

# **Master of Shadows**

Second Edition Preview

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## Prologue: Discovery

IT WAS JUST a routine mission. The deep space probe JQ109846-B had been on hundreds of similar missions since its launch in the summer of 2196. For nine years it had explored the outer edges of the galaxy, visiting one uncharted star system after another. In each case it searched the star systems with great care, relaying thousands of petabytes of information to the AI on board the mothership *Raptor*.

In every case it found nothing. No signs of life. No alien races. No abandoned cities. The planets it discovered were nothing more than empty worlds that had never known life. There were no signs that anyone had ever been this way before. As the years rolled by it became very clear that the far reaches of the galaxy's spiral arms were empty and deserted.

But the probe did not care. It was a machine, built to record data and send it back home. So it went about its job tirelessly, as weeks turned into months and months turned into years.

There was no reason to believe that this star system would be any different from the others. As usual, the G-glass star had several planets – in this case, five. Four of the small, rocky worlds were located more than a billion miles from the star and proved to be frigid worlds devoid of life. But the fifth planet was different. It orbited its sun in the habitable zone – a region at just the right place to support life.

After surveying the four dead planets the probe turned its gaze upon the fifth one. It duly noted an atmosphere capable of supporting life, but strangely there were no life signs. The world had no plant or animal life. It lacked both an ocean and a moon. It had no ecosystem at all.

But there was something about the planet that was just *wrong*. The first clue appeared when the probe began mapping its surface. As it orbited the unknown world it noticed that its crust was filled with a strange element that defied analysis and clouded its readings. Somehow the material – if it was indeed a mere *material* – gave off an interference that made it difficult to see what was going on below.

As the probe fought to counter the interference it began to notice that the ground below was covered with bits of broken metal and ruined machines. It looked as if a massive ground war had taken place long ago and no one had bothered to clean up the wreckage. But strangely, the wreckage itself appeared to hang somewhere between reality and nothingness. The probe watched as a broken robot at the bottom of a canyon came to life, only to disappear from existence. A life form would almost appear before turning back into a phantom and fading into the shadows. Alien craft would appear in the sky and fire at the ground, only to break up and vanish. The whole world was filled with shadows, populated with things that were neither real nor unreal, neither alive nor dead.

It took several hours of scanning before the probe realized that time itself was broken. On the planet below time did not run in a straight line. Instead it ran in loops and twisted circles, curling back upon itself before winking out altogether. *Something* had happened on that planet that caused the laws of the universe to break down.

But the planet was hiding one more secret. As the probe concluded its aerial survey it noticed a peculiar distortion near the planet's equator. When it took a closer look it realized that the distortion was actually a cloaking field. Something was trying to hide its existence.

After several days of difficult work the probe was finally able to penetrate the distortion and get a glimpse of what was hidden underneath. Inside was a vast city – the only one on the planet. The city was organized into two concentric circles: a massive outer ring of crumbling, abandoned buildings, and a small inner ring. The inner ring was guarded by a protective shield and appeared to be well-maintained. In the very center of the inner ring was a tall blue tower that radiated an unbelievable level of energy.

The tower was unmistakable. Eons ago a group of beings known as the First Races had inhabited the galaxy. These mighty aliens had reached unimaginable heights of power and knowledge before they

disappeared from history. Now all that was left of the mightiest civilization ever to exist were a handful of museum worlds that were maintained by the Janitor, the only surviving member of their kind. In each of those worlds the cities were powered by a tall tower – one exactly like the building below. But the technology to build those towers had vanished with the First Races, along with the knowledge of what made those races disappear.

For fifty years mankind had searched for clues to explain the disappearance of the First Races but nothing had ever been discovered. The probe realized it had found what Starman Alice Montaine had been looking for – a lost world of the First Races. Alice had built a fleet of deep space probes to search for clues, and this probe had finally found something.

With great satisfaction the probe relayed a message to the mothership *Raptor*. The long search was over.

## Chapter 1: Departure

STARMAN ALICE MONTAINE was nearly a mile away from the Gronburg Refueling Station when her compad beeped. After being cooped up inside the station for three excruciating days she finally decided she had had enough. Even though there was nothing on that airless world but an unending stretch of dry rocks, she donned her spacesuit, exited the station, and went hiking. After three days of boredom even rocks were beginning to look interesting.

The moment her compad beeped Alice excitedly pressed a button on her red Starman suit. A portion of her helmet's visor turned into a screen, and the image of a woman with short, red hair appeared. She was wearing an orange uniform, which was the standard attire for the artificial intelligence personalities of Starlight Enterprise spacecraft.

Before the computer could say anything Alice spoke up. "I am so glad that you called! Please, please, *please* tell me that Gus has finished refueling the *Raptor*. You have no idea how much I want to get out of here."

The computer shook her head. "I am sorry, Alice, but that is not the case. Gus has finally started the refueling process, but unfortunately it will take him several more hours to complete the job. We will not be able to depart until this evening."

Alice sighed. "Well thanks anyway, Rachel. At least the end is in sight. I just can't believe the level of incompetence we've experienced! I mean, c'mon. I set this appointment up *six months in advance*. They knew full well we'd be here! There's no way it should take three days to refuel – especially given the level of traffic they see out here. I bet we're the only ship that's landed on this poor excuse for a planet in the past six weeks."

"Actually, the freighter *Altair* landed here nineteen days ago," Rachel corrected. "But your point is well taken. However, it must be remembered that this is the only refueling station this far out in the Sagittarius Arm of the Milky Way Galaxy. The only other source of helium-3 in this sector is a two-week journey from here."

"I know," Alice sighed. "Don't remind me. I suppose I should be grateful. I just wish it was a Starlight Enterprise facility. Caedmon Starlight would never put up with this level of incompetence."

"True, but Starlight Enterprise has no need of facilities in this area. Most of its Starmen are busily engaged in the center of the galaxy. As far as I know you are the only one who is exploring this area."

"I still think that's going to pay off, by the way. After all, if you want to find something no one else has ever found you should probably look where no one else has ever looked! If there was a lost city of the First Races in the heart of the galaxy it would have been found by now. That tells me that if it does exist it's going to be somewhere else – like out here."

Rachel nodded. "Quite so- and that brings up the reason I am calling. It turns out your reasoning is quite solid. Just moments ago I received a transmission from one of your oldest deep-space probes. It appears to have discovered a planet that was once inhabited by the First Races."

Alice's eyes widened. "You're kidding! Are you serious? *Really*? Where is it?"

"It is three days' journey from here at top speed, in a previously unexplored sector of the galaxy. If our records are correct you will be the first human being to ever enter that region of space."

"Wow! I just can't believe it. After nine years of searching – nine long, frustrating years – it is so amazing to finally find something! Oh my goodness. Are you sure? Is there any chance the probe was wrong?"

Rachel shook her head. "Its guess appears to be based on solid evidence. The city it has discovered is powered by a tall tower whose signature is identical to towers on the other known planets of the First Races. In addition to this there are some irregularities that are unlike anything we have seen before."

Alice immediately turned around and began jogging back toward the refinery. "I'm on my way

back, Rachel! Give me just a few minutes and I'll be right there.”

“Very good, Alice. I will be expecting you.” The image on her visor disappeared and her helmet became transparent once more.

It took Alice less than ten minutes to race back to the station. Instead of walking through the building she ran around to the hangar and entered through a side airlock. Inside she saw the *Raptor*, the spacecraft that Starlight Enterprise had given her when she became a Starman. The giant ship was more than three hundred feet long and just barely fit inside the hangar.

Toward the rear of the giant red starship a panel had been removed and a series of flexible fuel lines connected the starship to the floor of the hangar. When Alice saw this she sighed with relief. She knew that beneath the cement floor were large tanks filled with liquid helium-3. *It looks as if Gus has finally gotten out of bed*, she thought with satisfaction. Near the fuel lines a short attendant stood behind a small portable computer desk. From this distance Alice couldn't tell if he was carefully monitoring the flow of liquid or if he was simply dozing off.

As the Starman took off her helmet and raced toward her ship Gus waved her over. Alice sighed and walked over to the disheveled man. *It looks as if he hasn't shaved in at least a week*, Alice thought to herself. Grease and grime covered the man from head to toe.

“What is it?” Alice asked. “I'm kind of in a hurry right now.”

“You're always in a hurry,” Gus chided. “You need to slow down. Nothing good comes of hurrying. Haste makes waste, you know.”

Alice looked him in the eye. “You have spent the past *three days* napping. I have seen tree sloths that have more energy than you do. I don't know how you even got this job.”

Gus shrugged. “There weren't much competition for it, y'know. Not too many people wanted to work this far from home, and this planet ain't much to look at. It don't have many comforts, and with just eight of us stationed here you kind of get tired of the company. In fact, putting a fueling station out here is kind of stupid if you ask me. No one ever comes this way 'cept crazy people like you. It just don't make sense to me.”

The clearly intentional insult made Alice's blood boil. *Calm down Alice*, the Starman thought to herself. *Just get your fuel and go. Fighting with Gus isn't going to make anyone's life better.* Aloud she said. “So what do you want? Is something wrong?”

Gus paused for a moment. He looked down at the control panel in front of him, and then over at the hoses that were pumping fuel into the *Raptor*. “It's that ship of yours. It doesn't make any sense as all. It took me the longest time to figure out how to refuel it.”

“What are you talking about?” Alice asked. “It runs on helium-3. This is a helium-3 refueling station. You just connect a pipe to the ship and off you go. How hard can that be?”

“But it ain't right!” Gus protested. “I checked the records. Your ship is the only Starman-class ship that runs on helium-3. All of the others run on antimatter.”

“So?” Alice asked. “Lots of cargo ships run on helium-3. It's pretty normal, in fact.”

“But Starman-class ships don't!” Gus insisted. “None of them do. Antimatter is way more powerful. Do you not realize that your ship is the slowest of its class ever built? Why, I've seen puddle jumpers that've got more speed than your poor excuse for a ship! Did they not like you or something?”

Alice sighed. “The *Raptor* was custom-built to my specifications. I didn't *want* an antimatter ship, Gus. Sure, they're faster, but they've got to be refueled at least once a month because it's too dangerous to store antimatter for long periods of time. I designed this ship so it could run long-term missions. In fact, this is the first time I've refueled her in five years! I can spend all year in space without having to worry about making a trip back to civilization.”

“But why?” Gus asked. “No one else is doing it.”

“That's the whole point!” Alice exclaimed. “I *wanted* to do what no one else was doing. Look. My goal is to find out what happened to the First Races. The only way to do that is to try something new. If I was interested in following the crowd then I could just let the crowd do the work and go home.”

Gus shook his head. "It ain't none of my business, lady, but if you ask me you'd be better off doing just that. The First Races disappeared a long time ago. Who cares what happened to them? It don't really matter."

"I disagree," Alice said flatly. "The First Races were very powerful. That tells me it took something even *more* powerful to make them disappear. That 'something' could still be out there."

Gus sighed. "You just don't get it. There ain't nothin' dangerous out there! We've had peace ever since Zip Foster defeated the Xenobots, and that ain't gonna change. You're wasting your time."

Alice nodded. "Sure. That could be. But if you're wrong and there really *is* something out there then we're in a lot of trouble. And if that something finds us before we find it then we're all dead. So it seems to me the best course of action is to *find out* if anything is out there or not, and not simply leave the fate of mankind to chance."

"You're still wasting your time," Gus said flatly. "I'm never wrong."

Alice frowned. "Oh really? You told me *three days ago* that my starship would be refueled and ready for takeoff in one hour. What happened?"

"I'm workin' on it," Gus replied.

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Alice walked onto the bridge on the *Raptor* and wearily sat down. She set her helmet on the desk next to her and sighed. "Sorry about that," she said aloud. "Gus detained me."

A holographic figure of a woman appeared on the bridge. The figure was a visual representation of the artificial intelligence personality that controlled Alice's starship. The woman looked at Alice and smiled. "I am glad you were able to escape him! I have begun analyzing the data from the probe. Let me show you what I have found."

For the next hour Alice and Rachel pored over the data. At last Alice was satisfied. "I think the probe was right, Rachel! This really does look like something the First Races would have built."

Rachel nodded. "Quite so. Still, it is unusual to find one of their cities so far from the center of the galaxy."

"Right, but I'm sure there's a story behind that. Maybe once we reach the planet we can find some answers. There must be a reason why they built it so far from their home worlds. Speaking of that, do you think the Lucians built it?"

"It is impossible to say based on the data provided," Rachel replied. "It could have been any of the First Races. From what we know about them they all appeared to possess roughly the same level of technology."

"Then our next step is definitely to visit the planet in person," Alice decided. "How long will it be until we can leave?"

"Judging by the rate of Gus's progress, I would estimate another four hours."

Alice sighed. "Figures. I'm tempted to leave right now and make due with whatever fuel we've got left, but I guess I'll wait. I have a feeling we'll need every advantage we can get! That planet looks particularly nasty."

"It does indeed. This would appear to be one of the most hostile planets ever discovered. The temporal anomalies alone are particularly unsettling, and I am sure it will not be easy to penetrate the city's protective shield."

Alice nodded. "But I'm sure we can do it! After all, the probe figured out how to see through it and get some pictures. I think we can use a similar penetration technique – and since the *Raptor* is far more powerful than that probe we should be much more effective."

"I agree," Rachel replied. "So what would you like to do now?"

Alice shrugged. "I think all we can do is wait! I'll go outside and see if I can prod Gus into moving a little faster. In the meantime, can you plot the fastest possible course to the lost world?"

“Of course. Do you want me to notify Starlight Enterprise of your discovery?”

Alice paused as she got up out of the chair. “No, let's not do that just yet. I'd like to see this planet in person before announcing to the world that we've made the biggest discovery of the decade. I kind of want to have more evidence than just a single data feed from a single probe.”

“Very good. But what if we do not survive our encounter with the planet? Would it not be wise to let our employer know where we are?”

“Boy, you're cheerful today!” Alice retorted. “We're just going to pay the planet a friendly visit and take a quick look around! What could possibly happen?”

“As you wish,” Rachel replied.

## Chapter 2: First Contact

IT TOOK the *Raptor* three full days to reach the newly-discovered world. During that time Alice spent hours analyzing the data that her deep-space probe had returned. What puzzled her the most were the phantoms that appeared and then vanished over the empty expanses of the planet.

As Rachel prepared to take the starship out of hyperspace Alice wandered onto the bridge and sat down in the captain's chair. Rachel saw the distracted look on her face and smiled. "You are thinking about the phantoms again, aren't you?"

Alice nodded. "I just can't figure out what's real and what's not. It doesn't make any sense! I've been over the footage countless times and I still can't tell. Everything is so vague and shadowy. I've never seen anything like it."

"There is no prior record of such phenomena," Rachel said. "You have discovered something entirely new! Perhaps this effect will be named after you."

Alice smiled. "I don't know about that. It just has me stumped. Anyway, I guess I'll find out soon enough. Aren't we about there?"

"We are indeed," Rachel replied. At that moment the *Raptor* exited hyperspace and appeared in orbit around the mysterious world. The sight of the planet took Alice's breath away. The bridge of the *Raptor* had no windows but it did have a large holoscreen, and the image of the planet was displayed in all of its three-dimensional glory. She had seen pictures of it before from the probe, but there was something about actually being there that gave her chills. *The probe did not do it justice*, she thought.

There was nothing inviting about the planet. The entire world was shrouded in dark, fast-moving clouds. There were few places where the ground could be seen, and those areas were quickly obscured by the ever-shifting clouds. Every now and then Alice could see arcs of blue light shimmer in the atmosphere.

"It almost looks as if a pot is boiling," Alice said aloud. "Or like a storm that goes on forever."

"The clouds are harmless," Rachel replied. "But there are some peculiarities. For example, even though the planet has constant cloud cover there is very little precipitation."

"So they're wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest, to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever," Alice whispered.

Rachel shook her head. "Of course not. As on Earth, these clouds largely consist of water vapor. I do not understand the concept of a dry cloud, unless you are referring to a dust storm of some kind. But I see no such activity on this planet. Plus, I do not detect a 'tempest'. There are no strong winds on the surface."

Alice shook her head. "That's not what I meant, but never mind. The point is that this is a very evil place. I can *feel* it. There is something deeply wrong about that planet. Those clouds are more than water vapor. They're a veil, hiding something horrible from the rest of the galaxy."

"And what would that be?" Rachel asked.

"I don't know," Alice said slowly. "Now that I'm here I'm not sure I want to know. There may be some things man is not meant to find out. But I won't turn back now."

"For what it's worth, I detect no life forms. I see no obvious signs of danger."

"Doesn't that bother you?" Alice asked. "How can the planet have a breathable oxygen atmosphere without plants or large bodies of water? What keeps the ecosystem going? Where do those clouds come from if there is no rain? How can they be constantly moving if there are no strong winds?"

"I propose we investigate and find out," Rachel replied. "Where shall we begin?"

Alice looked at the image of the planet for a long time and said nothing. At last she spoke up. "Let's start with a name. I vote that we name this planet of shadows Lemura."

"That would be from the Latin, meaning a planet of phantoms," Rachel replied. "Given your

unjustified superstitions about this place I think that name would be highly appropriate. Would you like me to officially register the name?"

"If you don't mind," Alice said. "And let Starlight Enterprise know that we're here. I don't want to become yet another lost Starman. Too many of us have disappeared lately without a trace."

The next hour was a busy one. Alice instructed Rachel to orbit the planet and make a map of the surface. The deep-space probe had already provided a rudimentary map, but the equipment on the *Raptor* was much more precise. Alice wanted to make sure the probe had not missed anything.

While Rachel was doing that, Alice went to one of the hangars and began modifying a small reconobot. When she first became a Starman Alice had designed several classes of probes, ranging from deep-space reconnaissance probes to smaller craft designed to enter the planet's atmosphere and scout the surface.

The reconobot was a polished metal sphere roughly the size of a basketball. The *Raptor* was stocked with more than a dozen of them. Alice removed one from a cabinet in the wall, carried it into her workshop, and began taking it apart. She soon had its outer plating removed and its sensitive electronic components scattered all over her workbench.

As she worked the holographic figure of Rachel appeared. "Are you sure I cannot assist you?" she asked.

Alice shook her head. "Thanks, but I've got this. It's really not very hard. I could probably send this probe as it is, but I want a better look at those phantoms on the surface. I'm going to upgrade the optics and tweak the firmware a bit to see if I can't enhance the image. I'm also going to link it to the ship's computer so we can make changes to its firmware while it's still on the planet."

"Very well," Rachel replied. She disappeared and Alice continued her work.

When Alice was at last satisfied with her work she reassembled the probe, brought it back to the hangar, and placed it into a small launch tube in the wall. "Rachel?" Alice said aloud.

The holographic figure reappeared. "Yes?"

"Go ahead and launch this probe," Alice said. "I'll head on up to the bridge while it's on its way down to Lemura. Have you finished the map yet?"

"Not quite, I am afraid," Rachel said apologetically. "There is something about the soil composition that makes it very difficult to get good imagery of the surface. It is as if the planet is interfering with my scan."

"I noticed the probe had the same problem," Alice replied. "It's just one of those things we've got to adapt to. I took some of the techniques the probe used and put them in my reconobot. Hopefully we'll get some good images."

"I am sure that being on the planet's surface will help. Your probe took all of its images from orbit."

"True," Alice agreed. She then left the hangar and took the elevator to the bridge. By the time she reached her chair the reconobot was just beginning to enter the planet's atmosphere. The Starman settled into her chair and configured the holoscreen to show what the probe's cameras were currently seeing. She also activated the bot's microphone so that they could hear any sounds that the bot was picking up.

Alice waited patiently as the bot worked its way through the upper atmosphere and into the clouds. "Look at those colors," Alice remarked. "All those dark grays, blues, and greens. I wonder what causes that."

"Just minute impurities," Rachel said. "It is nothing to be alarmed about."

"We'll see," Alice replied.

The Starman let the bot fly on autopilot until it had almost broken free of the clouds. After confirming that the bot was still giving off a strong, clear signal she took control of it manually and flew it through the final layer of clouds and into the open air over the surface.

The image that filled the screen made Alice gasp. She stopped the bot and made it hover in place.

“Look at that!” Alice whispered. “The planet is *broken*, Rachel! Look at those long scars in the ground. Do you see the shattered rocks and twisted hills? It's like – it's like some giant picked up this world and ripped it apart with their bare hands.”

Rachel nodded but said nothing. Alice kept the bot in place and studied the screen carefully. “It's all blacks and grays, Rachel. Even the light appears to be a shade of gray. The ground is as black as charcoal.”

“There are veins of blue in the rock,” Rachel pointed out.

“True,” Alice replied. “But it makes the planet look even more haunted. That blue is *glowing*. Is that the material you were talking about that's been causing all of the interference?”

“It is. However, I cannot analyze the substance from space. If you could obtain a sample for me I might be able to tell you what it is.”

“I'll keep that in mind, but I'm still hoping we won't have to land on Lemura. If I'm lucky I can do all my research remotely.” She gingerly flew the bot closer to the surface, keeping a careful eye on the signal strength. As the bot got closer to the ground she began to notice that the planet's surface was strewn with more than just rocks.

“Look at that!” Alice exclaimed. “That, right there. That's not a rock formation! That's a machine of some kind. Or, at least, it used to be.”

The object Alice had pointed at was a large, irregular mass roughly thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide. Upon closer examination it appeared to be made of some kind of tarnished white metal, but was coated with countless layers of gritty black dust.

“I'm seeing a lot of gritty black sand everywhere,” Alice commented. As she watched a gentle breeze came along and stirred up a pocket of sand into little eddies. A small black funnel formed and then settled back onto the ground. “I think it's obscuring everything. There could be all sorts of artifacts hidden down there.”

“I can confirm that the object is made of metal,” Rachel replied. “In fact, the alloy is one commonly found on planets belonging to the First Races. They often used it as a construction material in their cities.”

“Interesting,” Alice said.

As the Starman studied the object she suddenly caught sight of something. A faint blue mist appeared next to the ruined piece of metal. It had no well-defined shape. It began to move, and then as quickly as it came it disappeared.

“What was *that*?” Alice asked.

“I am not sure,” Rachel replied. “It just barely registered on the reconobot's receptors.”

“My guess is that the bot isn't very sensitive to that frequency of light. Let me see if I can fix that. There's just *got* to be a way to see what's going on down there.” Alice left the bot parked where it was and began remotely tweaking the bot's firmware.

Over time the view of the planet on the holoscreen began to change. Dozens of faint blue objects began appearing all over the ground. Unlike the phantom they had seen earlier, however, these were more recognizable.

“Look at that!” Alice whispered. “I've seen pictures of those on the Janitor's home world. Those are war machines, aren't they? Land-based attack vehicles of some kind!”

Rachel nodded. “I see eight of them, all in various states of disrepair. Only two appear to be mostly intact.”

“Very strange! They're not even moving. Are they real? They just kind of pulse in and out – they're visible for a few moments and then they fade away, only to come right back. It's like a candle flickering in the wind.”

Rachel pointed to the screen. “Look at that!” Alice looked and saw several saucer-shaped phantoms hovering motionless in the air.

“That looks just like what the first probe reported!” Alice said. “It must've enhanced the image so

we could see the phantoms better. They blend in so well with the sky that they're almost impossible to see."

"True, but in the probe footage the images were constantly changing. These appear to be largely stagnant."

Alice nodded. "I wish there was a way we could see them better but I think this is the best our bot can do. It can only enhance the image so far. Those things barely exist, whatever they are."

As Alice watched a bolt of lightning struck an outcrop of rock. The sudden loud noise caused Alice to jump. A rockslide erupted, sending large boulders tumbling down the mountainside. The Starman noticed that several rocks went right through one of the luminous tanks as if it did not exist.

"Do you suppose they're just images of some kind?" Alice asked.

"I cannot tell," Rachel replied.

Alice suddenly thought of something. "Hey, we're pretty far from the city, aren't we?"

Rachel nodded. "The bot entered the atmosphere more than a thousand miles from the city."

"Maybe that has something to do with it. Let's get closer to the planet's only source of energy and see if things change." Alice touched the controls and flew the bot toward the city. At first little changed, so she flew it at high speeds. As the bot passed over the broken landscape it continued to see craft scattered over the ground and even the occasional small building. All of them just barely registered on the bot's sensors.

Then she noticed something. "That's interesting. The closer we get to the city, the more equipment we see and the poorer shape it's in. The carnage is definitely increasing."

Rachel nodded. "Perhaps someone is or was besieging the city."

"Could be," Alice agreed. "Maybe these are just echoes of something that happened a long time ago. No one really knows what weapons the First War was fought with. Even thinking about it is a little frightening."

When the bot was a hundred miles out from the city Alice noticed a dramatic change. She halted the bot immediately and then watched the screen in wonder. Instead of being motionless, the faint luminous craft in front of her were moving, engaging others in a fierce battle that was being fought at an incredibly slow pace. But parts of the fight appeared to be missing. Massive, evil-looking land vehicles sluggishly fired at targets in the air, but there was nothing there to hit. Slow-moving planes flew overhead and bombed areas that had no buildings or equipment.

"It's like there's an invisible boundary of some kind," Alice said quietly. "If you're far from the tower all you get are still figures. But within a certain zone the rules change. Things start moving, but some of the pieces are missing. It's like an old painting that's degraded over time."

"The battle is repeating itself," Rachel noticed.

"I noticed that," Alice said. "That one machine at the foot of the cliff keeps getting destroyed over and over again. Each time it's blown up it disappears, only to reappear again in perfect condition. But sometimes it reappears at a different point in the cycle. It's as if it's caught in time, endlessly repeating the same action, but sometimes the loop starts in a different place."

"What do you think is going on?" Rachel asked.

"I don't think it's real. I mean, we can only see these phantoms at all when we're dialed into just the right frequencies of light. Plus, the explosions aren't damaging the landscape. The war is having no effect on the planet."

Alice paused to gather her thoughts. "I think we're seeing something that happened a long time ago. Take that aircraft right there. See how it gets hit and then crashes into the ground? Well, right where it crashes you can see small bits of ruined metal. I think that's what's left of the *real* plane. At some point in the past it was shot down and ever since then its carcass has been resting on the ground, slowly turning into black dust."

"There is one problem with your theory," Rachel replied.

"Oh?" Alice asked.

“The people aren't looping.”

Alice looked surprised. “People! What people?”

“I'll show you.” Rachel took control of the bot and flew it to within a few feet of the ground. As the bot flew toward a deep chasm Alice saw what she meant. There, at the edge of an abyss, was the ghostly silhouette of an alien. Its shape was unlike anything she had seen before, and it was very hazy. Even with the enhancements she had made to the bot she could just barely see the ghostly figure.

Alice took control of the bot from Rachel and nervously flew it toward the alien. As she got closer she could see that the being was wearing a suit of some kind. The upper portion of the alien was encased in a helmet. Through the glass of the helmet Alice could see two eyes.

The Starman continued flying the blot closer, making a wide arc around the alien to view it from all angles. As she did this she noticed that the alien turned, keeping its eyes locked on the bot.

Her blood ran cold. *It's watching us! It knows we're here!* To her horror, the alien looked at the bot quizzically. It reached out a hand to grab it. As its hand closed upon it, the bot and the alien simply disappeared, and the *Raptor's* connection to the bot went dead.

## Chapter 3: Obstacles

“WHAT JUST HAPPENED?” Alice shrieked. “Rachel? Talk to me!”

Rachel paused before answering. “One moment, please.”

Alice couldn't wait. “That couldn't have happened! It doesn't make any sense. Maybe something is just interfering with the signal. Maybe it only *looked* as if the phantom was looking at our bot. It's all some bizarre coincidence. It's got to be!”

“I am afraid not,” Rachel replied. “I apologize for the delay. I was attempting to locate the reconobot. The interference makes it difficult to scan the planet's surface.”

“Well?” Alice demanded. “Did you find it?”

Rachel shook her head. “The reconobot no longer exists. It has not merely been disabled – it is actually gone.”

“That's impossible!”

“It is the truth. The entire time the reconobot was on the surface I kept my sensors focused on it, so if we ever lost contact I would be able to retrieve it. The moment the alien's hand closed around the reconobot it actually disappeared.”

“Do you mean it disappeared through a wormhole?” Alice asked.

“No, it was not a wormhole. It appears to have been a temporal disturbance of some kind.”

“A 'temporal disturbance'? What does that even mean?”

Rachel calmly looked at Alice. “The entire planet is in a region of extreme temporal disruption. The normal fabric of spacetime has been greatly damaged. The cause and purpose of this is unknown. It does appear that this turbulence has consumed the reconobot that you sent to Lemura.”

“Ok,” Alice said. “All right. I'll accept that things on the surface are really strange. The countryside only had a mild dose of whatever is wrong, but as we got closer to the city things got much worse. I guess whatever is wrong with the planet could have endangered the bot. I don't understand how, but it's definitely gone now so we'll leave it at that.”

“What would you like to do now?” Rachel asked.

“Can you show me an aerial view of the city?”

“Of course. One moment, please.” A minute later the holoscreen came back to life, displaying a three-dimensional picture of a ruined city. From the air it was easy to see its three sections – the decaying outer ring, the fortified inner ring, and the giant tower in the middle.

“The picture of the inner ring of buildings is kind of fuzzy,” Alice remarked. “Is there anything you can do to enhance it?”

Rachel shook her head. “There is not. It takes a great deal of effort to maintain even this level of clarity. Something on the surface is working very hard to hide the existence of that metropolis. I cannot obtain a better picture from orbit.”

Alice nodded. “That's fair. Can you tell me this, though – is it true that the 'temporal disturbance' you mentioned is at its peak around the city?”

“Yes and no. The disturbance grows considerably as one approaches the outer ring of buildings, but there the effect stops. The inner ring of buildings shows no sign of temporal disturbance at all.”

“Interesting,” Alice said. “Can you pinpoint the origin of the disturbance?”

“Not from orbit,” Rachel replied. “The interference is too great. Would you like me to land on the surface?”

“Oh no!” Alice immediately replied. “Absolutely not. Under no circumstances are you *ever* to get closer to the planet than this orbit. Don't even *think* about landing! No, let's just send out another bot. This time we'll skip that haunted desert and go straight for the outer ring of buildings. Maybe if we avoid the phantom aliens we'll be all right.”

“Very good,” Rachel replied. “Would you like me to prepare the reconobot?”

“No, I’ll do it,” Alice said. “While I’m working I want you to take all the data we’ve gathered so far and send it to Starlight Enterprise. If something bad happens to us I don’t want them to wonder where we went.”

“Certainly. However, I’d like to point out that I am capable of multitasking. I can create the report, transmit it, and configure the probe all at the same time.”

Alice smiled. “I know! You’re very capable, Rachel, and I don’t know what I would do without you. I know that normally I let you do this sort of thing, but you have to realize that I’ve spent my whole career looking for this planet. This is one of those things I’d like to handle personally. No offense, but if something goes wrong I don’t want it to be because I’ve delegated all my responsibilities to a computer.”

“I understand,” Rachel replied. “Just let me know if there is any way I can be of assistance.”

“I will,” Alice promised.

An hour later Alice returned to the bridge. She sat down in the captain’s chair and let out a sigh of relief. “All right. I think we’ve got it! I’ve configured a new reconobot so it can see those phantoms and have placed it in shuttle bay two. Can you go ahead and launch it?”

“Of course,” Rachel replied. “The probe is now on its way.”

Alice tapped a button on her chair and the holoscreen came to life, showing the video feed coming from the bot. Alice pressed another button in order to pipe the sound directly to the bridge.

The Starman looked thoughtfully at Rachel. “You know, I don’t remember hearing any sounds last time. Did I miss something?”

Rachel shook her head. “There was the wind, but that was all.”

Alice nodded but said nothing. Both of them watched as the bot made a beeline for the hidden city. As it rapidly raced through the clouds Alice took over control and began guiding it.

“I want to enter the outer ring of buildings from the west,” Alice explained. “As soon as we get near the buildings I’ll slow down and we’ll spend some time searching them. I would love to find some documents! Any written material could tell us a great deal.”

“It is extremely unlikely that you will discover either printed or electronic documents in the outer ring of buildings. Given the estimated age of this world any papers, books, manuals, or even computers would have returned to dust a very long time ago.”

“Don’t remind me,” Alice sighed. “I’m just hoping. After all, the worlds the Janitor maintains are in excellent condition. He still has original documents from this period.”

“Only because he has gone to great lengths to preserve them. I do not believe anyone has been maintaining this world.”

“Probably not,” Alice agreed. “But there is that inner ring of buildings. The tower is still running, so there *must* be functional equipment there. If I can get to it I might be able to learn a great deal.”

“If you can get to it,” Rachel replied.

The Starman remotely piloted the bot through the empty deserts of Lemura. The bot soon reached the area where the blue phantoms were more frequent, but this time Alice flew over them at a high speed. *Something really bad happened here*, Alice thought to herself. *What could possibly have turned this place into a world of nightmares? What kind of war condemns its soldiers to an eternity of repeating the past, never to live again but denied even the dignity of death? And what am I risking by even being here? Am I going to waken some sleeping monster?*

When Alice saw the city’s outer ring of buildings appear on the horizon she glanced over at another holoscreen on the bridge. “Hmmm. Let’s get our bearings. According to that map the outer ring of buildings is thirty miles around and two miles deep. Then there’s a two-mile gap, and then the inner ring starts. The tower is at the very center. The whole inner area is only about two miles wide.”

Rachel nodded. “You are correct. Are you thinking about changing your plan?”

“No, I'm just curious about something. I've got a hunch that I want to test.”

Alice stopped the bot when it was still a mile away from the outer ring of buildings. There were many phantoms in the area, but she ignored them and kept the bot high off the ground.

The Starman spoke up. “Say, those outer buildings are actually kind of big. How tall are they?”

Rachel spoke up. “Each structure is four hundred feet tall and roughly four thousand feet wide.”

“Wow! Are there several rows of them?”

Rachel shook her head. “The outer ring appears to consist of a single row of massive buildings. Each structure is four miles deep.”

“That's ridiculous! Who could possibly need buildings that large? What were they for?”

“I do not know,” Rachel replied. “They now appear to be abandoned.”

“Abandoned! That's putting it mildly. If those things were in Eagle City they would've been condemned years ago. There's hardly anything left of them.”

Alice gazed at the structures for a minute before flying the bot any closer. At one time the buildings were imposing structures, but time and wear had ruined them. Now little remained but massive heaps of rubble. Their walls were shattered and broken, leaving gaping holes that revealed a cavernous interior. It was impossible to tell what the buildings were made of because a thick layer of black dust obscured everything. Giant portions of the structures had collapsed entirely.

The Starman nodded with satisfaction. “Just as I thought! We have a problem. How tall is the tower?”

“It is approximately three miles high and extends an unknown amount into the crust of the planet. If it is constructed like the others of its kind then it probably extends at least another three miles underground. At the surface it has a diameter of half a mile.”

“So, basically, it's really, *really* tall, right?”

“Of course.”

Alice pointed a finger at the screen. “Then why can't we see it? The cloud ceiling is quite high, and while the outer buildings are tall they're not *that* tall. At this point we're only six miles away from one of the tallest things in the galaxy! How can it *possibly* be hidden from this distance?”

Rachel shrugged. “We already know that the inner ring is hidden by a cloak of some sort. Since we need special instrumentation to see the tower from space I would be quite surprised if the situation were different on the surface.”

Alice nodded. “True. It just surprises me how effective that shield really is. It makes me wonder what else that invisible barrier is doing that we don't know about. I guess there's just one way to find out. Do you have a lock on our bot?”

Rachel nodded. “I have both a sensor lock and a visual lock on it.”

“Then let's get started!”

Alice flew the bot toward the nearest intact structure. At first all was well, but as the bot approached the building the holoscreen started to flicker.

Rachel spoke up sharply. “We're losing the signal!”

Alice frowned and glanced down at the bot's controls to see what was going on. At that moment the holoscreen went dead.

“What happened?” Alice asked. “Is the bot gone?”

Rachel shook her head. “I still have sensor lock on it. Let me give you an aerial view.” The holoscreen came back to life. This time it showed a picture of the outer ring of the city. Alice watched as Rachel zoomed in on a section of the outer buildings. The Starman didn't see it at first, but as the picture grew clearer she noticed the silver bot lying on top of the rubble.

“What's wrong with it?”

“It appears to be dead,” Rachel replied. “I see no obvious signs of damage but it is not responding. It does not even appear to be on. From all appearances it is now an inert object.”

“You were tracking it overhead the entire time, right? Did anything hit it?”

“No. It was acting normally until it drew near the building, and then it ceased to work at all.”

Alice thought for a moment. “Let's try an experiment. We've got more bots in the shuttle bay, right?”

“Yes, we do,” Rachel replied.

“Great. Can you beam one down directly into the outer ring?”

“I believe I can. Do you want me to enhance its optics first?”

Alice shook her head. “No, don't bother. I don't care if it can see the phantoms or not. I'm just testing something here.”

Rachel nodded. “I am launching the reconobot now. Please stand by.” A moment later Rachel spoke again. “The machine has been transported to the surface.”

“Great!” Alice pressed a button on her chair but nothing happened. She looked down at the controls and frowned. “Hey! Why don't I have a connection to it?”

“Because it has gone dead,” Rachel replied. “The moment it appeared on the surface the reconobot became inert. It is no longer functioning.”

Alice nodded. “Interesting. I thought that might happen.”

“What do you think is going on?” Rachel asked.

“Well, apparently the outer ring of buildings – and possibly the inner ring as well, for all we know – is protected by a field that disables all electronics. I don't know how it works, but I do know that this isn't the first time a Starman has run into this problem. There is one other known planet where electronic devices, and in particular reconobots, fail to function.”

“Larson's Folly,” Rachel replied.

“Right! We've got the same situation there. Starlight Enterprise has spent *years* trying to figure out what's going on there but have had no success. All of our modern equipment simply goes dead, as if the normal laws of physics don't apply.”

Rachel shook her head. “That would seem unlikely. The laws of physics are universal constants. One cannot simply turn them off at will. They apply equally to everyone in all cases.”

Alice smiled wryly. “And time isn't supposed to go in loops, either, but apparently Lemura doesn't know that. All I know is that Lemura and Larson's Folly both share a really rare phenomenon, and that makes me think those two planets are somehow connected. I've heard Joe Taylor say that he thought the First Races were responsible for what happened on Larson's Folly. Maybe he's right.”

“When did you meet Starman Joe Taylor?” Rachel asked curiously. “I have no record of that.”

“No, no, that's not what I mean! Of course I've never met him. Who has? All I'm saying is that I heard him say that in an interview and it makes sense. I bet he'd be really interested in what we've found.”

“Would you like me to contact him?” Rachel asked.

“Oh no. No no no no! Definitely not. Joe Taylor is a highly respected Starman. He doesn't need to be hearing from me! Besides, he's got to be at least 80 by now. Last I heard he was out at Space Station Zane doing some research, but that was ten years ago. I bet by now he's long since retired. No, let's not bother him. I didn't become a Starman so I could outsource my work to someone else.”

“So what would you like to do?”

“Tell me something, Rachel. Can you open a wormhole directly into the inner city?”

“No, I cannot. The interference is monumental and I do not have the power to overcome it. Even obtaining a mere picture of the inner city taxes my abilities to their limits.”

“All right. That's what I thought. So we know that bots can't penetrate the city's defenses, and we know we can't beam there directly. I really hate to say this, but I think that means we're going to have to land and investigate the city in person.”

Rachel's eyes widened. “You want to land the *Raptor* on Lemura?”

“Definitely not! Oh no. That's much too dangerous. My plan is to land a shuttle just outside the outer ring of buildings and then investigate on foot. If all goes well then I'll make my way to the inner

ring and see what happens.”

“Are you sure that's wise?”

“No, I'm not. In fact, I think it's a really terrible idea! To paraphrase Gus, I think only a crazy person would set foot on that planet. But we really need answers and I don't see any other way to get them. People land on Larson's Folly all the time and the anti-electronic effect doesn't bother them. Maybe the same thing applies here.”

“But your spacesuit is electronic!” Rachel protested. “It's not going to work.”

“The planet has a breathable atmosphere so I don't need a spacesuit. You know that.”

Rachel shook her head. “That may be, but I still wish you could take your spacesuit. What will you do if something goes wrong? Given the temporal anomalies prevalent on the surface there is no guarantee I will be able to use the wormhole transporter to retrieve you in the event of a problem. We only have one shuttlecraft, and if you take it to the surface and it fails I will not be able to rescue you.”

“I know,” Alice sighed. “I don't like this either but it's got to be done. I'll take supplies with me so if I run into trouble I can camp out while you call for help. I promise I'll take every precaution.”

Rachel looked at Alice sadly. “Are you sure there is no way I can talk you out of this?”

Alice shook her head. “Positive. Rachel, prepare the shuttle for departure. I'm going to Lemura.”

## Chapter 4: The Voice

STARMAN ALICE MONTAINE took a deep breath, summoned all her courage, and walked boldly into Shuttle Bay One. In front of her, taking up nearly the entire room, was the *Osprey*. Alice had rarely used the sleek red shuttlecraft since it had been given to her by Caedmon Starlight nine years earlier, as the *Raptor's* onboard wormhole transporter was usually more convenient. This time, however, she had no choice.

That very fact gave her misgivings. *Do I really want to do this?* She shook her head, as if to drive the doubts out of her mind. *It's fine! Really. I'll land, get answers, and come back, just as I always do. I will not lose my nerve. This is just another unexplored planet in a galaxy full of mysteries. There's nothing to be afraid of!* But this time she knew that was not true.

As soon as Alice stepped into the room the holographic image of Rachel appeared in front of her. "I have prepared the shuttle as you requested! All non-essential systems have been disabled, and the craft has been cleared of all unnecessary amenities. I have also stocked it with a two-week supply of food."

"Thanks," Alice replied.

"I realize you are already aware of my misgivings concerning what you are about to do, so I will not reiterate them now. What is your plan?"

Alice shrugged. "It's pretty simple, really. I'm going to land just outside the outer ring of buildings, walk through them on foot until I reach the inner ring, and then see what there is to see. After I've got some answers I'll walk back to the shuttle and return to the *Raptor*."

"How long do you anticipate being gone?" Rachel asked.

"Oh, probably four or five hours. It's hard to say. Whatever you do, though, *do not* land on the surface and come looking for me. If I disappear and you can't find me, wait 24 hours to make sure I'm actually gone and then call for help. *Do not* leave Lemura."

"Very good," Rachel replied. "I wish you the best of luck. Be careful."

"I will," Alice promised. Rachel stepped out of the way and Alice walked up to the shuttlecraft. Five minutes later she and the *Osprey* were flying through space, headed for the surface of Lemura.

Alice took her time on the descent to the planet. *There's no need to rush things*, she thought to herself as the *Osprey* flew through the planet's turbulent upper atmosphere. *Just be careful and use your head.*

Rather than flying over the vast deserts of Lemura Alice chose to stay hidden in the clouds. This made piloting the shuttle difficult, as the small ship was violently tossed by the winds, but she thought that was less risky than getting near the desert. *If a phantom can grab a bot and make it disappear from existence, I don't want to run the risk that something else can grab this ship. I've seen what can happen on this planet and I refuse to take any unnecessary risks.*

When the shuttle's computer showed that she was rapidly approaching the city Alice finally took the *Osprey* out of the clouds and brought it down to the surface. Alice then flew it to within half a mile of the giant, ruined buildings and carefully landed on an empty stretch of desert.

Before the Starman got out of the shuttlecraft she turned everything off and spent a few moments gazing through the ship's windshield. Outside she could see nothing out of the ordinary. A black, broken desert extended from horizon to horizon, strewn with twisted bits of debris and deep chasms that sank thousands of feet below the surface. A gentle breeze stirred up gritty dust that stayed in the air for impossibly long periods of time. High above her the sky was filled with dark, fast-moving clouds. The sun was nowhere to be seen and there was no plant life of any kind. What little light penetrated the cloud cover appeared to be almost gray. *This place looks so depressing. It's as if someone came along and sucked all the life out of this world and left behind an empty shell. Surely this wasn't always a*

*world of shadows.*

Alice didn't see any sign of the phantoms but she knew that was to be expected. *The only way we could get a good look at them was with that enhanced image processing, and that won't work in the city. I know I'm surrounded by them but without that bot I can't see them.* The thought made her shiver. *I don't like being surrounded by dangerous things I can't see! I feel as if I'm leaving my fate to chance. But what can I do?*

Before Alice left the *Raptor* the computer had recommended she change into her armored Starman suit. Unlike her normal spacesuit, this one was made of thick armor plates that were constructed out of the hardest substance known to science. "With that suit you will be able to withstand virtually anything short of a direct hit with a nuclear weapon," Rachel had told her.

"Sure, but at a great cost of mobility," Alice had argued. "This thing is so large and bulky it's almost impossible to even walk! If I need to do any quick movement I'm done for. And besides, since the suit's electronics won't work I can't wear the helmet. I'd suffocate! What good is armor if my head is unprotected?"

But Rachel had won out in the end, and she had worn the suit. While its electronic enhancements would not work, she had to admit that its armor plating was exceedingly strong. *At least if I get in a firefight I'll have some protection! Not that my laser pistol will work out here. But it doesn't hurt to bring it, just in case. I guess I could always throw it at someone and hope they trip.*

Alice manually opened the door of the *Osprey* and carefully set foot outside. She was surprised at how difficult it was to walk. Each step was awkward and she felt heavy and off-balance. *This suit is even worse than I remembered! How do people get around in these things? Well, I guess I'll have to make the best of it. I've got about ten miles to hike before I get back to the ship. Time to get moving.*

The Starman cleared her mind of everything but the mission and set her sights on the giant, ruined buildings in front of her. She began walking toward them. At first her pace was slow, but gradually her training kicked in and she remembered how to walk in the cumbersome suit. *I'll never win any marathons in this thing but at least I won't die of old age before I get there.*

As the outer ring of buildings drew closer Alice realized that she could hear something. She stopped to listen. At first all she could hear was the gentle wind that constantly blew over the desert, but as she listened closer she heard something else. It was a soft noise, almost imperceptible, that appeared to come out of nowhere. *It almost sounds like water! Or a host of voices. It's very low and jumbled. I wonder why the probe didn't pick up on it?*

Behind her Alice suddenly heard a loud *snap*. She whirled around, but saw nothing. There were no signs of life and no visible movement. The *Osprey* was right where she left it, in the middle of an empty desert.

"Hello?" she said aloud. Her voice echoed over the ground and then faded away.

She felt fear start to rise in her throat, but she forced it down. "I'm not going to panic, do you hear me?" she cried aloud. "It's not going to happen! I'm not going to lose it."

The desert did not reply.

Alice resumed her walk toward the buildings. She was soon on a wide, cracked road that went between two enormous structures. It appeared to continue on as far as the eye could see, but Alice knew that after four miles the road ended and the inner ring of buildings began. *It's an optical illusion, she told herself. I know the tower is there.*

The Starman looked at the buildings on either side of the deserted road and spotted a wide doorway in the one to her right. She jogged over to it and gingerly stepped through it. Once she was inside she stopped to look around. The floor and the walls were still largely intact, but much of the ceiling had fallen through. Huge piles of broken stone and rubble littered the floor, some of which were hundreds of feet tall.

Alice was surprised that the building was hollow. *I don't see any signs that there was ever a second or third story. This is like a giant hangar, or something. It's just one big room, four hundred feet tall*

*and four miles long! What could possibly have been the motive to build such a thing? Who needs that much empty floor space?*

After taking a good look around Alice walked up to the nearest pile of rubble and carefully examined it. She saw bits of scrap metal in the pile, but there were no pieces bigger than her hand, and any markings on them had been worn off years ago. The building had no paint or writing that she could see. *It's just been too long*, she thought to herself. *There's nothing left.*

Satisfied that she had seen all there was to see, the Starman continued jogging down the long building. She had gone about a mile before she noticed that she felt strange. Something seemed to be gently buzzing deep inside her brain. It was almost a tickling sensation, but it was originating from inside her. She shook her head, but the feeling persisted.

Without warning, a bolt of lightning struck the top of the building with a loud *crack*. The sudden flash of light and blast of thunder startled Alice, who fell off her feet and tumbled backwards. Above her she saw that a large crack had formed in the ceiling. The crack rapidly grew and with a grinding noise a six-hundred-foot-long part of the ceiling split apart and came crashing down toward her.

Alice panicked and tried to rise to her feet, but the armored suit made it difficult to stand up. As terror began to overwhelm her she jumped up, only to whack her head on something she couldn't see. The Starman tumbled to the ground in pain, her vision temporarily blackened.

She lay on the ground for a moment, stunned. The Starman waited for the concrete to crush her, but it never happened. All she heard was silence. Puzzled, Alice opened her eyes and lifted her head off the ground.

To her amazement the rubble was gone. The empty room was gone. She appeared to be inside a large research station filled with giant pieces of electrical equipment. Enormously tall figures dressed in protective white suits were working at computer stations. A gentle blue light filled the room, originating from no obvious source.

Alice stood up and stared. *What just happened? Where am I?* As she regained her senses she realized that the room looked familiar. *Wait a minute! I'm still in that building! There are the walls and ceiling, just where they used to be, and over there is the door where I came in. But what happened?*

No one appeared to take any notice of her. Alice took a step forward – and everything disappeared. She was once again in a room filled with rubble. She glanced up and saw the hole in the ceiling where the lightning had struck. Beneath her feet was the giant concrete slab.

“Hold on!” she said aloud. “That doesn't make sense. I should be *underneath* that slab. What's going on here?”

A thought burst into her mind. It was alien, forced into her from the outside. *I saved you.*

Alice jumped back. “Hey! Who said that?”

The voice inside her head laughed. *You are a miserable excuse for a life form! Had I not intervened you would have died. I must be growing senile in my old age.*

Alice whirled around, desperately trying to locate the source of the voice she was hearing inside her head. She could see nothing. *What's happening to me?* she thought.

*It is not so hard to figure out*, the voice continued. *Even for a species as stupid as yours. You have invaded my world with your crude attempts at exploration. Did you think I would not notice? Now that I am awake I have examined your kind and found it wanting. Your species is vile, and I am going to exterminate it. Thank you for bringing it to my attention.*

“What are you talking about?” Alice shouted. “You didn't exterminate me – you saved my life! You're not making sense.”

*You amuse me*, the voice replied. *You think you are so strong and important and yet I can kill you with a single lightning strike. Your senses are so weak I can trick them into seeing something that took place here before life existed on your world. Go ahead, Starman Alice Montaine. Do your worst. I grant you free access to all of my domain, for you are incapable of harming me. But know that I will wipe out your species and you are helpless to do anything about it. It will be my final accomplishment*

*before going on into the night.*

With that, the voice went silent and the buzzing inside her head stopped. Alice was left alone, in the shadows of a ruined building.

## Chapter 5: Data

AS SOON AS the alien's voice finished echoing through her mind Alice ran blindly to the doorway. She tore through it and rushed down the street as fast as she could go. She was so terrified that even the bulky armored suit was unable to slow her down.

After a minute, however, Alice slowed to a halt. She stopped herself, took a deep breath, and looked around. *Careful, Alice, she thought. What are you running away from – a voice in your head? Do you honestly think running is going to help?*

As scared as she was, the Starman forced herself to calm down. She looked up and down the street and saw nothing unusual. From where she stood the buildings that lined the road appeared to extend indefinitely in either direction. She realized that her self-preservation instinct had kicked in and she was running toward the *Osprey*, which was still some miles away.

Alice took a moment to catch her breath and then forced herself to think through the problem. *What are you going to do? Run home and tell your boss that a voice inside your head threatened to destroy all of mankind? That would go over real well! I bet they have special padded rooms for people who say things like that.*

The Starman soon realized that, despite the voice, she still had no idea what was going on. *Anyone could be behind that voice. Sure, it could be a Lucian, but it could also be a billion other things. How do you know that the person behind the voice is a threat? You don't. How do you know any of this is even real? You don't. In fact, you don't really know anything more than you did five minutes ago. Well, nothing that you can prove, anyway. Certainly nothing that you could use to persuade Earth to send an army here to destroy this horrible place.*

Against her better judgment Alice turned around and resumed her hike toward the giant tower. This time she avoided walking inside the buildings out of fear that another lightning bolt could strike at any time. *Maybe I'm just being silly, but why walk inside a crumbling structure like that to begin with? It could collapse at any time, lightning or no lightning. Besides, I've already seen there's nothing of interest inside. Just keep to the road and all will be well.*

The walk to the tower was long and boring. Even though the air was chilly Alice soon grew hot inside the armored suit. *This thing just wasn't meant to be worn for long periods of time, she thought wryly.*

Time passed very slowly. It was impossible for her to judge how far she had walked. Normally her suit could have told her, but some unseen dampening field prevented its electronics from working. No matter which way she looked all she could see was an unending street lined with two giant, crumbling buildings.

*If only I could see the sun, Alice pondered, after what seemed like hours of steady walking. Then I could judge my position. But those infernal clouds block out everything except for that dim, gray light. I wonder what this place is like after the sun goes down and that light goes out?*

The thought gave her chills. She hadn't stopped to consider the local time of day before starting on her trek. *Oh my goodness! For all I know dusk could be five minutes from now. What happens on this planet of nightmares when the sun goes down and the whole world is cloaked in shadows?*

Alice quickened her pace. *I'd better hurry! Or maybe –*

WHAM! The Starman suddenly slammed into an invisible wall. The force knocked her off her feet and onto her back and left her gasping for air. Dazed, she looked around but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. There was no wall blocking her path. All she could see was the same unending street and the same ruined buildings.

Alice got to her feet and reached out a hand in front of her. The hand collided with something

invisible. She moved her hand around on the invisible surface and realized a giant, solid wall was in her way.

*That must be the cloaking field, she thought to herself. Very clever. I had no idea I was even getting close to it. So now what do I do?*

Alice glanced down at her suit's electronic controls and saw that they were still dead. She pulled her laser gun out of its holster and saw that it was dead as well. *Oh boy. All my tools are dead, and I'm sure not going to break through it with my bare hands! Now what? Use spoons to dig a tunnel underneath the field?*

Acting on a hunch, Alice spoke out loud. "Hey there! I know you're watching me. What do you think you're doing, blocking my way? You promised me access to all of your domain! Are you worried that I'm a threat to you? Is that why you're not letting me go forward?"

There was no immediate answer, so Alice spoke up again. "Or maybe you just don't understand the meaning of the word *all*. I'd be glad to explain it to you if –"

Alice suddenly felt something grab her from behind and forcefully toss her through the air. She involuntarily let out a small scream as she passed through the barrier. She landed hard on the ground on the other side.

*Well, at least it worked, she groaned. For the third time that day Alice struggled to her feet and then looked around. What she saw was breathtaking. In front of her, less than half a mile away, was a giant tower. The enormous structure rose high into the air, its top lost in the clouds.*

What amazed her, though, was not its size but its construction. She had seen pictures of these buildings before but the static images in her journals did not do them justice. *It's as if the building were made of light, she marveled. Thousands of brilliant colors radiated from the tower in streams of light, ever twisting and merging from one hue into another. Outrageously bright beams of blue and white and red sparkled like tiny stars. The effect was mesmerizing. It almost looks as if it's alive, she marveled.*

She then noticed that the tower was surrounded by a massive ring of smaller structures. It took her a moment to realize that the enormous objects, each of which rose nearly a thousand feet off the ground, weren't buildings but were actually machines. She watched, awestruck, as the machines fed beams of glowing plasma into the tower at irregular intervals, shaping and changing the never-ceasing flow of light.

*So the inner ring is actually part of the power plant! It all works together to create unimaginable amounts of energy. But where is that power going? Why put such a colossal structure on a remote planet like this?*

Alice hesitated and then looked around. *The tower appears to be made of pure energy – as silly as that sounds. Maybe pure photons would be a better way of putting it. Or plasma. Or maybe it's some other state of matter I've never heard of. Anyway, it looks like something I should not be touching.*

She turned around and looked at the giant ring of machines that surrounded the tower. *Those look more promising! The plasma arcs are hundreds of feet off the ground and the unit itself appears to be made out of that white metal the Lucians always used. Maybe there's a control unit somewhere I can examine.*

Alice hurried over to the nearest machine and began looking around. After a few minutes she found a glass door tucked away in its side. When she walked up to it the door automatically opened and the inside lights turned on.

The Starman gingerly stepped through the door and looked around. Given the size of the machine the room was surprisingly small. *This isn't even big enough to house the Raptor, she thought to herself. But I'm sure these things are mostly automated. They probably don't need much in the way of adjustments.*

At first she thought the room was empty but then she realized that the walls, floor, and ceiling were all giant screens. Alice walked up to one of the walls and touched it but nothing happened. She frowned. *So how do I get this thing to turn on? Think, Alice, think. If you were a Lucian and you built a*

*giant computer, how would you want to interface with it?*

The answer came to her at once. *Telepathy! All of the First Races were telepathic. Let's try that.* Alice wracked her brain for what little spoken Lucian she knew and tried thinking several different phrases. Nothing happened.

*All right, she thought. Maybe the machine can't read my mind. Let's try something else.* Aloud Alice spoke the command for *activate*. Immediately the room came to life! The white walls dissolved away into blackness, giving Alice the illusion of standing in space. Around her swirled figures, charts, pictures, and text.

Alice smiled. *That's more like it! Now let's see what we can find out.*

The Starman spent the next several hours learning how to use the computer and attempting to extract what information she could. While her suit instruments still did not work she had had the foresight to bring a pencil and paper. She furiously took notes, writing down page after page of information.

*I wish my Lucian was better, she thought ruefully. There's so much of this I don't understand. I thought I was fairly fluent but a lot of these words are technical terms I've never seen before. Maybe Rachel can help me translate it when I get back.*

Alice was about to pack up and leave when she suddenly noticed something. Her pulse quickened. *Now that's interesting.* She studied it carefully, making sure she had not made a mistake. It soon became apparent that she had stumbled onto a major discovery.

After jotting down some quick notes she packed everything away, turned the computer off, and raced outside. *I've got to get back to Rachel immediately! This could be huge.* As she ran toward the long road that led back to the *Osprey* she suddenly remembered the invisible wall.

Alice stopped in her tracks. She reached out a hand in front of her and carefully stepped forward one step at a time. After a hundred feet she felt the smooth, unyielding barrier once more.

She grimaced. *I really don't want to do this. That invisible presence bothers me, and the last thing I want to do is draw attention to myself. But what choice do I have?*

Gathering up her courage, she spoke up. "Hey there! I'd like to go back to my ship. Can you please let me out?"

In an instant the inner city disappeared and Alice found herself standing on the bridge of the *Raptor*. The holoscreen was tuned to an overhead view of the inner ring of buildings. Rachel was standing in front of it, studying it carefully.

When Alice suddenly materialized Rachel whirled around. "How did you get on board?" she asked.

Alice walked over to her chair and wearily sank down into it. She felt cold chills running down her spine. *He knows about the Raptor! she thought to herself. He's just toying with me. If he can transport me here then he can surely vaporize this ship just as easily.*

"We've got a problem," Alice said nervously. "A big problem. How do I tell Caedmon Starlight that I've just doomed mankind to extinction?"