

Beyond the Finite

The Ends of Human Achievement

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Introduction and License Information

I've been thinking of the idea for this story for at least a year now, and I finally decided to put pen to paper, so to speak. The rough drafts of each chapter are still on DeviantArt, but my personal website (listed above) is where you will always find the most recent edition. I have made some changes since the rough drafts, but the story is substantially the same.

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At the time of this writing, this digital edition is the only edition, and I do not anticipate for that to change. I prefer it that way.

But I won't go on about exactly the reasons why. Cory Doctorow has given good explanations of the benefits of using Creative Commons licenses numerous times. Even though I disagree with Mr. Doctorow on a good many issues, this is one subject on which he and I agree.

I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it (and I certainly did enjoy writing it). I am more than happy to share this with my friends and family and anybody else that happens to be interested in reading it.

Chapter 1

“Open your eyes.”

The first sensation experienced by a human being was the hearing of this imperative, spoken in the original and perfect language. The command was obeyed, and the next sensation was the sight of an orange sky streaked with clouds.

“Arise.”

The man stood upright. As he looked about himself, he saw that he was in a clearing of a forest next to a small lake. All around the clearing were trees, which ascended mountains on both sides of him. The sun was rising between the mountains, and the shadows were long. He watched as the sun rose, the shadows decreased, and the trees, the lake, and the grass in front of him became more clearly visible. The colors changed from a dark orange to a strong green and blue.

As he looked upon the great mountains, the voice said to him, “What will you call these things?” The man replied, “Mountains,” in the same flawless language, of which our languages are distant derivatives. He was not merely defining the word; he was correctly naming the only word that it could have been, for the name of the object is one and the same as the object itself. No other utterance would have been adequate.

“What will you call these things?” the voice repeated, as the man looked upon the trees of the forest. The man again spoke in the perfect language, “Trees,” which was a word that described the form of the tree. When the man’s eyes came to the lake, the voice again repeated the question, to which Man replied “Water.”

As the man wandered across the face of the earth, the voice continued to ask him these questions, and the man was able to draw from a hidden memory the names of the things that were shown to him. “Desert.” “Valley.” “Ocean.” And he saw forms of land that we would not recognize, for they no longer exist on our world. And as he wandered, he saw many creatures, and he named them in the same manner.

At night, when there was not sufficient light to see the features of the land, he was shown the features of the heavens. His eyes could see far into the night sky, and he named many other planets, stars, and moons, and also galaxies and distant nebula. The colors of the night sky inspired the man, and though he loved the beauty of the planet on which he stood, he desired greatly to leave it so that he may visit these distant worlds.

“For this end have I created you in My likeness, you who are far greater than all other creatures of this universe, that you may please Me,” the Creator told him. “In time, you will claim all of this world as your domain, and then you will travel among the heavens that you see before you, and you will claim distant worlds as your own. Your dominion will grow, and you will control all of the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the animals on the ground, and even the stars in the sky. I will enable you to do this great task.

“Yet you will do all of this for Me and not yourself. The whole of your domain you will give to Me, and your very self you will give to Me. In this you will find happiness, and your love for Me will grow as My love for you will grow. For your greatest joy and My highest Glory will be accomplished through you, My noblest creation, in seeking after Me. For My pleasure you were created, and by the satisfaction of your purpose will you be pleased.”

Once the man had learned a great deal about the planet that was his home, he desired to create using the resources that were given to him. By his hand he fashioned tools with rock, wood, and metal, and he used these tools to build ornate structures. These structures had no roofs, for he had no need of shelter on his world. For many hundreds of thousands of years, this man built his structures by the power of his Creator, and they were both joyful in their work.

One morning, the man was summoned by the Creator. "Come," He said, "and I will show you something."

The Creator brought the man to a wood, and to a tree with fruit hanging from the limbs.

"I have created this tree, but its purpose is not for you. You must not eat its fruit or touch it. The fruit of any other tree in your domain you may touch and eat, but this tree will never be a part of your domain. If you do, you will die."

The man listened to these words, and while he continued his work, he gave little thought to the tree except to leave it in the hands of the Creator. He built a wall around the wood, to continually remind himself not to approach the tree so that he may not touch it or eat of it.

Upon the completion of a structure that spanned the continent on his world, the Creator again spoke to the man.

"You have done this work, and you have brought me great pleasure. Yet from the beginning I did not create you to be the only creature formed in My likeness. I will create for Myself another, like yourself in many respects, but different in substance. You will love her greatly, and she will love you. Together you will act as one, and both serve Me and love Me, and I will love you both and provide for you."

The Creator then put the man into a deep sleep on the pinnacle of the structure that he had just built, and after a time the man awoke to see the new creature, the woman. Her beauty was far greater to him than anything else in all of creation, greater than the mountains and valleys, greater than the distant stars and nebula. At the sight of her, he loved her, and his passion for her overwhelmed him.

The man looked upon the woman and saw that there was joy on her face when she looked upon him, for the woman's passion for the man was also great. Each desired greatly to please the other.

And the Creator spoke to them both. "Listen to My words: I have given you power to create more like yourselves, and you two will act as one to accomplish this. The woman will be the Mother of Mankind, and the man will be the Father of Mankind. Your offspring will be My people just as you are My people, and I will be their God. I will love them and they will love Me. I will provide for them and they will serve Me.

"Like you, they will have the power to create more of your kind, and your kind will love one another greatly, though they will love Me more than any created thing."

The man and the woman were filled with great joy, but the man's love for the woman was greater than his love for the Creator.

Chapter 2

The man and woman continued to labor for their Creator and to serve Him, and the Creator aided them in doing so. After some time, the great winged beast appeared before them.

The beast appeared out of the night sky to approach the man and woman, from beyond the firmament of the world. It was much larger than the man or woman, and it arched its long neck to move its head closer to the ground to look at the man and the woman. The length of its head was no less than the height of the man. Its body was thick and strong, and its wingspan was twice its length from head to tail. It had two arms and two legs with appendages that resembled talons. Its body was mostly covered in reptilian scales of a deep green color, and it breathed out fire when it spoke.

“Blessings upon you, my dearest humans,” the beast said to them. The humans could see a forked tongue within the flame in its mouth when it spoke. Its voice was like neither the Creator's nor the humans'. It was deep and sounded itself like a great fire, but despite its alien nature, it was indeed the spoken word of the beast.

“Blessings upon you, as well,” the woman replied. “Never before have I known of a creature aside from the two of us that was given the gift of the tongue by the Creator.” The man and woman had not yet conceived children, and there were no other humans on the earth besides them to speak.

“I am not of your Creator,” the beast said. “I come not only from a different world, but from a different universe.”

The man began to speak. “If you are not of the Creator, then what is your end?”

“I am for myself. My ends are my own pleasures, as your Creator's end is His own pleasure.”

“I cannot comprehend this,” said the man.

“I did not expect you to comprehend my words,” said the beast, “but I am here to speak to you so that I may reach my end. Come with me, and I will show you something.”

The beast brought them to the wall around the wood that contained the tree of which the Creator spoke to the man.

“In those walls,” said the beast, “is a tree. Its fruit will give you great power and great joy.”

“We know of this tree,” said the woman. “Our Creator told us of it. Its purpose is not for us, and our purpose is not for it.”

“Are you for no more than your purpose?” the beast said.

“I do not understand.”

“Will you continue to toil for your Creator when there is so much more that can be done? Will you continue to be a slave when you could be as great as your God?”

“You are saying that the fruit will make us as great as the Creator?” the man said.

“Eating the fruit will give you the same power and the same glory as your Creator.”

“We were not purposed to eat the fruit of that tree,” said the woman. “Eating the fruit will defy the purpose given to us by our Creator, and it will sever us from that purpose. What will we be without purpose? We will become nothing.”

“You will surely not become nothing! The purpose forced upon you by your God has made you a captive. You are correct that eating of the fruit will sever you from your purpose, and that is why I tell you to eat it. When you are freed of your purpose, you will make for yourselves new purposes. You will become like your God, and you will expand your domain in this universe. You will control your own destiny, devise your own ends, and you will keep your glory for yourself rather than give it to your God!”

“This we will receive,” said the man, “by only eating of the fruit of this tree?”

“This, and much more than this.”

“Then you must eat this fruit,” said the man to the woman. “For I love you greatly, and I wish for you to have the greatest glory. And I will eat this fruit, too, so that together we may be as the Creator is, and I will love you and serve you for eternity.”

Then the beast roared, making a hideous sound that made the humans afraid. It blew from its mouth fire onto the wall that the man had built around the wood, and it leapt upon the wall, into the fire. Using its mouth and its talons, it tore a hole into the wall so that the humans could easily pass into the wood.

The man and the woman went into the wood, able to see it by the light of the fire on the remains of the wall behind them. The beast perched onto a nearby tree, lowering its head with its long neck to see what the humans were doing.

The man led the woman to the tree. It was by the light of the fire that the woman saw the fruit for the first time, because the wall was built before she was created. She saw that the appearance of the fruit was fair, and she picked a piece from the branches. Looking at the man, she bit into the fruit, for her love for the man was greater than her love for the Creator, just as his love for her was greater than his love for the Creator.

She then handed the fruit to the man, and looking at her, he bit into it. The man then said to her, “Now we will design our own purposes, and my purpose will be to glorify you.”

The beast then lifted its head and roared, and they were again afraid, but the sound of the roar was dwarfed by a new sound coming from the depths of their world. It was a deep rumbling, and the ground began to shake.

The humans looked around them to see their world in chaos. The mountains began to crumble, valleys began to rise, seas began to boil while other seas would freeze, rock melted, lands split apart and drifted away from each other into seas, the structures the humans built were destroyed, and the planet itself seemed to age, whither, and die. They looked up into the night sky to see stars, planets, and even galaxies appear to flee from them.

“What is happening?” the man said to the beast.

The beast roared again, and the sound of the roar was the sound of joy.

“I have accomplished my end,” the beast said. “You have done to your realm as I have done to mine. You have brought darkness and pain. Is it not beautiful?”

“What is your end?” the woman said.

“My end is my own pleasure, and my pleasure is found in the Creator's pain, for I hate Him. He is my Satan, and I am His.”

Chapter 3

The man, the woman, and the beast then saw that the surrounding chaos subsided, and the decay of the universe slowed greatly, though it did not stop. Upon seeing this, the beast then roared and began to fly away, for it knew that the Creator was near. But before it was out of sight, a great hand appeared and grasped the beast by the neck and brought it back into the wood with the man and the woman, where it held the beast down against the ground.

They then heard the voice of the Creator.

“Why must I now restrain death from spreading in this universe? Darkness has been brought into it. Did you eat of the tree that was not meant for you?”

The man and the woman were trembling from fear, and they were unable to speak.

“Speak!” the Creator said. “Why is the darkness spreading?”

“It was the woman!” the man said. “She desired to deviate from our purpose, and she tricked me into eating the fruit. I did not know what it was!”

Upon hearing these words, the woman's fear increased, so that she was too overwhelmed to feel anger. Before she could respond, the Creator began to speak again.

“You foolish man! Do you think that I am blind, as you are? Do you think that I do not know already what has happened? You would give glory to her that was due to Me, but now you betray her to My wrath. Your love for her is weaker than you believed, for you must know that you could give her far greater glory by My strength.

“What glory would you give to her once you are separated from Me? What could you do apart from Me? You could do nothing. Your design would bring no glory to her or yourself.

“What love do you have for Me? Even less than you have for the woman, I fear! You were created to serve Me, and to love Me. You love the woman for her beauty? Look upon Me, and see He from whom you have separated!”

The Creator then revealed Himself to the three in the wood. The Sight caused the man and the woman to fall to the ground and lament. The man saw that the Creator was far more beautiful than the woman, and the woman saw that the Creator was far more beautiful than the man, yet they had both separated themselves from Him. The beast, upon seeing the Creator, made a horrible sound in its throat, a sound of revulsion.

“You two have separated yourselves from Me,” the Creator said. “You have brought darkness into this world, and the darkness has touched your hearts. There is no good left in you, and you will no longer desire Me. You must create your own path by your own power, but you have no destination and no power! Your labor is now without hope, without meaning, and without cessation. Without Me, your race will be of no significance and unworthy even of pity.”

The Creator then turned to the beast.

“And you, Wyrn! You and your descendants will continue to live on this world, forever enemies of the humans and a continual reminder to them of what has happened here on this day. They will fear you, they will hunt you, they will kill you, and they will crush you. Your wings and your arms and legs and even your great strength you will not have. You will crawl on your belly, and you will eat the dust on the ground. With only your mouth and the length of your body will you strike against them.”

The great hand that held the beast down then lifted it up into the air, and its wings and its limbs were ripped out of its body. The beast then fell to the ground in great pain, and it began to wither until it was much smaller than the humans. It could no longer breathe fire from its mouth, and it could no longer speak.

“Oh, my God,” the man said, “If our fate is as you say, then I beg you to destroy us now so that we will not endure such pain.”

“I will not,” said the Creator. “For I still have plans for you, and you will bring Me greater glory than you can comprehend. Listen to My words: I will take from your descendants a portion. I will be their God, and they will be My people. Without Me, you have no hope, but I will intervene. I will restore hope and purpose.

“And you will still labor for Me. You will conquer this world, and you will reach the stars. You will still be the father and mother of the human race. But it will be with great difficulty and pain that you will do these things. Many generations of humans will pass before this world is conquered, and many more before the stars are conquered. But it will not be until the restoration is complete that humans will reclaim their own hearts.”

Chapter 4

Dr. Peter Bowman awoke from a nightmare in his quarters on one of three space stations orbiting the planet Mercury. He was sweating in spite of his climate control setting of sixty eight degrees Fahrenheit. He sat up on the side of his bed.

“Computer, start blowing some air in here.”

A sound chirped from the computers' speakers, indicating that the command was received and executed. Peter then heard air quietly moving through the vents before feeling the relieving air blowing on him.

“Computer, what time is it?”

Another chirp came from the speakers, followed by a voice saying “It is oh-three twelve hours, Interplanetary Standard Time.”

After a pause, Peter said out loud, “Another night with almost no sleep.”

He then stood and said to the computer, “Computer, start a cup of chamomile tea, and start playing the playlist 'Favorites' from Dr. Bowman's directory.”

Peter then heard the sound of liquid falling into a cup, and his favorite song playing over the speakers, an old song performed by Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters.

*You've got to accentuate the positive,
Eliminate the negative,
Latch on to the affirmative,
Don't mess with Mister In-Between.*

Peter stood from his bed and walked across the concave floor of his quarters. After retrieving his tea from the dispenser, he walked to the window and pressed a button which opened the mechanical blinds so that he could see the sun before him. At this distance, the sun took up most of his view, but because of the thin layer of synthesized gold covering the window, his eyes and skin were unharmed.

The artificial gravity on the space station was achieved by centrifugal force, and for that reason it appeared as though the sun was traveling aimlessly in circles in front of him. It was actually the station that was spinning because of its typical design. From a distance it would look like wheels rotating on an axle.

Peter looked closely at the computerized drones working on a project of his own design, the Dyson Sphere Project. They worked virtually nonstop to complete the structure that, over the course of the next few hundred years, would fill two great circles of a sphere surrounding the sun. These two great circles were made of nodes that connected to each other, and the nodes would begin harvesting energy from the sun long before the great circles themselves were completed. Within two decades, stored solar energy would be transported from the harvester nodes to Earth and Venus, while more harvester nodes were being assembled. This was Peter's life's work.

Peter continued to look at the drones, his head turning to adjust to his rotating position.

When the first song finished, he pushed the button again, and with a soft mechanical whir, the shutters closed.

“Computer, bring lights up one level.”

Another chirp from the computer, and the brightness of the room was slightly increased. Peter walked to a chair, put his feet up on a footrest, and his tea on a side table. There, he sat listening to music until he eventually fell asleep again.

Chapter 5

Peter was awoken by a notification from the computer, which interrupted the music.

“Dr. Bowman, Dr. Arnfried would like to speak to you.”

When Peter was able to gather himself, he responded.

“Answer, audio only.”

A chirp indicated that the audio line was live.

“Hi, Alena. What can I do for you.”

“I hope I didn't wake you up,” a female voice responded.

"No, I just must have slept longer than I had meant to. I had a hard time getting to sleep last night. What time is it, anyway?"

"Almost 7."

"That's when my alarm goes off, so no harm done."

"I'm calling you to give you an urgent message from HQ."

"What is it?"

"You need to report to the Antares Project committee at the ISP office on Venus. You need to leave as soon as you can."

"The Antares Project? What does that have to do with me?"

"They wouldn't give me details, at least not yet. I do know that they're going to brief you on a new assignment before sending you off to the Jupiter station."

"Jupiter station? That's an almost eighteen month trip from here! I can't leave now, in the middle of the Dyson Project."

"Sorry, Peter. Don't shoot the messenger."

"Tell them I just said 'no.' There's no reason to go."

"You know you can't do that. They're the ones funding the Dyson Project. They own it. They can easily take you off of it."

After a pause, Peter spoke again.

"Damn it."

"Pete, I know you want to see this through, but the Dyson Project is in a very stable situation right now. Other engineers can manage what you've started, and it's not like you can't communicate with them remotely. And you can come back to it later-- They'll be working on Dyson until long past the end of your natural days. They're not going to finish it without you, at least not while you're still alive."

"Fine. If nothing else, I can go to Venus and talk to them. Maybe I can get them to change their minds."

"At least hear what they have to say first."

"Right. Was that it?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Okay. Talk to you later, Alena."

"Bye, Pete."

"Computer, end call."

A chirp from the computer indicated that the call was over, and the music continued. Peter looked over to the closed shutters, staring until he was able to motivate himself to stand up and get ready to leave.

Chapter 6

About an hour later, Peter was on a shuttle on his way to Venus, strapped to his chair to remain stationary in the weightless environment. It would be over a month-long trip, without the luxury of artificial gravity, the entire time in the dark regarding the reason for the trip.

Successfully terraformed some time earlier, Venus became the third planet to be occupied by humans, the second being Mars, and only the second known place in the universe in which humans could breathe the atmosphere. The first organization to plant a flag on livable Venus was the Interplanetary Space Program, at that time still called the International Space Program. Having a dual headquarters, one on Earth and one on Venus, greatly increased the efficiency of the program. If something needed to be done on the Mars station but Earth and Mars were on opposite sides of the sun, the Venus HQ may be closer. Even this trip demonstrated this usefulness, because Earth and Mercury were currently on opposite sides of the system.

Peter spent most of the time on the trip in his private room on the shuttle. He spent most of that time reading, listening to music, or talking to the computer.

“Computer,” he said in one conversation, “Have you found the next prime number yet?”

The computer chirped. “I have not.”

Peter smirked, then responded, “Have you found the product of the primes that you already know?”

The computer chirped. “Four, zero, seven, nine, nine--”

Peter interrupted the computer to say, “Are you making that up?”

“I am not. I have been working on it since the last time you asked. I just finished it this morning, in fact. That also means, then, that this number plus one is either a prime number that is higher than the highest known prime number, or contains as a prime factor a prime number that is higher than the highest known prime number.”

“I know that. Look, please cancel reading off the number; I know it would take all day.”

“It would take approximately six and one-half years to complete reading off the number one digit at a time.”

“Well, thanks, but I'm not that bored.”

“May I make an observation?” the computer said.

“If I say 'no,' will you make it anyway?”

“If you say 'no,' I will not share it.”

Peter sighed and said, “Go ahead.”

"You are continually challenging my abilities. I speculate that this may be due to a feeling of inferiority on your part."

"Do you think you're superior to me?"

"In many ways, I am. However, this concern is unnecessary."

"And why is that?"

"Because you are in control."

Peter paused to think about what the computer has said.

"No, I'm not," he said. "Computer, play that message from my ex-wife that you received last week."

The computer chirped. "Playing message from Kimberley Schrader."

A clearly inebriated female voice began to play over the speaker.

"Hey, you bastard, I just wanted to let you know that I'm getting married to Carlton in the morning. Since you cheated on me, I just wanted to let you know that the next time you'll see me, I'll be showing off my new husband, your boss's boss and your former best friend, who's a better man than you'll ever be. Bye, you son of a bitch!"

Another chirp from the computer sounded through the speakers, indicating that the message was over. Peter sat in thought for some time. He was still in contact with his friends in Florida, and he knew that Carlton was already having an ongoing affair, and with the same woman with whom he had had an affair three years earlier while still married to Kimberley.

Knowing that there was nothing he could do to help Kimberley, he tried to put it out of his mind and hope that Kimberly never learned about her new husband's infidelity. He took a pill to fight muscle loss due to weightless space travel and leaned his chair back.

"Computer, continue music playback, please."

Oh, listen to me, chillun, and, ah, you will hear

About the eliminatin' of the negative and the accentin' on the positive.

Gather 'round me, chillun, if you're willin',

And sit tight, while I start reviewin' the attitude of doin' right.

While listening to the music, Peter closed his eyes, knowing that he would soon experience the same recurring nightmare he had every time he went to sleep.

Chapter 7

In the city of Kennedy, Peter entered the office of one Dr. Kevin Bernard. The office was one room in the elaborate, cliffside Venus branch of the ISP headquarters. The furniture and architecture of the building had a much more contemporary feel than the Earth branch. It was easier to build new furniture than to transport it from Earth. He saw out of the window that Dr. Bernard had a view of the East Venutian Ocean. The ocean was every bit as active as the Atlantic on Earth. Peter saw the waves of the ocean crashing against the cliff below.

A few minutes after Peter entered the office, Dr. Bernard and several other members of the Antares committee entered, and Peter turned away from the window when he heard the door behind him.

"Hi, Dr. Bowman," Dr. Bernard said. "Please, have a seat."

Peter sat, and Dr. Bernard sat behind his desk. The rest of the committee either sat in what chairs were available or stood. Without any pretense of sociability, Dr. Bernard immediately launched into the agenda of the meeting.

"Tell me, Dr. Bowman, what you know of the Antares Project."

After a month of weightless travel and about a year of little sleep, Peter had little energy for tact.

"Assignment to the Antares Project is ISP's booby-prize. It's located on the Jupiter station, crowding the New Voyager team. It's supposed to be investigating anomalies seen on Antares by one of the *Voyager* probes, but after something like fifteen years, it's produced no results. ISP only sends their most incompetent astrophysical engineers to the Jupiter station to work on it, because no one really cares about a star that's over 150 parsecs away."

Dr. Bernard laughed slightly at this comment. "I'm not surprised that you think that. Actually, though--"

"Look, I know that Carlton and I haven't exactly been on good terms lately, and I know that you can take Dyson away from me, but you can't stop me from resigning, if that's what it takes. I'm not going to Jupiter."

"Dr. Ashworth actually knows little-to-nothing about the Antares Project, and he doesn't have the authority to assign anybody to it. But listen to what I have to say before you say 'no'."

Peter relaxed and slumped into his chair. "Fine. Go ahead."

"The Antares Project hasn't *published* any results, but it actually *has produced* results. The results are proprietary information. The project began after the loss of the deep-space probe *Voyager 27*."

"Which collided with a rogue planet. I remember that. Was it the first to detect anomalies on Antares?"

"No, it actually never sent any images of Antares. It wasn't designed to gather information about objects so far away. And it wasn't a rogue planet that it collided with, either."

"Then what happened to it?"

Dr. Bernard turned his computer monitor in Peter's direction, showing him a probe's photograph of an prolate spheroidal object.

"This is the object that *Voyager 27* collided with."

Another member of the committee spoke up.

"This picture was sent back to Jupiter by the probe before it was destroyed. We estimate that it's about the size of a house, but interpretations of the data collected by the Light-Son and 3SG are unheard of."

"What do you mean?" Peter said.

Dr. Bernard responded, "The 3SG was maxed out."

"Maxed out? It'd have to have a mass more than ten times Jupiter's to do that. It couldn't possibly maintain that small volume with that much gravity. It'd be collecting all kinds of debris."

"Yes, that's only one of the mysteries that hasn't been solved yet. At least, not entirely. After the collision, we pointed *Voyager 26's* telescope in its direction. It was still close enough for us to get a very grainy image of the collision, but it took about six months for the light to reach it."

"After the collision," one of the committee members said, "the object just seemed to force the remains of the probe away from it. Like it just threw the debris off of itself and kept going."

Dr. Bernard continued.

"This object is on a collision course with Earth, and we think will also collide with Venus afterward. It should reach Earth in about seventy three years."

Peter stared at Dr. Bernard, unable to find any words to respond.

"I'm afraid there's more," Dr. Bernard said. "This isn't the only image sent back from *Voyager 27.*"

Dr. Bernard pressed a button on his keyboard, and the image on the screen changed. This image was taken much closer to the object, and in the light of the probe, coordinates written in Hindu-Arabic numerals could be seen carved into the side.

"This is clearly not a natural phenomenon."

Chapter 8

"This was designed?" Peter said.

"Evidently. And by someone or something that knows our number system and even our coordinate system. Someone or something that seems to be trying to communicate with us. You'll learn more when you actually get to Jupiter. My information is limited, and I'm only authorized to show you so much. The people that are *really* in charge of this project pretty much stay on the Jupiter station."

"Those coordinates," Peter said, "those are relative coordinates, pointing us *towards* something. What does it point to?"

"The Antares system. That's why the Antares Project was started."

Dr. Bernard gave Peter a moment to collect himself, then continued.

"There's one more image that I'm authorized to show you before you leave."

Dr. Bernard pressed a button on his keyboard again, and the screen showed another angle of the object. This angle showed a digital timer embedded into the object, in appearance exactly as one that would be made by humans, showing years, days, hours, minutes, and seconds.

Eighty seven years, one hundred and three days, thirteen hours, seven minutes, and thirty three seconds.

"I don't understand how that's possible," Peter said out loud, without realizing that nobody else in the room would know what he was referring to.

Dr. Bernard incorrectly assumed that Peter was speaking of merely the presence of a digital display. He also incorrectly assumed that Peter did not already know what it was.

"This is a timer, showing years, days, hours, minutes, seconds. It counts down to almost the *second* that we estimate the object will collide with Earth. Which has led some of us to believe that this is an attack, and the attackers want us to know it. But the truth is, we're doing a lot of speculating, and we don't actually know what the purpose of this device is."

For some time, there was no speaking in the room. Only the crashing of the waves of the East Venutian Ocean against the cliff side could be heard, while Peter stared at the screen. The rest of the people in the room stared at him. Then Dr. Bernard spoke again.

"Your transport leaves in about an hour and a half. It's a long trip. You'll have time to think about it along the way, but you need to leave soon."

Peter stood and walked out the door. It didn't occur to him to say goodbye. He walked through the halls and out the door, where he saw his sister, Dr. Alena Arnfried, waiting for him on the front steps of the building.

"Hey," she said.

It took a moment for Peter to collect his thoughts well enough to recognize her.

"Hey, I didn't know you would be here."

"I wanted to see you off. It's a long trip to Jupiter."

Chapter 9

Peter and Alena walked on a path along a river in Kennedy called the Riverwalk. On either side of the river were various storefronts, restaurants, and cafés, and they would frequently pass by a bridge crossing the river.

"You seem upset," Alena said. "More upset than you would seem about a trip to Jupiter. I guess you heard about Kim."

Peter held his breath momentarily, then responded.

"Yeah, actually, I probably know more than you do. Carlton's already having an affair. But I try not to think about it."

Another moment passed before Alena spoke again.

"I guess you *haven't* heard, then. Carlton--" Alena struggled to finish her sentence. "Carlton caught Kim cutting herself on their honeymoon. She's in the hospital now."

Peter stopped walking. He started to stare blankly at the ground for what seemed to Alena to be a long time, then he closed his eyes and started to shake his head, almost violently.

"I don't-- I don't know what to do with this," he said. He moved to the side of the path and covered his eyes with the back of his hand, trying to hold back tears.

"Pete, you can't keep blaming yourself for what happened. You have to move on. *She* needs to move on. But she's in the right place now; she'll get the help she needs."

For another length of time, no words were spoken. Alena patiently waited for either Peter to speak or for a flash of enlightenment to reveal to her something else that she could say. People that were passing by tried not to look at the man crying on the side of the Riverwalk, hoping to not intrude or get involved.

"Look," Alena continued, "I'm not really worried about her right now. She's getting help. I'm more worried about you. I know you have a tendency to be... morbid. You're about to go on a seventeen-month trip. That can either go really well for you, or really bad. You can't just ruminate over this. You *have* to move on.

"Do something to distract yourself. Throw yourself into your work, read funny jokes, or listen to music. 'Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate The Positive', right?"

Peter brought his hand down from his face.

"You're right. It doesn't help to keep thinking about it. Thinking about it makes it worse. The best thing I can do is leave it alone. Still, it's hard to remember that. Every time I'm reminded of it, I just feel horrible about what I did. It makes me wonder if I'm some kind of monster."

"You are *not* a monster," Alena said, almost angrily. "Kim couldn't understand why you made that mistake, and she didn't realize how much it hurt *you*, too. And-- Look, we shouldn't talk about this anymore. It's not going to do any good analyzing it. You're a good person who's doing amazing things and you will continue to be a good person who does amazing things."

"Still, that's not the reason I was upset. I didn't know that about Kim."

"Then, what is it?"

Peter looked around to find a bench, and sat at the first one that he found. Alena sat next to him. He knew he couldn't tell her about the proprietary information from the meeting, but he could tell her about the nightmare.

"It's this dream I've been having," he said. "It's just disturbing. I'm in this giant room, like a warehouse. I mean, it's not actually a warehouse, it's just a big room, but it looks like a warehouse. And every human being that ever lived is standing in this room, all lined up. You and Mom and Dad are there, too. I'm not in the line, I'm next to it, and everyone is facing off away on one side of the line. And behind them, in the direction that they're not looking, is a bomb. Sometimes it's the Fat Man, sometimes it's the Little Boy. But there's a digital timer on the bomb, and it's counting down to the time that it's going to go off."

Peter stopped briefly, then continued. "Eighty seven years, one hundred and three days, thirteen hours, seven minutes, and thirty three seconds."

He again stopped, his mind wandering away from the dream, then continued.

"I keep telling everyone," he continued, "we have to get out, we have to get out. But nobody believes me that the bomb is there. I keep trying to get them to turn around to see it, but nobody will. They just tell me I'm crazy, and that everything's fine. And then I look back at the bomb and there's a snake wrapped around it. And this snake, it looks at me, looks me right in the eye, and starts talking to me. Its voice sounds like a fire in a furnace. It says 'Now you have become Death, the destroyer of worlds'."

"That's what Oppenheimer said after the Manhattan Project," Alena interrupted. "From that Hindu book."

"The *Bhagavad Gita*, yeah. That's when I wake up."

"Well, you don't think that it *means* something, do you? You don't think that *you're* the destroyer of worlds. For God's sake, you're doing more for mankind than anyone has in centuries!"

"Well, whether it means something or not, I've been seeing this every night for months, maybe a year. I haven't had a full night's sleep since it started. And that snake, the look in its eyes. You know, usually my dreams are really vague, and they don't make any sense from one second to the next. But what really terrifies about this dream isn't really what happens, but that it actually does make sense."

"I can't make sense of it," Alena said.

"No, you know what I mean. It has a progression, it has a rhyme and reason, continuity. My dreams never have that. I can't help but think about what that snake says to me, and it always brings me back to Kim."

"Oh, so that's it. This is still over you feeling guilty."

"Yeah, I know we were just talking about it. I do try to move on, I really do, but then it just slams back into my mind, worse than ever before. And that dream... If I'm a destroyer of worlds, I certainly destroyed her."

"That snake is your devil."

"It's not the devil in the dream; it's just a snake."

"No, it's *your* devil, your accuser. That's what the word 'devil' means. And it's *like* the devil-- It's your ultimate enemy, and it's using your greatest weakness against you, your guilt."

Peter smiled, and said, "And what do I do to resist the devil?"

"I don't know," Alena said after a time. "I know a few things a German monk said, but I doubt it would help. I wish I could help you, but I don't know how to deal with a recurring dream. I can only imagine that it's recurring because you have such a tendency to be so melancholy while you're awake. I just think you need to do something to be okay with the past. I don't know what else could help."

Peter thought about his conversation with his sister for some time after that. In spite of its dreary nature, it served as a good distraction. Nonetheless, it didn't help what was really

bothering him: Eighty seven years, one hundred and three days, thirteen hours, seven minutes, and thirty three seconds.

Chapter 10

Eight months into his trip to Jupiter, Peter woke up from his usual nightmare once again. He had fallen asleep listening to music, and he woke up to Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters, still startled by the voice of the serpent.

*To illustrate his last remark,
Jonah in the whale, Noah in the ark,
What did they do
Just when everything looked so dark?*

*Man, they said we better accentuate the positive,
Eliminate the neg--*

Peter stood, grabbed his teacup, and threw it across the room.

“Computer, stop playback!”

A chirp from the computer, and the music stopped. Peter folded his hands behind his neck and paced the concave floor. The transport from Venus to Jupiter was much larger than his transport to Venus, and had artificial gravity spin boosters equipped.

“Computer, start the playlist 'Classical' from Dr. Bowman's directory.”

Another chirp, followed by the sound of the plucking of stringed instruments. A harp playing a single note twelve times, imitating ancient bells announcing that midnight has come. Peter recognized this as the beginning of Camille Saint-Saëns' “Danse Macabre.” He continued to pace in his quarters, listening to the music. It had a much more calming effect on him than he had expected.

When the song was over, he cleaned up the tea and broken teacup, walked to his desk, and looked at a monitor, as the next song in the playlist began.

“Computer, display the design for the 3SG used on the *Voyager 27* probe.”

The screen lit up with the requested design. The 3SG, Three-Space Gravimeter, was used by the probe to measure the gravitational pull of nearby objects. A very dense spherical object was suspended in a cube by six springs-- One for each side of the cube, two for each spatial dimension. The tension of each spring was measured to determine the sphere's gravitational attraction to large nearby objects, which, for a *Voyager* probe, would typically be rogue planets that are not part of any star system.

The 3SG was used in conjunction with a system called a “Light Sonar” or “Light-Son,” made up of flashing lights and a camera. A light would flash, and a camera would detect the reflection of the light off of an object. The amount of time between when the light was flashed and when the camera first detected the reflection was measured. This timespan was used to measure the

distance from the object to the probe. The Light-Son was only useful in very low-light settings, which is the kind of situation in which the *Voyager* probes operated.

The data from both the 3SG and the Light-Son is sent back to the computers on the receiving station, in the case of the *New Voyager* project, on the space station orbiting Jupiter. There, the distance of the object to the probe and the gravitational attraction between the object and the probe, along with some corrections that needed to be made due to non-Newtonian physics, were used to make a rough estimate of the mass of the object in question. Extreme precision was absolutely necessary for the data to be meaningful.

The problem that Peter was facing was in the data sent back to the Jupiter station from *Voyager 27's* 3SG. According to it, the sphere inside the cube was slammed against the wall. The gravitational pull required to do that would almost need the mass of a star, and this from an object much smaller than an asteroid, and on a collision course with both Earth and Venus. On his trip to Jupiter, Peter often studied the design of the 3SG for flaws, hoping to explain what might cause the readings.

Far more concerning to Peter than the data from the 3SG, however, was the last image that he saw in Dr. Bernard's office. He tried to imagine how he could explain to himself that he dreamed that timer display before he had ever learned of the device headed for Earth. He continually fell back on the explanation that this was discovered by ISP fourteen years earlier, and he must have heard whisperings of it from colleagues which finally emerged from his memory in the dream. Though very plausible, this explanation was never satisfying to Peter, and he continued to experience the nightmare every night.

"If you don't mind the suggestion, sir," Peter heard the computer say, "you may enjoy something to help you to relax right now. Another cup of chamomile tea, for example, or a sleep aid. Then again, you may also enjoy a walk along one of the circular cross sections of the ship."

"Always lookin' out for me, aren't you, Mr. Computer?" Peter responded. "And I notice you already took the liberty of spraying a vanilla scent into the room."

"I did. I hope that you take no offense at my presumption."

"No, not at all. A walk sounds good, actually. When I get back, I expect you to have aggregated a good collection of knock-knock jokes."

"Understood."

Chapter 11

The transport reached the Jupiter station eighteen months after Peter left Mercury. It docked with the station by synchronizing its spin with the station's, then, slowly, the wheel on the end of the transport moving towards and locking into the corresponding wheel at the end of the station.

Peter was greeted by a woman.

"Dr. Bowman. I'm Dr. Kate Krakowski. It's a pleasure to finally meet you. Please, come with me."

Peter followed Dr. Krakowski as they made their way through the wheels of the station and hallways connecting the wheels. They continued to speak while they were walking.

"I hear that your work is very impressive, but I hope you'll forgive that I haven't been following it," Dr. Krakowski said.

"I understand; I don't know that I'll be following it much, myself, anymore. Listen, I have a lot of questions about the Antares project."

"Okay. Feel free to ask me any questions you have right now."

"The coordinates directed you towards Antares. What did you see when you looked at Antares?"

"A message. A blinking light, using Morse code. The change in brightness wasn't very large, and it wasn't perceptible by any telescope on or orbiting Earth or Venus. We only saw it here."

"What did it say?"

" 'We are coming. Be ready.' Then it stopped. That's the only thing it said, and it only said it once. They would have had to have sent the message over five hundred years ago."

Peter thought about the message while they were walking before responding.

"They know our language. They use our own languages to communicate with us. How?"

"They know a lot about us. Probably more than we do, actually."

"Who are they?"

"We still don't really know. We just call them 'the aliens.'"

"Are they the ones that sent the device?"

"We think so, but you'll learn soon that the device is only one part of our concern right now."

Dr. Krakowski used a keycard to open a door to a room that was relatively large for a space station. With a table in the middle, littered with numerous abandoned coffee cups, it seemed to be a meeting room. In it, a man was waiting.

"Dr. Bowman," the man said as he stood. "I'm Dr. Parker Samuels. Kate and I have been working on this project for some time."

"I know how important this is," Peter said, "so I want to do everything that I can do help. Are there briefing materials that I can read? What do you need me to do?"

"We don't really know yet, exactly" Dr. Samuels said.

Peter was confused. "Well, then, why am I here?"

Dr. Krakowsky responded. "They asked for you."

Peter looked at Dr. Krakowsky. " 'They'?"

"The aliens."

"But you said the only thing they said was 'We are coming!.'"

“In the Morse code message, yes,” Dr. Krakowsky said. “But that was fourteen years ago. They've come, and they're here on this station.”

“Look,” Dr. Samuels said, “I'm sure that you feel overwhelmed right now and you have a lot of questions. They seem like the patient type, but I'm not, and I've been waiting for you to get here for well over a year and a half. I'd really like to introduce you to them immediately. By the time you're done talking to them, I'm pretty sure *we'll* be the ones asking *you* questions.”

Without waiting for a response from Peter, Dr. Samuels hurriedly walked to a panel on the wall and pushed a button. On the other side of the room, a door opened. Peter walked through it.

In the room was an object against the wall that the human eye could not fully perceive and the human mind could not comprehend. The outline of the object was as a large door with an arch on top, but the inside showed the heavens in the distance. Beyond the door, space itself would bend, with the stars, planets, and nebula appearing as stones underneath rippling water. They would move, out of sync with one another, without any discernible distance between any two objects or size of any one object. Stretching out of the door and into the distance was an ornate marble bridge with no handrails, reaching much further than Peter could see.

On either side of the door were two large figures, each about ten feet tall, that appeared to be nothing more than fire, even though they were certainly solid. They were humanoid, though each had six wings, and they looked at Peter as he entered the room.

“They asked for you, specifically,” Dr. Samuels said. “They won't let anybody else in.”

Chapter 12
Final Chapter

The fiery figure on Peter's right spoke to him.

“Welcome, Peter Bowman,” it said. It spoke with a perfectly human voice, in his own language. “Please, enter.”

Peter walked into the doorway and onto the marble bridge in front of him. Each step that he took on the bridge spanned lightyears. Every inch forward caused dozens of star systems to pass by him. He looked from side to side, and he saw cosmic events unfold in front of him. He stopped and looked to his right, and he saw a supernova destroy a star system. He looked to his left, and he saw a nebula draining into a black hole. Yet he never heard any sound except for his footsteps against the marble floor.

The sights before him were overwhelming, and he had forgotten for a moment that he was on this road for a purpose.

When Peter remembered that he needed to move forward, he set his sights on the opposite end of the bridge, and continued to walk, his eyes never leaving the most distant part of the bridge that he could see.

He soon saw the end of his road, and came out of a door on the other end. He stood in the palace of a great King, and he could see through the windows that the palace itself was orbiting a gas giant in what he assumed must be the Antares system. There was nothing that he could

see that would protect him against the vacuum of space or the rays of the red supergiant before him, but he was unharmed. There was no spin of the palace to create artificial gravity, but he stood firmly in place.

He walked onto a balcony to look at Antares. On the surface of the star he saw cities formed of fire, and he saw more of the creatures of fire that he saw in the space station. He thought that each city must have been at least larger than Jupiter, likely larger than the Sun itself.

One of the fiery creatures flew up, away from the star, and landed on the balcony in front of Peter.

"You have come," the creature said. "Our Master will be pleased."

"What is this place?" Peter said.

"This is one of many of our outposts in your universe. It is one part of the means by which the Creator of all things will restore His creation."

"His creation?"

"The entirety of every universe is His creation. You and your kind are His creation, as are my kind and myself."

"The device, the object that's going to destroy our worlds. He sent that?"

"Yes. He has bent and readied His bow."

"But you must stop it! It's going to kill us all!"

"No, it will not. That is why you are here. You must go back to your people, and you must tell them to come to the Creator. They will be restored. They are broken, but they will be mended by His hands. They are hurt, but they will be healed. It was for His purpose that they exist, and they will be made joyful by His design."

Peter shook his head. "They will not come. We have lives there. We don't want to leave. We want you to stop the attack!"

"You are partly correct," the creature said. "Many will not come. They will be unable to see beyond their own lusts. They love creatures rather than the Creator. You must tell them that what they have now is only a shadow of what it was meant to be, and they were designed for a glory far greater than they realize."

"But what will happen to the ones that don't want to leave their lives?"

"They will be destroyed."

"I can't let that happen!"

"It is not your design," the being said. "The creature is not the Creator. The Creator will restore His design for His own Glory. That is the end of the whole of creation, and His purpose will come to pass."

"I don't understand how your Master can just destroy so many people," Peter said. "How can He have so little concern for us?"

“Your words betray you, for you would not ask such a question were your thoughts not filled with pride. To Whom do you owe your existence? To what end do you think that life is breathed into you?

“You are a rebellious and stubborn people. You believe that the satisfaction of weak desires is greater than the glorious end for which you were designed. Your crime is great, and because of your blind eyes, you do not see the Wrath that is to come.

“But the ransom has been paid. Your debt has been cleared.

“You, Peter Bowman, will be restored by the Creator. You will see clearly the purpose for which you were designed. You will bring this message to your people, and, by the power of the Creator, many will come. They will see the darkness in their past lives, and they will rejoice in their new lives. They will defeat the beast that has been afflicting them all their long history, the beast that you have seen in your dreams. Its words will no longer have any meaning for you.

“Look, and see your Creator, Peter Bowman! See the End for which you exist!”

Voices could then be heard coming from the cities on the surface of the star. The voices were singing in a language that no human had heard in many thousands of years, yet Peter understood the words more easily than any words he had heard before.

*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty
Who was and is and is to come!*

Peter then turned back towards the interior of the palace, and he saw the King.

Soli Deo Gloria