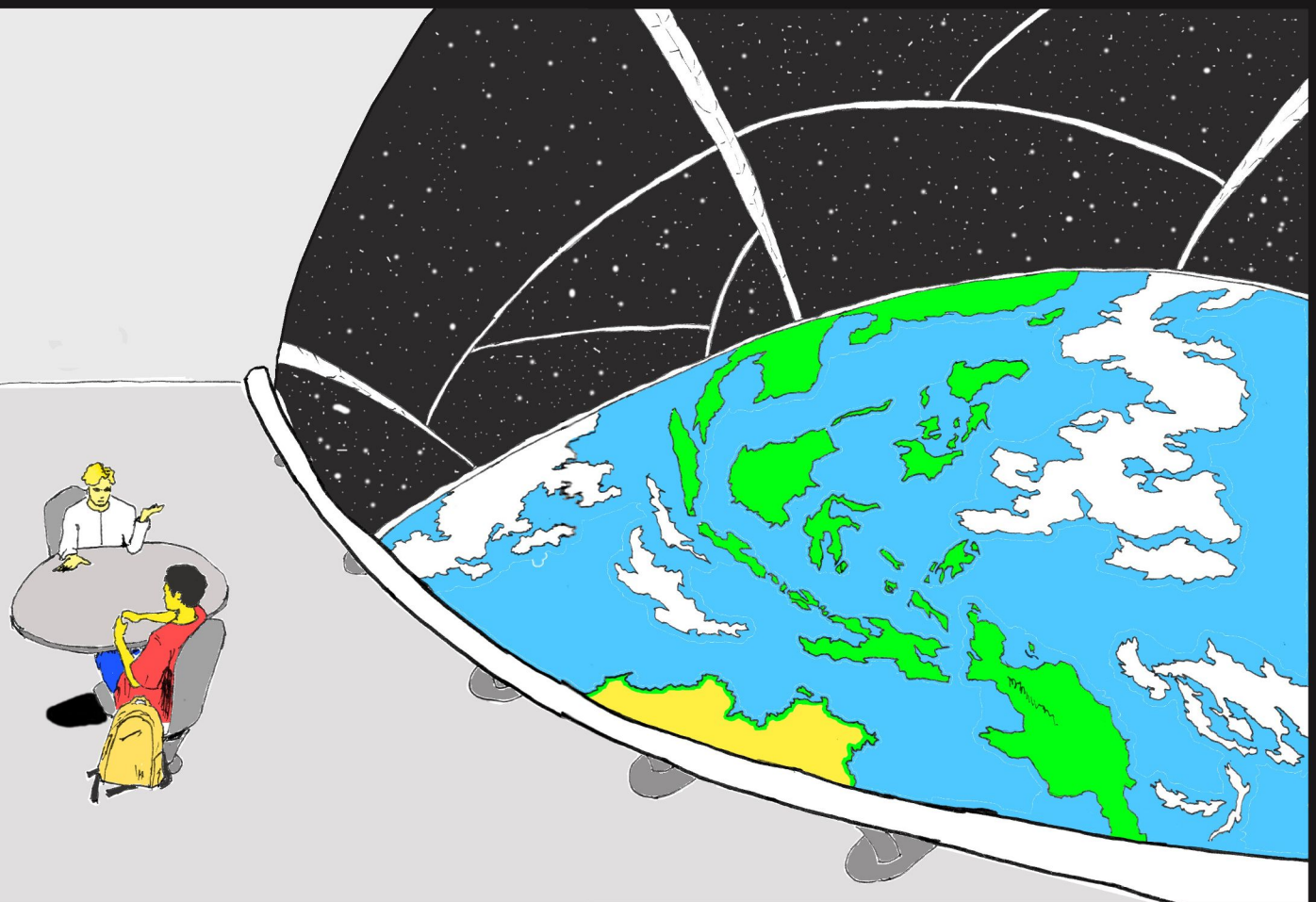


The Veil and the Cage

Johannes Mantiri



“Where is everybody?”
Enrico Fermi

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CHAPTER ONE

A warm breeze swept the courtyard of the Jakarta International School. Simon sat on a bench across an enormous tree in the middle and watched the leaves sway gently, taking a momentary break from his mobile phone game. It was the wet season in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, and this sometimes meant unbearably hot afternoons followed by dark thunderstorms in the evenings. From across the tree Simon noticed his friends walking toward him.

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“Hey man.” Raymond Pasaribu extended his chubby hands and clasped Simon’s before pulling him up from the bench to a bro hug. Simon greeted his other two friends, Jason Kurniawan and Pete Hines.

“All set yeah? So after class we go straight to that house we found.” Pete said. “I figure we’ve got a couple of hours of sunlight to scope out the place.”

The house Pete meant was an abandoned residence the boys had planned to check out after school. They had been eyeing the place for weeks. Pete thought it might be a good idea to turn it into some sort of base for them to gather and play their table top role-playing games. No one else really agreed to the idea. The thought of all that bacteria, and all those germs circulating around a humid and dusty abandoned building in a tropical country wasn’t appealing. But Pete was new, having moved only recently to Indonesia with his family.

Jason shook his head. “Dude I really hope there’s no one there man.” He said. Jason disagreed the most with the plan from the start, and even after some coaxing he was still reluctant. “An abandoned house you know? Don’t like drug addicts hang out in abandoned houses?”

“I doubt it, not in a house in Pondok Indah area, Jason” Simon replied. “You’re talking about some of the

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downtown city areas, or in the West and the North side of Jakarta.”

“Yeah, the North for sure.” Jason agreed.

“Then Let’s do it!” Raymond said as he clasped Pete and Simon’s shoulders and gently nudged them on their way to their next class, the last class of the day. Raymond was the shortest of the group, but his large physique and his open nature made everyone feel comfortable whenever he was around. His large hands would always be on top of one of their shoulders at any given time. Jason was slim, very much like Simon, and he had been best friends with Raymond since they were little, both being Indonesian and having lived in Jakarta all their lives. Pete Hines came to Jakarta only two years ago with his family from Australia. Pete brought the knowledge of table-top role playing games to the group, quickly establishing himself as their de-facto leader. Everyone took an immediate liking to him, probably because he did not look at all like a typical geek. Tall, blond, and a member of three school sports teams, Pete didn’t seem the type at first to want to associate with Simon, Jason and Raymond, but role-playing games kept them close and they found themselves doing almost everything together after school. Simon had the most unique background from the group. His father was from Sri Lanka and his mother was from South Korea.

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After spending a few years in Thailand, his family moved to Indonesia when his father was transferred by his company to lead a division in a Jakarta office branch.

The boys were the first ones out of their classroom after the final bell, scrambling to their bikes. "It's gonna rain today, man, I tell you." Jason said, squinting up at the sky. It was bright but overcast. Rains had fallen on most days this month, but not yesterday, and not yet today. This meant there were guaranteed showers this evening. Simon looked at his watch "My parents are gonna want me home soon if the weather gets worse.." He began to say. "Nope." Pete interrupted "We planned and agreed to this guys. We're not canceling it now. I say it'll be fine." When Pete had a plan nobody disagreed with him, partly because he brought more excitement into the group than anyone else. It was his idea for everyone to start riding bikes to and from school instead of being dropped by car. They found bikes gave them more freedom to roam around South Jakarta and around the Pondok Indah elite residential area, and to have an excuse to why they did not answer their mobile phones immediately whenever their parents called.

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CHAPTER TWO

The sky was darker when the boys arrived at the abandoned house in the middle of the residential district. For weeks they passed this house on their way to school, Pete had talked about sneaking into it since the first time they laid their eyes upon it. It was somewhat isolated from the neighboring houses, with a large surrounding garden, which made it look like someone could go inside without drawing attention from the neighborhood. Behind the house was an empty plot of land with large trees which made it

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possible to enter the house from the back, and that is where the boys parked and hid their bikes.

"Yeah, this place is much easier to get into than that other abandoned house, the one in the main Pondok Indah road." Pete Hines said as he rested his bike on the grass next to a tree.

"Guys it's really getting dark right now" Simon said worryingly.

"I'm more worried it'll suddenly rain." Jason replied.

"None of us brought coats, and I really hate getting sick because of the weather."

Raymond and Pete took their phones out from their back packs "Calm down, Simon, there's enough light for us to take some pictures of this place." Pete said.

"And we're not staying very long, just enough to look around for a good spot for us to set up camp and play our next RPG session."

Raymond lit up and looked at his best friend Jason who simply shrugged. "Woah! So we're really playing here next time?" Raymond exclaimed.

"Yeah," Pete grinned back. "I'm working on this role-playing campaign in an apocalyptic wasteland setting. Playing it here would be awesome in the weekends. We aren't using any campaign maps so we don't really need a flat surface to play it on."

"No maps?" Simon asked. "You mean we're using different RPG rules this time?"

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"You got it." Pete replied as he vaulted over wall.

"Come on, guys." He beckoned at them.

The abandoned house was large, two stories high, with multiple rooms on each floor. Jason stuck close to Raymond and they both took as many pictures as they could with their smart phone cameras. Pete looked around casually, and seemed as if he was taking everything he could by memory. Simon tried to look inside every room, hoping to look out for the ideal spot for their game session, thinking the sooner they found a place for their game the sooner they could return. He was a bit hungry, he didn't eat much during lunch, and he was looking forward to returning home. The winds stopped suddenly, and everyone felt it. The sky seemed to grow visibly darker by the minute, and the air grew colder too. The combination of all of that startled the boys and they glanced at each other for a moment. They had only just climbed up the stairs to the second floor. "Maybe we make this quick?" Jason suggested. "Uh-huh." Pete agreed, looking around him. "Actually, we've seen enough I reckon, Let's return tomorrow or something, I've saw some areas in the bottom floor where we can have our game session."

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And then, each of them heard what could only have been a soft whisper.

"What the he-?" Raymond almost shouted. "Something said my name! Did you guys hear that??"

Jason replied nervously "I heard MY name, man!"

Simon looked around, hoping to pinpoint where the whisper might have come from.

"We're getting out." Pete cut through, putting his hands urgently on Raymond's and Jason's shoulders. Then making his way swiftly downstairs.

"Wait, guys this doesn't make sense." Simon said. He found himself strangely curious about the whisper.

"Nope, we're getting out!" Pete shouted as he made his way to the exit they came from and didn't look back. Raymond and Jason followed close behind him. "Lets get out of here!" Raymond echoed.

Simon heard the whisper again. Strangely enough it did not sound eerie and he could not shake away the thought that the whisper spoke his name with a near perfect American English accent, Which just didn't sit right with him as here they were in Jakarta, Indonesia.

"Show yourself!" He shouted. "Show yourself right now!" From a room in the far corner he began to see what seemed to be a some sort of glow. Moving closer he gripped his mobile phone tightly and let his back pack slide down to his right hand, hoping to use it as some sort of swing weapon for whatever could be in

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that room. As he rounded the corner and looked into the room his eyes were filled with bright light and then sudden darkness.

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CHAPTER THREE

Simon woke up and found himself on top of a small bed in a strange empty white room. Thoughts of confusion filled his head as he seemed to perfectly recall everything that happened before, even falling unconscious. He ran his hands across the bed and felt the strange texture of the covering, a material he had never felt before, but yet it felt incredibly comfortable and, warm. He sat up and noticed a door slightly opened across the bed. Then he heard a voice, seemingly inside his head.

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“Hi there, Simon, Hold on right there, I’m on my way. please don’t leave the room before I get there.”

The voice was calm, a sound of an adult male human that seemed like he was busy doing something else, but may have been suddenly alerted to Simon waking up and had to drop everything and attend to him now. Moments later the door opened and a tall caucasian man dressed in a simple but unusual white outfit walked into the room with a smile. At first Simon thought he looked very much like his friend Pete Hines, except older, The man was tall, and had slightly long blond hair combed back neatly with a side parting. His hairstyle looked like something Simon had seen before in old pictures of people that looked that way in 1950’s America.

“Hi Simon.” The man spoke again, this time out loud and not inside his mind. “Sorry, I meant to be here with you when you woke up, but something came up. My name is Trent.”

He extended his hand and kept his warm smile. Simon shook his hand but did not react any other way.

“I’ll jump straight to it Simon.” Trent said. “Right now you are in a space station. We are currently in orbit around the planet earth. You were brought here just minutes ago, and you have been unconscious for about 15 minutes.”

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“What?” Simon asked, his face bewildered. “A space station? How did you? What?”

Trent raised a palm, he nodded his head in understanding, then moved his hands toward the open door, and turned his palm upward.

“Please follow me. I’ll bring you to an observation lounge where you’ll be able to see everything through a large window.” Trent walked out of the door and didn’t look back. Simon followed closely behind him. The hall outside the room was empty and plain white. The entire scene looked exactly like some sort of science fiction movie. Simon followed Trent past a few doors before Trent turned and entered into what seemed to be a large empty lounge space.

At the far end there was a large window indeed where Simon could see a very clear picture of earth. Just as Trent said they seemed to be in a space station orbiting the planet. Simon gasped. He had seen pictures like this from the internet and from movies, but looking at earth for real, from a large window took his breath away.

“Is this all real?” Simon asked in disbelief, but not looking away at the view. “How did you bring me here?”

“It is real, Simon.” Trent replied. “We really are above earth. This is all real. As for how we brought you up here. We teleported you up here instantly.”

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“Seriously? You can do that?” Simon asked in disbelief. Trent nodded firmly but gently. “Yes, we can. We have the technology and the ability to do so.”

Simon scratched the corner of his eyebrow as he stared at the window, his mind racing with countless other questions.

“Take your time, Simon.” Trent suggested, as if he could read Simon’s mind. “I understand you must have many questions.”

Simon turned to look at Trent.

“How, how does this all exist?” Simon asked. “A real life space station? Are you an American? Is this NASA? Why am I here?”

Trent moved toward the window and rested his elbow on the bar in front of it, then looked back at Simon.

“No.” Trent replied. “This is not NASA. I am not an American, but I am a human being just like you. This space station is not visible to anyone on earth, Simon. And you are here because we wanted to show all this to you. For now I am here to answer any questions you have about this place. And as for why you are here. Well, we want your help, but not for now, maybe sometime later in the future.”

“What?” Simon exclaimed.

“It’s a little hard to explain right now.” Trent replied. “I would prefer to answer your questions about this place, this station, and perhaps after you understand

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more about us you will understand what we would like from you.”

“Okay..” Simon said, “So who are you? And what is this station?”

Trent walked over to a table some feet away from the large window, still overlooking the view of earth. He motioned Simon to sit down on one of the two chairs that were placed facing opposite each other. There were two transparent glasses filled with a clear liquid on the table.

“It’s just water, Simon.” Trent said, reading Simon’s mind as the young man carefully held the glass and examined its content.

“As I mentioned before, we are humans, Simon.” Trent began. “But we are technologically far more advanced than the humans on earth. We live on this station and keep watch over the development of our fellow humans on Earth. We do not interfere with anything that happens on Earth, except of course when we brought you here, evidently. Our task is to observe earth and the humans that inhabit it as they continue to grow and develop as an intelligent species and as a civilisation.”

“We do not work for ourselves, Simon.” Trent continued. “Humans are not the only alien species in the universe, and we are not the most advanced. Our masters, our superiors, are far more advanced alien

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life forms that have tasked us with observing our own race.”

“There are aliens here?” Simon leaned forward. his eyes lit up as he moved his glass gently aside.

“Not here in this station.” Trent replied. “Only humans run this station. But we work for the aliens.”

Simon looked around the room. “I haven’t seen anyone else.” He asked.

“No. But it’s a big station.” Trent replied taking a small sip of his drink. “There is a lot of space here, and it’s not very crowded. The others are busy with their tasks. My specific task right now is to answer your questions and assist you while you are here.”

“And exactly why am I here, Trent?” Simon asked again.

Trent nodded, leaned back on his chair looked out at the window. “I, like you, was taken up to this station to work here. Some humans from earth are invited up here to help us with our task of monitoring human development for our superiors the aliens.” Trent looked at Simon. “Eventually, will will ask your help in this too.”

“It is too soon to understand your specific role in this. But most likely you will have some sort of job, perhaps here in this station, and on earth as well.”

“Seriously? I’ll have a job? Here in this station?” Simon asked “I haven’t even finished school!”

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Trent smiled. "Don't worry. We will eventually train you on what you have to do of course. We are, after all, pretty advanced. All of this will depend on if you want to work here or not."

Simon suddenly remembered his home and looked at his watch. "Wait, what time is it? My friends from school. They'll want to know what happened to me."

"Don't worry." Trent assured Simon. "We sent a message on your smart phone device to your friends and family, telling them you are fine and that you will be back late."

Trent took out Simon's phone from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"And don't worry, we will send you home shortly, perhaps in an hour? After we've answered some more of your questions. Unless you'd prefer to go home now? It's only seven O'clock really in Jakarta."

Simon took his phone and read his messages. One message to his parents

Mom, Dad. I'll be back around 8?

And a message to his friend's chat group

Not in the mood to talk about what happened today guys. I'm going home.

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Followed by messages from Pete, Jason and Raymond about how glad they were he was fine and apologizing for running off and leaving him like that.

“All of this is overwhelming.” Simon ran both his hands across his hair.”

“It is.” Trent said. “I suspect you can guess that we would like you to keep all this a secret from your friends and even from your family.”

Trent leaned forward again and brought his hands to the table. “Of course we also have the option of sending you back home and erasing your memory right after this meeting if you want. No harm will come to you of course, but you will not remember any of this and you will never see or hear from us again. This is a choice you can make.”

“No wait.” Simon replied. “I totally want to come back. I want to know everything that’s going on here. Are you kidding? This, all this, this is incredible!”

Trent smiled widely. “Great, Simon. So, what else would you like to ask?”

Simon looked around the room, and looked again at the window toward earth. The planet looked unbelievably majestic. Better than any pictures he had seen before. His mind continued to race on and he wondered once again about how all this was possible. Again was it all real? He looked across the earth to see more of the station around it. From his view point the

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station surrounded the planet like thin white strings in some sort of simple web structure. But it had to be enormous to cover the entire planet. A myriad of questions rushed through his head as he stared out of the window, eyes darting across the planet, to the station structure, to the dark void of space, then back to the planet and station. Until Trent spoke and interrupted his thoughts.

"I know space looks empty. We cannot really see that far into space. But the fact is, there is a lot of alien activity even in this solar system. They have been harvesting every uninhabited planet, moon, and asteroid in this solar system for thousands of years." Simon looked back at Trent, confused, but Trent continued.

"So, this solar system is actually quite abuzz with activity, spacecraft routes, all over, with stations, depots, even leisure spots all around for aliens to enjoy the amazing vistas and scenery the planets have to offer." Trent smirked, but Simon sensed he was being serious.

"Hold on then." Simon asked. "So why can't we see any of this? Or even see this station from earth? From here it looks like this space station covers the entire planet."

Trent nodded. "It does cover the entire planet. And as for why no one can see it, well this is because of what

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we call 'Er yand haaka'. The closest translation in your language to what we refer to it is 'a Veil'. It screens the eyes of every human from seeing what is really out there."

"A veil?"

"Yes. Or more accurately, 'The Veil'. That's the English word for it that we use often when we try to describe it to humans from Earth. We use the Veil to manipulate what you see, hear, smell, touch and taste." Trent shrugged and smiled slightly. "I could walk on a busy street in the middle of any city on earth in broad daylight and no one would be able to sense me. In fact, I have done so many times."

"How does that even work?" Simon asked.

"As you know, what we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste from the outside, are simply signals sent to the brain." Trent replied. "We are able to manipulate these signals through very very tiny robot-like machines."

"Like nanotechnology?"

"Yes, very similar to what scientists on earth call nanotechnology." Trent smiled again. "We are very pleased that earth scientists have been exploring this branch of science in recent years. Soon they will probably discover the 'Er yand haaka' for themselves, but not now, since Earth science is not very advanced comparatively, well not yet anyway."

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Simon looked directly at Trent "So with these, nanomachines, you can actually manipulate what I see, and hear, and taste, and everything?"

"Exactly."

"But then how will I ever know what I'm sensing is true? All this could be manufactured, and therefore a lie." Simon motioned around him, then stared at Trent momentarily, before gazing all around the floor.

"Indeed Simon. That is also very true." Trent replied. He moved his head closer to Simon, as if trying to get him to consider his next words very carefully "What that would really mean is, everything we see, hear, touch, smell and taste, really, we do so by faith."

"Faith." Simon repeated.

"Yes, faith. We believe in what we observe through our senses." Trent looked around the room. "Theoretically even I, and everyone on this station could be deceived. Have you seen the movie, 'the Matrix'?"

Simon smiled as he scratched the side of his head.

"Yeah I get it know. So you are saying everything we sense is manipulated somehow. This is how nobody on earth can see all the activity in space. Or even this station. As you claim.."

Simon looked at the planet again, and noticed they were on top of Indonesia, he moved his eyes across

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the pacific ocean and toward America, but the continent was barely visible. "And somehow NASA from the US is not able to sense any of this? You've basically used the veil to make them think space is empty? That the universe is empty? Even as they've sent their spacecraft to gather information?"

"Pretty much." Trent replied "NASA's space station and satellites work as we intend them to." But all their deep space craft, Mars rovers and all of that, we keep with us safely here in this station. And what their scientists observe, is really simply what we want them to observe."

"We can program the Veil, Simon." Trent pursed his lips casually. "The Veil, Er yand haaka, is actually like a massive computer."

"That's really interesting, and incredible!" Simon rubbed his face, trying to take in all of what he was told. "How big is the Veil?"

"It covers the entire planet. It saturates it" Trent replied, He stared at the window facing earth and extended his arms toward it. "It covers the earth's atmosphere, it is practically inside every particle on earth, inside every creature." Trent turned back to look at Simon. "And it is inside every human being. Even inside your brains, manipulating your neurons and brain cells as we speak. Allowing you to sense

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only what the Veil is programmed to allow you to sense.”

Simon was taken aback at that answer, but tried to hide it. Instead he asked. “Concentrated, would the Veil look like some sort of gas cloud?”

“You’ll find out, Simon. It’s a little overwhelming to explain all about the Veil right now” Trent replied. “The nano-machines, as you call them, that make up the veil, are very, very small, almost atomic or subatomic in size. There are lots of different types of machines. Each has different tasks, and each of them can be programmed.”

“So.” An idea cropped up Simon’s head “When do you think we Earth humans will be able to detect your Veil?”

Trent chuckled. “The grand discovery by earth scientists. We call this ‘Za’aimba Net Heni Er yand haaka’ which loosely translates to ‘The lifting of the Veil’.”

“Our scientists and scholars postulate different theories on when that might happen, considering Earth civilization’s current rate development.”

Trent leaned back at his seat and held a hand in front of his mouth to hold back and hide laughter. “The rest of us make bets on how long before Earth discovers us.”

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“Unfortunately.” Trent shrugged. “The closest estimation is at least another 1,000 years, and this is because we are also taking some active measures to hide ourselves, until the very last possible moment, When we cannot hide anymore.”

“But.. Why would you do any of this?” Simon asked, confused.

Trent put his hands together in a sincere pleading fashion. “I promise you, I will explain all this to you Simon. But not now, perhaps in your next meeting with us, next week if possible?”

Trent stood up, walked toward the door and motioned Simon to follow him. “The plan is for you to visit the station once a week. For about a few hours. You will learn more and more about us as time passes. Have patience, Simon.”

Simon followed Trent “I feel I still have a million questions to ask you.”

Trent grinned. “Well after this week, as you think more about it, you may have a billion questions next time we meet.”

They walked a few meters in the outside corridor before turning into another room with a small circular pad in the middle.

“Just step on that, Simon.” Trent instructed and smirked. “It will transport you back somewhere near

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your home instantly. Just like in Star Trek, but without the special light effects display.”

Simon stepped on the circle before he thought to ask if it was safe, and in a moment, he found himself near his house, with his original clothes, school bag, and holding his bicycle. It was raining heavily. Simon rushed home and rang the gate bell. It was about five minutes before the housekeeper, Anton, opened the gate and offered Simon an umbrella.

“Your parents are out for dinner, Simon.” Anton said as he gave Simon the umbrella to hold, But Simon gestured he preferred to hold on to his bike and push it toward the garage instead.

Simon smiled. “Awesome. They’d be mad seeing I came home drenched like this.”

Simon took a shower and had dinner while trying to order his thoughts. He planned to put everything down in note form, but after dinner he suddenly felt incredibly drowsy. His last thoughts before going to sleep was whether this was some sort of manipulation from the Veil.

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CHAPTER FOUR

“Alright guys.” Pete Hines put both his hands palm down at the table, leaned forward and looked intently at Simon, Raymond and Jason. “So we are not going back to that house. I’ve booked this room from this guy that does business with my Dad. It’s located in a shop lot, what you guys here in Jakarta call a ‘ruko’. We’re going to visit the place today after school.” Pete took out his mobile phone and showed his friends a photo of a room. “As you can see, it’s got a large table and some chairs. Perfect for our RPG setting. There’s a mini-mart nearby there, so we stop there and get some drinks and snacks first, alright? I’m tired

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of meeting in coffee shops in shopping malls, they're just too loud."

"Okay, looks good, man." Raymond replied, then smiling at Simon and Jason he asked. "How about you guys?"

Jason examined the photo carefully, before shrugging. "Yeah." He said. "Looks good to me. Can we really use it anytime we want to?"

"I think so. No one is using it for anything at the moment." Pete replied "So, my dad's friend owns this company that's some sort of vendor that supplies something to my dad's company. And he's fine with lending us the room as long as we keep it tidy and don't break anything."

Jason chuckled a bit. "It doesn't look very tidy in the picture, man. But alright, let's take a look."

Simon noticed that his friends seemed to have no clear recollection of what happened the day before in the abandoned house. Another manipulation of the mind from the Veil and the station? He inferred that they seemed to remember visiting the house yesterday, but was somehow not able to find a room good enough for their RPG session. A part of him wanted to probe his friends on what exactly they remembered from yesterday, but another part of him did not want to get them to talk about it much, so he held his peace.

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Raymond slapped his chunky hand on Simon's shoulder. "So, man." He asked. "You've been a bit quiet today. What gives bro?"

Simon grinned, somewhat feeling a strange sense of relief at Raymond's question. "Nah man, just, having one of those weird days where my mind isn't cooperating."

Jason grunted. "I have no idea what that means, man. But you look like my dad that way when he comes back home sometimes. Like when things aren't going that well in his company."

"A lot on your Dad's mind I guess." Pete responded to Jason, then looked at Simon. "Hey Simon, If you ever want to talk about it."

Having his friends' attention toward him seemed to shake him loose from whatever he was thinking that moment. "I'm good now." Simon shrugged it off. "Just woke up wrong today." He adjusted his back pack as he began to stand up from the short concrete block he was sitting on. The school bell rang and the boys made their way to the class room for their final class of the day.

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The shop-lot room looked somehow smaller than the picture. It was on the third floor and looked as if no one had used it in months. There was a small money

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changer's office in the bottom floor, and the next floor above that was some sort of secure stock room.

Simon could feel the air in the room dense with dust as he made his way to open the windows. "We gotta get a standing fan or something here." He said.

"They're lending us one." Pete replied as he began to arrange the chairs around the table. "Jason's getting it from downstairs. I told him to get the brooms and mops too while he's down there." Pete took out a bunch of wiping cloths from his back pack and handed them over to Simon and Raymond. "So we'll wet these in the toilet just downstairs, then start wiping the table, chairs, and the windows."

Raymond looked around, a bit puzzled. "I would have thought they'd clean it up for us. I mean it's obvious the guy that owns this place wants to get in your dad's good books right? You said he's a vendor for your dad's company?"

"Yeah, that." Pete grinned broadly. "See I told him we wanted start using this room on Friday, but I changed my mind, just now, in class."

Raymond shook his head. "And now it's Wednesday. Well that explains why the keeper looked surprised to see us so soon."

Jason arrived with the shoplot caretaker and the mops. "hey man are we really gonna clean this place up ourselves? Darmin the caretaker said his boss told

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him we were gonna start using this place on Friday. He was planning to clean it up tomorrow.”

Pete looked at everyone and exhaled. “You guys in Indonesia aren’t used to cleaning rooms up yourselves huh?”

Raymond laughed. “Yeah, yeah, we’re spoilt upper class brats.” He went to Jason and took the mop and bucket from his hands and put it in the middle of the room. “Alright guys, let’s do this.”

The boys were now used to Pete pushing them to do physical work themselves. Deep down they seemed grateful he taught them how to get their hands dirty. If it wasn’t for him they would never have gotten bikes to ride around the neighborhood. And this wasn’t the first RPG room they had to clean up before they used it.

Pete took the wiping cloths and went toward the stairs downstairs. “I’m gonna wet these.” He looked back at Raymond. “And don’t worry, it’ll take an hour tops to get this room cleaned up. We’re gonna be here until about 9 o’clock, so this leaves us about four hours to play a game session.”

Simon didn’t say a word. He only smiled quietly to himself as he tried his best to help his friends. The boys managed to get the room cleaned up, and their RPG game session set up about an hour and a half later. They sat down in their places across from each other in the table, slightly sweating from the work they

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had just done, but glad overall that the room was in better shape. Jason leaned back at his chair and looked around. "You know, tomorrow they're gonna clean this place up again and get it neater than we did today."

"Yep." Raymond replied as he took out his playing dice and a bright blue and green folder that contained his RPG character sheets.

"Alright." Pete began. He took his place as the game master, as he always did. Simon, Raymond and Jason would play the role of characters of a story and make choices that would help progress the story narrated by Pete. "We're doing a new game today. A completely new world. A world that was devastated by some sort of disaster. Hundreds of years have passed since the cataclysmic event that wiped out nearly all life from the planet, and now the Earth is beginning to heal itself. Remnants of humans live scattered as war-like tribes, descendants from early post-apocalyptic raiders and scavengers. But they are beginning to rediscover farming as some parts of the soil are starting to recover..."

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CHAPTER FIVE

“We don’t really know, Simon.”

Up on the station, Trent continued to answer Simon’s questions. “We have no idea how many alien species and civilizations there are in space. Trillions upon trillions we suspect.”

Simon was about to ask something else but Trent was typing something on the desk in front of him. The entire desk, and perhaps every white surface on the space station, floors, walls, seemed to be interactable, like one giant touch screen surface.

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"This station is incredible." Simon spoke, forgetting his question. "Is there, like, one computer that anyone here can call up on any surface of this station?"

"Yes." Trent replied not looking up from a display he summoned up on the surface of the desk. "And it's all linked to the Veil. The Veil, and the Cage, they're part of a single system. You'll know more about this in the future."

"The Cage?" Simon asked.

"Oh, I forgot." Trent looked up at Simon. "We call this station the Cage."

Trent smiled like he knew what Simon was thinking about. "You may have probably guessed by now that us humans in the Cage, we are only allowed to remain in the Cage. We don't have permission to leave the Cage except to go down to Earth. Everything outside, even the Solar System, is pretty much controlled by the other alien races. Our patrons, so to speak."

"Okay.." Simon said cautiously. "But why?"

"Well it's because we aren't, enlightened, I'll use that word, for now." Trent pulled up some sort of clear holographic map of what Simon recognized to be a galaxy. He pointed to a part of the map somewhere closer to the edge of galaxy than to the core of it. "We are here." Trent explained. "Earth is located somewhere here in a section we call 'Fea'. Fea is under the authority and control of an alien race we call Ern-

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Hea. They are our caretakers. They control this sector and a number of other sectors around it. We are not sure how many sectors they control in the galaxy overall, but they have told us that they do not control the whole galaxy."

Simon asked. "The entire galaxy is populated by different alien civilizations?"

"Pretty much." Trent answered. "The information we are given in our computer's data library is quite limited. Not all of the data is available to us. As I said before, we suspect trillions upon trillions of alien civilizations, and we even suspect they populate and control other galaxies outside of ours too."

"Yeah, like you mentioned before, space isn't empty at all." Simon allowed his mind to wander on this for a bit.

"It isn't, I'll say it again, space is quite bustling with activity." Trent closed the image of the galaxy and inputted some more commands on the table computer display. "And as I mentioned in our last meeting, our own solar system is quite busy too, there is just so much going on here. We suspect tourism, commerce, trade, mining. We aren't fully sure how these alien species interact with each other, but we do know that though the Ern-Hea control our solar system, other alien races from other civilizations occupy and perhaps 'work' here."

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Before Simon could ask why, Trent continued. "You see, Simon, we only have contact with our patrons, the Ern-Hea." Trent looked around the room. "They built the Cage, or so they claim, and they operated it before they gave it to us to run it for them."

"And when did this happen?" Simon looked at what Trent was doing. Trent brought up a three dimensional image of an alien. Simon guessed this must be what the Ern-Hea looked like physically. It looked like a humanoid, somewhat taller than a human, with proportions that made it look slimmer. It seemed to have a larger long oval head, but the entire skin surface looked like what Simon could only describe as moving metal, with shifting dull color tones and only slightly shimmering, what seemed like metal plates constantly moving and sliding over and under each other. The elaborate patterns, like some sort of living metal suit of armor, were beautiful to look at. The divisions between the individual metal pieces seemed to change size and shape, looking like a solid plate at one moment, then a thin liquid piece the next moment. Over the 'armor' was some sort of fabric coat robe with slow moving almost liquid-like patterns, again constantly shifting, but not disorienting to the eyes. The coat's colors were brighter than the metal skin.

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“That looks incredible.” Simon squinted his eyes and tried to focus on the small details in the image. It looked almost like how the transformer robots transformed in the movies, or when Tony Stark’s Ironman armour shifted and formed over him when he suited up, except somehow more fluid. And here with the display of the aliens, the movements didn’t seem to stop.”

“We don’t actually know if that is really what they look like, or if it’s some kind of metallic suit.” Trent smiled and shrugged before he leaned closer to look at Simon. “Or if what we are seeing is what they want us to see. For all we know they aren’t even humanoid or bipedal creatures at all.”

Simon shook his head “Yeah, yeah, nothing I see, hear or sense with any of my five senses can be trusted.” He paused for a second. “You said earlier there are no aliens in the station, that it is run completely by humans like you now. But how often do these Ern-Hea visit?”

“Very rarely.” Trent slid his hand across the table and moved the alien image to the side. It looked like a small statuette on the table, but somehow Simon felt it was only an image and that if he tried to touch it his hand would only go through it. Trent continued. “The Ern-Hea almost never visit the Cage now. the station is

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run by a council that communicates with them. I myself have never spoken to a single alien ever."

"It really does sound like you're, we're, all trapped here, inside this Cage." Simon had been wanting to ask this for a while. "So why can't the humans in the Cage go out and live with the aliens?"

Trent put his hands together, rested his chin on them, looked down and smiled. He took a moment to take a sip of his glass of water. Simon waited uncomfortably before Trent began to answer. "The aliens, every single space faring alien race and civilization, are immortal, Simon. They cannot naturally die."

"Immortal?" Simon began to ask, but Trent held his hand out gently and politely, indicating he wanted to continue.

"Immortal, yes. They say they were mortal at first, but somehow, they claim they managed to figure out how to gain immortality, and then they somehow got their entire civilization to collectively 'transcend' into immortality."

Before Simon could answer Trent went on. When you think about it, it's the only way really to live as a space faring race, Simon." Trent pulled up the picture of the galaxy again. "Have you see the movie 'Interstellar'?" Simon nodded. "I saw it, yes."

"Then, well, so you probably understand now that time moves differently in space, in different parts of space.

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In some planets and solar systems, time moves faster than in others. You see, the only way interstellar races can interact with each other and thrive in any sort of galactic civilization, is if none of them are bound by the limitations of time. Not as we are."

Simon didn't know how to reply to this. But somehow in his head he began to understand the implications of what Trent was saying. Time in one part of space did move differently from time in other parts of space.

Trent stood up from his chair and walked toward the window area of the observation lounge. He waved his hand toward an abstract part of space. "Even if a race could live to be a million earth years old, that would still be a heavy limitation on how that race would interact with other races in space. There are some parts of space where time has moved a million years just as only one earth second has passed in our part of space."

"And here is the incredible thing, Simon." Trent looked back at Simon. "There are probably millions of species that have developed from probably almost nothing and become intelligent space faring races, in only just the minutes we have been speaking."

"Seriously?" Simon scratched the back of his head. "So in some parts of space a million years have passed in just these few minutes, and some race somewhere has somehow managed to evolve and develop itself

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into an advanced space faring civilization? and attained immortality also?"

Trent chuckled and sat down again, more relaxed this time. "Yeah," He shrugged. "It happens all the time, really."

"Wow!" Simon said, almost in disbelief. "Like really wow!" He thought for some time about what this might mean. He then looked straight at Trent.

"Trent, are we going to evolve and develop into an immortal space faring civilization?"

Trent smiled. "Here in the Cage, this has been our goal for thousands of years, Simon. To get our race to, well, transcend, or to somehow uplift ourselves into some sort of immortal state"

"Oh!" Simon wondered. "And how are we doing so far? How long is that going to take?"

"Good question. " Trent replied. "The Cage is full of, what you may consider scientists or researchers, and different people have different ideas on how to go about that. Some say it could happen in the next thousand years, others say it could take another ten thousand years."

"That long huh?" Simon pursed his lips. "I guess it would have been nice to see us achieve immortality in our lifespan."

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Trent looked at Simon and did not say anything for a brief moment. "And now, here is where I finally ask for you your help Simon."

"My help?"

"Yes." Trent continued. "You see, Simon, we want you to stay with us in this station. But as I said before, not now." Trent could read Simon suddenly shifting in his seat uncomfortably. "I mean perhaps later, in nine years from now to be exact.

Trent continued. "I'm going to give you some information, to take home with you to read. Your phone will contain a mobile application. It will contain all the information of what this really means, and more information about us. It's sort of like an encyclopedia, with a lot of text, pictures and videos in it. You may browse it during the week, and I'll answer all your questions about it when next you visit the Cage. How about that?"

Trent assured Simon that there was nothing to be concerned about, but that the decision to join the station would be quite an important one. "We are actually willing to give you those nine years to decide if you really want to stay here with us or not." Trent said. "In the meantime, We will continue to bring you up here to the Cage and we'll have these weekly chats."

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Simon agreed he would take a look at the encyclopedia app over the week. They left the room, and before Simon could recall anything else he found himself once again just inside his neighborhood and outside his house.

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CHAPTER SIX

“Look, can we get back to the game?” Jason moaned at Raymond and Simon. Pete was looking through his files inside his large yellow hard folder. The boys were in the middle of a tabletop Role Playing game session in their new place, but their adventure had brought them to an encounter; and Pete, the game master, needed to check through what their enemy’s stats were. Raymond took the time to talk about comic book superheroes again, and Jason was naturally not very interested. He wasn’t a big fan of western superhero comics. He preferred some Japanese Manga. Simon only smiled at his friends, and folded his arms in

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amusement. "Well I'd like to hear more about what Raymond has to say about this battle between DC's Superman and Marvel's Thor." Jason rolled his eyes upward and lifted his hands up in resignation. He knew Simon wasn't serious and was just trolling him.

"As I was saying, I'm afraid there is no match between them." Raymond continued enthusiastically. "Thor beats Superman in 3 seconds, even without his hammer."

Pete stopped scanning his files and looked up at Raymond. "Yeah?" He asked. "That quick?"

Jason held his hands out pleading at Pete. "Pete please, just find the stats for that enemy encounter ASAP before Raymond goes on and on about which fictional comic hero is better, and why, like for the hundredth time.."

"I'm afraid so." Raymond answered Pete. "Thor is a god. He is immortal, and he is a trained warrior. He's had thousands of years of training and battle experience and knows literally every combat technique Asgard has ever developed over many many millennia. Superman is a simple farm boy and he's probably only around 30 years old?

Incomparable combat training and experience here to say the least. A galaxy apart of difference."

Raymond hands waved in front of him as he continued to explain his point. "Even if, I tell you, even if

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Superman was physically stronger than Thor, which I might add, I believe he is not, Thor beats Superman easy, in the same way as how the highly-trained Batman easily beats up thugs that may even be bigger and physically stronger than him.”

Pete rubbed his chin. “Well that would mean Wonder Woman would beat Superman easily too, since she’s immortal and grew up training with the Amazons for hundreds of years or something, right?”

“You got it.” Raymond wagged a finger upwards as a gesture of agreement. “And with this same line of reasoning, Ben Grimm, the Thing, from The Fantastic Four, who is a skilled brawler, would totally be able to take down a rampaging Hulk, who isn’t even in full control of what he is doing, I mean the hulk’s just lashing out wildly. Skill beats strength all the time.”

“Wonderful! I am enlightened.” Jason pressed his palms together. “Hey Pete you done yet? Can we start the encounter?”

Pete nodded and laughed as he continued the game session. “Alright guys. So you encounter a strange creature in the middle of the ancient sewers that looks like some kind of monstrous octopus, but it seems to have more tentacles than your characters can visibly count right now, and in its center is a large gaping maw with multiple layers of sharp teeth all around it. Jason, it’s your go.”

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"Sweet." Jason looked at his character sheet and ran a finger down at a list of inventory. "I hurl a flash bomb thingy at it."

"Why not just an incendiary grenade, Jason?"

Raymond shrugged and held his palms up outwards.

"How do we know that thing even has eyes?"

"I've got just one of those fire bombs left, man." Jason replied. "I'm saving that."

"It's your go Simon." Pete looked at Simon.

"I think I'm gonna hang back and let Jason's flash grenade do its thing?"

"Dermos' flash grenade." Pete corrected. That was the name of Jason's character in the role playing game.

"I hang back and wait too." Raymond said. "But I'm gonna ready my weapon of course."

Jason rolled two six-sided dice on the table to see if his attack was successful. The pair of dice landed on 1 each.

"Seriously?" Jason gasped.

Pete smiled as looked at his notes. "The creature knocks the flash grenade back with one of its tentacles towards you all, and the grenade explodes in front of you. Everyone takes a minus four penalty to his attack value. You are all temporary blinded for two turns."

"Man, Seriously?" Raymond said. "Was that luck or is that thing, like, intelligent?"

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“It’s smarter than you are man.” Jason shook his head jokingly “You glad I didn’t use the fire bomb now?”

“YOU rolled the critical failure, man” Raymond retorted.

“Let’s fall back.” Simon suggested. “Unless you guys wanna get eaten by that thing?”

The boys played their RPG session for about four hours after school, then they returned to their homes. Simon had felt more relaxed somehow after his second meeting with Trent in the Cage. He opened the app Trent gave him briefly on his mobile phone just after he reached home, but most of the information was in text form and he wasn’t in the mood for a long read. The app had a reasonably simple interface. It was the next day only when Simon decided to take the time go through the information Trent had given him.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

At home, Simon ate dinner as soon as he got back from school. He planned to stay inside his room all through the night and pour over the information Trent had put into his mobile phone. It was presented in simple bullet points, some had paragraphs under them with further details. Simon wondered why his school text books couldn't use a similar format. He found himself absorbing the information easier than usual, and part of him wondered if it was because of the way it was presented, or was this due to some strange effect from the Veil.

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Questions filled his head the more he read the information and he decided to record them all down in an old mobile tablet he had but rarely used. He could hardly believe what he was reading. The humans in the station, and that could mean Trent also, were around 5,000 years old. Somehow, through breakthroughs in advanced technology - most of which the humans in the Cage had to discover for themselves, without help from their patron race the Ern-Hea - the humans in the Cage were able to prolong the average lifespan of a regular human being to as much as 10,000 years. No human being living in the station had ever died yet, and it was likely their science would enable them to prolong human life even further before they reached the age of 10,000 years old. Yet in all their efforts, they did not seem any closer to reaching their ultimate goal of transcending into immortality, what they called "Anta' hien iella", a term given to them by the Ern-Hea.

It appeared that most intelligent species' in the galaxy developed on a planet. A space station like the Cage was built around that planet, and it shielded the species from what really went on outside. Every Cage projected a Veil. Many of the alien species would develop technologically, and eventually 'pierce' through their Veil, meaning discover that such a Veil exists, then the member species of their kind, the ones

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that ran their Cage station, would reveal themselves to their less advanced kin in the planet, then the entire civilization would somehow consolidate into one united entity and work toward bringing their race and reaching "Anta' hien iella". Once the civilization unlocked the key to achieving immortality, it would be allowed to join the other space faring races as more or less equal in status, rights and benefits.

All the immortal alien species' were under some sort of representative council, and they seemed to have some sort of agreement between themselves to not interfere with the development of planet-bound alien civilizations, and that still-developing intelligent species' had to discover the secrets of immortality themselves, with no outside assistance. It seemed like some sort of test to see whether they were worthy of acceptance, if they would be worthy of 'fellowshipping' with other space faring alien civilizations. Once an alien species managed to transcend themselves into immortality, they would then be allowed to live among the stars with everyone else.

A part of Simon's insides churned as he read about some intelligent alien species never managing to discover their Veil, as they ended up obliterating themselves through war. Many of these species developed incredibly devastating weapons of mass destruction and the entire species was wiped away to

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extinction by them, usually through an event caused by one planetary faction initiating war on another. The result caused the alien patron race of that planet to shut down their Cage station, and all members of the alien species, including those that manned the station. Every creature was eradicated and exterminated instantly through a single programmed order through the Veil. The thinking behind this was that any species that would be so destructive as to cause their own demise, was not worthy of even discovering, let alone joining the greater galactic civilization. Simon had natural questions on whether humans of earth were closer to this fate rather than that of finally discovering the Veil collectively.

The aliens living in the Cage were permitted only to observe their less advanced kin on the planet. On planet Earth the Cage dwellers were given the description "Er yand haaka", which translated loosely in meaning to 'uplifted'. Any attempt by Cage members to reveal the Veil to civilizations or planet-side authorities would be stopped abruptly even before conception. The aliens in the Cage were not allowed to interfere with the natural development of the civilizations on the planet, and this included not being allowed to prevent them from annihilating themselves if it led to that. The alien patron race naturally had overriding control of the Veil, which

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gave them the power to literally freeze everything in its tracks, or even remove the memories of any person living on the planet or its Cage in an instant. Naturally, the powers of the Veil enabled anyone with full control of it to annihilate all life in the planet and the Cage station, in an instant, with simply a command. Simon surmised this is what the earth's patron race, the Ern-Hea, would do to the Cage if humans on earth destroyed themselves completely through war.

There was no information on how an alien species could attain Anta' hien iella. This was for every species to discover by themselves, and for themselves. Most inhabitants of the Cage stations conducted advanced scientific research on figuring out how Anta' hien iella should work, along with their regular duties on keeping watch over how their planetside kin developed. What Simon found interesting was that no alien species was ever able to discover and activate Anta' hien iella until the whole planet was united.

There had been no record of advanced aliens that manned the Cage stations discovering the secrets of Anta' hien iella before their less advanced cousins pierced the Veil and discovered their existence. Unity of species seemed to be an important factor before the whole race was able to transcend itself and reach

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immortality. Simon wanted to ask a question on this to Trent.

Simon wondered how much of this information was true and not fabricated by the Veil. It was obvious the patron alien race for earth, the Ern-Hea, withheld information on purpose from humans. But how much could humans trust what was revealed in the first place? Seeing that the technology was available to manipulate even the senses, awareness, even cognition itself. Simon's mind asked itself, how could we trust what we observe? Could we even trust our own innermost thoughts and desires? All this could be manipulated through the Veil, that had access even to the individual neurons inside everyone's brain. The files gave no information on what the microscopic nanomachines that comprised the Veil looked like. Simon somehow imagined tiny robots that looked like creepy little spiders, based on what he had seen previously through internet search results. The Veil was said to surround everything, and saturate itself inside everything on earth, all matter and substance, and inside all living creatures, every rock and plant. Simon thought about the millions of tiny nanomachines inside his mind right now, possibly manipulating his every neuron and brain cell. He asked himself if this was the reason why no one was able to leak anything about the Cage to anyone. that

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even if he wanted to scream out, tell everyone, and reveal all he knew about the existence of the Cage, he would simply be unable to do so. The idea could be stopped even at the stage of conception and desire, so that it would not promulgate at all. The frightening part of it was that this level of control meant all life could be one hundred percent subject to the control of whoever operated the Veil. Even the thoughts he had now could be monitored or even initiated, by the Veil. It made him question exactly how free his mind, or anyone's mind, truly was.

Simon continued to read about how the Veil manipulated senses. The Veil made it so anyone from the Cage could walk on earth, even in the middle of a crowded city, and that no one on earth would be able to see, hear, or detect them in any way. For all Simon knew, Trent could be in his room right now and he would never be able to sense him. The formal language in the Cage was not English and so Simon was not actually hearing Trent's real voice, or seeing how his lips truly moved. He 'heard' Trent speak English and his eyes perceived Trent's lips speaking English words. But they were not so. The Veil could also alter memories, which made Simon uncomfortable as he started to wonder if any of his memories were fabricated. Simon recalled the memory wiping device from the 'Men in Black' science

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fiction movies and realized that the aliens and the humans in the Cage could do the same simply on command. Any technology that allowed total manipulation of the brain made Simon question reality itself. As Trent had said before, all anyone could do is 'trust' and 'put our faith' in our own senses, in what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch.

In one sense, knowing that the Veil was so intimately close to him, almost merged with him and with everything else, was a comfort and a danger at the same time. The Veil could instantly end everything, and yet for so long it hadn't done so, instead allowing some sort of state of grace to permeate throughout everyone, all across the planet. He shrugged that thought aside in mild annoyance as he thought about suffering in the world, and how the neither the Veil, nor anyone with control of it, chose to interfere with suffering and death at all, even if they could.

After that Simon decided to read about something else to take his mind away from thinking about the Veil. He brought up information on the Cage station in the tablet display, thinking that perhaps reading about the space station might be less terrifying. He was wrong. The walls of the Cage, indeed all of it, was composed entirely of the nanomachines. The same material as the invisible Veil literally. This was how the Cage's substance could be manipulated. The

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nanomachines in the cage could take on the form of an extremely dense solid if necessary, right on to the form of the invisible Veil, lighter than vapor, and everything in between.

Seen from above earth, the Cage looked like some sort of spider web network encircling the planet, yet allowing earth to be mostly visible. The thin strands that made up the Cage's overall shape were too thin to be visible from a distance away, barely visible if seen from the earth's moon. Simon surmised that this was designed on purpose so any of the space-faring aliens could see the planet without obstruction, but then brushed that thought away; since the Veil could manipulate the visual senses, none of that was even necessary.

The 'strands' that made up the Cage were not static. They moved and weaved ever so slowly. Inside the strands were corridors. Simon thought about whether there were high speed vehicles that transported people all across the Cage, then remembered the power of the Veil to simply transport anyone anywhere, inside the Cage or on earth. The power of the Veil and the Cage meant any and every part of the station could be manipulated and change shape. The station could even be summoned to simply 'vanish'. Again this thought made Simon shiver a little, before he realised the earth, and everything inside it, was no

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more safer and could be ended with a simple command or 'word'.

Simon had seen Trent command the walls and tables on the Cage to display anything he wanted, whether it be a three-dimensional image or just a flat projected display. Trent would simply whisper the words. It seemed like the Veil could read what Trent conceived in his mind and that it wasn't very important for him to be specific in his commands. The words were probably only necessary to trigger the Veil to act.

A single important issue was in Simon's heart. He felt he knew the answer Trent would give him, and he thought long that night about how he would bring this up in their next conversation.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Trent was waiting for Simon inside the main observation room again. He looked as if he had just set up interactive displays on the table where they had their usual conversations. When Simon was teleported up into the station he found himself just in front of the observation room entrance. All he had to do was move forwards and the doors would open automatically for him to enter the room.

Simon greeted Trent politely as he took his seat and looked at the displays prepared on the table. He blinked suddenly as he recognized them to be his

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phone and his mobile tablet. Simon chuckled as he looked at Trent, who shrugged almost innocently.

“You’re not surprised are you?” Trent asked jokingly.

“I guess not, Trent.” It didn’t take long for Simon to realize the Veil could literally call and summon up data from every electronic device in the planet, and simply display them on any surface of the Cage.

Simon pulled up the questions he had typed into his tablet some days ago.

“I guess you’ve read all my questions then?” He asked Trent.

“No. Of course not.” Trent replied. “Just because we are able to monitor everything you do, does not mean we actively do so. Usually the Veil alerts us if something important happens that requires our attention.”

Simon thought about that for a moment. “Is the Veil somehow,.. intelligent, Trent?”

Trent made a motion with his hands indicating what he was about to explain might be more complicated than what Simon imagined. “Yes and No, Simon.” He said.

“As you can guess obviously, there are complex built-in ‘algorithms’, for lack of a better word, in the Veil’s programming that makes it seem intelligent in some ways. But it does not seem to have any sort of what we would identify as an intelligent personality. You may

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have read that even we don't fully understand how it works. But we have teams dedicated to studying what the Veil is truly made of, trying to figure out how exactly we control and communicate it. Right now, suffice it to say we understand it like humans understand plants, enough to have some measure of control and manipulation over them, but not enough to be able to understand their true essence, not as deep as how earth's computer programmers understand their programs right down to the individual letters of their code."

A random thought came to Simon's head, one that he didn't think about until just now. "Do you think the Veil holds a key to humans' achieving Anta' hien iella?" Trent looked at Simon interestingly. "I'm pleasantly surprised you thought of that this soon, Simon. There are dedicated research teams here in the Cage working on that very question. We also wonder if the answer to immortality is somehow embedded inside the Veil, and that the Ern-Hea expects us to discover it, or how to use it, as we uncover how the Veil actually works. The popular theory is that the Veil is directly responsible for maintaining our bodies so that our cells don't degrade. The Ern-Hea, has naturally declined to confirm or deny our theories on this issue." Simon shrugged. "For all I know everything I think about could have originated from the Veil. All the

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analysis and conclusions your researchers can think of could be one big manipulation. Your Ern-Hea patrons could be in full control of what your researchers come up with, even the ideas your scientists concoct in their minds.”

“Yes.” Trent acknowledged. “As I told you before, the Cage is run by a council. That council comprises the only humans that are in contact with the Ern-Hea, and we brought all these issues to them thousands of years ago. They say simply that they do not manipulate our reasoning and analysis, and so all we can do is take them at their word.”

Simon folded his hands and leaned back on his chair.

“Trust?” He said sarcastically. “These aliens have been lying to us all this time. Showing us a practically empty universe when it is simply not true. This universe, even this solar system, is bustling with activity, to repeat your exact words. I mean for all we know there could be multiple layers of these Veils, and you in the cage have simply been allowed to see past the first one.”

“One of many.” Trent nodded smiling as he acknowledged what Simon said again. “And who knows if the Ern-Hea know everything themselves or if they too are kept in the dark on some matters by an even higher alien race, that there are other layers of Veils between them and something else?”

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Trent spoke calmly. "When you realize that reality itself can be manipulated there is no more guarantee or certainty in anything."

"I guess you've pondered every possible scenario by now huh?" Simon asked.

"As much as we can, Simon. But we in the Cage have finally decided, mostly in faith of course, to come to one possible conclusion on all of this." Trent sounded more serious. "And that is that our first goal is to figure out how to live forever, gain eternal life. All else can wait until this is achieved. Maybe even the truth can wait."

"But what if what you need IS the truth before you can live forever?" Simon muttered, not really sure of what he meant himself.

"Then we will adjust, and we will seek that." Trent smiled.

Simon looked back at his tablet display, looking at the next question on his list. "Trent, I have to ask this again. How exactly do you want me to help you? What could I possibly do to help the Cage? Why do you need me?"

Trent nodded. "Good questions. The thing is, Simon, we don't really know. You were selected by the Veil. The Veil selects candidates it deems helpful to the Cage's operations, and the human race overall, and we don't fully understand what parameters it uses to derive its

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conclusions and make its decisions. But we follow its instructions as it gives them. That whole scene with your friends and the seemingly ghost house encounter you had before you were first brought up here to the Cage? I have no idea why the Veil orchestrated such elaborate scene when it could have simply teleported you up here. Perhaps it was a test of your reactions? You didn't even need to have been put unconscious for 15 minutes in that room. Perhaps it was more comfortable to have you wake up in a strange room instead of being simply teleported here to the observation lounge? We have no idea why the Veil decides what to do when it selects a candidate from earth and chooses to bring him or her up here." Simon was somewhat taken aback at what Trent just explained, that he forgot his next question, the one he thought about all night the previous night, the one he didn't write down. Instead he said something else. "You know, forget about the Veil's intelligence, it's starting to sound more like some kind of god."

Trent laughed out loud. "Indeed." He replied, genuine amusement in his face.

Simon pressed on with another question. "Does anyone up here believe in God, Trent?"

"I've had to answer this question many times, Simon," Trent replied. "Some do, some don't, some have no idea. I have no idea myself if there is a god or not. Of

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the inhabitants of the Cage, even the people that do believe in a God, have their own differences in what that means exactly. I will tell you that spirituality is a thing some people take very, very seriously here."

"Well that's just like back on earth." Simon answered.

"Oh no." Trent corrected "They take it even more seriously than you imagine, Simon. You see, there are research teams focused fully on researching matters of God, or gods, and on the human spirit, and the human soul, whatever they may mean, if they are even different in the first place."

"Really?" Simon asked. "Does the soul exist?"

"Many researchers believe so." Trent adjusted his posture and leaned forward toward Simon. "You may have read that we haven't made any real progress on discovering the secrets to Anta' hien iella. The best we can do is prolong our current lifespans. This is because many researchers here believe the secrets to immortal life may not be a simple issue of technology. Many of them believe the soul or spirit, or that part of us that comprises intelligent awareness, is key to finally transcending ourselves to a higher state of being."

Simon pondered on that for a moment. "My mother is from South Korea." He said. "She's told me stories about how some philosophers in the East have been

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trying to attain immortality and this transcendence thing through meditation."

"Indeed." Trent replied. "Many researchers believe there is some merit to the theory of transcendence through spirituality. And for them it's their lifelong research."

Simon remembered something. "I remember my father talking to me about some sages called Rishis in India, way up in the cold mountains, that are said to have attained immortality or a long life span. But my father doesn't really believe in this too much because he is quite firm in his Catholic beliefs."

"Your father is Sri Lankan, and your mother is South Korean." Trent grinned. "An interesting and unique mix. I often wondered if that made you a different kind of person, somehow special, or able to see things in a way not every one else can on earth."

Simon didn't respond to the statement, choosing to continue to ask the next question on his mind. "So do they exist Trent? These immortal Rishis I mean."

Trent paused for a while before answering. Looking as if he was carefully choosing his words, but not in a serious way. "There have been some people, Simon, where through deep meditation, or occasionally through consuming various herbs, have managed altered their state of mind, and have managed in some way to pierce the Veil and see past it

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individually, even if what they perceive may not fully accurate or clear. Many of them we have brought up to the Cage and they are now researchers.”

“And then there have been some people...” Trent exhaled slowly before continuing. “You might consider them spiritually wise and sagely people, that have simply disappeared from our detection. From the Veil.” “Disappeared?”

“Yeah.” Trent shrugged. “We noticed they looked like they were on the verge of piercing the Veil, and then they disappeared, and we simply cannot find them, not on the Cage nor anywhere on Earth.”

“What do you think happened?” Simon leaned forward to ask.

“Lots of different theories. Some say that they achieved immortality and have thus gained the attention of the Ern-Hea directly, and were brought up to live with them. The theory is that any human that somehow manages to achieve immortality individually disappears from the Veil, or at least from our ability to detect them anyway. One terrible sounding theory is that they were simply exterminated, but not many people believe that.”

Simon’s mind wandered on that idea and again he forgot about his other questions. Trent continued speaking. “Some very perceptive Individuals have been able to pierce the Veil, or at least detect

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something is amiss, and they do so without technology. But our records show that alien species tend to discover the Veil exists, through a collective and not an individual fashion, and always through some kind of technological advancement, There is a certain level of technological advancement that allows a planet-side race to pierce the Veil, and this makes it impossible for the patron alien races to hide the Veil forever from them. A lot of this occurs when the alien species in the planet have developed advanced nano-technology and reasonably advanced space travel capability, and their governments are beginning serious programs to mine resources in their own solar systems. At that point it is simply not worth maintaining the facade, and so the Cage around the planet is revealed. The Veil is lifted and the Cage is opened, removed."

"But after that it can still take many centuries or even millennia, before the alien species develops the ability to live as immortals collectively." Simon said as he finished the thought, remembering what he had read previously from the Cage's encyclopedia app. He recalled also that for the next nine years he would have contact with Trent only, and no other humans in the Cage, not until he had fully accepted their offer to join them and live in the Cage with them.

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“The good news.” Trent replied, but sounding somewhat reserved. “Is that when the Veil is lifted on an alien planet-side civilization, the chances of them destroying themselves become very, very low, as they usually make a firm decision to pursue immortality together as a united civilization from that moment onward.”

Simon didn't pay much attention to that last part from Trent. He remembered what he was about say and was waiting for the right time to finally say it. He sighed as he straightened up in his chair. He looked at Trent directly and spoke. “Well, Thank you, Trent, for showing me all this. Thank you also for your incredible hospitality all this time.”

Trent rubbed a eye lid with his ring finger and grinned at Simon as he listened to him patiently, as if somehow he knew what Simon was about to say next. “But I'm afraid I will have to reject your offer.” Simon continued. “I won't stay here with you on the Cage. I'm quite willing to have my memory removed, if possible, from all of this, and live a normal life with a normal mortal lifespan, together with my family.”

It felt good to Simon to finally say what he thought about last night. But Trent's reaction surprised Simon, as if Trent had received this sort of answer many times from many people, and that it looked like he would not accept it.

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“Your Family...” Trent replied thoughtfully, he gave Simon a genuinely empathic look. “It’s obvious you love your family, and your friends, you care for them, and you cannot stand the thought of outliving them if you were to live here in the station.”

Simon pursed his lips “Well, you must have known some of your Cage ‘candidates’ would make a decision like this.”

“They all do.” Trent interjected.

Simon blinked momentarily, somewhat startled, then continued. “As much as I am tempted to live a long life, I feel as if I would far prefer to live a normal life, even if it seems I will be ignorant of the truth, as long as know I will be happy with my family. You are right, Trent, my family means the world to me. Surely you must understand this, right?”

Trent paused a bit before replying slowly, trying to make his words and his next point clear. “Every ‘candidate’ as you call them, that the Veil has ever selected to be a part of the Cage, has had strong bonds and ties of love to either their family, or their friends, or both, Simon. The Veil has never selected anyone that didn’t care about anybody deeply, to join us and help us in our mission to discover the secrets of immortality.”

“Well, I haven’t changed my mind, Trent.” Simon replied plainly.

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"Might I ask a favor of you, Simon?" Trent suggested.

"Please talk to your father this week? Talk to him about his late brother, and about your mother's brother who also passed away."

Simon was about to say something but Trent again indicated politely he wanted to continue.

"Look, Simon. You can probably guess I've had this kind of conversation with many people in the past. You also know that we are in no hurry to hear your final decision. Visit us regularly, and continue live your life on earth with your family and with your friends. We will ask for your absolute final decision nine years from now, so there really is no cause to rush things, is there?" Trent then added, as if figuring out what Simon was about to say. "And surely spending an hour a week here can't be such terrible waste of time right, Simon?"

Simon didn't reply immediately, somehow still not fully understanding why Trent didn't accept his choice. "I guess... Anyway, can I go back now, Trent? I've got some homework I need to finish up for tomorrow."

"Sure, Simon." Trent walked Simon out of the room looking somewhat pleased, as if some sort of progress was being made. Simon felt the urge to ask him one more question.

"Is this how these conversations go, Trent? Are there, like, predictable stages, predictable doubts that run

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inside our minds, before potential candidates like me eventually change our minds and accept the invitation to move and live in the Cage?"

"You are implying that every candidate will always refuse at first, and then, as time passes, go through a number of other psychological stages before eventually accepting this invitation? Something like the five stages of grief? On earth I believe you call it the Kübler-Ross model." Trent replied.

"The what?"

"You can look it up, Simon." Trent replied. "Yes, there is something like that. It's not as straightforward, but suffice it to say by now we've seen every human reaction to when a person discovers the truth about the Cage, and the universe, and how things really work; or at least how we think they work."

When Simon got back home all he really wanted to do was to go to sleep. He thought he would struggle to get his homework done that night, but he was wrong. He managed to complete his assignments surprisingly quick, and he was certain this was some sort of 'grace' provided by the Veil, by the tiny nanomachines inside his brain, helping it work better. He muttered what seemed to be a prayer of thanks for that. "Hey thanks, Veil." He said before he went to bed.

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CHAPTER NINE

Simon sat with Raymond on the back seat of Raymond's car. It was Sunday and they were on their way to the Pondok Indah shopping mall, which was just down the wide road from a Church they had just came out of called 'The Collective'. Raymond invited Simon about a month back to visit his church. Both of Simon's parents were practicing Roman Catholics, especially his father. But Simon had expressed his distaste and boredom for Catholic mass years ago and so his father did not force him to attend one anymore. Simon would occasionally follow his parents to church during major holidays like Christmas and

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Easter. The Collective was Raymond's church, it was a non-denominational Christian church that held its services in English language only, it was a spin-off from another church and it seemed to focus at first on providing English language services for expatriate workers living in Jakarta. The church seemed to follow the format and style of a fairly recent trend of evangelical churches from the US, that aimed at getting the youth interested in worshiping Jesus. The worship was led by a full band of musicians and singers. The preachers delivered their sermons in an interesting way and crafted them to be relevant to young people and to modern times. Raymond loved The Collective, and tried to invite all his friends to check out their Sunday services. But only Simon was willing to give it a try. Pete spoke about similar churches from his home country of Australia that worshiped God in that sort of charismatic style, but said firmly he did not believe in God. Jason followed his parents to a different charismatic church somewhere in the West side of Jakarta called Puri. Jason's church held their services in Indonesian language and most of their congregation were Indonesian Chinese that lived in that area of the capital city.

"So, How did you find the service, Simon?" Raymond asked.

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"It was, intriguing." Simon shrugged. "I admit the preacher said some interesting things. It's a bit different from how Catholic priests deliver their homilies, sermons, I mean."

"Do you think your parents' are gonna be fine if you ever decid to come to our church more often?"

Simon looked back at Raymond. "My Dad said he wanted to talk to me about your church after I get home. I mean my parents are practicing Catholics, sort of. I feel luckier than most kids because my parents have never forced their religion down my throat, even if they take it seriously themselves."

"Man, that's awesome to hear!" Raymond grinned.

"Both my parents are from the Batak tribe from the West of Indonesia. The Bataks have their own church organization. I'm kind of glad they don't really push me to join their church either. What the Batak church and this church have in common is that they are both still protestant churches, well sort of,... kind of. What I mean is, Catholic churches tend to be really different, right?"

Simon raised his hands indicating he didn't know much about different church denominations. "I guess?" He answered. "Catholic churches are a bit more formal, with the robes, statues, old style cups, old style building decorations. That sort of thing."

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The car arrived at Pondok Indah mall. Both boys thanked Raymond's family driver as they got off. The four boys had planned to meet in the mall in the afternoon for lunch, and to talk about a new table top role playing game campaign Pete was working on. They communicated with each other through their mobile phone chat applications and it turned out Pete had already arrived at the mall. He was inside an eating place on the third floor. Jason was still on the way.

After all four of them had gathered and finished their lunch Pete pulled out a folder from his bag and looked through it for moment before he began. "Okay guys, so I've been working on a new RPG campaign. This time it's gonna be set in deep space. You guys get to go all over the galaxy as a band of mercenaries for hire. You do dangerous jobs, and use the money you earn from them to upgrade your gear and your ship. When you roll a new player character, you can choose between five different alien races."

"I'm going to be a human." Raymond said immediately. "I hate playing as alien races, even in video games when they allow it."

"Alright." Pete responded. "Human characters have a bonus for favor with the Terran Confederation faction of the galaxy, which is run by humans naturally, and control about a quarter of the galaxy currently."

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Simon snorted. "We tend to portray humans doing pretty well in science fiction don't we? Humans are usually the heroes. And even if they start off as underdogs, they are eventually depicted as the most noble people at the end, comparatively, compared to other intelligent alien races. And Humans seem to have the highest moral standards and the greatest levels of wisdom, even compared to other advanced space faring alien civilizations and races that may have existed before them. Has anyone ever thought about writing science fiction with humans as pathetic underdogs that will never rise to be as good or as wise or as smart as other alien civilizations?"

Raymond and Jason stared at him in bewildering silence.

"Man, you okay?" Jason asked trying to hide his grin.

"Raymond, I told you not to bring him to that weird church you go to, man."

Raymond was about to respond when Pete cut in. "I think good science fiction stories have never been so much about the aliens as about us humans, and what we are going through in the present time, y'know?"

"My question is.." Simon responded. "Is it an accurate picture of us? Or does modern science fiction embellish our virtues more that it reveals our flaws?"

Pete shrugged. "Probably? But science fiction's about entertainment too mostly, right? Trying to make it

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realistic is probably just gonna make it boring, if not impossible. Now why are you even asking this anyway, mate?"

"Sorry Pete." Simon waved his hands like he now wanted this conversation to end. "I think I'm just not a big fan of space science fiction anymore. That last campaign you did with the post apocalyptic setting is more my alley, as it looks more likely to come true."

"Hah. Well, that was depressing." Raymond interjected. But Pete nodded and put his folder back. He seemed to sense Simon's discomfort.

"Well, we're in luck." Pete went on. "I brought the files from that last adventure we did, so we can continue that one if you prefer."

Jason smirked and shook his head. "Great, let's do that."

The boys spent another four hours in the mall, until it was evening, with their RPG game. Simon thought about asking his father for some time to talk that evening when he returned home. His father was busy during the week usually. But that night when he returned, his parents had another dinner invitation and so Simon sat on his bed and opened Trent's files on his phone again. The application directed him to parts that he had not read yet. Simon typed down more questions he planned to ask Trent when next they met, and then deleted them. He figured that if he

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was given a nine year time span to think about whether he was willing to be a member of the Cage or not, there was no need to rush things, as Trent said. Simon determined in himself to relax and try to take things as they come, but he remained firm in his decision not to join in the Cage.

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CHAPTER TEN

Trent was once again looking out at the large window when Simon entered the observation lounge. This time the window was larger and touched the floor. There was a differently designed railing in front of it that wasn't there before.

"I've never actually asked this before, but is this a large window, Trent?" Simon placed his palms on the railing but did not rest on it. "Or is it just a large screen that shows us any point on the earth or outside the Cage that you want it to display?"

Trent looked at Simon and smiled warmly, he seemed pleased that Simon looked less tense today. "As you

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may have read, we can command any wall in the Cage to display a screen, or go into a sort of transparent mode." He said plainly, then grinned wider. "But what you are looking at is exactly what is behind this wall, Simon. I guarantee you the rays of light you see do come from the outside. They are fresh from the sun as they bounce on the earth and into your eyes!"

Simon smiled back then went sit down on his usual chair near the table. He revolved his seat towards Trent.

"Y'know, Trent. I've never really asked you about yourself, or your family. I think I remember you said you were brought up to the Cage like I was?"

Trent raised his eyebrows and walked toward the other chair to sit down. "You are right, Simon." He replied. "I was born in a small hamlet very near what is now the city of Trento, Italy. Where the council of Trent occurred in Roman Catholic religious history. That's where I got the idea for my current name."

He pulled up a map on the display table and showed Simon the exact location. "I was born around 3,022 BC, right over there, in that spot."

Simon ran both his hands through his hair in astonishment. He had guessed Trent might be hundreds or even thousands of years old, but hearing it from him directly was still incredible. "So you are about five thousand years old?"

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Trent made a gesture of polite acknowledgment. "I was brought to the Cage when I was about your age. It took a lot longer to teach me about what was going on, naturally. The Cage liaison that spoke to me as I am now speaking to you, leads a research team currently, in a different area of the station, but we still keep in touch and I work closely with him on matters regarding people like you that are invited to join the Cage."

"Do you still remember much about your past?" Simon asked.

"Yes, of course, Simon." Trent replied. "Everything is recorded by the Veil. I could command a perfect reconstruction of everything that has ever happened anywhere on earth via the displays."

"Oh right, of course." Simon understood that practically nothing was hidden from the Veil and from the nano-machines that have apparently existed on earth for many millennia. "How old is this station anyway?"

"A good question." Trent replied. "The Ern-Hea has never wanted to reveal this to us, but we know it is at least 7,000 years old, from the time the first humans were brought up to the Cage, and begun training under the Ern-Hea on how to operate and run the Cage's systems."

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“Well that’s suspicious.” Simon pondered. Two thoughts came to his mind simultaneously, a strange wild theory and another question. He began with the question “So how does life begin on a planet? Or even intelligent life? How does that form?”

Trent smiled slyly, as if guessing what Simon was speculating on. “We actually don’t know. The Cage’s records are limited, and they do not give much information on the situation of this planet before around 7,000 years. The Ern-Hea has also never wanted to answer this question either. So we have no clear record of where we come from as an intelligent species.”

Simon asked. “Could we have been planted here by another intelligent species? Maybe even by the Ern-Hea themselves?”

“As some sort of experiment perhaps? Trent replied. “As you may have guessed, we have asked this of them also, and they deny it. There is an old theory that is marginally related to what you are suggesting. On earth it is called Panspermia, that all life somehow originated and came from outer space, and did not begin naturally on any planet. A mathematician and astronomer from your father’s country Sri Lanka, Chandra Wickramasinghe, is among one of the modern proponents of this theory. But again, what he

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proposes is still somewhat different in the details from what you are suggesting.”

Simon did not ask anymore questions for a moment. Trent seemed to use that as a queue to ask him about his decision. “Did you manage to speak to your father about his brother, Simon?”

“Umm, no, not yet. I mean you knew that, right?” Simon shifted uncomfortably at the question, even if he expected it. “You seem to think that a conversation with my father about his brother might help me reconsider your invitation?”

“I do, Simon.” Trent answered plainly. “At the least I believe your father may have interesting insights to share that will help you see the broader picture of what we are asking your to do.”

Simon almost responded by asking Trent why didn't the Veil choose his father instead, and extend an invitation to him to live in the Cage, but he knew that even Trent didn't fully understand how the Veil made its choices.

“My father is quite religious, or spiritual at least.”

Simon finally said. “I'm not quite sure what he could say to me that would make me change my mind about wanting to join a space station in orbit around earth and work for aliens.”

Trent rubbed his chin. “Don't underestimate the importance of religion, spirituality and faith, Simon.

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I've mentioned before about some incredible individuals have been able to somehow pierce through the Veil on their own using spiritual means."

"Yes, well, my father is a Roman Catholic." Simon stated plainly, then looked up toward Trent "So tell me, Trent. Is the Bible true? Did all the events recorded in the Bible really happen? The Veil must have clear records of supposed miracles, the parting of the seas, Jesus Christ healing people, resurrection of the dead?"

Trent smirked. "I'm going to let you find that one out for yourself when you accept our invitation. You will have full access to the Veil's historical recordings and you will be able to pull up any event that has ever occurred, well the ones we have access to anyways. An enticing offer, no?"

"Oh, how very convenient." Simon snorted and rolled his eyes.

"It is." Trent teased, then said firmly. "These sorts of questions are important for people that have some sort of connection to religion, and we would prefer they see such things for themselves, with their own eyes."

"But in the end." Simon said, almost wearily, extending and resting his hands on the table, palms facing upward. "In the end, how can I trust what I'm even seeing, or what any of my senses tell me. Look, Trent.

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Right now, are you hearing me in a language that you understand? and do you see my lips moving like you would if I spoke your language?"

"Yes, I do, Simon." Trent nodded in acknowledgment.

"It's programmed that way otherwise it would look like I was watching a dubbed earth movie."

"So even you're not seeing a completely unaltered image of me speaking. The Veil manipulates everything."

Trent put a hand on Simon's shoulder, but Simon gently nudged it off and looked Trent straight in the eye "And there's one other thing. The thing I may have mentioned before, there is the fact that people on earth are suffering, and dying, even now! And no one is doing anything about it! And of all the people who could do something, you up here on the Cage, you could."

Simon stopped himself for a moment. He realized he was in error. None of the humans who dwelt in the Cage could do anything about suffering on earth even if they wanted to, could they? Simon had read that they were simply prevented to interfere with anything on earth. Even if a person wanted to take control of the Veil and stop an event of suffering, the Ern-Hea would override the controls. They could override it even in the mere conception of the idea and the desire itself, and they most probably often did.

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Trent looked like he was waiting for Simon to compose his thoughts on the matter before he gave a response. "Once you live here, Simon, you would not even conceive the desire to interfere with the humans on earth. You know by now, as well as I do, that is how the Veil works."

"Even the things I want will be subject to the 'will' of the Veil."

"Some things." Trent said somewhat sullenly. "Again, all this is just what we are told by the Ern-Hea."

"I'm starting to wonder if we can really trust them, Trent." Simon stood up and began pacing around the lounge. "I mean here they are, asking you to simply monitor the earth when you, they, could be doing so much to help us. People suffer and die every day, unlike the people in this Cage. Here it sounds like some sort of paradise. The manipulation, the deception, all the hidden information the Veil keeps from us, feels, evil, or at the least, unfair."

Trent rubbed the tips of his fingers thoughtfully as he answered back. "I understand that the Ern-Hea do not wish to reveal everything to us. And yes they could, if they wanted to, and prevent suffering and death on earth, at any time, but that they have deliberately chosen not to do so, and they believe it is for some greater good."

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Simon shook his head, not fully accepting Trent's point, yet seemingly trying to make an effort to understand. "And is that greater good about us as a species learning from our mistakes and evolving for the better?"

"The Ern-Hea have mentioned before that the human race must find a way to co-exist with itself better. Too many humans kill each other, and this is our own fault. You need to remember this, Simon. WE choose to inflict suffering on our own people. There is a lot of greed, malice and jealousy inside us, and we have not been able to fix this." Trent tried to explain. "The fact remains, WE are responsible for the suffering."

"Do you think that only if we are able to somehow evolve into a better state of moral being, will we be closer to achieving immortality?" Simon asked.

"Many researchers here believe this. Especially the ones I mentioned before, those that have made research on spirituality and matters of the soul their life long study."

Trent continued. "Here is what we have been led to believe by the Ern-Hea. First, that they did not have to do anything for us. I remember a time in history where simple might gave humans the right to take whatever they wanted to from other humans that were not strong enough to protect themselves. If the Ern-Hea were and are mightier than we were, they

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could just as easily have destroyed us and taken our planet for themselves. They did not have to bring some of us up into this space station and train us to operate the Cage. They could also have simply let us humans live and develop on our own. The Cage is quite capable of running by itself, you see. The reason for why the Ern-Head brought some of us up here to help monitor our kin on earth, is to somehow find the secrets and unlock the potential to be immortal, which we believe begins by studying ourselves.”

Trent stood up from his chair and waved a hand toward the earth in the large window. “Humans on earth might develop into a space faring immortal race eventually. But with the help of the Cage, when the Veil is finally lifted, and when all humans agree on the single collective pursuit of immortality, we here in the Cage, Simon, will be able to ‘jump start’ their research efforts, and maybe help all humankind achieve immortality faster, since we have already done some of the research legwork up here.” Trent sat down and leaned forward toward Simon. “When the Veil is lifted, we are allowed to share the technology of extending the natural lifespan of a human being. We are not allowed to do this right now, unfortunately. The critical point of any alien species’ survival and development is that it discovers the Veil or that it completely

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annihilates itself through war before it can discover the Veil. All of us hope we will not destroy ourselves."

"Yeah, I read that part. "Simon said almost soberly.

"The fact that the Ern-Head gave us the Cage to help us shorten the time between lifting the Veil and attaining immortality could be seen as some sort of grace extended to us, what do you think Simon?"

"Maybe." Simon did not sound convinced. "We don't know enough about the Ern-Hea's motives to say that for sure."

"Indeed, of course we have thought the same. But since they are immensely superior to us, and could destroy us at any time anyway, we have simply decided to take their word in faith, and believe that what they want is the best for us in the long term."

"That all sounds nice, Trent." Simon looked at earth thoughtfully. "And yet right now as we speak, All I can think about are people still dying, and suffering." He looked back at Trent and gave him an empty cynical smile. "I'm afraid my mind is made up though. I'd rather live a miserable ignorant life on earth than see this version of the truth, if it is true in the first place, I'd rather do that than have to watch so many people die and suffer, and not be able to do anything about it."

"Isn't it the same whether you live on earth or here in the Cage with us, Aren't you still going to be aware of

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the suffering and know that you are powerless to stop it immediately? What is the difference?"

"The difference." Simon said determinedly. "Is that on the station the Veil will manipulate my mind and make me care less about it, like it does with you right now. There is a difference, Trent. Call it a gut feeling, but I think there is a difference."

"You are an incredible young man, Simon." Trent smiled genuinely. "But please do me a favor and have that talk with your father? You have nothing to lose by doing so, right? Please, Simon. I ask you again."

"Here we go again." Simon said, then sighed. "You're up to something, Trent. Why do I get the feeling I'm being manipulated somehow?"

"As I have said before, maybe we both are, Simon." Trent said plainly. "Maybe we are simply both powerless against our destinies."

They continued to talk for some time about Trent and his past. Then Simon was sent back home once again.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

At home, Simon found his father sitting on the living room sofa reading something on his mobile phone. After a brief greeting, Simon decided to go straight to his room. He wanted to avoid that conversation with his father Trent seemed to want him to have. The thoughts that flooded his head troubled him. They were like thoughts of conspiracy theories, how perhaps the Veil had planned Simon to have a discussion with his father and this was all engineered somehow to get him to change his mind on the matter, and accept the offer to join and live in the Cage.

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Simon knew there were billions of tiny little nanomachines in his brain even now, and that the Veil could, at any point, manipulate his own capacity for reason, and simply put the desire in his mind and make him want to live in the Cage. But perhaps that was not the point? That it was important for there to be no neural programming affecting his decision? That the manipulation had to be external somehow? Simon had read previously that in order for a civilized race to attain immortality naturally as a species, the Veil was not allowed to manipulate their internal brain processes. The Veil could after all, if it was programmed to, simply give anyone the secrets of immortality, by somehow downloading the information directly into any brain.

Simon rubbed his eyes and head irritatingly. Simply thinking about the possibilities of what the Veil could do was overwhelming to him. This was not the first time he felt this way. He had never felt comfortable with the fact that he couldn't trust anything anymore, not even his senses, maybe not even his own thought processes, but sometimes he felt more annoyed about it than other times, usually when he was thinking about it when he was alone. He made a decision not to have a talk with his father this week also, and see what Trent had to say about that. Part of him wondered if all this was some sort of test, some sort of test of

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obedience, or perhaps it was defiance that was the actual correct path to take? Even if the Cage decided to cut ties with him, that would be fine, as he had firmly made his decision to stay on earth and live a normal life. He was confident that the Cage would erase his memory of everything at one point in the future because of this decision. It was to their benefit that he forgot everything after all. The thought of outliving his family and friends by that long was not appealing at all to Simon; and somehow the benefits of a simple comfortable lifestyle inside the Cage while everyone outside suffered, felt wrong.

Some days passed. It was evening. Simon was now sitting in the living room sofa, reading an article on his tablet that came up on his social media feed. Trent had told him that a lot of articles that would pop up on his feed would have some relationship to what researchers in the Cage were conducting studies on. Simon's father entered the living room and sat next to Simon, which somewhat startled him.

"I've noticed you've been using your old tablet more and more often than before these last few days." His father commented casually. "Have you been doing a lot of reading lately, son?"

Simon's father leaned over to take a look at Simon's tablet display.

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"Ahh, I've read about that before. The immortal jellyfish. Found somewhere off the coasts of Japan." His father looked puzzled at the next picture in the article "And what is that, son?"

"Oh that's just a vocaloid character that's inspired by the jellyfish." Simon replied. "It's some sort of Japanese cartoon character representing a singing voice synthesizer." Simon didn't quite want to go into much more detail, and worried his father would ask more questions about it, but he didn't.

"You know, Simon, there is something very interesting about this jellyfish I noticed years ago when I read about it." His father began. Inside his head Simon braced for it, this was probably going to be something about Christianity or Catholicism. "Do you see it, son? That at a certain angle of this jellyfish, from the bottom, can you see the cross? Also the red colored parts, denoting the blood that redeems."

Simon rolled his eyes. "It looks more like a 'plus', dad." "Still." His father continued, "Not many creatures have a cross shape on it, son."

Then Simon's father stopped himself, as if he detected his son's irritable mood. He rested a hand on his Simon's shoulder. "What's wrong, Son? You've seemed very preoccupied lately, your mother tells me too."

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“Dad, can you tell me about Uncle Anura? And maybe Mom’s brother Uncle Ji Sung?” Simon blurted out unexpectedly. He caught himself wondering why he suddenly asked that question. The Veil? As much as he was adamant about not asking his father about his uncles, there was also a part of him that was curious to know about them.

“And why are you asking this, Son?” His father leaned back on the sofa and asked inquiringly.

“I don’t..I don’t really know.” Simon answered. “I guess I’ve just been thinking about something lately. About my future.”

Simon’s father paused and exhaled for a moment. Then looked at him with a very focused seriousness. A look that Simon had rarely seen before. “First tell me. Are you thinking about joining the military, son?”

“The military?” Simon replied. “Not really, I mean I know my uncles were both in active military serv..”

“Thank you, Lord.” His father interrupted and exhaled at the same time. Then smiled lightly, as if anything else Simon may have wanted to do was far preferable to that.

“I did want to ask why they joined military service, Dad.” Simon suddenly felt as if he found the words he wanted to speak. “I guess I’m partly curious as to why they would sacrifice love, and family, to join the army.”

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Simon's father took a moment for himself, looking around the living room, as if trying to formulate his words, or wondering where to start. "You know, Simon, I recall part of the reason how your mother and I got close was because we often talked about our brothers. Aruna was my older brother and I loved him so dearly. Your mother felt the same way about her brother, she had a great relationship with her brother Ji Sung. From what your mother told me about her brother I felt they were both very much alike. Intelligent and driven, very handsome young men, and also very caring. They both got top scores in their military academy. Arjuna joined the STF from Sri Lanka and Ji Sung joined the South Korean 'Black Berets' both special forces branches of their respective armies. And, yes, as you know they both also tragically died on duty and neither my family nor your mother's family were ever given full details by our governments on how or where they died. We never even received their bodies."

Simon wanted to reply but he decided to keep silent as he watched his father think and speak.

"I guess that is how it works with top secret operations and classified military engagements" Simon's father continued. "The Sri Lankan government was in a war against the Tamil Tigers terrorist group at that time, and Aruna would often be sent on missions. For

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months at a time we would never see him, nor could we ask about his work when he did come home. Your mother told me it was the same with Ji Sung. The natural conclusion was that your mother's brother might have been sent regularly on classified missions into North Korean territory. Your mother and I were in high school when our families received news about their deaths. When we both entered university, I remember we were both rather sullen people. It wasn't easy for us to leave our families and study alone and abroad, and at a time too soon after our brothers died. I believe it was God who brought us together, and somehow we comforted each other when we talked about our brothers."

Simon's father began to stare at him. But Simon asked his question before his father could ask his. "Dad, could I ask you a general question? This may not make sense to you, but, what if you had to choose between love and truth?"

Simon's father looked taken aback for a moment at the question. He paused and thought about it for a while. "I admit I don't understand why you are asking this question, son, or if I even know what you mean exactly." His father took some more time to think to himself, and then he smiled warmly. "The way I personally see it, son, I consider myself very fortunate here. I am very grateful that I feel I have found love

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and truth in the same source, in the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed I believe I have found all these magnificent things in one place; love, truth, peace, wonder, beauty, duty, joy, comfort and rest, and even work; all these wonderful things, in and through Jesus Christ.

Simon resisted the urge to groan but his father seemed not to notice. "Yes, even work." Simon's father mused, "Ora et labora, 'Pray and work', that was the school motto in Wesley College, my high school, when I was about your age back in Colombo. But, back to your question, son. I've never felt like I've ever had to choose one, or sacrifice love for truth, or truth for love."

"Uncle Aruna, and uncle Ji Sung." Simon tried to form his words carefully. "It sort of seems to me vlike they sacrificed love of family for duty."

Simon's father leaned forward toward him, waved his hand and shook his head. "No, no, no, that is wrong, Simon." He stated bluntly. "They loved their family, they loved their country. They didn't sacrificed love. It was a type of love that drove them to serve in the military, and to make the ultimate sacrifice for us, for our country. Well that is what they believed in anyway. I may disagree with your viewpoint now, son, but I feel I understand it because for a time I felt the same as you do about the situation. You see, Simon, in my family, and your mother's family, we grew up with a

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sense of nationalism toward our respective countries, and that drove our brothers to join the army and serve their countries. Again I will say it was their great love for their countries and their families that made them willing to sacrifice their lives for us. At the time of Aruna's death I remember I felt all this was just meaningless sentiment. It was only later, around the time I began to take Catholicism seriously, did I begin to understand the importance of placing a higher cause than ourselves, a cause we should be willing to die for, if needed, and a cause that can only be driven by love."

"Right.." Simon replied, trying hard not to sound sarcastic, yet a part of him felt like he was beginning to understand.

"Indeed." His father continued. "If I hadn't met your mother early in uni, I might have even considered making similar sacrifices myself, and may have joined the Catholic priesthood. I recall understanding the importance of sacrifice even then. To be fair it was the many discussions with your mother that helped the both of us come to terms and understand this concept of sacrifice."

Simon's father appeared more lively now as he looked at his son. "If you ever feel a higher calling, son. I feel it is our solemn duty, both your mother's and I, to fully support you. I, I just hope to God it isn't military

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service." He looked down at the living room carpet for a moment. "But if that is what God wants then we will support you even in that, son."

Simon thought for a moment about what his father said. "I don't think I want to join the Army, dad. Well right now I don't anyways. But back to what you were talking about. What you're saying is you think true love is to sacrifice?"

"I do, son." His father asserted. "As hard as it may be for me to say it, it is true love that drives a person to give up everything, maybe even family and life, for a better future for those he or she loves dearly."

Simon's father put a hand on Simon's knee. "As you know, we send money to your grandparents in Sri Lanka and South Korea regularly. But when I made the decision to leave Sri Lanka to look for better job opportunities outside, it was very difficult, for me and your grandparents, but I felt it necessary to do so, or else we would not have been able to support them with the homes they live in now. For your mother and I, we felt we actually had to leave our respective families in order to serve them better."

"Alright, well thanks, dad." Simon finally said after a moment. "I guess, maybe I kind of get it now? and maybe you are right about before, maybe love and truth aren't exactly always separate for everyone."

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“We mistake the kind of love that focuses on giving, a greater love, with the love that focuses only on getting for ourselves.” Simon’s father said with a wide smile, then laughed. “And I still have no idea what is going on in your head right now, son.”

Simon chuckled also. “Well, whatever it is, it feels clearer now, thanks again, dad.”

Simon went up to his room feeling a little lighter. And then the thoughts of whether this conversation was all engineered by the Veil entered his mind. All that was left now was to talk to Trent.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Simon found Trent sitting on a large comfortable chair when he entered the observation room. The usual table was not there anymore, and this time the chairs had a different design. They looked as if they were made for resting, more like sofa chairs. Trent turned politely and smiled at Simon.

"I don't know, Simon." Trent spoke straightly and shrugged. He seemed to be thinking about something just as Simon walked in.

"Don't know what?" Simon asked, slightly bewildered.

"We've been monitoring the thoughts inside your head, Simon recently." Trent answered. "We know that

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you've been wondering if the conversation with your father yesterday was all somehow orchestrated by the Veil. That somehow this may have been all set up, geared up, to get you to change your mind and accept the offer to join us the Cage and live with us in the future. As far as I can guess, you could be right, Simon. All I can say is that we, us humans in the Cage I mean, did not program the Veil to manipulate your thoughts or do anything to directly influence your decision.

Trent went on "Still, that does not rule out the possibility that the Ern-Hea did, or that they do so for even all of our thoughts. And that is why I said I don't know, Simon."

"But it was you that asked me to talk to my father about uncle Aruna and uncle Ji Sung." Simon replied.

"You must have known that the conversation would have made me change my mind somehow."

"I did not observe your family when your uncles were alive." Trent said. "But I did review the files, and did run analysis on the motives and thought patterns of your uncles and your father at the time. Also thousands of years of experience has given me insight on how us humans think."

"And yet all of you here in the Cage went on and let my uncles die." Simon said bluntly.

Trent exhaled, his hands seemed to clench slightly as he spoke "Thousands of lives suffer and die every

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single minute, Simon. It is ugly. Even now, as we speak, there is for sure a girl or a child on earth being raped and murdered. And we are just as powerless as you are to stop it. The Veil prevents us. We don't have full control of it, Simon"

"I'm really sorry, Trent." Simon raised his palms in apology. "Forgive me for bringing this issue up again and again. I know you say you don't have complete control of the Veil, and so you cannot interfere. I suppose it must be harder for you since you can choose to observe everything yet not be able to do anything about it."

Trent looked away. "I often wonder, even now, if and whether we humans even deserve to be 'saved', to be granted immortality at all. Many of us often feel as if perhaps we should just destroy each other, that is what we truly deserve as a species."

Simon nodded as if he had thought about this too. "So what keeps you going? what keeps you all here in the Cage going, Trent?"

"I'm not sure." Trent said. "Maybe the only thing that keeps us going is the simple command we were given, a simple order by the Ern-Hea, who are our superiors, that we are to conduct research and find a way to attain immortality, or die trying. We try our best simply because we are under orders to do so I suppose. The Ern-Hea who are mightier than us, could

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probably destroy us any time they wish to, and yet they allow our existence, and they give us a command and they give us a purpose. Perhaps that's the only thing that keeps us going?"

Simon stared out at the observation window. He was silent for a long time, then turned and looked at Trent. "I'll help you." he said finally. "Just tell me what to do. Maybe the sooner I do my part, the less people will suffer and die."

Trent made a firm smile. "Thank you, Simon. That's really all we can hope for." He tapped some commands at the table and brought up a three dimensional display of some sort of timeline.

"For now, Simon, you will continue your life on earth and finish your formal school education." Trent explained. "And you will go on to get a university degree. We will then arrange you to work as some sort of social charity worker in some of the most remote regions on earth. You will not see pleasant things in your work, but the things you do see will probably help forge some sort of character in you. At least that is what we surmise. This time table that I have here on display was designated for you, but it was designed by the Veil, not by us. We simply follow it. I took a look at it before and it originally planned for you to join military service after university. But after your

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conversation with your father the time table suddenly changed on its own.”

“Really?” Simon wondered at that. “Does it recalibrate destinies like a GPS recalibrates routes? Was the Veil trying to be kind to my father by getting me to avoid military service?”

Trent chuckled mildly. “We believe that might be so. We’ve seen the Veil do that a number of times before.”

Trent then looked at Simon earnestly “Thank you again, Simon. I really wanted to say this to you today.”

“Your welcome, Trent. I should thank you too.” Simon replied with a broad smile.

They talked for a few more minutes that day. A light-hearted conversation mostly about Trent. After that Simon asked to be teleported back to near his school, not his home. It was still open that day in the evening and he said he wanted to sit outside and just think about things for a bit.

Simon sat once again on the bench across the enormous tree in the middle and watched the leaves sway as a gentle warm breeze swept across the courtyard. Then he took out his mobile phone to play a game on it.

END