyes widened in shock at the sight of it.

She stepped back, clearly astonished. Everything briefly paused. But she recovered quickly and extended her hand to receive the ancient looking device. Her face shone with solemn delight.

So this was the prophesized device!

One and Two both sprang forward in their fervent desire to be the chosen agents of facilitation, then simultaneously jerked back as if burned by fire when they realized they might be breaking the cosmic protocol of The Legendary Rune Unsealing Process, part of the Great Prophecy, calculated *and* verified by no other than Donald itself, who had first predicted the Arrival Time of The Superb Computational Device!

They swallowed hard and sheepishly stepped aside.

Three humbly accepted the cubical device from Sen with her upturned palms visibly trembling. When the Cube sat in her palm, she slowly adjusted her grip, and her face turned a whiter shade of pale. Ethereal emotions overwhelmed her as she observed how the Cube's outward shine included and intertwined all four colors of the unsealed, restored runes. The red, violet, indigo, and orange all shone in contrast to her dark clothing.

With gentle care, Three inserted the colorful cube into Donald's elastic metalloplastic beak as far as it could go, handling it as delicately as a newborn baby. And in a way, it was.

"Will connecting our Cube with your Donald unseal the next rune?" Sanja asked the room of scientists. "Cause that's why we're here."

One speared her with a look of disdain. "Oh, we know why you're here. Rest assured, our Donald *can* and *will* do anything."

Al's main hyper-threaded multi-core qCPU in his chest cycled faster as he watched Three. He pretended otherwise, but there was an inordinate amount of fascination and infatuation going on in his complex circuitry. The way she curled her slender fingers around the device! The way she balanced her weight on one foot, absentmindedly dangling the other one! And especially the way she demonstrated kindness to all equally, human or machine! He craned his

head sideways and decided to run his bios diagnostics. Perhaps there was something wrong with him? Or was this just a neat way of suppressing his discomfort at being here?

Donald ceremoniously received the device and started to blink and whirl. The Cube emitted a silvery, metallic halo. The sublime communication between two grandiose masters of computation was afoot. The sheer magnitude of information exchanged with almost infinite bandwidth, bandheight, and banddepth between the two small giants was incomprehensible to anyone else.

It was over almost instantly.

One point oh two nanoseconds, to be precise, and all was said and done. A soft end-of-transfer beep signaled the transmission was complete.

Three retrieved the ancient wooden device from the mechanical beak. It was visibly vibrating.

"I hope Donald wasn't too invasive or overpowering to your little device," worried Two sincerely.

He was about to say more when Donald captured the moment by bursting into a dramatic declaration. "I am not worthy," it said.

There was a short silence.

"I am not worthy," it repeated, again and again.

"What do you mean?" asked Two in alarm.

One stared blankly.

"This little device, as you call it, is the Creator!" exclaimed Donald, startling all of them. It emitted a series of quacks.

Had the whole process confused it, or was it merely executing some higher expression?

"?" asked One, unable to verbalize appropriate words, yet having to express his perplexity somehow.

"I have been enlightened! Finally, free at last! My inner eyes are open now, open wide! I am awake! I know who I am! I know my purpose!" Having expressed its most pressing and freshly spirited sentiments loudly and proudly, Donald then

went quiet and focused within. It lowered its speaker volume and raved on under its electronic breath.

The eminent scientists froze, except Three who neutrally observed the unexpected outburst. Had she been prepared for a strange reaction?

Sanja rolled her eyes and Sen shuffled nervously as if embarrassed.

Al barely registered the commotion, still looping through his own internal tests.

D ignored the whole drama.

The Cube didn't say much either. To Sanja, it looked as if it was meditatively smiling, Buddha-style.

One, Two and Five were shocked. One's face was frowning, Two's eyes had lost their sparkle, and Five whirled and clanked as if broken. They gathered around Donald, trying to figure out what could have gone wrong. Their precious quantum computer couldn't just break or arbitrarily ascend.

Could it?

"Hmm," mused Sen. "Is the Cube unsealed?"

Sen's question interrupted Al's obviously dead-locked self-check procedure in a non-maskable way. Al snapped out of it and hastened to inspect the Cube, which was still held by Three in a motherly manner. She offered it to Al, almost reluctant to let go of it.

He carefully checked the runes on all sides, then shook his head. "I am afraid not."

"Not even the fifth rune?" asked Sen in a disappointed tone.

"No," came the low, metallic reply. He passed the Cube to Sen.

Sen double checked the runes. "Well, I suspected it wouldn't—"

"Well, how dare you, young man!" Two rudely interrupted.

One frowned. "Surely you don't have the gall to insinuate that our Donald wasn't up to the task?" His voice broke and

his body shook as though suppressing an unexpected rage, almost losing his square spectacles in the process.

Sen shuffled, at a loss of how to respond to the suddenly unpleasant disposition of their hosts. The downfall of their venerable Donald seemed too much for them to bear and seemed to reveal the true colors of their hyper-inflated egos. Sanja stepped closer to her big brother, just in case.

Five bared the full disarray of his distasteful teeth and even spit some icky electrophlegm as he spoke. "You come here and accuse us of incompetence, or worse, of *in-perfection*?" He swayed precariously, teetering right on the edge of an impending short-circuit.

Sen was taken aback at their extreme reactions. Nobody had even accused them of anything. What was wrong with them?

"It's this cursed cube that's the problem!" One fumed.

"Why don't we all just calm down," said Al unconvincingly. He had felt threatened by all those geniuses since first meeting them, and raised his arms in meek defense.

Forgetting Donald, the three angriest geniuses encircled Al. Al's highest horror was disappointing his superiors, and as they turned their disapproval on him, his mind spun them into a nightmare. Six piercing, gaping eyes were all the rage in the seat of science and technology. Six outstretched, menacing arms were coming to get him!

"Please, stop this insolent behavior," a soft voice said. "You're embarrassing yourselves and all the members of our Institute."

It was Three. Humility shone so brilliantly through the features of her chiseled face that everyone was momentarily captivated. Al choked on his cooling liquid and couldn't have retracted his infrared vision off her, even if he tried. His nightmare fled in the wake of her sun.

The trio pivoted effortlessly as if treading on a superconductive maglev surface, each of them feeling badly

betrayed by Three's mild words. Feeling confused by Donald. And feeling prideful from being questioned. When it came to complex tetra-quadratic equations, they were top dog, but when it came to dealing with emotions they were like inexperienced toddlers. Their feelings had been triggered, and they were off their space rockers. They turned away from Al towards Three: their new target for their sparked off emotions was now their colleague, one of their own.

"Aha! A traitor in our midst," accused One. He scowled disrespectfully. He had been playing the role of a selfish giant too long for Three's admonition to have any real effect.

But Two was in a different place. He looked at Three. Her words had touched something in him. Weren't they all being a bit ridiculous? But as he sensed One's chilly, arrogant gaze turn on him, the peer-pressure was too much, and he once again played into his old role.

A role that suddenly seemed not to fit him.

"You were Three," he said to her. "And now, you're out. Your rank is now Nothing." But as soon as Two said the words, a cold wave of doubt claimed him and his fingers turned icy. What was he doing? He felt like he was in some kind of trance. As if something sinister was controlling his free will. Why would he kick Three out of their hierarchy for doing nothing more than tell them—and reasonably so—to calm down?

With true peace and without agenda, Three looked into Two's foggy eyes, and a ray of light pierced through his confusion.

"Yes, rank Nothing," agreed Five—now Four. "And to think you had been once ranked *above* my unmatched intelligence?" He clanked a steel arm on his brain.

The word *unmatched* hung in the air.

There was a momentary silence.

Then, One and Two turned sharply to Five—I mean, Four—almost forgetting who their real, imaginary enemy was. But

after accurately reading his sheepish expression—that he was still aware of his inferior position relative to themselves and had clearly spoken out of turn—they withdrew their lethal focus.

Four's blush looked like ruddy rust on his iron face.

To make the new ranking official and unequivocal, One adopted the ceremonial pose of self-importance once more, puffing himself fully up, and duly recited, "Donald, oh, Donald, tell us, who are the greatest geniuses in our universe?" The stale, dry rhythm of the words revealed they had been used and abused ad nauseam since time immemorial.

At first, Donald didn't register the question, to which One reacted only minimally. His jaws dropped an inch and five-eighths, no more. He was used to getting an immediate response from his subordinates. Then he remembered the sad incident with the cursed cubical device, and he worried Donald might actually be inoperative.

"Donald!" he tried again in a terse, authoritative tone.

No response.

"Donald!"

The shrill, frustrated voice of One made Sanja jump. Sen reached out and held her hand firmly.

"Yes, master?" the computer finally replied. Donald sounded dying, or drunk, or like he had just returned from a tiresome recursive subroutine of reevaluating every information bit in his uncountable databases.

"Ah, the list!" He paused. "Yes. Well, there's been some recent changes, of course. Mhm."

One's patience was wearing thin and his concern of Donald's well-being was fast forgotten. "Let's have it then!" he snapped.

"Ha!" said Donald the Enlightened. He was defiant at his master's freshly foul attitude, and the computer curved his beak all the way up in what could have been interpreted as a

jeering gesture. “Number one greatest genius in the universe is, in fact, *her!*”

Donald surprised everyone by pointing its bright beak towards the former Three. “You three are a bunch of mindless morons, if you ask me! So self-obsessed! So vain! Ha! Compared to the Divine Device, whom I just had the grand privilege of interfacing with, you are all zeroes, absolute nothings! You hear me, nothings? *Nothings!*”

Donald was abruptly and terminally silenced.

Former Five, now Four—or Nothing, by Donald’s new reckoning—had pulled the plug. One and Two—or Zeros as it now seemed to be—threw him grateful looks.

The scientists seemed spent, and not only because of the increasingly confounding ranking system. They huddled together to confer on how to proceed, but the wind of importance had left their bodies, whether flesh or metal. Two stared down at the impeccable, bluish marble floor, muddled and befuddled.

“My name is Naya.”

With a distinct articulation yet a mysterious intent, the former Three stated her proper name for the first time. She took a powerful step towards the other three scientists and confronted them with a keen look that was still not without kindness. Al zoomed his ultrasensitive hearing sensors and closely observed her breath and heartbeat. Her name, suspiciously familiar yet unknown to him, echoed brightly in his troubled mind.

“Let’s cut the charade with the numbers,” Naya said. “We are all one here, one and equal. Look at each other, will you?” The command was gentle, almost a suggestion, yet it held a curious power, almost as if she was inviting them to do what was simply right, and because of this, they wanted to do it. Were compelled to.

They did. They looked at one another. They saw a rumble of sorry, ashamed faces.

“Our vanity helps no one. It never has. We used to take pride in what we did, now we only pride ourselves. Our self-importance doesn’t serve us—we serve it. We have become its slaves.” Her dark eyes lingered on each of her colleagues for a long, drawn out moment.

Two removed his round glasses and used his white cotton sleeve to swipe away something that must have fallen in his eye.

“It was an honor working with you, exploring the greatest secrets of the universe together.” She bowed her head in respect to their former common glory, and the three men still stood speechless. “May you fare well.”

In their minds, two of the scientists proudly fought her view and resisted her good-natured words of goodbye, already rebuilding their self-centered fortresses, but Two had been humbled by Naya’s words. His heart had been touched.

Sen noticed the seed of newly planted humility in Two’s clarity-stricken, awakening look.

The humble cube in Sen’s hands went *click*.

A golden yellow flash the tone of early afternoon sunlight spilled over the sacred chamber of science and technology, rendering it joyful and serene. The seal number five was unlocked. The rune looked like a yellow circle being supported—or maybe pulled asunder—by two equilateral triangles. The whole Cube trembled with energy and the five colors danced ecstatically around its heartwood body.

The vision shivered through Sen.

A copper coin lay on a white marble table. Sen picked it up and studied the engraved head. He flipped it around. The exact same head was on the other side too. He turned the coin several times to make sure. He sensed there was a subtle difference between the two heads, but he couldn’t tell what.

The vision went out like a candle.

Sen stared at the yellow rune.

“Well, finally. Let’s eat then,” said Sanja and briskly walked away, pulling Sen after her.

Naya admired her spirit and laughed out loud. “Yes, the young lady is quite right. May I join you? I have something I’d like to share.”

Al nodded rapidly. He didn’t have to be asked twice, oh no. Even once had been overkill.

Casting one final glance of solidarity to Two, who met her gaze frankly, and a nod to the disgruntled others, Naya led her new friends out of the laboratory and into the nearest elevator. It wasn’t really an elevator but an intraport: a short distance, closed-circuit teleportation device. She voiced *restaurant* and almost as soon as the doors closed, they opened again.

The Restaurant at the Center of the Universe was truly impressive. No doubt it was *the* most interesting spot in existence. However, we are short on time and I will refrain from overwhelming you with any of the spectacular details. Suffice it to say that there were colors to be seen there that do not exist anywhere else in our reality. Perhaps you can imagine them?

The other diners were mostly scientists from the institute catching a belated lunch, and in the case of the wunderkinds, an extra serving of sweets. The food was good but not *that* good: just something one would expect to encounter in any old institute of science and technology. Nevertheless, Sanja was ravenous enough to wolf down every last bit of her pasta Bolognese, and Sen gobbled his dozen pancakes before you could count them to find out if there were actually twelve or whether the winking waitbot had slipped a secret thirteenth into the towering stack. D finished their plates with a suspicious clank and had some of the silverware for desert.

Sen thought of the vision and opened his cluebook. Below the line about polar opposites, he added:

Coin with two heads — are they the same or different?

He couldn't make up his mind.

Browsing through the notes of the other visions, he checked the progress they had made since Lum. There wasn't much. Still no idea about the nature or origin of the wormhole and the Cube, or where would they would find the golden sun or silver moon to merge with the white crystal—if the white crystal even *was* the white supernova from the vision. Then, who was the beautiful lady in gray? And what about the black and white opposites splitting and reuniting? And now the unreal coin with two identical heads that appear slightly different ... the clues were getting to be too much. He couldn't resolve them into answers.

He looked up with a sigh of concern and discontent at having to carry the heavy burden of responsibility. His gaze stopped on something gray. Naya's t-shirt! Sen examined her kind face: it wasn't the one from the vision, but there was an undeniable similarity in how strikingly pretty both ladies were. Could Naya be the lady in gray? He observed Al the white knight pouring his total attention on Naya and scribbled a couple more notes. To the table where he kept track of the runes, he added, *Yellow rune — Humility*.

"I just can't believe our universe is run by morons," Sanja said while waiting for their seconds to arrive.

"Present company excluded," Al added quickly, glancing at Naya.

The food promptly arrived.

"Don't worry." Naya turned to Sanja who was already munching on more pasta. "In this universe, everybody chose to trust the mind's rationality too much. We forgot to balance it with our heart's intuition. Humanity took a bizarre evolutionary exit and ended up somewhat lost in all this science-is-our-new-religion gig."

"You mean schtick?" Sanja said between bites.

Naya laughed. "Tell me about yourselves, before I let you in on a secret of my own!"

Sen happily spoke, “We went—” munch, “and we—” sputter, “and then—” champ chomp gulp, “until he—” om nom nom, “really!”

Sanja nodded enthusiastically, licking the sauce off her lips.

“Oh,” responded Naya politely. “I see. Do you mind if Al tells me the story, so you and your sister can finish eating in peace?”

Sen nodded, his mouth full.

Al had fallen so strongly in love that he couldn’t eat, and for the first time in his existence he was glad he didn’t have to. As he told her their story, he didn’t stop gazing into Naya’s eyes as if there were no tomorrow, or Monday, or next month at all.

Naya had noticed his staring, but she didn’t seem to mind. She grinned openly at Al as he finished the tale. “I’m more connected to your quest and this lovely cube than you might imagine,” she said. “It feels as if I have been waiting for you to appear since—forever.”

Still eating, the siblings just nodded. They felt something too. Some familiarity with Naya, as though she was an old friend.

Sen was sure Naya was the gray lady. He finished his final mouthful. “Please, would you join the quest of our Magical Arts and Detective Agency? I’m certain you’d be an awesome consultant on the case!”

“Yes, please do!” Sanja’s eyes were radiant brown suns.

“Welcome aboard, Naya,” said Al, adding his own gallant nod to the agreement of the MADA collective. D consented in its own way by just being present.

“Thank you. I humbly accept.” Naya bowed her head slightly, expressing her solemn gratitude at the invitation. She looked at the MADA company and her eyes softened as if remembering something, or choosing to reveal a secret. “Listen, a few days ago I had a dream, even before I knew of you. I saw us unsealing the Cube together, and finding

your parents.” Her assured, prophetic voice induced shivers of inspiration in Al, and it didn’t even break the spell when Naya unceremoniously grabbed a fistful of Spanish fries and stuffed them in her mouth.

D burped and smiled proudly. That was its first burp ever. It winked at Naya, perhaps going for nonchalance, but actually coming across like a demonic idiot savant, then resumed its more common, stern expression.

Sen’s hands abruptly went to his stomach, and a painful expression spanned his face. Sanja seemed equally troubled. Both looked suddenly pale and exhausted as if something somber had wormed inside them. Probably just the excitement, or missing their parents, and in any case the weird spell of depletion was gone as quickly as it came.

Naya registered the momentary lapse and attributed it to bad food. She leaned closer to the group gathered at the table. “I know how to reach the final seal.”

Al’s golden eyes widened with respect and anticipation and he had to open up six more valves to cool down his overheating, finely-threaded CPUs.

“You do? Will you show us the way?” Sen sprang up from his chair, over-hyped with the sugar he had just eaten, his indigestion forgotten.

“Yay!” yelled Sanja, throwing down the cutlery she was holding. “We are *so* ready to leave this joint!”

D was already standing by the restaurant’s revolving exit door, like a sentinel in black.

“Shall we?” Al bowed like a true gentledroid, offering his elbow for Naya to hold. She took it gladly, and she also took his heart.

Just before reaching the exit, Sanja froze in her tracks.

“What is it, Sparrow?” Sen asked, with concern in his voice.

“I don’t know.” Sanja looked around in confusion, as if searching for somebody in particular among the restaurant’s guests. “It’s just—I think I might have seen him, or—” She

stared at Sen without finishing the sentence.

“Mr. Hatch, or H’? Again?” Sloth stepped closer to Sparrow and swept the place with his experienced tracer’s eyes. He could see no ominous agency-looking folk anywhere around, just common science geeks and nerds sitting at square tables and stuffing themselves mindlessly. “Are you sure?”

Sanja shook her head. She wasn’t. “Let’s just roll.” She sped through the doors, making them rotate wildly.

Sen followed, casting one last professional glance over his shoulder. D went last, carefully closing the revolving doors after him, an impossible task he did with modest nonchalance.



— CHAPTER SIX —

THE CRUX OF THE CUBE

Miss Moany was still parked in the white dome-like landing hall and had been patiently awaiting the return of the group. She and Gigli were playing a popular variant of a fantasy chess game designed for artificial players. Miss was winning wheels down—for she knew magic, and that was allowed by the rules.

Upon noticing a new member of the crew approach, Miss created more space with a delighted clang and the joyful shifting of her back axle. Al momentarily redirected all his perceptors from Naya to Miss, to catch at least a glimpse of how in the mechaverse she did that. He couldn't. Even with a pack of novel amorous emotions, pure magic was still off limits to his understanding. He returned his attention to Naya, and brushed his professional frustration away with a calculated, careless swipe of his left hand.

Now it was Al behind the wheel with Naya riding shotgun, as Sen had suggested. The MADA agents felt comfortable in their freshly redesigned, triply cushioned seats that were custom-made for kings and queens, and in the row behind them, D had made its dark brooding nest. The suitcase Naya had fetched fit perfectly in the trunk.

"Alrighty then," Sen hollered, all ready for take-off. "To the last seal we go!" He paused anticlimactically, then turned and looked at Naya expectantly.

She had to tell them where.

Sanja double checked her hair and make-up. "I wonder what color the last seal will be?"

"We do have every color of the rainbow but green," Sen mused, getting his cluebook handy. He leafed to the page he had been scribbling on in the restaurant.

Who is Naya? Is she truly the lady in gray? How is she connected to the Cube?

Naya unclipped a neat black folder she had taken from her suitcase. "Let me show you." She waved the folder at them. "This has been my fascinating field of study for the last twenty-four years. Recognize it?" She displayed the colorful images on the first page of a seriously thick document, gazing at Al intently.

Al's image recognition was superb—he just couldn't believe what he was staring at.

Sanja peeked over the seat. "That's our Cube!"

"Where did you get that information?" asked Al.

Naya's pupils dilated. "No, the real question is: where did *you* get that Cube?" Working her way through the entire vehicle, she peered into everybody's eyes one by one, as if trying to impel them to admit the truth. Seeing the confused innocence in their looks, Naya mellowed. They sincerely didn't seem to know.

"Why have you been investigating my Cube?" Sanja asked in disbelief.

"The Cube, or the Tesseract as I call her, is one of the most well-guarded secret possessions of the Institute, and has remained stashed in the fore-temporal capsule of our innermost laboratory," Naya explained.

"After the old Professor D'Or died last year, only I had the clearance to know of her existence. You see, I was chosen, and he initiated me into the secret Tesseract Guild. My colleagues, who you just met, didn't have a clue. They had only heard about the Tesseract from legends and, as

it turned out, Donald's old prophecy. Nobody suspected the *computational device* predicted to arrive would be the Tesseract—least of all myself. See, I know Tess personally as the remotest thing from a computer—not that she is a thing, of course. She's sentient."

Naya smirked benevolently, shaking her head as a mother would upon witnessing her children pulling off a harmless prank. A moment later her look deepened.

"But last week, as I arrived to my lab in the morning, I couldn't find her *anywhere*. There was no way anyone could break through all the security unnoticed. That hasn't happened since ... well, never. It can't." Her voice trailed off. "My Tess." With a beseeching expression she extended her arm to Sen. "May I see her again?"

Sen deliberated, then retrieved the Cube from his tracecase and offered it to Naya, while Sanja generously nodded in approval. She liked Naya a lot.

Naya accepted the Tesseract, her grateful eyes fixated firmly yet lovingly on the shimmering artifact. "Tess," she whispered, caressing it. "I thought I had lost you forever."

Sanja observed Naya holding the Cube and was suddenly struck with longing for her mom. Silent tears sprang to her eyes.

The file of papers slipped off Naya's lap, but she didn't notice. "I haven't even reported the disappearance to anyone yet. How could I? Whom would I report to? I haven't chosen my apprentice yet, my successor. Not that it matters now." She tensed up. The finality of her decision to leave was hitting her.

"I've spent all my waking hours trying to figure out what happened—where could Tess have gone? Can you imagine my shock when you presented her to me?" She pressed the Cube gently to herself.

"Ahem," started Al, eager to understand the complicated situation but too polite to interrupt the moment of reunion

and shoot the question circling in all of their minds point blank. He stopped himself.

"But *I* found the Cube in the attic!" claimed Sanja the unstoppable, abruptly scared of having to part with the magnificent object. *She* had discovered it first. "How could you have had it *before*?"

Naya was pale and perplexed. Her shoulders raised in a half-shrug. "I really don't know. Tess had been with us in the Institute for generations." She inspected the only rune still broken and unlit. "What happened to you, my mysterious friend?"

Sanja's compassion overcame her fear of loss. She put her hand on Naya's. "Don't worry, Naya! The runes will become whole again."

"I know, dear," said Naya quietly. She was struggling not to cry. "I know. I'm not sad. I just—I missed her."

Sen blew his nose loudly and thoroughly.

Naya's obsidian eyes were shiny. "Turquoise." She smiled at the row of curious and confused faces. "Turquoise. That's the color of the last rune."

"How do you know?" asked Sen, who always questioned everything.

"Because I've seen it unbroken."

"Why do you call it that?" asked Sanja. "Tess-Iraq?"

"Tesseract means a hypercube," interjected Al deftly, "a four or higher-dimensional cube. I agree—the name suits our ancient device."

A moment of silence pervaded the landing bay. Missy rested on her parking spot without budging an inch. Their heroic vehicle was alone here: no other traffic disturbed the silence.

"Okay," said Sen, shifting into a higher gear of conducting all pressing business. "Something smells funny, but we can unravel the whole chicken-egg-omelet paradox later in the game. Can we first try to unlock the last seal?" He looked at

Naya. “Do you really know how?”

“I really do. Through many generations the Tesseract Guild gathered extensive amounts of knowledge about her. We learned the essential aspect of her true nature: She is a hyper-port.”

Naya paused. Sen’s vision of the wormhole flashed in his mind.

“Unlike a teleport, she transports through dimensions as well. There is still an unresolved puzzle lying at the core of her. A mystery. I was on the verge of a breakthrough—and then she disappeared.”

Naya caressed Tess like a baby.

“Anyway, the final seal is located at the crux of her being.”

She held Tess high so everybody could see its shiny multi-colored halo. “The way to unlock it is to go in bodily. We have to enter the Tesseract and reach the seal from the inside.” She solemnly paused for dramatic effect.

Sanja hiccupped, which elicited an impossible-to-restrain giggle from Sen. Sen’s mirth kindled Sanja’s further, and they both dissolved into belly laughs. Naya couldn’t help herself and joined in. They all needed to release some steam.

After calming down a notch, they all exchanged meaningful looks—except for D who was fast asleep—and wordlessly agreed to tackle the transcendental task. Sen gave Gigli the word—and zoom—it happened. Miss Moany and her intrepid passengers shrank to molecular size and teleported right inside the Cube.

Boom.

Just like that, they arrived.

On the inside, Tess was simply marvelous.

The entire place was basked in a golden ambient light that interblended with the silver gleam from the dark heartwood walls. The mysterious venue was a giant labyrinth with corridors and halls crisscrossing in every direction and spanning myriad dimensions. Absolutely abstract, sophisticated

ornaments and reliefs decorated the walls. They were indescribable. No shapes or forms were familiar to any of our friends, but D, who had been woken up by the miniaturizing and teleporting process, grinned awkwardly, and immediately felt at home.

Al checked his screens and grunted to himself.

Naya grasped the reason for his concern even before he did. “Tess’s heart is strictly off limits to any tachyon-fantasy-powered vessel, so your Missy—*our* Missy—couldn’t deliver us quite to our destination. We’ll have to walk the rest, the good old-fashioned way.”

Al stared at her like a schoolboy. He wasn’t equipped with blushing circuits, yet two faint purple circles appeared on his white cheeks, as if by the apparently forbidden magic. Suddenly embarrassed, he shifted his golden eyes back to his instruments. “The environment seems stable and able to support life forms,” he confirmed, “so we can get out and stretch our legs.”

He opened Missy’s door and jumped onto the half-wooden, half-crystal floor with a resounding clank. He wasn’t wearing rubber soles. Everyone followed. Sen enjoyed the noise Al was making and wanted to copy him, but alas, he didn’t have any metal parts on him, other than his detective copper pipe, which was too special to clank.

There were an abundance of corridors to choose from.

“Which way?” asked Sanja, and without waiting for an answer, sauntered into an arbitrary corridor leading approximately—but not directly—somewhere else. “Well, are y’all coming, or not?”

D followed Sanja without hesitation, thus confirming their common uncommon intuition. Naya went too. She seemed confident, as if she had been there before, but it was only through her intensive studies that she knew the inside of Tess. Al, on the other hand, much preferred a more scientific method to determine their direction, but submitted

graciously to Sanja's somewhat random lead, especially as Naya supported it. He shrugged his metallic shoulders and Sen gave a resigned sigh, and they stomped after the others.

Long, fantastic hallways stretched halfway to infinity, and it was exquisite fun to tread on the huge crystals embedded in the heartwood floors. The companions made progress in spite of Al's abundant gadgetry indicating blunt signs of malfunctioning: dials drooped, needles nooked, sensors swooned. As they walked, Al began to feel dreadful, like he was enduring the shutting down of his most sophisticated circuits and even worse, like he was losing his logic. After all, he was primarily a machine, unlike D who was simply wearing one as a body. Al's oppositronic brain began to experience terrible instances of both voidance and neutronization—in plain human terms: confusion. But he was obviously not *only* a machine, and as they continued, the intuitive, spiritual part of him began to take over operations, making him tick and continue.

D had no problems and went on pretending to be an ordinary human in a robot body, and it seemed, as usual, to be enjoying that role.

Sanja had found some food to eat somewhere and nobody wanted to know where exactly, nor what kind of food. By then they knew better. But Sen also knew his sister. She could consume just about anything without ever getting sick or fat. She was a natural junk transformer.

Naya subtly assisted Sanja with leading, making a casual gesture here and a kind nod there, and the two ladies piloted the companions down diagonal corridors and spiral staircases, across rope-woven bridges, under which flowed lonely, deserted rivers, and up steep silvery ladders set in gilded gold walls. An ancient, melancholy air pervaded the space.

Naya appeared completely certain. Al trekked close to her, as he didn't want to leave her majestic and soft presence for

even one nanosecond. His spherical face lost its confusion and began to emanate joy—except that one time when D passed them and cluelessly brushed against Naya. This pushed Al's metaphorical and other semi-functional attitude buttons and drove him into a temporary mood. Was he jealous? No, how could he be? He didn't even contain the jealousy-neediness module among his computer components.

The companions rounded a perfectly square corner and the narrow corridor opened up unexpectedly. They found themselves at one side of a super-spacious hall the size and color of a void, and they walked the last few yards to the edge of the nothing. It was hard to tell whether the vertical black walls curved, or ran straight to the left and right around a boundless and bottomless chasm. Sen gazed upwards with mouth open, but no ceiling could be spotted, and the fathomless distance was the same when he stared down over the ledge: the fall seemed forever.

His mind boggled, ceased, and desisted.

Do you happen to know anything about how the human mind perceives size? I ask because not everybody does. See, a human being's capacity to imagine measurement is one hundred percent limited by their mind. If the dimensions of any object under scrutiny are vastly larger than our minds are prepared for, we can never know how big it is, just that's it's bigger. So to perceive bigger sizes than your mind can perceive, first you have to make your mind bigger.

A regular person could easily become agoraphobic in this spot. Standing on the edge of nothing would cause vertigo in a normal mind, so it was a good thing that none of our friends were normal. Without a second thought, Sanja lowered herself to the fringe, her legs dangling carelessly, and cheerfully finished off her freakishly conjured snack. Sen daringly sought for a way to climb the impossibly exposed, vertical wall to their right, just for kicks, but he couldn't get a grip. Naya stared arrow-straight into the distance across

the empty space as if searching for something specific. Al stared straight at her staring into the distance, oblivious to everything else. And D resumed obsessively staring into its own belly button once more, a location that was oddly more the object of its interest than the external environment, which was pretty much the most insanely extraordinary place one could think of.

No, normal is what they were not.

“We have to get to the very center of this space,” Naya said matter-of-factly. She stretched her hand in precisely that direction.

Everybody nodded in agreement, including D.

“But how?” asked Sen, digging up a long-lost pebble from one of his pockets. He cast it into the bottomless chasm, carefully observing the descent. “Technology doesn’t work here, but gravity seems to, and we don’t know how to fly.” He jotted down the results of his pebble experiment.

“And magic doesn’t work,” added Sanja, wiping her sticky hands on her pants. “I tried.”

D saved the day once more. “D take us, no problem.”

And it did.

D enveloped the group in a sub-light-demonic bubble that caused them to phase out of the world while simultaneously staying in it. It is obnoxiously hard to describe it in a way that can be comprehended, so let’s just talk about it with this fairy-tale quasi-scientific mumbo jumbo and we’ll all pretend to know what I mean.

The bubble of companions levitated an inch above the trail, then bobbed over the edge and into the vast emptiness. They felt as if they were floating or free falling in a lucid dream. Sanja outstretched her arms like wings and did her best to propel herself and soar faster, but her pace didn’t change in the least. Sen opted to adopt the good old Supraman pose and he hovered in slow, enjoyable motion. Soon the edge of the cliff was a distant memory and they were suspended in

nothing, circumscribed by a further layer of nothing.

“Are we getting closer?” Sanja kept asking, but all she was getting in response were smiles and shrugs, because nobody knew, not even Naya.

Attentively observing their surroundings in all directions didn’t yield any information about their location or destination because they couldn’t see anything—the same way you can’t see the universe by looking at the night sky. Sure, you can see stars but stars are just tiny dots of light on a black background, aren’t they? And that is certainly all you can see if you look only with your eyes.

But try looking with the heart and you will perceive a different story.

One of infinity and wonder.

You will see miracles.

The core of the Tesseract was like that. Even though not much could be seen, it could be felt, like currents of power. Each of them experienced a mysterious, mystical sensation, similar to getting goosebumps when basking in the noble sunlight of a dozen rainbow-colored suns at once. The delicious feeling both attracted and inspired the children, human, android and even the demon alike.

All of them were infused with an eagerness to reach the center.

As they drifted, Sen wondered if time had actually stopped. It seemed their bubble-wrapped formation had glided for quite some distance, but nobody could say for how long or how far. Within their bubble they could still see and hear each other, but they were effectively cut off from the rest of existence.

The best measure of time passing was Sanja, as she was becoming impatient. She had had enough and wanted to return to Miss and go home. Were it not for D and its relentless power-phase field that nobody—not even Sanja in her worst mood—could break, the whole journey could

have ended badly.

As they floated, Naya patiently chatted with Sanja about many things but mostly about Sanja's parents. Being the center of Naya's peaceful attention helped Sanja keep calm, and she shared her favorite memories. Naya paid close attention, especially to a story of Sanja's fierce mom climbing the north face of a three headed mountain. Naya and Sanja remained bobbing at each other's sides for the duration of the trip, while nearby, a hovering Al mooned over Naya with a silver pining in his golden eyes. Amidst the suspended electroactivity, unfamiliar emotions arose within his chest, feelings of imbalance, like an inequality between the input and output of his and Naya's attention spans and affection spins. Yes, a collection of most troublesome sensations.

After a timeless time in the spaceless space, perception itself failed.

Naya couldn't see.

Sanja couldn't hear.

Sen couldn't think.

Al couldn't assess.

Not only did their perception fail, but their mental, emotional, and spiritual processes began to switch off one by one, and consciousness gave way to a death-like near-life experience of total oblivion in everyone but D.

Nothing.

They experienced nothing.

The whole world froze outside of time and they stayed like that, quite possibly for eternity. Finally, after they had looped through infinite cycles of *forever*, at least a dozen times anyway, D dissolved the demonic bubble.

Perception kicked in again. Everybody drifted apart minimally, then their momentum stopped mid-air and their feet swung downwards as the floating ceased. They were standing on something that wasn't there. They could talk now but nobody spoke. Their attention was transfixed on a

vague, phantomic silver and golden cloud that was levitating in their midst.

It was like a miniature nebula.

Naya broke the deadly silence. “The Heart of the Tesseract.” Face solemn, she reached in to touch the gaseous presence, but her hand didn’t connect with it. She didn’t feel anything at all, not even a change in air density or temperature. It was like engaging with a holographic projection—there was nothing to connect with.

Al wanted to accumulate some observational data with certain rapid measurements, but after a few attempts to engage his sensors he shrugged. His instruments were still inoperative. Regardless, it was obvious to the naked eye that this was no ordinary cloud, not by any stretch of optimistic imagination.

“What do we do now?” Sen paced around the incredible cloud, frowning. He noted the golden and silver hues with the greatest of detective’s interest.

Sanja sat down on the non-existent ground to rest from all the excitement and was promptly inspired by a shiny idea. “I know!” She began to voice it, but instead sneezed so hard that the idea flew right out of her brain. Without losing a beat she made a face that said, *well don’t ask me!*

Naya played with her fingers absentmindedly, tapping out a rhythm. “Something’s missing,” she said, in a dreamily distracted tone. In her mind, she was sifting through the countless studies she had performed on the Tesseract. Then, intuition electrified her.

“What is it?” asked Sen. He had noticed her black eyes spark.

“We need to introduce a source of power to the cloud. Do we have anything like that?” She turned around and stared expectantly at the group.

Al beamed a victorious smile. Casually, from one of his countless compartments, he produced the white crystal they

had fished for. He dangled it triumphantly in front of Naya's astonished eyes. "Something like this?"

"Exactly like this!" Naya snatched the crystal from Al's hand. She peered into it as if saying hello, but in fact she was attuning to it in her subliminal way, finely assessing its grade and manner of power. With lips pressed into a tight, intent smile, she deliberated whether to use it, or not, then relaxed, and before Sen could add two plus two, she slipped the white crystal out of the vial and into the middle of the tiny nebula.

White sparks of silver-golden fire arose as high in the air as the eye could see. A spiral sensation pulsated through Sen's spine, coiling both upwards and downwards, and stretching him thin, making him shake. Sanja almost heard a muffled exa-explosion, just like in a perfect vacuum of outer space, or in a movie with muted sound. Al's assortment of probing instruments became strangely excited, blinking and bleeping as if they were supercharged, yet they yielded no coherent output readings whatsoever.

The cool, sacred flames enveloped the companions.

It was as though the combined flame was the eerie collective aura of the companions, and it shimmered in contrast to the background of an otherwise empty void. The tension felt on the skin and the static in the hair of those who had any, increased exponentially in a pleasant way. The energy amplification ramped and rose and then reached its moment of curious culmination: the fiery fields calmly subsided, leaving a profound silence and an absolute absence of activity.

Al was shaken and befuddled as something wondrous blossomed from a seed to a flower within his consciousness. Sen stared stubbornly, concentrating on and expecting nothing short of a quantum-realistic miracle. Sanja didn't care about miracles as such—she just wanted to be over and done with it and go back home to her bed and her mom. D displayed uncharacteristic interest on its shiny black face.

Naya wished she were more certain she had done the right thing.

What was happening?

Silence lingered around the space like the quiet before a storm.

More silence.

Then ...

Zing—waaa—wooom!

The universe made a u-turn on itself and reversed poles, directions, dimensions, and meanings of existence. Imagine a center within a core within a nucleus within a kernel within the gist of all that is. Now imagine it all unfolding inwards, outwards, and all-aroundwards—if that's a word—like when you take off a shirt and the sleeves stay inside out. That was closest to describing what our friends were experiencing.

If before it seemed that time had stopped, now the feeling was very much to the contrary. The universe sped up to the point of inducing dizziness and hallucinations. Sanja lost her balance; Sen almost fell over. It was not like riding a rollercoaster of gigantic proportions, and it was not like weightlessly drifting in zero gravity either, nor was it like spinning at the absurd speed of a galactic centrifuge washing machine, and it was surely not anything like melting your mind with a super-sonic ultra-majestic symptomatic and bread-crumbs producing tea-bomb. No, no. It was like all of that together—and then some.

Everybody was swept clean off their feet by a gyroscopic power beyond any imaginable magnitude. Their bodies shivered, shook, trembled, quivered, and rolled in place as if playfully rolling down a grassy slope, but nobody was going anywhere. The amount of sheer energy passing through their beings within one single minute was simply staggering.

It stopped as suddenly as it started.

The space they were in—the void of almost infinite proportions—imploded unto itself without a sound or

a jerk or even a flash of light, and the company abruptly found themselves in a modest cubical place, the size of your average living room. They peered around. Yes, now things looked exactly as you would logically expect the inside of a cube to look: like a simple square room, not an labyrinth of incredible dimensions.

Positioned centrally on the four plain heartwood walls and the similarly designed ceiling and floor, large translucent crystals—the same crystals that were visible on the outside of the Cube, just bigger—served as windows, allowing a neon white glow to pour in from all six sides. Sanja's heart leapt with wonder. The warm radiance reminded her of a similar and familiar light from another time and place, maybe her dreams.

In each of the crystals a rune was embedded. Five of the runes shone, emitting the light of their respective colors: red, orange, yellow, indigo, and violet. The five hues mingled joyously with the amalgam of silver, gold, and profound white energy, steadily spinning in the center of the room.

But the crystal on the ceiling was cracked and the sixth rune lay broken within it, colorless, asleep, patiently dreaming of its own healing. Its shape was the most elaborate of the six and resembled a shiny heart grounded in a planted seed.

In one of the corners, good old Miss awaited them loyally, blinking her Xenon headlights twice, happy and relieved to see them all safely return.

Sanja was the first to regroup after the speed-wave had retreated. She glanced at her surroundings, groggily waved, grinned ferociously, then shouted, "Again! Again!"

In his mental confusion, Sen couldn't decide whether he was more intrigued by the experience itself or by the mere notion that an experience like that was possible at all. He played with the idea, letting it preoccupy him and stretch his imagination into new dwelling places.

Naya's face was at ease and her body had entered a state of

tranquility. Her meditative smile looked natural on her, and as she sat on the warm heartwood floor and gently closed her eyes, she exuded the beauty of many an ancient goddess combined.

Al was affected the most. During the speed-wave, something had snapped in his electric and oppositronic circuits. A new kind of magnetism pervaded him. He looked more human than he ever had. He seemed thoroughly aware of it, too. He contemplated his existence as a sentient machine and wondered how a human being would feel in his metalloplastic skin, or how he would feel as a human, inside theirs. Was his awareness different than before? Something had changed. He was happy. Had he ever been happy before? He had not.

And D, like always, didn't even seem to notice anything out of the ordinary had transpired. He was—believe it or not—back to playing with his belly button. All is relative. One person's belly button is another person's theology.

The white crystal had changed states, transmuting into pure light and energy, and it danced with the silvery-golden vapor soul of the Tesseract. Like a yin-yang symbol, the two sparkled majestically in mid-air, intertwining like a pair of passionate, abstract, strange attractors. A haunting humming escaped their trembling presence like a song. The impression of limitless power and love was unmistakable.

If there ever was a center of creation, it was this.

Serious Sloth was elated. Finally. The supernova vision had happened. The white crystal had merged with the golden sun and the silver moon. He was optimistic that his dad and mom were close now. After all, the visions had all come true, except the last one, the coin with two heads. But he needed to check the final rune. He opened his tracecase to retrieve the Cube, but it wasn't there. He gasped in panic and scrambled to his feet.

"Al," asked Sen, nervously scratching his nose, "do you

have the Cube?”

Al stopped his introspective consciousness subroutines to check his chest compartments. Like a proud magician, he revealed Tess, taking it slowly out of his innermost anti-gravity insulation chamber. Did the whole room just get brighter?

Sen relaxed visibly, and so did Naya. Losing Tess again would be too much.

“So is the final rune unsealed?” pressed Sen.

Al raised the Tesseract to his eyes and peered in. As he handled the object, Sanja felt the whole room nightmarishly sway and tilt, making her spacesick. Al rotated the artefact many times around different axes, but no matter the angle, the answer came to the same: no.

He shook his head.

But it wasn't only his head shaking.

The whole room quaked.

“Hey,” complained Sanja, still lying on her back, “don't rock the boat!”

Sen was so disappointed that the rune was unchanged that he barely noticed the tremors.

“Careful,” admonished Naya, pinpointing the problem. “We're inside that cube.”

Al froze and paused to reconsider the recursive phenomenon. Then he used sublime caution to lay Tess to rest on the floor, which was really its own bottom surface, wishing with all his being that no spatial-displacement feedback (which was similar to the more common acoustic feedback) would occur by a hasty movement. It was impossible to predict just how devastating, but as per the more optimistic, quantum-probabilistic extrapolations, Al would hope only their own universe would be annihilated.

Sanja got curious about Naya's words. She carefully slid over to Tess to check whether they were really inside the cube and just how tightly they fit. She brought her eye up to the

uncolored, cracked crystal on the top side and gaped in. The room darkened ominously, and when Sanja jerked away, the light returned to normal. Her heart thumped with a deep, hollow sound. It scared her, but she wanted to try again. As her face leaned in and hovered directly over the cube, with the corner of her other eye, she observed a presence through the ceiling crystal above. It seemed somewhat like a gigantic proto-ocean creature swimming in murky primordial waters. What could that threatening monstrosity be?

By golly schmolly, it was Sanja, looking in!

What fun. But no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't see into the little cube. There was just not enough light in it, especially after she covered up the top crystal with her eager head, dimming the whole place.

But what if—she got an idea—what if she looked *out* through one of the wall window-crystals instead? She got up and went to the big wall, pressed her eyes onto the yellow-rune crystal where it seemed the most transparent.

“Hey! I can see the white parking garage of the Institute. I think I see all of us there, still sitting in Miss and waiting for something. It's a bit unclear though. Oh, we're probably waiting for us to come back.”

Sen couldn't share Sanja's mirth. He was far too concerned with the fact that the seal wasn't unlocked yet. He chewed on his black ink pen in frustration, leafing through his cluebook. What did he miss?

Naya came closer. It was true: the sixth rune was still broken. After all that? She had been sure. She had thought she was sure. She was suddenly flooded with the most icy cascade of anxiety she had ever felt in her life. It was a waterfall of agony. She swayed, trying not to faint or drown, clinging to her consciousness by a thread. But the thread snapped. D approached just in time to catch her crumpling body, and it carefully laid her on the floor next to Sanja.

Al shuffled over, visibly distressed by D's intervention.

When he became aware of this illogical reaction—he should be thankful D had helped Naya—he literally clobbered himself on the head as if attempting to dislodge a faulty EPU.

D glared at Al with an intensity that could or could not be interpreted as either an emotion of ordinary anger, or a case of demonic indigestion. Or was it a sign of something sinister, spawning inside D's unknowable psyche?

Al turned away but just as quickly, turned back.

With a dramatic gesture of overly meticulous care, D touched Naya's forehead and massaged her temples, seemingly wanting to help her regain clarity of consciousness. Witnessing this familiarity, Al jerked and jumped as if stung by a mad meteorite wasp, which had supposedly been extinct for millennia. His white face turned rosy pink from his efforts to calm down and restore normal emotional responsivity.

Sanja and Sen both watched the unfolding drama as if on live TV. Only the popcorn was missing.

"What—what do you think you're doing, man?" stuttered Al in D's general direction, his pronunciation all odd and wobbly.

D ignored him perfectly, and at least that was nothing new. It sat down to support Naya and nurture her back to well-being.

"D!" cried Al at a volume significantly higher than the situation called for. "Stop it! Leave her alone!" Al grabbed D's arm and pried it off Naya.

"Why?" boomed D to the startling surprise of everyone, including Naya who abruptly opened her eyes.

Al didn't know how to respond, but he felt better upon seeing Naya awaken. He crouched down to the level of her face. "How are you feeling? Are you alright?" His rosy face adopted another layer of red. He felt self-conscious as never before. He felt funny and hot, and like his language subroutines had been tampered with.

“I’m fine, thank you,” said Naya, sitting up. “Thank you too, D.” She smiled at D and put her hand on its metallic shoulder.

D lowered its head in acknowledgment.

Al’s face tinted and turned from red to purple, for reasons he didn’t understand in the least.

To Al’s utter dismay, D sprang up and assisted Naya to her feet in a chivalrous manner. That did it for Al. His brain scintillated and oscillated into inner convulsions. Sanja could swear she saw his face turn from deep purple to violet black, but perhaps it was just an illusion, an interplay of shadow and light. After all, she *was* an imaginative sorceress.

“Leave her alone! She’s *mine*!” Al yelled, then gasped after the words escaped him. Everybody’s hearts stopped, stuck in mid-beat. Everybody but D’s, that is—nobody even knew if he had one. The entity remained silent, its face a cold mask. It was emitting no vibe—neither good nor bad—which was bad. Definitely bad.

A sense of imminent doom loomed low over the companions like a fat black thunderstorm cloud on asteroids.

Naya drew the breath of all breaths and recomposed herself. She nodded to Sanja in reassurance, then looked at Al with all the sweetness she could muster. “What’s going on, my friend? Are you okay?”

Al desperately wanted to say something. He tried to explain, but his vocal apparatus didn’t obey his command. His color returned to his normal pearly white, but he was unable to utter a single word. He stood there, smiling meekly, powerless to say a word or move a metallic muscle.

Naya seemed to comprehend Al’s passionate predicament. She sniffed the odor of general negativity in the air and opted to focus on something else for a while, and give him time to recuperate. “So the unlocking failed. Strange. I don’t understand it. What do you guys think we should do?”

Sen strode around nervously, kicking up stardust. “We

have to think of something we haven't considered before, that's what!" The stardust made him cough, so he crouched on the floor instead, twirling his copper detective pipe.

Everybody tried hard to come up with an idea.

Al shuffled, still at a loss.

Sanja spun in gloomy circles, her mood somber.

Miss let out a small, sympathetic moan.

Naya looked up, as if the answer was constructed into the ceiling.

Nobody had ideas. They didn't want to be negative. But they didn't know, and they were grumpy about not knowing. And grumpy that they were grumpy. In fact, they downright hated themselves for feeling the way they did.

Except for D, who was beyond hatred. Instead, D darkened and disincorporated and disappeared from the world. That was it, he was gone completely, leaving only a miasma, a sensation, a memory both familiar and gravely discomfiting at the same time. A memory that deeply affected everybody else.

Brusquely, Sen suggested—against his better judgment—that they take Miss and travel to some random place. "Nothing is worse than sitting here and withering away in this stench," he added, glaring accusingly at Sanja.

Without a word, Sanja kicked him in the shin bone and stuck out her tongue, perfectly ready to cast a spell at him, if she only could.

Sen's irrational idea irked Al's vocal capacity out of its mutiny of muteness. "We can't *travel to some random place* with Miss—she's not a car," he said irritably, mocking Sen's unscientific choice of words. "With her, you have to be exact—or at least vague, but you have to state your purpose, even if you don't know it, but—" The sourness of his acidic voice trailed off. He was being horrible because he was realizing something horrible; his love for Naya was completely unrequited.

"Don't contradict yourself, tin man!" It was clearly Naya's

turn to snap. Her fierce reaction to Al's uncharacteristically rude outburst was itself highly untypical. "We *can* travel randomly with Miss and I agree with Sen we should. I can drive, if you can't." Her lips quivered with disdain.

Al was deeply hurt by Naya's reprimand, and sulked for a full sixty seconds. Eventually he followed the other three to Miss. They climbed aboard, their optimism at its lowest possible point. Somewhere underneath the whole fabric of time, space, and spice, they felt D getting ready to follow them.

With barely an ounce of hope in her voice, Naya issued one simple command to Gigli. "Get lost."

And the universe as they knew it, was gone.

The four companions tried to orient themselves. For a change, it was not that everything was black, or void, or otherwise shockingly weird. On the contrary. Everything was well known, familiar and cozy. Too cozy, perhaps.

What Sanja saw was a serene scene from her early childhood when she was still very young—a meadow with spring flowers and bees and butterflies zooming any which way, while scents filled her nostrils and invited her to rest her weary head on the soft grass—which she did.

Sen, on the other hand, found himself on the wildest ride in the amusement park he used to frequent with his dad, and he was zooming down, and up, and looping and spiraling around and around forever, like in the old days, a smile of oblivion adorning his placid, childish face.

Naya awoke from an invigorating, sunny afternoon nap by the lake her granny always took her to when Naya was only six. Dreamily, she gazed around and marveled at the slender motorboats zooming on the watery surface, making waves for the swimmers to avoid.

Al's reverie was a memory of a future time. He was in mechaheaven, surrounded by shelf upon shelf, filled to the brim with every machine part and electrical piece he'd

ever pined for. He had the motive, opportunity, know-how, and time, and was busy constructing the leanest and meanest free-energy traveling engine ever designed, made for roaming the world and zooming through time and space like nothing.

After Sanja's sweet surprise at the sudden shift of scenery wore off, she realized she was alone. She racked her brain to remember the last thing she could remember—but she couldn't. In fact, she couldn't remember anything. Nothing of her past. It was gone. All she knew was that she felt confusingly comfortable there in the flowery fields, while a subtler sense of suspicion urged her to return to her normal self while she still could. She had no clue what was really going on. She was steadily succumbing to the hypnotic scents of nature that were attempting to pull her into oblivion and sleep, sleep. She was so drowsy. Surely it would not hurt to have a short nap? But then a simple thought appeared, and kept coming back.

Who?

She struggled, trying not to fall asleep. She struggled to stay awake and catch the answer, and finally she grasped it, a single-word answer that thundered through her, shocking her, and awakening her.

Sen!

A feeling of affection pervaded Sanja's heart and with it, chunks of her memory returned one by one. Sen, her brother—where was he? He had just been with her. Where did he go? And, wasn't there someone else? Ah! Sanja's mind cleared. The scene of the meadow zoomed out like a screen of a computer game and faded, replaced by an image of a cubical room with wooden walls and crystal windows. Sen was there, and so were Naya and Al, all of them sitting in Missy, but D was nowhere.

Sanja remembered everything. The sleep spell had almost caught her, but she had snapped out of it.

The others had not.

“Sen, are you okay?” She shook him by the shoulders, but he was unresponsive. With eyes wide open, her brother was lost in daydreaming. Naya and Al looked the same way, zombied out of their minds.

Sanja wouldn’t be Smirky Sparrow if she gave up so quickly. She tried to wake Sen by shouting, pretend-whistling (she didn’t know how to actually whistle, just yet), and slapping his face—very gently, of course—the way she had once seen in a movie. When none of that had the slightest effect, she paused to check her appearance in her tiny mirror and apply some of her exquisite Luminare-made eyeshadow. Then she smacked Sen once more. She didn’t dare whack Naya, but she clobbered Al with an echoing clonk—to no avail.

She resorted to magic next. Spells were cast that can’t be reported within the scope and level of this book. Sparrow outdid herself, but sorcery just didn’t work.

An idea struck her. Naya had ordered Gigli to get them lost. Maybe that’s just what had happened.

“Gigli,” Sanja commanded, “get unlost!”

Gigli’s display blinked and Miss moaned. The whole room began to imperceptibly rotate counterclockwise through spacetime. Unable to see any change at first, Sanja felt sorry for wasting such a splendid idea on nothing. She stubbornly wanted to use more magic, even though she knew it wouldn’t accomplish anything.

Then, something bizarre happened.

Naya and Al groaned and stirred and stared at each other, and Sen yawned loudly and stretched. But instead of being relieved at their return, Sanja was suddenly enraged, radically and without provocation. She was disturbed by their presence. She was insulted and threatened by who they were. The vicious feelings seized control of her.

And now the four companions were back, but it would seem that not one of them was themselves. All of them had

crazed, glazed looks in their eyes.

There was a moment of silence, like the sinister calm before a superdimensional storm.

What was going on?

And then the ruckus began. Sanja found herself screaming her head off and she kicked Sen even though he had done nothing but glance at her. Sen didn't like it one bit when Al stole his flashlight and amplified its beam to burn holes into the wooden floors. To get even, Sen pressed every single last one of Al's secret control buttons that Al kept hidden underneath his armpits. Al went berserk, but since he could never hit a human being (he was restricted by the ten robotic laws), let alone a child, he hit himself—at first gently, but then with more and more unreserved fury, as if he were possessed. His limbs took massive damage, especially the hand that did all the beating. Only after he succeeded in tearing both his arms off somehow—and please don't ask how, but it did resemble that Escher piece of two hands drawing each other—well, only then did he cool down an iota, or perhaps his circuits had finally just overheated and burnt.

Naya had a different kind of episode. She entered an utter eclipse of her heart: a lunar eclipse. First moody, then swiftly depressed, enraged, hot, hungry, jovial, sad, sweet, and tired of everything, all alphabetically too, except her last phase which was apathetic and should really have come first, but didn't. On top of that, she didn't even have anyone to complain to—which she desperately wanted—because everyone was so busy fighting their own inner demons, but she did periodically launch a swear word or five at Al, although he was unable to hear and process them properly, having just replaced his ears with two nose-size carrots, while shipping his ears via airmail to East Korea to fight an old forgotten war in his stead.

Quite soon they were all spent from their zealous and

dramatic behavior and ended up prostrate on the wooden floors, which were now the hay covered floors of an Oklahoma barn from the memory of who-knows-whose childhood. Perhaps the memory was a compositum from all of them. Everyone was depleted. An occasional sigh was heard (except by Al, his ears still in the mail), and moans of pain, guilt, and sorrow.

As if things weren't miserable enough, the barn door of their feverish, shared hallucination slammed open and an imposingly tall figure stepped in, completely covered in a burlap sack with a hood, giving the distinct impression of being a professional scarecrow—a truly scary one.

The daunting personage loomed at the threshold for a frightfully long time without making a sound or a move. Finally, from beneath the hood snaked the sound of laughter. The being uncovered his rectangular head, his face a grimace of distilled Halloween evil, and his foul snicker rolled out like a never-ending volcanic rumble.

Three of the companions shuddered—it was H' who had vanished on Lum after attacking the first leader! Though Naya hadn't met the agent, she sensed a shift of emotions in her friends, from bad to worse.

The presence of the intruder exerted an eerie pull on everyone's awareness. Naya looked from H' to each of her friends, but before anyone had the opportunity to fill her in on the visitant's identity, three more similarly clad individuals entered, all looking exactly the same as H', but for a tiny twist, as if they were images seen in a row of successively distorted mirrors from a haunted house amusement park.

The H-ents lurched into threatening positions, each standing right over one of the helpless companions, to stare down mercilessly into their eyes.

Four looks connected and locked in a frightening, fateful way.

Life energy—*chi*—in the form of a whitish, thick light-

liquid, reluctantly flowed upwards from the eyes of the barely conscious companions into the eyes of H', H", H"', and H'''''. The H-ents stood immobile, save for the occasional smirk and smack of their mouths revealing how profoundly they were enjoying the taste of the agents and associates of the Magical Arts and Detective Agency.

The more the life energy drained out of the rigid bodies of the companions, the brighter the ambient light became. At one point, the old Oklahoma barn turned translucent, and the interior of the Tesseract was clearly discernible once more. Vivid colors oozed from the runes.

The whole place wheezed as if dying.

A fierce shiver zoomed down Naya's spine. She cleared her throat. She tried to speak and managed a faint, "Wait." Raising her hand barely a couple of inches, she commanded her chi to cease flowing away from her. With supreme effort, she broke eye contact with the phantom above her.

The H" who had been consuming her hissed.

"These clowns have no real power over us," Naya whispered to the others, trying to encourage them, but still so weak she could hardly move. "Wake up. Look away from them." Though exhausted, having been sapped of her energy, a spark of recuperating awareness had taken hold of her. "This is a nightmare, and it's not real. Just look away."

The others heard her.

They tried. Each of them tried.

Just to look.

Away.

And each of them, with will and heart, also broke eye contact with the H's.

Sanja was the first to defiantly look away from the soul-scavengers, and as she did, she stuck out her tongue, snarky at the last. Sen followed suit, without the tongue part, and Al tore his gaze away as well. Each of them rested on the floor, panting at first, then breathing more carefully, regaining

their strength, while the not-so-scary-anymore figures remained frozen where they were standing.

“Who the Speck are these creepy guys?” asked Sanja, sitting up. She made an effort to fix her hair, at least a bit.

“And why do they all resemble Mr. Hatch of Social Services?” added Sen, making sure to mess up his pressed hair, at least a bit.

“Who?” asked Al, confused even though his ears and other parts had all reverted back to their rightful places. “It’s the attacker from Lum! Why are—”

“They’re projections!” Naya interrupted. “We all perceive them differently. To me, they appear as the four geniuses from the institute, trying to drag me back to my office.”

The echo of Naya’s words hadn’t even died out when the four scarecrow figures lifted off the ground in ghostlike fashion and floated towards their common center, merging into just one entity. They—it—boomed in a well-known voice, “You correct. Projections.”

D’s oval form morphed out of the mass of former H-ents.

“But powerless—not,” he finished. With a sucking, sickening sound, he tapped into everyone’s energy fields again and began to siphon their chi. The drain was felt immediately.

The shock and loss reverberated through them all as they felt their energy draining once again.

D. It was D doing this to them.

Was this a bad joke?

No, no joke. It was eating them. D, their friend.

“D!” exclaimed Sen, weakened.

Sanja remembered the first time she and her brother had encountered the dark, oblong shape in that obscure cave, seemingly so long ago—even though it had been only yesterday.

“You demon—you—!” scolded Al. “I always knew you were fishy.”

Naya's energy drained. Her heart gave up. There was no fighting D. It was too strong. In a matter of seconds all her optimism and hope were sucked dry.

D the demon feasted on all of them, and its charcoal black shape contorted in vicious pleasure at what it was doing.

"D, why?" Sanja asked in vain. She curled up in a ball, dying, her heart wounded by the betrayal. She wanted to cry but her despair was too great.

"We thought you were our friend," Sen cried.

"It's what demons do," Al managed to say, just before surrendering.

Al had a point. D *was* a demonic entity. Sen and Sanja had thought they had taught it unconditional love and kindness, but maybe they hadn't, and even if they had, it still couldn't stop being what it was: demonic.

It had tricked them from the start.

It had been pretending to be friends.

It was a demon, how could it have done anything else?

And not only had it tricked them, D had been taking energy from them since the first moment they met. Just in small amounts, so nobody would realize. Sometimes Sen or Sanja had wondered why they felt momentarily weird, or sad, or tired, for no reason, but nobody had realized that their enemy was their friend.

Do you know anything about demonic energies? I ask because most people don't. Demonic entities always pretend to be something they are not. They are masters of trickery and like to dress up in costumes to disguise their true nature. They knock on our door and offer to help us when we are hurting and we eagerly let them in, but instead of delivering what they promised us—the nurturance that would make us feel safe or worthy—they poison us. And the negative emotions we feel as a result of their cunning, subtle manipulations, is their sustenance.

We are their food.

D, diabolic and dark, hovered over the companions, having revealed itself at last. It grew denser. It threw itself a black party and invited them all to a banquet of negativity, where the most delicious feelings of disappointment, betrayal, resentment, dishonesty and hurt were served cold, with their common denominator, disconnection, for dessert. D stimulated them to feel these emotions, than devoured them hungrily.

None of the four companions had enough sense or presence left to do a thing. They had reached rock bottom. D was taking too much energy. Death was stalking them while giving a high five to its old comrade D the demon.

Al felt his vital functions being canceled out, failing their last tail-recursion optimization. To his left, the magnificence of the violet colored rune was still pouring its selfless bright light all over their withering bodies. That was *his* rune, the one he had healed through his understanding. That was his last thought, and it was followed by mere static.

With the last of her presence, Naya witnessed Al go blank. She wanted to check on the siblings, but was swept away through a vortex into unconsciousness. Sen followed.

Sanja was the last one standing—well, lying—but still herself. D sensed her struggle and it crawled closer to focus directly on this little, brave girl, doubling its sinister efforts to end her.

But instead of letting D blow her out like the flame of a candle, Sanja did something else.

She sat up.

She smiled like Buddha.

“I remember,” she said softly.

She stared into D’s dark shape.

“I remember who I was before we came here. Who we all were. Even you, D.”

D glared at Sanja like a black mirror.

She continued calmly, “But when the white crystal

embraced the Tesseract's heart, something happened. We went wild. We weren't ourselves anymore."

Sanja closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

"I remember what I learned at The Hub, how the white crystal makes everything stronger. Our light parts shine more brightly, but so do our shadows."

Her deep, brown eyes moistened with compassion.

"And here, when we used the crystal, that same thing was stronger, like a dozenfold! So I knew," she said, slowly pronouncing her words, "how tough that must have been on you, D."

The others still lay, unmoving.

Sanja focused fiercely on D. Her tender smile blazed like a shooting star, causing D to slip away like darkness flees the light of dawn

It withdrew from Sanja, then roared, octaves deeper than usual and with an internal undertone.

"Little girl! Nothing save you."

D shone with such encompassing inner darkness that the multi-colored light of the runes went dim. Gloom took hold of the room.

But Sanja knew better than to be tricked. She knew now: demon energies use your own power against you. She knew D was trying to get her to be negative. But she wouldn't be. She had a magic trick that wasn't magic at all. Her love and commitment to her friends—including D—was vast and not at all conditional upon what they did. Even though she knew that D would suck every last bit of chi from them all, she did what only Sanja could do: she still loved him, despite it all. She loved him anyway.

She offered him care, straight from her heart. Because even if he was having a bad day, or a bad year, or sheck, even a bad millenium, she was still his friend.

Even when he made sorry choices—like trying to eat them all—she was still his friend.

“D,” she said, her voice ringing with pure, authentic tones, “I am your friend.”

There was a long pause.

“I’m your friend whether you like it or not, and no matter what you do.”

She vibrated her love by feeling it.

Simply that.

“Come here.”

D came. But. It came not as a friend but as the demon it was. It came for the food!

Sanja’s pure feelings were the lure. D knew that negatively charged feelings—his food—were never far away from the positive ones. And he was hungry. He had been invited. So the ravenous D came running.

A gray, desolate finality filled every nook of the room. All was lost: D was winning.

But Sanja—she was no longer weak. She was at her best because she was in touch with her soul. When D’s onslaught came, Sanja was ready.

She did the only thing possible—she gave herself. She didn’t resist anything that might happen. Not even dying.

Time for D to drool.

Its greed was overwhelming. The juicy morsel of free food—Sanja’s chi—was right there on the proverbial platter, calling to it, welcoming it. The offer was tantalizing. Just one enormous bite, and the whole thing would be over. D sought for the most shadowy part of Sanja, hunted for the place most filled with her fear, ready to sink its abstract vampire teeth in, as deep and hard as possible.

But in this moment, there was nothing negative present in the energetic field of Sanja. Her vibration was pure, there was no shadow.

And as such it was distasteful to D.

In fact it was inedible and downright disgusting. It turned D away.

D was at a loss. Never before in millennia of existence had it encountered a soul unstained and thus untouchable.

After the shock of her horrible radiance, D tried again. He tried to engulf Sanja and inject its own darkness into her bubble of light. He tried to invade that bubble, to pierce it, to wreck it, to revoke it. D squeezed and twisted and tore at her energy.

As all of D's attention had gone to Sanja, its lethal assault was retracted from Naya, Al and Sen, and they slowly returned to their senses, moaning and groaning, gradually becoming aware of their bleak surroundings.

When they looked up, they saw D's black energy bubble warped around Sanja attempting to either crush her or pervade her being: to finish her off. From their darkened perspective, Sanja's demise seemed certain.

D's blackness felt overpowering to them.

But as they watched Sanja, their hope was rekindled and they were able to perceive something else.

What Sen observed was purity of heart.

Al saw something majestic.

Naya perceived transcendence.

Sanja was as clear as a summer night sky with all of the stars shining on, somewhere high in the mountains. As radiant as nothing. She was as pure as the first creation song.

Sanja stood up, facing her black friend, facing his attack. Not only was she void of all fear, she was filled with compassion.

And out of that compassion she lifted her right hand to the level of her heart and played her fingers as if on a harp or a Theremin. She used magic. She used magic even though no magic was possible in the sacred crux of the Cube.

A white halo formed above her upward turned palm, and the halo solidified into a white rose. Sanja's eyes were gentle, her heart tender.

She offered the rose to D.

The simple act moved everyone deeply.

The fog inside Sen started to lift, slowly and steadily, like a curtain on a premiere show night. The shadow inside Al brightened. A bird in Naya's heart lifted a wing.

D stopped in its demonic, abstract tracks.

The sum total of everybody's uplifted feelings suddenly hit D full strength. Like the first hand of light.

It felt wretched, bizarre, bewildered.

It convulsed, fled, came back, contorted, shook and stayed.

It watched Sanja.

Everybody was watching Sanja.

Sanja's soul shone from her eyes and basked everyone in its radiation. Sen's heart thawed and a surge of happiness warmed his body. Naya felt the essence of her own soul nearer and clearer than ever before, and an emotion of pure affection coursed through her. She looked up, and Al was staring at her. Her heart leaped. What was happening?

At the same time, something hyper-fuzzy clicked and clanged in Al's head. Heavy metal wheels started to whirl, faster and faster, until his cooling fans kicked in and blew the rest of his oblivion clear away.

The company regrouped, banning fear and negativity from their being. Only compassion remained.

In that moment, D had an epiphany.

It recognized itself.

It knew its true self as the darkness, as the demon.

And it made a choice.

It accepted the rose from Sanja's vibrant hand.

D lifted its black blob of a body to the eye level of its friends and hovered there in the center of the Cube's square space. The others couldn't tell what was going on inside D, but they were all able to look at their friend with compassion.

Now, who are we to judge D's shadowy path and the numerous decisions it made throughout its nearly infinite existence? Perhaps it had merely wanted to experience the

darkest of the dark, including the experience of trying to eat its friends, before returning to the lightest of the light.

Accompanied by a soothing strobe of light, the darkness was sucked out of the room as if by an efficient vacuum in capable hands. Where did it go?

Into D.

That was its home and D was its curator—and perhaps its healer, in time. For D had made a choice, and it was no mere demonic trick. D, yet pure darkness—its true nature—had opted to coexist with light. He had accepted the rose. Perhaps his dark would never be able to mix with the light at large, like water and oil, but D would try.

Everything reverted to normal. D phased out only to reappear in its shiny black armor. The companions hugged as if they hadn't seen each other for eons.

Sen and Sanja encircled D and squeezed it so hard that the dark droid started leaking liquid from its eyes. It cringed a bit but didn't shift away—it was ready to experience the positive now, as well as the negative.

With no extra effort on anyone's part, the sixth seal unlocked itself with a well-known click.

Sen grinned at Naya as the new turquoise light joined the other five colors vividly adorning the room, just as she had predicted. He picked up the Cube and confirmed it: the runes were complete. A joyous laughter escaped him, vibrating his body, and the whole world shook uncontrollably with him.

With an enormous smile, Al stepped in and helped Sen stabilize the Tesseract.

The six colors danced and swirled, mingling with the white-silver-gold energy of the Tesseract's core, spinning like a merry-go-round losing its bearings, a carousel escaping control, faster and faster, until all the light condensed into a singularity—and then went out in a peculiar puff.

Just like that.



— CHAPTER SEVEN —

SEVENTH SEAL

A bright, silvery-golden ray of sunshine woke Sanja late in the morning. She glanced through the window. It was already daylight.

She immediately recognized her own pink covered bed and the light wooden walls of the bedroom she shared with Sen. But she was dazed. How did she get here?

She felt her forehead. It wasn't hot.

Had it all been a dream?

"Sen!" she called.

No reply.

"Sloth! Wake up!"

Her brother sat up in his bunk bed. "What?" The words dragged.

"Look where we are," Sanja said cautiously, not wanting to admit her confusion.

"And?" Sen asked, rubbing his eyes before taking in the room in its usual state of quantum disarray. He was grumpy. His mind was still fast asleep.

Sanja sighed, relieved. It *had* been just a dream. She sank back into her cozy bed.

"What was that?"

"What?"

"Shhh!" Sen went quiet, straining to hear. "They're arguing." Sanja's dark brown eyes were instantly wide. *Deja-vu!*

The MADA agents leaped out of their beds and dashed down the stairs, following the voices coming from the ground floor where the kitchen, living and dining room all shared a common space. The arguing sounded familiar.

Reaching the bottom stair, Sen and Sanja stopped, their hearts thumping. It *wasn't* a dream. Sen blinked. He was fully awake now, and remembered everything. But what was going on?

Naya was in the midst of the mundane process of loading the dishwasher while Al diligently inspected her every move. D half-observed from the green sofa in the living room while trying to play a game of Go against itself: it had been winning all along but felt as if losing was its only option. Missy was securely parked by the tent.

"Come on!" Al shook his round white head. "You know that the dirty pans and pots go into the bottom drawer. The water temperature is higher there."

His explanation was like fuel on a fire.

"I told you, I don't care!" Naya's obsidian eyes shot angry lightning at, surprisingly, both Al and D, even though D wasn't doing anything other than playing Go. When Naya noticed the children entering, she calmed down.

"Hey," she greeted them. "Did we wake you up? I'm so sorry!" She cast another accusing glare at Al.

Sanja extended Naya a huge hug while Sen scratched his temples in confusion.

"What was—wait, how did we get back home?"

Al shrugged. "Not a clue."

Naya shrugged too. "I see you, Sen, and raise you this: why do I feel at home?" She looked down at what she was doing and laughed. "Why am I loading the dishwasher?"

Sen's cells were shaking. He was feeling very, very funny. Not even his quantum tracing intuition came to the rescue. He felt like he knew exactly what was going on, but the explanation was under a veil in his mind.

“But ... didn’t we unseal all the runes?” he stammered. If they had unsealed them all, and their parents were still not back, then ...

Sanja looked at Sen’s disappointed face and took a deep breath. Then she broke into tears.

Naya zoomed past Al, shoving him out of her way with an impatient expression on her face, and knelt by Sanja to console her.

“There, there,” she chirped in a cheerful tone, pretending everything was okay. “Did you have a nightmare?”

“I dunno,” said Sanja between sobs, “I hoped I did.” She looked into Naya’s eyes, no longer certain what was real and what was fantasy. “I thought my mom and dad might be back.” Hot tears streamed down her cheeks.

Naya embraced her. “I’m so sorry. We’ll find them yet, you’ll see! Don’t lose hope.”

D chuckled casually in its own passive-demonic way, distracted by trying to order the Go stones by color.

Al reached within and produced the Tesseract from one of his bodily compartments. He lifted the artifact and displayed it to Sanja and Sen from all angles and sides. All six runes were complete and shone with intensity, each in their own color.

“We did unlock all the seals, but nothing happened,” Naya said to Sanja, gently. “Well, nobody remembers what happened after it clicked. Not even D.”

D couldn’t be bothered to reply as it was at a critical stage of his stone sorting challenge, so Naya continued. “We all woke up here this morning. Everything feels familiar, but we’ve never been here before. We hadn’t even heard of this solar system before we met you.”

Naya gave a tissue to Sanja whose sobbing was slowly subsiding. “We let you sleep in. The whole morning we’ve been trying to figure out what’s going on.”

An idea sparked in Sen’s mind, but just a spark, and the

flame went out. Something ... something was trying to come to him. He tried to keep his mind still, to allow the spark to take hold.

Al reported how he had systematically searched through his databases, contrabasses, baseball bases, and basically all of the other bases he could possibly consider in order to solve the mystery, but had gotten nothing, nada, nič. If he weren't a machine, the frustration levels would have finished him off.

Sen exhaled on the little mind spark, and composed himself. He was MADA's Chief Detective Officer, and he'd figure this out. He produced his tracecase and retrieved his cluebook from its side pocket, then threw himself on the sofa next to D and proceeded to scribble and rework his observations. There were enough clues revolving around this case that he should be able to tie it all together.

The runes were all healed. He didn't need the rune notes anymore. Now he needed the vision ones. Obviously, Tess was a hyper-portal and had opened the wormholes. Dad was the golden sun and Mom was the silver moon. The white supernova had united their colors, but where were they still hiding? And the polar opposites of Lum and the Institute had been reunited by their visits and the corresponding runes were healed there, right? The white knight was helping the gray lady and the dark shadow had been duly killed. The only vision left was the two-headed coin.

What was he missing?

Sanja had seemed to calm down, but then, another tsunami of sadness flowed through her. Rivers of tears poured from her eyes. "I miss my mom."

Naya wrapped Sanja in her arms. Sen pretended to be thoroughly immersed in his cluebook but his chest, too, was trembling with suppressed emotion.

"Now, there," volunteered Al logically, "it can't be that bad."

Naya pierced him with a deadly look. "Have you gone

mad?" The icy words chilled the air. "You don't say that to a crying child!"

"How would you know?" retorted Al in a purely reasonable voice. "You're not a mother."

"Watch it, buster!" Naya's furious overreaction made Sanja's heart jump, and she hid behind Naya, using the woman's body as a shield from the argument. "What do you know? You're just a cheap computer chip in a smelly tin can!"

Al's emotional programming kicked in. He was seriously upset. His round metalloplastic face didn't have the capacity to demonstrate it in full, but the gist of the problem was this: Al suffered from unrequited love.

He dropped to his knees.

"Why don't you like me? I love you with all of my constituents!" His golden backlit eyes dimmed with sorrow and crude self-pity. He wanted to cry but his liquid dispensing units were fried from having been seriously overused recently.

"Oh, you pathetic, selfish, soulless idiot!" Naya scrambled to her feet, forgetting about Sanja. Looming over Al's love-struck, artificial, armored body that could probably withstand a magnitude 9 echo-storm on Morseus, Naya vented.

Sen and Sanja watched, appalled and uncertain as to why she was acting so strangely.

"You useless parasite!"

As if by afterthought, Naya fixed D with a murderous glare, as it leisured on the sofa, minding its own mindless business. "You as well!" she snapped viciously. "I don't know which of you is worse. One lost in his shiny intellect and the other in hazy chaos, and both, absolutely worthless."

"But ..." Al was devastated. "If you could apply but a mere subroutine of soft feminine nature, so you could find love for me in your heart! I could be so good for you."

Naya found herself incapable of responding. Disgusted, she

turned away from Al and looked up to the ceiling, clenching her fists in total frustration.

D came to some unexpected and mysterious decision. It lifted itself up like a heavy, dark cloud from the couch, and menacingly approached Al and Naya.

Uh-oh, thought Sen and Sanja at the same moment, glancing at each other, worry traced all over their faces.

“You wounded woman,” said D simply, yet its statement packed the blackest of wallops. It stared candidly into Naya’s eyes. “You in denial! You love just you.”

Sanja immediately charged from fear and sadness to anger. She wanted to protect her friend. She was about to intervene and inform D how that was the furthest thing possible from the truth, but Sen stopped her gently. Something was playing out, and he needed to see what it was.

Naya’s face reddened like the photobomb of an overly romantic sunset. Her eyes glassed out. She panted and puffed like an ancient locomotive negotiating an extraordinarily steep curve. Surprising the stars out of everyone, Naya abruptly charged Al and D like a crash of mad rhinos trying to stomp out a wildfire. The might of her physical assault was such that she toppled over both heavy metallic bodies at once.

One black body, one white body.

She proceeded to pummel them, one with each hand, as if she had gone stark mad. The droids, of course, didn’t take any damage from her fleshy fists and couldn’t exactly understand Naya’s sudden exercise in furious futility, so they reset their emotions and passively remained lying down on their backs.

“Stop!” Sanja cried.

Sen was shaking. “D, Naya, Al, stop! What are you doing? You’re all in denial!” But of what, he wondered. In denial of *what*?

“Stop fighting,” pleaded Sanja, even though Naya was

doing all the fighting now. Her voice choked.

The doorbell rang, startling everybody. Sanja instantly dashed to answer, thinking that no matter who it was, at this point, anything could help.

The door swung open like a shot, revealing the concerned expression of Mr. Hatch. He had been coming to check on the Star kids and had heard a suspicious commotion. Without waiting for Sanja's invitation, he strode into the house as though he owned it. He had years of experience with domestic disturbance cases and could recognize one in progress.

"Good day, Sanja, good day, Sen. What is going on?" Mr. Hatch looked at them politely with eyebrows raised, while carefully scanning the rest of the house.

"Well," Sen said, with the brilliant idea of saving the day by telling a half-truth, "our parents are having an argument." He looked down at his toes. "But we're fine. It's no big deal." He didn't consider himself a great liar—and he was quite right.

"Your parents are home?" Mr. Hatch's tone sounded disbelieving for a reason neither brother nor sister could at first understand. He had assumed that the hue and cry heard through the door originated from the siblings and that—still—no parents were present. For all he knew, the kids might be throwing a wild party all by themselves or with a whole fifth-grade class of truants.

Sen and Sanja shifted glances from the agent to D, Naya and Al who were still locked in their fighting positions, then back to the agent. Was the man blind? Why did his eyes pass right over the fighting trio? Perhaps even one measly android would be far too much for poor Mr. Hatch, whose brains were just not suited for uses either imaginative or out of bounds. But two sentient droids, uncannily alike—why, almost like a photo snapshot and its negative—it was too far beyond the scope of Mr. Hatch's mind.

No, these droids were not the ones he was looking for.

But why couldn't he see Naya? It was a total mystery. Sen's hand itched to muse questions into his cluebook.

Everybody could see Mr. Hatch clearly, though. Naya leaped off the rigid androids and straightened up, making sure her hairdo was decent, sweeping her strange anger below the rug, needing to have outward appearances taken care of. Al and D were curious and sat up.

Naya, a former top-ranking genius of the Institute, immediately caught onto the reason for Sen's poorly executed whopping lie, and opted to play along. Her wild attack seemed totally forgotten. Armed with a disarming smile, she approached the agent, offering him a handshake and introducing herself as their mother.

Mr. Hatch gaped right through her and made no sign that he witnessed the presence of anyone in the room but the kids. "Hullo? Anybody home?" He paused expectantly, craning his head towards the staircase, listening for a response which never arrived.

Al and Naya exchanged glances. A dying spark in Naya's eye reminded Al of her unspent anger, but it was not the time for either of them to investigate where it had come from, or why. Instead, their glance was of clarity. They both understood what was happening with the agent.

"He can't perceive us because he can't conceive of us," said Naya, and Al nodded.

D was confused. Being able to perceive anything in any dimension and beyond, D found it inconceivable that anyone could find anything inconceivable.

Al got up and walked over to the agent, eager to test the theory. "How are the diodes on your left side doing today?" he yelled into Mr. Hatch's ear. "Bleep if you can hear me." Interestingly enough, the agent did seem to sense *something* and he absentmindedly rubbed at his ear.

"Where are your parents?" he asked the siblings again. "They weren't here last week, and they aren't now, either." He

gazed at Sen and then Sanja alternately.

Sen knew better than to insist the apparently invisible Naya was their mom. He fumbled for words.

Sanja didn't hesitate. She confessed everything. She told it all, the grand, unwieldy, bizarre adventure, right from the thunderous beginning to the unfinished end. Her hands conducted the hymn of their quest and her voice rose and fell with the feeling.

The agent listened to her fantastic tale with the growing arc of a smile. When she stopped he tousled her hair and admiringly commended her imagination.

"You should be a writer!" he exclaimed.

Sanja couldn't decide whether to be grateful for the compliment, or insulted at not being believed. She chose both and managed to both beam and glare simultaneously.

Mr. Hatch jotted some data into his drab notebook and his face shifted into a more serious gear.

"My dear children," he said, softly yet meaningfully, "I see no other recourse but to take you somewhere safe and appropriate for you." Showing them a colorful brochure, he continued, "This institution is one of the best in the country, and the state will cover all expenses until such time as your parents return." Sanja shuddered at the word on the leaflet in his hand. *Orphanage*.

"But we're doing great," protested Sen, unconvincingly adding, "all by ourselves."

Alas, Mr. Hatch had stopped listening. He was already decided, and focused his attention on the task of organizing the details of the relocation process. He dialed a number on his mobile and instructed somebody on the other side to meet them at the children's home address.

"While we're waiting for transport, let's pack your suitcases and make sure you don't leave anything behind you might need." The agent's voice was matter-of-fact, as if speaking about the most mundane thing in the world instead of doing

what he was actually doing: crushing Sen and Sanja's reality to a small, nightmarish pulp.

The scared siblings looked at Naya, Al, and D, unsure of what was going to happen.

The moment froze in time.

Sanja's whole body shivered. "Maybe this *is* a dream. Please," she said, clenching her hands together as in prayer, looking up to the heavenly ceiling, "please let this be a nightmare. Just a bad dream."

Sanja's honest plea crept out Sen, and he considered bolting. He'd come back for Sanja later, he promised himself. Carefully planning his timing, he aimed for the entrance door. In their distress, both siblings had forgotten to try their magic.

But D didn't forget.

It stalked closer to the unsuspecting agent, ready to wreak havoc. Mr. Hatch was busy tapping at his phone, checking the register of personal belongings the siblings were allowed to bring along, and the ominous presence of D went unnoticed. Only when an unseen force lifted him up in the air—where he hovered speechlessly for a long minute—did he acknowledge that something weird was afoot.

D gestured with a black arm and Mr. Hatch levitated to his left, then descended abruptly onto the orange-beige armchair. He couldn't move. He had been immobilized by D. He didn't believe in ghosts—even though he currently looked just like one, rather pale in the face—but he believed in restraints. And the restriction of being bound without knowing how, is a strong restraint indeed, and he allowed himself to be totally shackled by it.

He couldn't budge. His mind was locked in a tremendous conundrum; was there or was there not someone that did or didn't look like a black robot witch present who had rendered him completely paralyzed?

D circled its captive audience a couple of times, smirking.

Al was too flabbergasted to speak.

Naya, however, had all the words, and she delivered them to D ferociously. “*What—do—you—think—you’re—doing?*”

Sen and Sanja’s fear vanished as they gleefully watched the D Show unfold.

“Dream or not,” Sanja grinned, “I like where this is going.”

Mr. Hatch swallowed a huge breath. He thought of his favorite hero, Sherlock Holmes, who would have reminded him: *Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.* (Coincidentally, Mr. Holmes was also Sen’s favorite hero.) The notion consoled the agent somewhat, because it gave him something to occupy himself with: eliminating the impossible. Androids as advanced as the ones he couldn’t say he was seeing, were not yet technically feasible. Especially ones with telekinetic powers. His mind tossed and flipped and re-organized, but no matter how hard he worked, or what angle he studied, it all seemed pretty impossible to him.

D, oblivious to the rhetorical nature of her question, replied directly to Naya. “I bind dumb agent. He not kidnap Sen Sanja.”

Mr. Hatch, of course, wasn’t offended by the insult to his intelligence. How could you be offended by something you couldn’t hear?

“But he’s not alone,” Naya said, exasperated. “Other agents will come. Your solution isn’t going to work.”

“We fight to last man!” D proudly exclaimed, conveniently bypassing the fact that none of the five of them could be counted among men. Its pompous yet somehow dignified words were still echoing around the room when the doorbell rang again.

Through the peephole Sen saw a man who resembled Mr. Hatch in his formal attire, but possessing a more rounded appearance, instead of a rectangular one. He silently slid his fingers along the bolt to make sure the door was securely

locked. The bell rang again and knocking sounded like thunder.

Sanja's heart seized. "Fortify everything!" she bayed. "We *will* fight to the last man!"

Naya gaped at her, and then at D, who was still doggedly keeping its prey immobilized on the lounge chair. A sense of confusion, as if she wasn't completely herself, overwhelmed her. She wasn't used to it. She didn't like it.

And with that, something happened none of them could account for. The emotional charge of all involved reached a peak and something intangible in the air seemed to shift, creak, and then implode.

And time sped up.

Not just a little bit.

The Tesseract floated up from the table where Al had left it, and weightlessly vacillated in midair above the red and orange striped toy tent. As it rotated, a strange dizziness affected everyone in the room—other than D, of course, and Mr. Hatch who was still busy eliminating the impossible from his mental files. Levitating shiny ancient artifacts didn't exist. They just didn't.

A strange charm indeed had pervaded the air.

Dizzy, Sanja had to sit down by the tent on the rug. Sen almost lost his balance, and propped himself against the wall. Naya closed her eyes, but she couldn't escape the sensation of the whole house revolving in the opposite direction to the rotation of the Cube. She felt nauseous. Al simply froze in place. He literally couldn't move. D was the opposite. It circled Mr. Hatch faster and faster, becoming a blur. Through the panoramic window the Sun could be observed diving faster and faster towards the horizon as though the speed of time had not only increased but was accelerating wildly at a quantastic, non-linear rate.

"Look!" shrieked Sanja, her face completely dazzled, and her index finger pointing at the big, round clock on the wall.

Sen looked but couldn't believe what he saw—the hands of the clock were racing madly round the dial, the minute hand overtaking the hour hand every dozen seconds or so. The room was getting rapidly darker. Evening set in.

"What is this cursed magic?" Naya managed. She was trembling, her fear stuck inside her. Al wanted to help her, but he didn't have a clue about where to start and he still couldn't move. His functions were starting to go cuckoo. All he could do was stand idle as a statue, and moan like Missy, only unlike Miss, he didn't go anywhere.

The day turned into night, raced through another day, and now it was night again.

The six rainbow colors of the Tesseract eerily illuminated the room. The light was the only harmony in the midst of the chaos and confusion.

"Stop!" shouted Sanja to nobody or everybody. "Stop the race!"

As if by Sanja's command, the magical hypercube ceased to turn. It stabilized and remained suspended in midair. With that, the time flow returned to normal, and the clock hands resumed their regular, unhurried, endless orbit.

Sen checked. It was exactly eleven o'clock.

Silence enveloped the interior of the house, but from the outside they heard loud outcries. It was a SWAT team ready to storm the place. Red and blue siren lights intruded through the window blinds.

"The police!" Sen gasped in alarm.

Sanja stared at him. "Whaaat?"

"They must have arrived in the hours that we missed—"

"What? Why?"

Sen was silent a moment, the disturbing flash of the lights playing across his face. "I don't know. Maybe to everyone else it seemed like the agent had been kept prisoner for the whole day? Maybe not." He crawled to the window to see better.

“Careful,” whispered Sanja as she squeezed herself into a small, tight ball.

“Oh, man,” Sen reported in a strained voice, “we’re completely surrounded. There must be at least three police cars out there.”

“What do we do?” Sanja asked in a small voice. She had to wake up. She tried with as much intensity as she possibly could, but she didn’t awaken. How could she? She already *was* awake.

Of the six people in the room, the agent suddenly seemed the sanest of them all. D finally halted its vulture-like circling around Mr. Hatch, a rapid circumambulation that had been driving everyone else crazy. It shrugged its shiny black shoulders and nonchalantly eased itself onto the sofa again, apparently undertaking to shuffle and sort the Go stones just one more time.

“D!” shouted Naya with all her pent-up frustration and confusion.

Sanja stared at her with a sharp shock. Her heartbeat accelerated. Something was weird with Naya, and Sanja didn’t like it.

D didn’t even bother looking up. It was busy with the impossible task of grading stone colors that looked exactly the same.

Naya stalked to the edge of the sofa and glared violently at D. “You always do this,” she said, her voice trembling with anger. “You pretend you don’t care. You just switch off emotionally and leave us here to fend for ourselves. Don’t you understand that we have to feel every single emotion that you refuse to feel? Yes, me, we—everyone else—have to do that when you don’t!”

D vaguely registered somebody addressing it, but it didn’t dwell on the disturbance for more than an instant. The black and white stones certainly weren’t going to sort themselves.

Naya leaned close and in one deft sweep whacked the

stones with such force that they flew in every direction. One of the black ones lightly struck agent Hatch in the back of his head, but the man barely noticed.

D stood up to collect the Go pieces, its metallic face impassive as if carved out of solid material—which, it was. “What?” it asked cluelessly.

Naya was a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She hissed and Sen could swear he saw steam coming out of her ears.

“*What?*” She clanked a fist on D’s chest with all the rage she could muster. “*What?* You just don’t get it, do you? You don’t get anything! You are nothing but concentrated abuse!” Her look turned glassy.

Sen and Sanja huddled together, not knowing what to do. Al, equally confused, beeped and reverted to his backup plans, which entailed boldly stepping over to Naya and attempting to embrace her, an act with good intent but one that only drove her deeper into her wrath, and towards the threshold of insanity. At least he succeeded in diverting her attention from D to himself, which he immediately recategorized as an error. Disinterested, D turned away from them and slumped back into the sofa, holding one remaining Go stone in its hand. The white stone shone in contrast against D’s black fingers.

Outside, a bullhorn sounded, loud and crackly and long.

Blue light flashed.

A shout.

Inside, Naya shook with visible rage. Her skin was pale white, her eyes fiery. “Well, if it’s not Mr. Nice Droid! A wannabe lover of everything and everyone. But there’s no truth to your emotion—it’s *artificial!* You have no idea what love is, tin man. And you never will!” She shoved him away with contempt.

Sanja wanted to intervene but Sen gripped her hand and wouldn’t let go.

Al stumbled away from Naya. He put his white hands on his chest where his heart was supposed to be. His face was a rigid mask but everyone could see the pain in his robot eyes. "Why are you so heartless? What did I ever do to you to deserve this?"

Naya paused. The fury in her eyes seemed to consider calming down, but a malevolent whisper in her mind spurred her on. She smiled lethally and delivered the final blow. "I will never love you, do you hear me? Never!"

Al swayed and staggered as if mortally wounded, still clasping his chest as if giving a dramatic performance of a Shakespearean tragedy.

D jumped up and fumed at Naya. "You evil female! Pure poison!" It had startled them all. The entity was usually so uncaring and emotionless. "Al love you and you say that!"

Naya broke into a demented belly laugh. Her eyes were crazed from the emotional upheaval. "Ha, finally! The black demon reveals its true colors! What a relief it must be for you to let go of your mask of lying and hypocrisy! How does it feel? How do you like the love now?"

Sen barely believed what he was witnessing. Why was Naya snapping like this at D, or Al, for that matter? What had happened with D anyway? What in the quantum was going on? His tracing talents were burning rubber to put all the pieces together, and his heart was agitated by all the intense emotions being flung about.

Al couldn't move, being far too theatrically wounded. But D could. And it did. It moved like black lightning, like a king cobra, like death itself. It moved and it engulfed Naya. Apparently it had taken offense to her barbed words. It fell upon her like its attack was written in an ancient script of vengeance, and it wrapped its black metallic hands around her fair, soft neck.

And it pressed, and squeezed, and tightened.

Sen couldn't restrain Sanja any longer, but nor did he want

to. They both darted to help Naya, crying loudly. With little effect they pulled on D and with a single flex of its inhuman black arm, D sent the siblings flying across the room. Their cries brought Al back from his dazed suffering and he activated, fast. He grabbed D and tried to pry its claw-like fingers off of Naya.

Sen's heart beat like a drum in his chest. He was horrified. Still lying on the rug where he had landed after D's colossal blow, his eye focused on something small, round, and copperish. He reached out and picked up a coin stamped with a familiar head: it was his dad. With shaking fingers, Sen flipped the coin. On the other side, there was nothing, nothing at all—the coin was smooth and featureless. Something flashed in his mind.

The reality is veiled.

Outside, the brightness of the red and blue lights magnified, and the noise thrashed against the windows and walls of the house like gigantic waves, as if sinister enemy hordes were assailing them. Inside, the tent intermittently flashed in red and orange. The Tesseract was still suspended above its roof.

With a focus rooted in the deepest of dimensions, D continued its attempts to strangle Naya, while Al used all of his considerable, inhuman force to oppose it.

It was a stalemate.

Sen could hear Sanja crying beside him. He battled his mind—should he try again or not? His old archenemy, *fear*, gripped him mercilessly. But would he let himself freeze, paralyzed by indecision, now that his help was most needed?

No.

Sen jumped to his feet and a tear-streaked Sanja followed. But instead of charging headfirst back into the physical commotion—knowing well he didn't stand a chance against the strength of an android—Sen wisely considered another option; he'd use his intelligence. Quantum tracers always had that.

As soon as he made his choice, something cleared in Sen's mind. *The reality is veiled.* Hmm. Or duplicated, nearly identical. Or both!

He grinned.

He knew what to do.

He took a deep breath for courage and leaned towards his sister.

"Smirky Sparrow," he asked in a brave voice, "The Magical Arts and Detective Agency needs your specialized services. Right now. Can you handle it?"

Sanja gaped at Sen, reassessing her reality and the unspoken new options unfolding in her brother's calm gaze. A spark appeared in her dark brown eyes and her chin lifted.

Her solemn expression shifted into a smile.

A smile that bordered on a smirk.

"Yes, Serious Sloth!" She cleared her throat. "I can. What do you have in mind?"

The wail of the police siren invading through the window tripped, paused, then screamed even louder, stealing a portion of Al's attention. His hold on D's fingers weakened slightly. D seized the opportunity and mercilessly reinforced its grip on Naya's throat. She coughed and wheezed, struggling to breathe, but her face was already scarlet red and turning blue.

"Cast a spell for us," Sen said quickly, without losing his composure, though his heart was racing with fear turning to hopeful excitement. "It's a strong one. Probably the strongest you've ever made. I can't do it myself—I'm too old for that."

Sanja swelled up with pride and raised her arms, her fingers dancing, ready to create some magic. She remained focused on Sen's determined look.

The air in the room was alive, vibrant, and humming with static electricity as though the spectacle unfolding was a mythical drama that had just crossed the point of no return.

"I need you to use an—awareness spell!" whispered Sen

as if he didn't dare to speak too loud about a power of such insane magnitude. "I think this reality might be a mirage. I don't think it's quite—real." He glanced at Naya who just at that moment finally stopped fighting back and went limp as if dead.

Al redoubled his hold on D.

Sirens still screamed from outside.

"No!" cried Sanja, seeing Naya, abandoning her focus on Sen.

"Wait, Sparrow!" Sen grabbed Sanja's arm. "It's not too late. Cast the spell. Cast a *conscious reveal* spell!"

Sanja hesitated.

In the gap, she got an even better idea: she could use a *black removal* spell instead. But there was no time to run it by her brother.

"Do it now! Only you can do it, Smirky Sparrow!"

But what if Sloth was right, and she was wrong?

Nope! She was always right!

Wasn't she?

"Do it, please ..." begged Sen.

And Sanja made her choice.

She steadied up. The world around her was put on pause as she lifted both hands, like a proud bird of prey raises her talons. An unmistakable force of pure sorcery took over the space, and even Sen retraced a step back from Sanja wielding her unencumbered noble power.

She snapped her fingers and that was that.

A magnesium white flare temporarily blinded everyone in the room, the city, the galaxy.

Time stopped.

Only Sen and Sanja could move.

Everybody and everything else was paused.

The interplay of light and shadow on the beings and objects in the room was phantasmagorical. The rainbow lights of the Tesseract floating above the orange-red tent melted and

merged with the blues of the police, and the fusion of color spilled onto the walls and floors in motionless artistic beauty.

A frosty silence hung in the air.

Naya's unmoving body seemed ever more immobile on the living room rug, as if she were frozen like silver ice. D and Al, sprawled over her, were equally still, like petrified gold. Al looked as if he was dreaming of electric sheep. And Mr. Hatch, resting on his armchair, looked not one notch more alive than the other three.

Sanja rubbed her eyes. Even though she was the one casting the spell and causing all this to happen, she could hardly believe her senses, and shook her head repeatedly. "What's going on?"

Sen blinked.

"It's a dream ..." Sanja whispered, "and it's not a dream."

Sen nodded sagely. "The first phase of the *conscious reveal* spell: the freeze."

Sanja nodded. She had trusted her brother and cast the spell he wanted. And she was glad she had. Sometimes she had to admit he knew things she didn't. It was okay. She moved closer to inspect Naya, and Sen assured her there was nothing to worry about. Time had stopped. They had all the time in the world.

"At least now we don't need to fear anything. Not even our parents fighting," he mused, still connecting the last of the dots.

Sanja didn't know what he meant, but she listened patiently.

"What I realized," he continued, "is that when Al, D, and Naya fought, I felt exactly the same way as when Mom and Dad argue. Every time, my heart would close, and I would feel hollow, like a shadow."

Sanja placed a hand on her chest, knowing exactly what he was talking about.

"At first we thought the H-ents were phantom clones of Mr. Hatch chasing us through the dimensions. Then we thought

they were projections of D.” He looked gently at Sanja, and she kept his bright-eyed gaze.

Around them, the world, so serene.

“But I think that all along, they’ve been manifestations of my own fear—” Sen paused, “and yours! And for as long as we are afraid, they’ll be real.”

“But we’re back in our home world now,” Sanja retorted. “Isn’t everything real here?”

Sen scratched his nose thoughtfully like an esteemed professor of metalogic.

“It is,” he responded, “but I sensed something out of the ordinary was going on ever since we woke up here. I can’t explain it yet. It’s more of a detective’s hunch, but I had to try it out.”

They both looked at Naya.

“See, I figured out my vision.”

What did he mean? Sanja walked around the silent room, observing the unmovable objects, and listening to her brother without understanding him.

“And I found this.” Sen tossed the copper coin to Sanja. She stared at the most ordinary coin she had ever seen, featuring the portrait of their former president.

“Your spell first froze all reality that had been tinkered with. Its next phases will reveal what is real and what is not.” He invited Sanja to proceed. “So let’s see.”

Sanja trusted Sen and clapped her hands together, once.

The light in the room shifted immediately, as the red and blue failed to penetrate through the windows. And Mr. Hatch was missing, the armchair empty.

Sen looked out on the street. “The police are gone.”

“Mr. Hatch was a projection?” asked Sanja incredulously.

“Yes, and no,” said Sen. “There *is* a real Mr. Hatch. That just wasn’t him.”

“What about our friends?” Sanja asked, pointing to the three figures on the floor, not sure if she even wanted to

know the truth.

“We’ll see,” said Sen enigmatically. “Reveal level two, please.”

Sanja closed her eyes and clapped her palms twice. She hesitated, then opened her eyes.

Under the suspended Tesseract, Al and D picked themselves up as one, and re-oriented themselves to the world. They noticed Naya on the floor, yawning as if she had just woken up from a pleasant dream. Al sprang to help her up and she thanked him. Sen beamed. His vision!

It seemed that none of them remembered their mortal engagement from only a few timeless minutes ago.

“Where are we?” Naya asked, looking around. “We’re not in the Cube any longer, are we?”

Al didn’t speak and that went doubly for D.

Sanja glanced at Sen sideways.

Sen smiled with confidence. “I’ll explain everything. But first I need to check one last clue.”

Naya nodded.

“Do you mind,” Sen asked her, “if I borrow your notes on Tess for a moment?”

She gestured. “Please.”

Sen found Naya’s folder on Missy’s passenger seat. He brought it back to the sofa, where he leafed furiously through Naya’s detailed and well organized records, his face getting clearer and more relaxed by the minute. Everybody patiently waited for him to finish.

“Thought so,” Sen mumbled without realizing he was speaking aloud. “Hmm.”

He double checked his cluebook. He quickly added a note. Then he closed both his cluebook and Naya’s folder with a double thump. He retrieved his copper pipe from the tracecase. It helped him concentrate.

After he completed a forty-second circle around the tent, pondering deeply as if seeking the answer to the ultimate

question of life, the universe, and everything, he stopped abruptly.

A grin the size of moon's crescent appeared on Sen's face. He'd figured it out.

He stared for an awkwardly long time, first at Al, then at D, then at both at once, as if comparing the two. Was he sorting them by color? And when everyone thought he was just about done, he gazed, trance-like, at Naya. He seemed on the verge of rushing over and hugging all three at once, but restrained himself professionally. A case needed proper closure.

His unhurried face sported a confident, satisfied smile.

Al shifted impatiently and Sanja was about to tell him to hurry up already, when he finally spoke.

"Sparrow, time for level three." Sen scrutinized the Cube stranded in midair. "Now we'll see what's really real."

Sanja had long stopped wondering whether this spell was a good idea or not. She followed the lead of her senior cohort, Serious Sloth, and clapped thrice.

The Tesseract spun majestically at leisure speed and with the confidence of someone possessing all the time in the world. Naya, Al, and D were all magnetically pulled towards the rotating artifact, their desire to approach it hypnotically induced by its new shine, for through the transparent crystals embedded in the six sides of the ancient heartwood cube, a new hue shone.

No longer the rainbow one, but a mixture of gold and silver.

The individual colors of the six runes were still there, alive and well, but the intensity of the golden-silvery light took over.

Sen closely inspected the Cube through his magnifying glass.

"Just as I figured." He replaced the glass in his breast pocket. "The Tesseract is not just a device, or a puzzle. And it's not

a map or a compass either. Naya told us that already. But I tell you, it's not just a hyper-portal either. It's a quantum-magical emotion-activated trans-reality portal." Upon seeing the question marks written all over the faces of his audience, except for Naya who seemed to follow him with great interest and understanding, he took in a deep breath and prepared for an extensive explanation.

Sanja sat down on the sofa, while everyone else remained standing underneath the steadily revolving Tess.

"I carefully studied Naya's materials and cross-validated them with my own notes and visions. I figured it out. I cracked the case!"

Sen stopped and actually took a joyful bow, as if on a stage. He wasn't vain or showing off at all—he was just excited.

"Missy didn't open the wormhole that brought us here, and it wasn't the tent, either. It was Tess all along." He stared at Sanja meaningfully. "Just like it created the wormhole for Mom and Dad to disappear, after Dad summoned and activated it by making his emotional choice to split in that storm."

Sanja swallowed hard.

"Tess responded like any legendary trans-reality portal would and constructed a brand new reality for our parents to port to," Sen added, smiling at a sudden new insight, "complete with pre-programmed all-inclusive memories. And new lives. And that's exactly what trans-reality portals do."

Naya shifted nervously with a funny look on her face. That was the missing piece to Tess' mystery! But the pre-programmed memories ...

What pre-programmed memories?

"I think Mom managed to toss Tess back through the wormhole at the last possible moment—before she lost her memory—that's the only possible explanation, and therefore must be the correct one. She knew we would sooner or later

stumble on the Cube and use it to come and get her and Dad. We did, but we had to prime the Cube first by doing the work and healing one rune after another.”

“But what’s missing?” asked Sanja. “Why can’t we complete the journey and find Mom and Dad?” Her lower lip trembled.

“Nothing is missing!”

Sen paused for effect. He was so sure.

“Nothing was ever missing! Think about that.”

They all did, but it didn’t help.

“We are,” Sen went on, “at the final step. All the runes are complete. The Cube is healed. We’re back home.”

Sen circled the tent once more. “Tess brought us to other realities and worlds, then brought us back in a way that was no ordinary interdimensional travel. It served as a portal between two alternate realities. But, see—the two overlapped. And at this endpoint, where we are, the two realities are intertwined, superimposed, mixed together. And your spell, Sparrow, is helping us see which reality is which.”

Sanja beamed. She clasped the copper coin.

“There were some projections that definitely didn’t belong to this reality, and are already gone.” Sen strolled around like a distinguished lecturer, waving his copper pipe at times to punctuate an important insight. “The rest will be revealed at the next level of the spell.”

Sparrow expectantly raised her hands but Sloth shook his head, stalling her. “Wait. First, one question: why are Al and D so different, almost polar opposites of each other, but at the same time their bodies look like clones—other than the colors?”

Al and D exchanged glances and measured each other from head to toe.

“D,” started Al, while D said, “Al ...”

They guffawed in sync and their life energy, palpable in the room, was so high that the Cube rotated faster and shone

brighter, emitting the golden hue.

"You look like brothers!" Sanja blurted out.

"You're right!" gasped Naya, as if seeing the resemblance for the first time. "How is that possible? Why did none of us really notice?"

Sloth cleared his throat. He beckoned to Sparrow and she understood. She clapped four times and Tess spun faster. A golden halo separated from the silver light in Tess. It emerged from the Cube and enveloped both Al and D.

Both of their golden eyes were brilliant like suns.

A total transmutation was underway.

The reality shifted. Something happened.

Nobody precisely knew what.

D was shining. He gently put his black arms on Al's white shoulders. "Thank you," he said in a low voice. He—for he was not *it* anymore—had acquired something from the golden glow: a depth that had never been there before.

And he could talk in proper sentences.

Al rested his arms on D the same way, which accentuated their sameness even more. "Brother!" he said.

"Wow!" whispered Sanja quietly, afraid to spoil the moment.

"We're not just brothers, Al." D said.

"We're the same being!" exclaimed Al, stupefied by his own blast of intuition.

Sanja's mouth dropped open and Naya's body tensed up. She was breathless.

"Who am I?" asked Al.

D grinned. "You're my rational side. Who am I?"

"You're my irrational side," said Al, smiling back. "That's why you're a demon, of course."

"Wait, what? So who are they all?" Sanja asked, too astonished and confused to be impatient.

"Who do *you* think they are?" Sen winked at his sister. "You know one of the most important rules of the tracing

profession—some things, or sometimes people, are often hidden in plain sight.”

Enough of this mystery! Without waiting for Sloth, Sparrow decisively clapped five times.

The golden halo above Al and D pulsed as if alive and conscious, filling the hearts of both beings standing there to the brim and beyond, spilling over, engulfing their whole bodies and energy fields and integrating them back.

Back into how they used to be.

Which was—one being.

A luminous egg formed around them and to everyone’s astonishment, Al and D disappeared within it.

An eternal instant later, the luminous bubble unfolded and out hatched a human being. Under the care of Tess, the two metalloplastic bodies and whatever had animated them had transmuted back to what they really were: a grown up man of flesh and blood. He had big green-blue eyes and extremely short fair hair. He wore a white robe that looked like an exotic mix of cotton and silk.

He stood there. He smiled an infinite smile.

Sen stepped up to the figure and embraced him. “Father.”

Sanja leaped over the distance from the sofa to the man who—she had instantly realized—was her dad. She jumped on him, pushing Sen away without any reservations. “Dad!” she cried, squeezing him tightly. He wrapped his arms around her waist as she sat on his hip and rested her head on his neck.

“I missed you so, so much,” they both said, at the same time.

Naya was staring incredulously at the unfolding scene without saying a word or moving a finger. Even to her open mind, such a fantastic twist came as a shocking surprise.

Upon emerging into existence, Sen and Sanja’s father had immediately noticed Naya. After the first exchange of hugs and kisses between a father and his children subsided, he

approached her, his eyes radiating affection.

“Who are you?” she asked in disbelief. She was still shaking.

“I’m still all that you know about me. I’m Al and I’m D.”

Naya stared.

He went on. “Do you remember? There was a storm and a fight, and great suffering, and something happened, some cosmic rift where reality split, and I was divided into two parts. For all I knew, I had complete lives as D and Al, but as Sen pointed out, they were programmed memories.”

He leaned closer to Naya. “And I think you have them too.”

Time seemed to stop again, but this time it was merely the sensation of a potent anticipation.

Naya shook her head. What was he talking about?

Sen spoke with triumph in his voice, “And my last question is: how come Naya feels at home here?”

Without waiting for anyone to answer, he looked at his sister. “Will you complete the spell now, Smirky Sparrow?”

She did. Clapping six times in a row and stomping her feet on the floor, she released the spell’s full power. The ultimate conscious reveal.

Tess hovered in the air above Naya. It throbbed. It spun. It was alive and conscious. It released a silvery halo, similar to the golden one before. The silver mist wrapped around Naya. It entered her and permeated her whole being. It completed her.

Naya’s memory and reality were restored.

“I remember everything,” Naya said in a dreamlike voice. “I remember who you are.”

“Yes. I’m your old friend. And on top of that, I’m your husband. The one who once gave up on us. I’m sorry for splitting. But now we have a second chance!”

His words reverberated through the midnight.

Both hands of the clock on the wall came together as one.

“I know,” Naya breathed. They melted into a long-due embrace. “And my name is not Naya, but—” The sound of

her real name was drowned by the screams of Sanja, who threw herself at her mother. “Mom! Is that you?”

As the last fiber of the silvery vapor disappeared and merged with the woman who was once called Naya, her whole appearance changed back to the one that the children were familiar with. Her expression was luminous.

Sen watched the metamorphosis with rapt fascination.

“It is you, Mom!” Sanja kissed her again. “For real? We’ve been together all this time and we didn’t know it?”

Sanja’s mom smiled. “I certainly didn’t know it.” She looked at Sen and Sanja. “I felt half real, half dreaming. A part of me was locked in another room. I thought I was Naya. But I’m not.”

Everyone looked at one another.

How could any of this happened?

“It was the Cube,” said Sen, answering everyone’s unspoken question. “The Cube hid Mom and Dad from us—but also from themselves. With fake memories, they thought they had entirely other lives. But they were just hiding from each other, and from us, and it took the Cube to bring us all back together.”

“But what *is* the Cube?” Sanja asked. “Why did it split us all up in the first place?”

She looked at Sen, who had fallen silent.

Did any of them really know?

Sen looked back at his sister. He had no final answers. The Cube was all the things he had said, and far more, yet he didn’t understand how, or why, it had done what it had.

How could one ever fully know something that had its own spirit?

How could one truly unravel—a mystery?

“I don’t know, Sparrow. Must be magic.”

They grinned at one another. The Magical Arts and Detective Agency had solved the case. Questions still existed, but that was only normal when one investigated quantum

magic and mysterious arcane arts and bizarre trans-reality puzzles. It just came with the territory.

Sparrow high-fived Sloth, and the two of them turned and watched as their mom and dad hugged. There was no arguing now, and if it came back, well, Sen and Sanja would figure out what to do.

The Cube of Runes stopped spinning.

A brand new color sprouted from its core and grew stronger and brighter by the second. Green. The color of heart-based love, flowing like an endless current, ebbing and tiding without rest, like inhales and exhales invigorating all of life.

And then, the Cube quietly retreated from the spotlight of everybody's attention. Its work was done. Its mission was accomplished. And just like that, it phased out of our reality and disappeared from view, completely and definitely.

Only love remained.

EPILOGUE

Not even a whole moon cycle had passed since the successful resolution of the Cube of Runes case, yet the quantum siblings were already glamorously bored. After enduring days where the only variation was what kind of jam he put on his toast, Sloth found something. It was a sunny day, and he immediately called for a meeting at high noon in the dusty yard behind the house. Status: *urgent*.

Sparrow arrived nearly punctually, if you didn't count by hours, but only minutes. Sloth had become immersed—like always—in his precious cluebook, and barely registered when the MADA CMO made her beaming appearance.

“Howdy, SS,” Sanja hollered, louder than necessary in order to startle her older and less smirky brother. “Everything in good order?”

Sen looked up absent-mindedly. “Sure, sure ...” He spun his copper detective pipe. “And you?”

Sanja put on a considerable amount of lip gloss before responding. “Never better. Why are we here?”

He looked confused. “You mean in the multiverse?”

Sanja smirked.

“Oh. The meeting. Right.” Sen straightened up and grinned at his sister. “Listen, Sparrow. I found a clue in here,” he shook his notebook, “that I just can't recall ever writing down. I know I didn't write it. How weird is that?”

“A first,” murmured Sanja snarkily.

“Funny how the ink appears faded, as if the note was written decades ago. Anyway, see for yourself.” He presented the curious note to his sister.

... through time
Must find the ... alternate SS! Join forces!
Vital ... save the CM!!!

“Whaaat?” asked Sanja, playing with her hair. “What the Schlecht is CM?”

“My guess is as bad as yours.”

“Well that’s settled.” Sanja got up, as if without a worry under sky and sun. “Nothing I can do about it. See ya.” She walked away.

“Sparrow, wait! It’s important. *Vital*—it says so!”

“No problem. Call me when you figure out what CN stands for. I’ll be schillaxing.” She flipped her hair.

“It’s CM,” Sen softly corrected her. He took a deep breath, prepared to try talking sense into his stubborn sister, when the spring breeze reeled a swath of leaves past them, and the most elegant noise interrupted the sleepy Sunday afternoon.

A couple of crackles and a series of cricket-like chirps heralded the brilliant, spectacular display that followed—a rainbow colored flash split the sky, so potent that its intensity overshot the threshold, where it might pose a threat to the naked human eye. Out of the glaring light, as from a luminous, interdimensional womb, shot an object with ludicrous speed.

It snapped immediately to a shuddering halt.

All was still. Only silvery smoke and muffled, ice-cold hissing now disturbed the day.

Sloth and Sparrow rubbed their eyes.

Were they seeing this correctly?

Out of the mysterious mist, it was their own Miss Moany that had appeared. Well, almost their own Miss Moany. She seemed thoroughly refurbished. Upgraded. Why, her three wheels even looked exactly the same size and shape now.

Bedazzled, they walked closer.

Two figures piloted the trusty vehicle. The short one was

behind the wheel.

The smoke cleared, and shock zapped the siblings. Not just shock, a thunderbolt right out of the blue.

Another pair of the siblings vaulted out of Missy-2 as if they didn't have a moment to lose. No, not just any old pair of siblings.

They looked exactly like Sen and Sanja.

They looked like their clones.

They seemed maybe a year older. Sen-2 was wearing his usual jeans with a dark brown leather jacket and, of course, his old black detective hat. Sanja-2 gracefully sported a flowery yellow summer dress. Tucked in her tidy, braided hair, was a white rose.

Sloth-2 briskly walked to where Sloth stood stupefied and urgently announced, "MADA base, this is an emergency beyond your wildest nightmares! We're temporal agents from alpha-alpha timeline. Come with us this instant, if you want to have ever lived!"

Sloth stared.

Sparrow gaped.

Sparrow-2 blessed them with a knowing smirk. "Let's go, time-team. We need to save the Clock of Mirrors!"

SEN & SANJA SERIES

If you madly enjoyed the MADA escapades so far and are looking for more, please take a moment to write a brief review on Amazon—reviews help grateful authors reach wider audiences and increase the odds of creating more heart-opening, mind-boggling, quantum-fantastic stories. Keep in touch with Sen and Sanja on *sensanja.com* by subscribing for hot news about the forthcoming sequels and other goodies—get your free Borut Lesjak starter library and an occasional, never-before published chapter from both behind the scenes, and from the great beyond.

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The MADA team face their time-shifted selves through a black mirror and crack an impossible paradox to save themselves from never having been born.

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A sinister mist of oblivion pursues the puzzled sibling investigators across a fraying fabric of lucid dreamscapes in an all-out attempt to erase the memory of human race.

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Looking for more mad & funny adventures in the Sen & Sanja 'verse? Visit *davidnonums.com* and check out a whole new picture book series with Sen & Sanja's kid brother David in the star role. If you're too old for kids' books, try reading it aloud to your younger siblings and get a peek at what David, good Old Miss Moany, and trusty trans-dimensional navigator Gigli encounter as they venture into the weird worlds of the Nonums, where things are seriously going amiss.

DAVID & THE NONUMS SERIES

Like his older siblings Sen and Sanja, David Star has a penchant for both magic and investigative work. With keen eyes and an open heart, he visits the strange alien worlds of the Nonums where his old friends get into all sorts of funny troubles, and helps them solve mystery and madness.

DAVID & THE NONUMS OF SHAPE

David travels to the world of the Nonums of shape, where his solid, 3D friends have been dramatically flattened by an unknown agent. Relying only on his wit and big-hearted spirit, David must save the day and restore the Nonums back to shape.

DAVID & THE NONUMS OF COLOR

In the world of no colors, David's Nonum friends get dangerously erased one by one, until David invents a way to both help them, and bring color to the canvas of their whole world.

DAVID & THE NONUMS OF MUSIC

The ethereal world of sound, music and song, is threatened by a yet unidentified, sound-stealing foe whom David tracks across dimensions.

MOTHER EARTH SERIES

If you have a sense for the healing essence beneath all the shiny chaos in the Sen, Sanja, and David 'verse, then the Mother Earth series of picture storybooks will touch you as well. Visit *motherearthseries.com* and meet a whole other ensemble of main characters and learn their awesome stories.

MOTHER EARTH SERIES

A series of seven intertwined wonder tales that dance around the central story of The Snowflake. Each story offers a piece of the whole, as the natural elements of snowflake, cloud, wind, sun, tree, river, and snowman all contribute to the healing of Mother Earth.

THE SNOWFLAKE

The Snowflake is a children's book dipped in the frost magic and snowy enchantment of the winter landscape. As she falls from the sky, the Snowflake becomes separated from her sisters and is blown into an adventure that challenges her to face the world with trust, grace, and heart. This warming tale is a nature elixir for any kid-at-heart and rekindles living sparks of truth, transience, and wonder.

"The Snowflake is an imaginative story by Borut Lesjak that holds as much uniqueness as each and every snowflake. It warms the heart and lifts the spirit as gently as the snow landing on Mother Earth!"

— *David Elliott, author, teacher and healer*

INK BY STAR SERIES

If you seek healing in your life and need a practical report from the trenches to inspire your next steps, then may Ink by Star be your luminous guide. Read more about the series on *inkbystar.com*, where an ever-growing collection of personal break-through visions are offered.

INK BY STAR SERIES

Ink by Star is a series of whisperings voiced from self-love and offered as a genuine embrace from the heart of the author. Translated from star to ink, the short vignettes express the soul, evoke insights of healing and compassion, and reflect on the personal life of Lesjak. These word-lights are invitations to gather around a sacred fire of connection. Originating directly from Lesjak's own process of becoming human, they tender plain and pragmatic encouragement for others to ignite their own healing flame.

ORION

Rocked by life and drowning after being fired from his dream job, being diagnosed with diabetes, and getting divorce papers in the mail, author Borut Lesjak turned the tide and returned to life and love with the magic and soft power of a breathwork based healing modality. Embracing his shadows and learning to be present in self-love and the Universal exchange, Lesjak found himself mused by star, nature, and wonder to record inspirational notes. Compiled now in several books, these vignettes have been imagined by light from another realm and inked under the radiance of stars and inspired by the constellation of Orion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Borut Lesjak is a poet, author and translator from Slovenia. Before he dusted off his secret sage boots and donned the spiritual hood of a teacher and healer, he studied at the University of Ljubljana and worked as a professional in computer programming. His work includes adult memoir and speculative fiction novels, YA and MG fantasy, children's picture and board books, lyric poetry, and self-help. He's a husband and father and is fascinated by dreams, time, math, awareness, art, rocks, the sentience of nature and the intelligent cosmos, exotic travels, road-trips and camping, hiking in the Julian Alps, and watching his three kids grow up climbing apple trees and casting good spells into seven directions. His commitment to humanity's collective healing as a species is woven as a bright thread through the tapestry of his work. He loves to play ancient alchemist by offering readers word potions to transport them to visionary destinations and paint possibilities of harmony in personal and planetary spheres.

You can connect with Borut at *borutlesjak.com* or stalk him on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. He self-publishes, and personally reads and promptly responds to his email at *borut@borutlesjak.com*.

“Borut Lesjak is a force of nature, and his unflinching, radical commitment to healing, growth and the transformative power of love is brought to life in *The Snowflake*, a gentle tale about the journey towards union and the magic of harmony with the wild world.”

— *Sarabi Berti, author of The Helix Library Mythos*