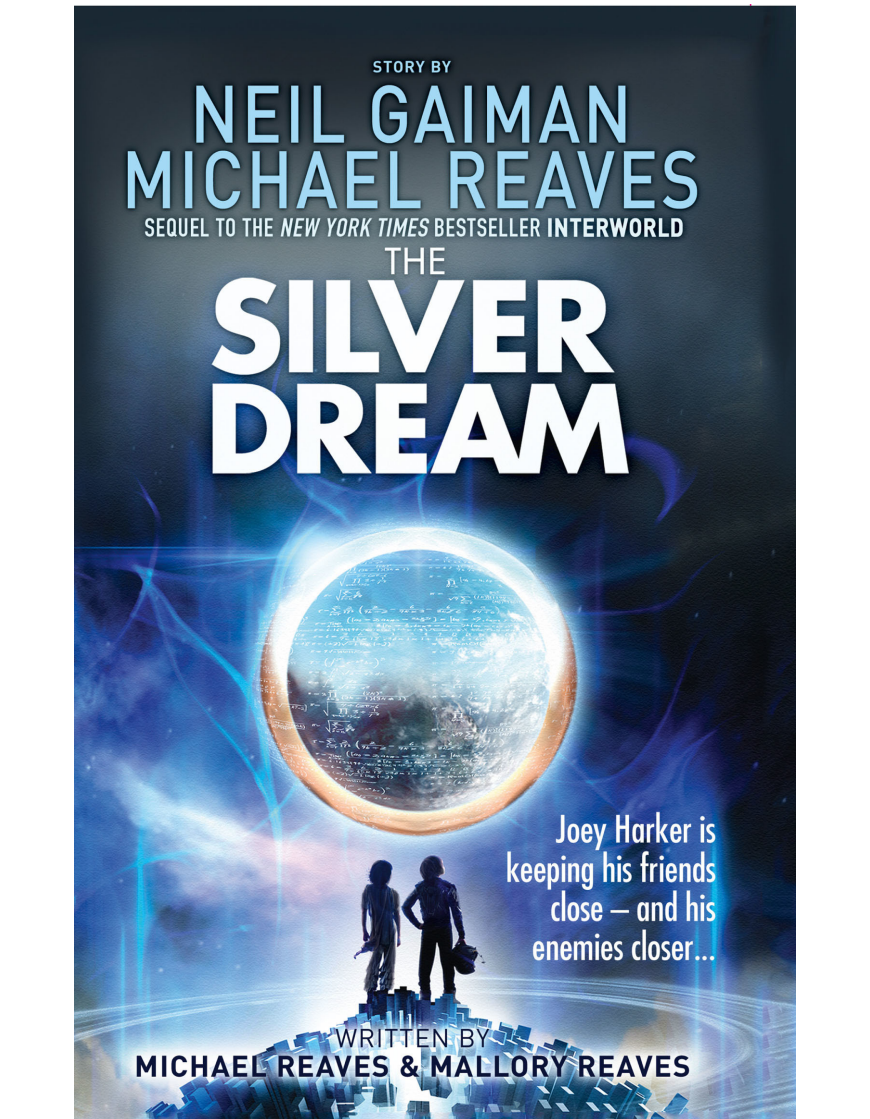


STORY BY

NEIL GAIMAN
MICHAEL REAVES

SEQUEL TO THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER INTERWORLD

THE
**SILVER
DREAM**



Joey Harker is
keeping his friends
close — and his
enemies closer...

WRITTEN BY
MICHAEL REAVES & MALLORY REAVES

Neil Gaiman
Reaves Reaves
The Silver Dream

Аннотация

Sequel to New York Times bestseller INTERWORLD by award-winning writers Neil Gaiman and Michael Reaves. Joey Harker is a hero...After mastering the ability to walk between dimensions, Joey helped save the Altiverse from destruction. But rival powers of magic and science are still out there, seeking to control all worlds. InterWorld's peacekeeping mission is far from finished. And when a stranger follows Joey back to BaseTown things get even more complicated. No one knows who she is or where she's from and, more importantly, why she knows so much about InterWorld. Dangerous times lie ahead...

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AN INTERWORLD NOVEL

story by

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HarperCollins Children's Books



[Dedication](#)

For MALLORY
with deep appreciation
from Michael and Neil

For KARI
and the MARKER-MORSE FAMILY
from Mallory

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CHARACTER GUIDE

Joey's Team

Joey Harker

J/O HrKr—male, younger cyborg version of Joey.

Jai—male, senior officer. Spiritual, likes big words.

Jakon Haarkanen—female, wolflike.

Jo—female, has white wings, can fly only on magic worlds.

Josef—male, comes from a denser planet. Large and strong.

Other Walkers of Note

Jaya—female, red-gold hair, voice like a siren.

Jenoh—female, catlike. Mischievous.

Jerzy Harhkar—male, quick and birdlike, feathers for hair.

Joey's first friend on Base.

Joaquim—male, new Walker.

Joliette—female, vampirelike. Has a friendly rivalry with Jo.

Jorensen—male, senior officer. Good-natured, taciturn.

Teachers and Officers

Jaroux—male, the librarian. Loves knowledge, is friendly and quirky.

Jayarre—male, Culture and Improvisation teacher. Cheerful, charismatic.

J'emi—female, Basic Languages teacher.

Jernan—male, quartermaster. Strict and stingy with equipment.

Jirathe—female, Alchemy teacher. Body made from ectoplasm.

Joeb—male, team leader, senior officer. Laid-back, brotherly attitude.

Jonha—male, officer. From a magic world. Skin like tree bark.

Jorisine—female, officer. From a magic world. Elflike.

Joseph Harker (the Old Man)—male, the leader of InterWorld. Older version of Joey. Stern, has a cybernetic eye.

Josetta—female. The Old Man’s assistant. Friendly, well organized, no-nonsense.

Josy—female, officer, has long golden hair with knives braided into it.



CHAPTER ONE

CALL ME JOE.

Please.

It’s not that I have anything against “Joey”—it’s a perfectly good name, and it’s worked fine for the first sixteen years of my life. But that’s the point. I’m sixteen now, almost seventeen, and the name “Joey” just doesn’t feel like me anymore. Which maybe isn’t surprising, given that I’ve met more versions of myself than Star Wars has clones. When you stop to think about it, I’ve probably got the biggest identity crisis of all time going, so if I want to drop one lousy letter from my name, I think I’m entitled.

I was trying to explain this to Jai, which wasn’t easy, considering that we and the rest of the team were pinned down by Binary scouts shooting what looked like elongated blobs of mercury at us, and Jai’s not the easiest person to talk to unless you happen to have a dictionary chip installed between your ears.

Which I don't.

He listened, returning fire with more mercury blobs (which are called "plasma pods" in case you're wondering), and then asked, "Are you unambiguously certain?" Behind him, Jakon leaped on top of a power condenser, crouching all sleek and furry, snarling as she looked for more prey. The wolf girl version of me looked like she might be enjoying this a little. She always did, but I suppose there was nothing wrong with loving your job. . . .

"Excuse me," Jai said crisply, aiming over my shoulder down the length of the big chamber in the abandoned power plant. He fired the emitter, which made a sort of thwip! sound. I caught a crazy, distorted glimpse of movement from behind me, reflected off the chest area of Jai's encounter suit: a Binary scout on a grav-board, trying for a sneak attack. Then the plasma pod hit him and negated the binding force in his atomic nuclei, which is how Jai would've described it. Me, I'd just say he disappeared in a puff of smoke and a sound like zzzaph!!

This caused a momentary lull in the fighting on both sides, which I took advantage of to ask what he meant. "Huh?" I said. (I get a lot more mileage out of words than Jai does.)

"Are you unambiguously certain?" he repeated patiently. He pointed the emitter in various directions. Thwip. Thwip.

Next to me, J/O fired his laser-cannon arm at a group of attacking scouts. "That means are you sure," he offered helpfully, and I rolled my eyes. J/O did have a dictionary chip installed

between his ears, and took every opportunity to make me aware of it. I ignored him.

“That I want to change my nickname? Yes.”

“No, that your chronological age is in fact sixteen.”

I started to tell him that his brain had finally grown too big for his head, but stopped. He had a point.

Though we don't time travel in the classic sense in the InterWorld organization, we all know that time itself isn't independent, aloof, and serene from all the myriad worlds that make up the various versions of Earth. Though I'd never encountered any Earths on which time itself seemed subjectively altered—Earths on which everyone seemed to ta-a-a-l-l-k-k . . . r-e-e-a-l . . . s-l-o-o-w . . . or Earths where everyoneranaroundliketheywereinanolddilentmovieandtheyalltalk—still, most people knew that time passed quicker or slower in some planes as opposed to others. Just as it was also known that after some time spent in those worlds, your own time sense, not to mention your body, adjusted to the new temporal reality.

I'd been in quite a few such parallel planes in the time I'd been a member of InterWorld. Which meant that Jai had a valid reason for asking, but only up to a point. I might be, as far as I knew, older than my birthday said I was. Or younger. Problem was, there was no way to measure the rate that time passed “outside” the plane we were in. And even if there were, what about time spent in the In-Between, that crazy-quilt collision of various realities and worlds that a Walker used as a shortcut from

one reality to the next? Besides, it was all subjective, tied in with consciousness, so really, you only were “as old as you felt.”

I said as much to Jai, who looked at me as if I’d just pointed out to him that the sky was blue. (Usually. On this world it was more greenish.) “Indubitably,” he said, and then he lost me again. “And are you unquestionably certain your haecceity is defined by your moniker?”

“My what?”

“Your moniker. Your name.”

“I know that one. My . . . hi-ex-it . . . ?”

“Haecceity. Your youness. The qualities that make you you, rather than me.”

“Even I didn’t know that one,” J/O admitted, looking like he was filing it away somewhere—which he likely was.

“That’s an ironic thing to ask,” I said, “considering that you are me. Or I’m you, whichever.”

“Yet we all possess qualities which render us unique. Haecceity is the particular characteristics of those qualities that make you you.”

Thwip. Thwip. Zzzapht!!

I pondered that as another rutabaga bit the dust. I was getting used to seeing it, which was both a relief and a disturbance, if you know what I mean. The emitter dissolved the atomic bonding, which meant no muss, no fuss. They just went poof—or zzapht. And they weren’t people in the same sense that we were. They looked human until you got up close; then their skin had a waxy,

unfinished look, which made sense, since they were actually clones made primarily from cellulose and plant matter. The Binary was big on cookie-cutter assembly-line cannon fodder, just like HEX's armies of choice were usually zombies. There wasn't much point in feeling bad about killing something that was nine-tenths dead to begin with. But it still bothered me that it was bothering me less, if that makes any sense.

I was about to say something else to Jai, when I heard Josef approaching. Josef came from a world much denser than most of ours, so it wasn't hard to recognize his heavy tread. "What's up, Josef?" I asked, without turning my head. I was tracking another rutabaga.

He didn't reply immediately, so I squeezed off my shot (thwip!) and glanced over my shoulder at him. "They've sent in reinforcements," he rumbled, looking troubled.

"How many?" Jai asked, and I knew then it was bad, because Jai usually can't ask anything in less than ten syllables. Josef shook his head.

"Too many to count quickly."

J/O turned and looked at the nearest blank wall. "Tapping into an exterior security cam," he said. J/O's a cyborg version of me, from an Earth that is currently recovering from the Machine Wars. He's got more hydraulic fluid circulating in him than blood, so when I watched the color drain from his face I knew something was very wrong. He was younger than me by a few years, and while he always handled himself well on missions—

and made sure to point it out when he did—it was moments like this that I was reminded of his youth.

“Let’s see,” I said.

One of his eyes was cybernetic; it usually looked almost identical to his natural eye, save the circuitry going through it. That eye grew brighter, and on the wall there appeared a black-and-white projection of the outside. At first there was little to see: just more blasted masonry, exposed rebar, and the like. But then—

There was movement.

Lots of movement.

Rutabagas swarmed down the blasted, torn-up streets; over, around, and through walls; and even up from manholes and huge cracks in the pavement. There must’ve been a hundred in the first couple of minutes. And they just kept coming.

J/O had only tapped into the visual, not the audio, if there even was one. It really was eerie, seeing them coming, wave after wave, in utter silence.

And I realized that the silence also meant the hostilities had stopped inside the power plant. The veggie clones already in here with us had ceased their attack. Of course: No point in wasting more of their numbers when they can just sit back and wait. Six of us against five hundred or so of them . . .

Suddenly my deep and abiding concern over what I wanted to be called didn’t seem very important.

The walls and floor began to tremble. They were right outside.

“What now, fearless leader?” This was from Jo, another version of me—a girl with angelic white wings.

“Now I think we die,” Josef rumbled. Big guys are usually phlegmatic, and they didn’t get much bigger than Josef.

I gripped my emitter hard. “Not on my watch,” I said.

Jakon looked at me. Her eyes glittered in her furry face. “And what are you gonna do?”

“Think of something,” I said, with far more confidence than I felt.

A shot fired by a rutabaga outside demolished the camera J/O was tapped into. The feed dissolved in a burst of static. At the far end of the big chamber I could see what remained of the initial Binary attack force gathering. Behind us a window shattered, and rutabagas began climbing in.

I looked around wildly. Left, right, down, up—there was an air vent above us, the kind that might have led to vent shafts, but I wasn’t sure how much help that would be. Certainly Josef couldn’t fit up there; he was almost twice my size and about four times as dense. Jo had her wings, but she couldn’t do more than glide unless there was enough magic in the air to support flight; this world was completely taken over by Binary, much closer to the technological end of the spectrum than the magical—and she couldn’t carry more than one of us anyway.

I raised my arm to give the order to attack. There was no time left and no other choice. I couldn’t sense a portal anywhere near us, so we couldn’t escape through the In-Between. If Hue had

come along on this assignment, things might've been different, but the little pan-dimensional critter's a lot like a cat: Sometimes he just disappears for weeks at a time.

We needed a miracle, but I wasn't going to put a lot of faith in the term "deus ex machina" when we were surrounded by Binary.

We'd have to fight. Before I could give the order, however, the air in front of us began to glow. It was warm, the kind of cozy heat that radiated from a fireplace on a cold night. The glow formed an oval shape, and through it stepped a girl.

My age, no more—if that. She had shaggy black hair and wore a strange outfit that seemed cobbled together out of various locales and times: Moorish pantaloons, a mantle from the Renaissance, a blouse that looked Victorian. I noticed all those later, though. At the moment all I noticed were her hands.

Actually her fingernails, to be exact. Each nail looked like a tiny circuit board. She pointed her right index finger at the Binary scouts. The nail glowed green, the rutabagas were surrounded by a green light, and . . . froze. Not in terms of temperature but in terms of movement. Then she pointed her left pinkie at us; it glowed, and we were all enveloped in a purple light.

Just before the room disappeared, she looked at me. I had a brief impression of long lashes surrounding violet eyes. "Hey, cutie," she said. And winked.

I saw Jakon give me a big grin, full of fangs. And I knew, as the chamber vanished from around us, that I'd turned crimson clear to the tips of my ears.



CHAPTER TWO

THE IRONY IS THAT I've been known to get lost just going from my bunk to the bathroom.

I used to think it was simply that I had no sense of direction. And it's true—I didn't. But one thing I've learned over the last two years is that things are never simple. It turns out that my lousy sense of direction is limited to the first three spatial dimensions: longitude, latitude, and altitude. But there are other directions, lots of them. Eight at least, and probably a whole bunch more.

If you're like I was at first, just trying to visualize eight or more ways that proceed at right angles on top of the three we already have gives you a massive ice cream headache. Where are these other dimensions? Why can't we interact with them the way we do with the three we already have?

Well, according to the brain trust at Base Town, they were “compactified” (one of the fun things about being a scientist is being able to make up new words) the instant this universe began; somehow they were shrunk down to distances less than the diameter of an atom. If you pick any one of the “big three”—let's say “up”—you can use it as an infinite vector and head away from the Earth—past the moon, past Mars . . . out of the solar system and into the dark. You'll never run out of “up.”

That's because we live—most of us, anyway—in a three-space

world (or four, if you want to get technical). In a three-space world there's just enough room for three vectors to proceed at ninety degrees from a point; they're mutually perpendicular. (Time is a constant until we get fairly far up the asymptotic curve, so we can ignore it for now.) But there are also universes where the rules are "looser," where there's more "room" for new directions to exist.

I know—it's hard to conceive of such things. But remember: All we really know of the universe is what filters in through our senses, and that isn't a whole lot. Take the electromagnetic spectrum. It includes virtually every ripple of energy that powers the cosmos, from the long, lazy radio waves we communicate with through microwaves that we cook with all the way up to X-rays and gamma rays, which pack enough punch into their wavelengths to outshine an entire galaxy. All that majesty, all that infinite variety of energy, and all we see is a narrow little slice of it: seven measly colors. It's like being invited to a royal banquet and then only being allowed to pick the crumbs off one plate.

So, take everything I just told you, and then try to imagine it all at once. Things moving at angles you didn't even know existed, inverting and reverting and transforming, all painted with colors and textures and noises, and mash it all together. Then picture it reflected in two cracked mirrors, facing each other. That's kind of what the In-Between is like.

That's where the girl took us, though it was by far the most wrenching transition I'd ever experienced. I'd traveled to the In-

Between more times than I could count by now, and the jump had never once made me feel as queasy as it did when she brought us there.

That's where we were, though; I could tell before I even opened my eyes. All my senses, both internal and external, were verifying it. I could tell by the incredible and ever-changing sounds: mostly wind chimes but occasionally faraway noises like car horns, rumblings, birdsongs, water flowing, and every now and then the strains of an old instrumental from the 1930s that my dad was fond of, "Powerhouse," by Raymond Scott. If you've ever watched an old Warner Bros. Looney Tunes cartoon, you've probably heard it. I could smell paprika; chocolate; and an astringent, medicinal smell that I couldn't identify. The breeze felt now like feathers, now like fine-grain sandpaper. All this before I even opened my eyes.

So I opened my eyes.

I was standing on what looked like a Rand McNally globe of a terrestrial planet. It was maybe twenty feet in diameter and I was sticking out from it at a forty-five-degree angle, halfway between the equator and the South Pole, just like the Little Prince on his asteroid (assuming the South Pole was on the "bottom" relative to me and the rest of my team, who were standing or floating upon or nearby a whole slew of various other improbabilities).

And something wasn't right.

That probably seems like a pretty ridiculous statement; after all, when is anything ever right about the In-Between? It's

the essence of wrongness, entropy's landfill. Saying there was something not right about it was like saying there was something a little scary about Lord Dogknife.

But the feeling was unmistakable. Furthermore, it wasn't going away.

Jo opened her eyes then, and by the look on her face, I could tell she felt the same way.

J/O looked accusingly at me. "Where did you take us?"

"Hey, I didn't take us anywhere! It was that girl," I said. Technically, Jai was our senior officer, but after a training mission had gone awry and I'd rescued them from the clutches of HEX, most of them tended to look to me in a pinch. There are drawbacks to being even an unofficial team leader, the biggest of which is getting blamed for everything.

"Fine, then where'd your girlfriend take us?" Jo's voice was as accusing as J/O's glare, and it probably didn't help my case that I was crimson again, but I tried to protest anyway. "She's not my—"

Before I could finish, several members of my team gave little reactions of surprise, looking past me. I whirled as the unfamiliar voice sounded from behind me, my hands coming up in a defensive position. I know it sounds like cheesy kung fu movie stuff, but you learn to think fast in the In-Between.

"Yes, I'd say that is rather premature," said the mysterious girl, giving me another wink, "since we've only just met."

"Who are you?" The question was clear and strong, the voice

of someone not at all intimidated—unfortunately, it was Jakon’s voice, not mine. All I’d managed to do was stutter. My tongue felt like it was tied in a Gordian knot.

“A friend,” she answered easily, giving a little shrug of one shoulder. When I’d still been home—before my life became cluttered with Multiverses, Altiverses, and versions of me sporting fur, fangs, wings, and bionic implants—I had a wild, passionate, undying crush on a girl named Rowena. Rowena had sometimes done that artless little shrug when she was being silly or coy. I’d come to covet it, to take it as proof that I could amuse her in some way, even if all I’d said to prompt it was “That test was murder, huh?” or “Do they really expect us to run a mile in eight minutes?”

“Not good enough,” I said. I stepped off the miniature world and onto a bright red cube the size of a steamer trunk that was busily engaged in turning itself inside out. It stabilized as soon as my shoe touched it. Gravity shifted to accommodate, and behind me the “planet” collapsed into a point and vanished. I hardly noticed. Oddly, the memory of Rowena had strengthened my resolve a bit. I’d never been able to talk to her because, really, what do you say to a girl like that when you’re just one guy in a school of hundreds? There had been nothing special about me then.

Now, however, I was more than just a high school kid—I was a Walker. (Although, when you get right down to it, now I was essentially one guy in an army of a few hundred different versions

of me, but thinking of it like that wasn't conducive to my self-esteem right then.) "Tell me who you are, where you've taken us, and—"

She looked at me with what might have been something akin to respect but was more likely just surprise that the blushing idiot was able to form sentences. Probably the latter, because instead of actually answering me, she said, "You honestly don't recognize the In-Between?"

"Of course I recognize—" I began, only to have her talk over me again.

"Then that renders your second question a little superfluous, doesn't it?"

I kept talking, going right over her as she finished. "—but it's not our In-Between." As I said it, it became clearer to me that whatever was wrong about the In-Between was her doing. She was an unknown, and quite possibly an agent of either HEX or the Binary. But even so, I was inclined to trust her—and that really scared me. I couldn't risk her finding out the way back to Base. The notion wasn't likely; it took a specific formula to get back to InterWorld, and only Walkers knew it. She was clearly not a Walker. Yet, she'd traversed the In-Between. . . .

She gave me a considering glance. "You're right. And wrong, but mostly you're right. I'm sorry about that; I needed to make sure the Binary were off your trail." She gave that same one-shouldered shrug and a wink. "Not to worry; it's fixed."

Then that purple light enveloped us again, before we could

react, and that same sense of severe dislocation, worse than anything I'd ever experienced before—

And then we were home, back on the base that we all recognized. Everything was as it should be. We'd made it back to InterWorld.

Only . . .

She was with us.



CHAPTER THREE

THE OLD MAN IS . . .

If your principal and your sternest grandparent had a child born on the last day of summer before school starts, and that child grows up in the moment you realize you've been caught filching a cookie from the jar. In other words, he exists simply to remind you of all the bad things you've ever done, all the things you've ever failed at, and all the mistakes you will ever make.

At least, that's what it feels like. Especially when you've failed a mission.

Which we had. We all stood there in his office, hardly daring to breathe as he looked at each of us in turn. Even the new girl was silent.

"I don't think I have to tell you again how important this mission was, or how miserably you botched it."

His bionic eye glittered accusingly as he talked. No one's ever

figured out what that eye is made of—some say it's a Binary construct, some say it's a regular glass eye magicked by HEX—but we all pretty much agree it could see into our souls.

Part of the reason I find it so unnerving to be run through the ringer by the Old Man is that, out of everyone at Base Camp (including J/O), the Old Man looks the most like me. Except he looks like me in a few decades, a few wars, a handful of personal tragedies, and a couple of reconstructive surgeries. He's like your conscience personified; he knows you could have done better, because he pretty much is you.

He also has room in his cranium for amounts of data that seem to be bigger than the combined memory clouds of all the computers on any thousand different Earths.

“I sent you to Earth F Δ 98⁶ for a very specific reason, and you returned in less than an hour, empty-handed save an unauthorized visitor.”

I opened my mouth—why, I wasn't sure. I still didn't even know her name, so it's not like I could introduce her.

Luckily, I didn't have to worry about it.

“Acacia Jones,” she said confidently, though she didn't offer her hand to the Old Man. “And don't,” she said, before I or anyone could do any more than blink. “Ever.”

She was looking at me, so I don't think my response was overly paranoid. “Don't what?”

“Don't call me 'Casey,’” she said, although her devil-may-care attitude was a mite tempered in the presence of the Old Man. He

could ruffle the smoothest of feathers, and his look of tolerant amusement caused her to amend her statement with “Uh, sir. Please.”

He assured her, in the most acidic way possible (to my ears, anyway), that he never would, and then ignored her while we gave our report. Though he didn’t move, and in fact hardly seemed to even be breathing, his glare grew more and more intense as we told our story.

The silence hung heavy in the air for a few moments after we finished, and we knew enough not to break it. At least, most of us.

“I’m sorry, sir, but it would have wound up the same way, regardless.”

“I’ll thank you to keep your mouth shut, young lady, and your nose where it belongs.” The Old Man turned his glare on our stowaway, who straightened up slightly under the force of it.

“I am sorry, sir. But—”

Sitting there quietly, not moving or raising his voice, the Old Man nevertheless managed to give the impression that a bomb had gone off inside his cramped and cluttered office. Out of the corner of my eye I actually saw several of my colleagues flinch, as if seeking shelter from the incoming shrapnel. “Sorry about what, Ms. Acacia ‘don’t-call-me-Casey-on-pain-of-retribution-too-horrible-to-be-contemplated’ Jones?”

Acacia drew herself up slightly under the Old Man’s eye, taking a breath. I expected her to start talking, but she didn’t. She just looked at him, visibly keeping hold of her nerves.

After a moment the Old Man said, “Walker, you and your team are dismissed to showers and mess.” He sounded bored. He shuffled some papers on his desk, pretending not to notice as we exchanged a glance and stood there for a moment before we headed for the door, including Acacia.

She didn’t get far. “You are not on his team, Ms. Jones. Sit.”

I caught a glimpse of her face, full of equal parts surprise and trepidation, as she started to sit. Then the door closed behind Jai, who was the last to leave the office.

“Did you see that?” J/O whispered once we were safely down the corridor. “She stood up to him. And won.”

“I believe that may be an exaggeration of the events that transpired,” murmured Jai. “Though it was certainly disconcerting and unprecedented.”

“And weird,” Josef added.

Jai nodded. “Oh, yeah. Definitely weird.”

There’s nothing like a shower and food after going out on a mission. The In-Between somehow makes you feel grimy, like all those sights and sounds and sensations and smells have stuck to you, like you’ve been rolling around in a preschool art class’s trash can. And plane travel is always disorienting on the stomach, so it’s usually better if you haven’t eaten a lot beforehand. Yep, there’s nothing better than a hot shower followed by some hot food, especially if you’re able to revel in the congratulations of a job well done.

Which we weren’t, this time. But the shower and food were

still good, and we were also the most popular table in the mess, since word had gotten around to everyone that we'd brought someone back from a mission.

Someone who wasn't one of us.

And the fact that my entire team was now referring to the first non-redheaded J-named real person to have appeared on the base in—oh, ever—as my girlfriend was making me both very popular and very not.

Now, it's not that InterWorld relationships are forbidden, really. It's just that they're not done. Why, you ask?

Because it's weird.

We're all from different planets and dimensions and realities, sure. But we're also all just similar enough that it would be like hooking up with your first cousin. Whom you've known all your life. Who looks so much like you it's impossible to pretend you're not related.

Besides, we're busy. We've got places to go, worlds to save, first cousins to recruit. Those of us who may have been interested in romance of some kind just don't have time to worry about it.

But this new girl . . .

"She's really not one of us?" someone asked for the umpteenth time, talking over someone else asking where she was from. The questions were flying like laser beams or fire-tipped arrows or plasma pods, and a dishearteningly large proportion were aimed at me.

"Why'd you bring her here?"

“Where’d you find her?”

“How old is she?”

“Where’s she from?” The questions were endless, and I couldn’t answer any of them—except one.

“Is she really Joey’s girlfriend?”

“No!” I said finally, loud enough to be heard over all the questions. My volume earned a temporary reprieve from the chatter long enough for me to add, “She’s not my girlfriend, I don’t even know her.”

“Yet,” Jo offered smugly, which set off a round of laughter loud enough to wake the Binary, if it ever slept in the first place. My cheeks were burning like those of a squirrel hoarding jalapeños, and I busied myself with my vitamin-enhanced protein cake as though it were real dessert.

My team was enjoying this far too much.

The questions continued. Things like “Can we meet her?” and “How long is she staying?” and “Why is she here?” as well as a hundred other ones we couldn’t answer and maybe two or three we actually could. I let my team answer those, intervening only when I heard the g-word and my name (which was apparently still “Joey,” incidentally) in the same sentence, and finished my “dessert.” It was only just past lunch, but I was thinking I might have been ready for a nap. I’d been up since dawn on a world with two suns, and it had been a tiring day.

I made my way to my quarters, discovering upon the way that, despite how it had seemed, not everyone on Base had been

crowded around our table. There were a few stragglers in the hallways and, after answering several more questions with “I don’t know” and “She’s not my girlfriend,” I took to peering around corners before I actually turned them.

The theme from *Mission: Impossible* kept playing in the back of my mind.

It took me twice as long to get to my quarters that way, but at least I avoided any more questions.

Hue met me at the door, changing from a kind of warning red to a confused beige and back again as I entered. My little mudluff friend—that’s MDLF, or multidimensional life-form for those not in the know—spent most of his time in the In-Between but occasionally liked to come find me on Base. After scaring a few of the newer locals and almost getting fragged a few times, he tended to keep to my quarters, venturing out only when I was with him.

“What is it, Hue?” I asked tiredly. I was ready for that nap. “Did Timmy fall down the well again?”

“You named him ‘Hue’? That’s adorable. But who’s Timmy?”

I didn’t even bother to turn. Hue had made himself metallic, affording me a distorted view of my own reflection and that of Acacia Jones sitting behind me in my reading chair, one of my books open in her lap.

I sighed. Would this day never end?

INTERLOG

From Acacia’s Journal

Really, there are some advantages to being me.

I got to Earth FΔ98⁶ with perfect timing, of course. Okay, I admit it; I like to make an entrance. There's nothing wrong with having a bit of flair now and then, no matter what my brother says. Besides, a timely rescue from certain death tends to get people to trust you—at least, usually. Joseph Harker is proving to be a little more difficult than most of my clients.

I mean, I get that he hasn't had it easy. I've done the full research; I know he got a rough start at the InterWorld academy, what with his handler getting killed. That whole thing was glossed over a bit in the archives, but I can read between the lines; he Walked by accident the first time, like most of them do. Unfortunately for him, Binary and HEX were having it out on a neighboring world, so both of them caught it when he ripped through the dimensions. The Walkers may not be able to do much in stopping the war, but every little bit helps—and their powers are still useful enough to the baddies that they'll snatch up a Walker whenever they can.

There's a footnote in his file that says he's one of the more powerful Walkers we've seen in a while; apparently someone here gave InterWorld a heads-up, and they sent a field officer named Jay after him. Jay got him through the In-Between and a little closer to Base, though not without some snags; that's where the log gets a little muddy. I guess he got nabbed by HEX and Jay had to recover him. He was a good officer, that one; his death really upset a lot of people on InterWorld. I take back what I said

about Joseph Harker not having an easy start—that's kind of an understatement. Not that I can really be sympathetic. I can't even let him know he has a file with us, let alone that I've read it. . . .

He really stepped up his training, though; wanted to prove himself, I guess. I can't really blame him—I know I was chomping at the bit to get my sea legs when I was old enough to go for my first voyage. I never got captured by a Tech, though, the way he and his team did by HEX.

That part was pretty well documented. I don't know if we had an Agent there, or if we just did interviews; Agents are more reliable than firsthand accounts, but there weren't any records of one being deployed in the travel log.

Anyway. To the best of my knowledge—which is extensive, believe me—he's the only Walker to have ever been booted from InterWorld. Sent him all the way back home, just because he was the only one to make it back to Base with the full story of how his team got captured. They take no chances on that boat, and if you do anything to raise suspicion even once, your name may as well be Jonah. Escaping from a trap your entire team got caught in is kind of a big deal, no matter what the truth is.

Not that it was his fault, though. That little MDLF of his saved him—and a good thing, too, since I'm pretty sure it's also the reason he got his memories back. I don't know exactly how InterWorld does those brain wipes, but I've seen them done before. They last. His didn't, and it was because his MDLF friend came to find him after he'd had his memory wiped of anything

related to InterWorld. After that, he remembered he could Walk and single-handedly rescued his team from HEX. I was pretty impressed to read that part, I'll admit.

That MDLF, though . . . The story kind of makes me want to befriend it, too; who knows how useful it could be? There's almost nothing about it in the archives—then again, not a whole lot is known about multidimensional life-forms in general. They're dangerous, but we have more important things to worry about. Which is why I'm even sitting here in the first place.

I've already read through Joe Harker's entire file—at least, the part that's not classified. Yeah, it miffs me a bit that there's something in his file that's classified. I mean, come on; I may be young for an Agent, but I've got high clearance, and the guy isn't exactly upper deck material. Besides, I volunteered for this job; it'd be nice to know what to expect. I'm sailing blind almost as much as he is, not that I'm gonna let him know that. Heh . . . I have to pretend I don't know anything about his past, which I do, and make him believe I know all about his future—which I don't. I'm sailing into a storm, here.

Joseph Harker, the anomaly of InterWorld. I gotta admit: Even though he's a grouch with a lot to prove, I kinda like him.



CHAPTER FOUR

IT'S DIFFICULT, IN SITUATIONS like these, to determine

which question will be the least stupid. I could go with the obvious “How did you get in here?” which would likely just make her laugh, or the equally obvious “What are you doing here?” to which she would probably, judging by past history, snap back a witty one-liner that would leave me with at least two omelets’ worth of egg on my face. So I chose to go for the unexpected. Instead of asking a question that would put me at a disadvantage, I could criticize her lack of cultural knowledge and, with luck, make myself feel more confident in the process.

“What, you’ve never heard of Lassie?”

They have all sorts of sayings about the best-laid plans. . . .

“Oh, yeah. The 1950’s Earth television series about the collie.”

So much for making myself feel more confident. All I’d known was that there’d been a show called Lassie about a smart dog. “You, um, obviously know about the show.”

She gave an amused smile and that little shrug. “Yes,” she said, in the tone of voice that meant obviously. “It ran as a TV series on Earths $K\Omega 35^2$ through $\Omega 76$.”

“Right. Of course,” I mumbled. “I’ve just—”

“Not to mention $T\Delta 12$ through 18, where various episodes were reality and not—”

“I’ve just been living with a bunch of people who don’t know about anything from my world. And sometimes . . .”

“You wish you had someone who could talk about the things you like.”

The way she’d said it was like she knew it was true. Like she’d

pulled it right out of my brain. Or out of my journal, which is where I'd written down that exact phrase a few months ago.

Which also happened to be the very same book she had open in her lap.

She saw me look at it, and made no attempt to pretend she hadn't been reading it. I knew she was waiting for a response, but all I could say was "You're reading my journal" in an "of course" tone of voice.

Her smile wasn't quite so cocksure this time. "You're not mad?"

"No." I hoped I was managing to control the blush I felt roaring like a brush fire up my neck. "It's not like it's a diary. Everyone here is required to keep a log of their activities and their feelings."

She looked relieved, tried to hide it. "I know that. That's why I knew you wouldn't be mad."

Somewhat to my surprise, I realized I wasn't mad, just resigned. "How do you know so much about . . . everything?"

She laughed and closed the journal, leaving it on the chair as she stood, folded her arms, and tossed her hair back. "I had a great education. Not to mention long-term memory holographic optimization. How about you? Wanna show me what they teach you here?"

"Not really," I answered automatically, then fumbled as she raised both eyebrows. "Well, yes, sort of, but—"

"Don't worry about clearance. They can't keep me out anyway,

and I'm no threat to you. Unless you give me reason to be," she amended, smiling in a way that reminded me of Jakon at her most feral. Jai calls it her "Cheshire wolf" look.

"The Old Man said you could stay?" I hedged.

"Yep. As long as I'm escorted at all times."

"You were in here alone," I told her, then stumbled forward a bit as Hue bumped me from behind. I'd almost forgotten about him. I looked over my shoulder, noting the mudluff was a rather indignant shade of purple. "Sorry, Hue."

He turned a more pleased shade of pink, and Acacia laughed. "He stayed between me and the door the whole time," she informed me—and then linked her arm through mine. "So. Let's have the tour."

I knew that if I walked out there with Acacia on my arm, I would really never hear the end of it. Ever. For eternity, squared and cubed. I wasn't remotely ready for that. So I walked her to the door, then used the pretense of opening it as a way to disentangle us. I gestured her through in what I hoped was a gentlemanly fashion.

She gave me a little curtsy before stepping out, her amusement as visible as if she could turn colors like Hue. Praying that everyone I knew—which was pretty much everyone, period—was in class or on assignment, I started down the corridor, mysterious girl on one side and mudluff on the other.

"So where are we now?" She was looking around like we were at a theme park, taking everything in. "Everything" being, at

the moment, a corridor with occasional floor-to-ceiling pipes, stanchions, and wallcom panels.

“A corridor. Deck twelve, to be exact.”

“I can see that, thanks. In what sector?”

I wasn't sure why I was giving her a tour in the first place, since she'd already known where my room was and knew that the different areas of the ship were specifically called “sectors” (and something about the way she'd said “sector” tugged at my memory in an odd way, like trying to remember a dream you'd had the day before), but it seemed to be making her happy.

“It's the barracks. Sorry, we don't have a fancy name for it or anything.”

“Yet,” she amended, but I got the feeling she was just saying it to mess with me. It was probably always called the barracks. Why would we want to call it anything else? It wasn't even divided by gender; wasn't much point, especially since there were a few para-incarnations of us who seemed to be both, or neither. As I'd observed before, Acacia was the first real, genuine girl who wasn't an incarnation of us.

“So what are you going to show me first?”

“What do you want to see?” I asked, without much hope of a real answer. I didn't get one.

“Whatever you want to show me.”

I gave up. I was stuck with her because she'd deemed it to be so, and there didn't seem to be much I could do about it. I wasn't even sure I minded; she was a mystery, and she was interesting,

and my complete inability to answer any questions about her had rankled a little. Earlier in the mess hall was probably the most popular I'd ever been in InterWorld, and I hadn't even been able to enjoy it.

"Okay," I said, turning the opposite direction down the hallway that led to the mess hall. That's where pretty much everyone would be right now, and if I had to play tour guide, I'd prefer to do it without an audience. "Well, right next to the barracks are the lockers, where we suit up to go on missions. No one's going out right now, so it should be empty."

"A row of lockers," she commented, looking like she might be making an effort to seem impressed. A considerable effort.

I moved her through the room to the wide double doors nestled between the security pillars. They lit up when we reached them, little red lines scanning over me, then Acacia. I realized I'd better identify her before it decided she was an unknown and therefore dangerous.

"Joe Harker, with—"

"Welcome, Joey." It was the kind of voice that could drive you crazy over the phone, the voice of a maddeningly calm mature female whom you just knew was smirking at you, even though she was just a disembodied vocal pattern. "Welcome, Acacia. Proceed."

I turned to glance at her as the doors slid open. Her smirk matched the one I was pretty sure the voice had sported. I had to ask, even though I didn't think she'd give a straight answer.

“How’d it know you?”

“I told you. I have clearance.” She stepped through the doors into the briefing room, leaving me to hurry after her.

That happened twice more as I showed her the briefing room and the receiving room. I realized as we were walking that, although Acacia had found both the base and my room by herself, she was honestly letting me lead her. I’d taken extensive classes on body language and facial expressions, and I was fairly confident that she truly didn’t know her way around. I was just as confident that she’d probably give me a run for my money in a sparring session. She had an economy of movement to her that suggested she was well schooled in some kind of martial art, a liquid grace that was just about as dangerous as it was fascinating.

“So this is where new recruits come in?” She was leaning over the railing, staring out at the world on the other side of the dome. It was kind of hard to tell where the world ended and Base Town started, since the dome was translucent and the floor of the receiving room was covered in perfectly manicured grass.

“Usually, unless there’s some problem.” I hesitated before explaining further, then continued. If the Old Man had given her prime clearance, he obviously wasn’t keeping many secrets. “The formula we all learn is like a generic address; it’ll take us to whatever world the base is on, then we blip the radar and the pilots bring InterWorld to us. In a bad situation, the ’port team will teleport people directly into Base—usually to the infirmary—but most of the time the whole ship pulls up and they walk

on board.”

“Must be a sight to see,” she murmured, tilting her head to look up at the sky. It was just growing dark outside.

“It is,” I said, remembering where I’d been when the dome picked me up. I remembered Jay’s body beside me, and how I hadn’t been able to feel anything at all by the time they’d come to get us. “C’mon,” I said, my voice a little more gruff than I’d intended it. “I want to show you something else.”

There were very few things on InterWorld that weren’t run with military precision. We had gardens, libraries, gymnasiums, and even an entertainment room for our downtime, but all were kept neat and clean and overseen by a teacher or senior staff appointed by the Old Man. There was no graffiti on Base Town, no litter, no gum under the desks we studied at. There were no murals, no bushes cut into the shape of dinosaurs, no sculptures—there was nowhere on the entire base that showed we were people, with thoughts and feelings and imagination.

Except for the Wall.

Acacia took a few steps into the hall between the receiving room and the infirmary, her expression going from curiosity to genuine, unfeigned awe. “What is this?”

“We call it the Wall. Inventive, I know. It’s been around for as long as anyone here, at least. No one remembers who started it. But it’s pretty much all we have of those who’ve fallen.”

Acacia reached out carefully, brushing her fingers over a photo: yet another boy who looked like me, except his eyes

were silver. I'd never known why. She walked down the length of the hall, looking at everything—or, as much of it as she could. It was impossible to take in everything. There were hundreds of pictures, both holo and flat, plus scraps of paper, with appreciations and epilogues scrawled on them. There were printed epigraphs, as well as words and images painted on the Wall's surface. In one place was the perfectly shed skin of a snake. There were feathers, bits of material, clothing, jewelry, and seashells, along with things I'd never been able to identify because they'd come from worlds I'd never heard of. Some of the holos moved; others were static. Everything that had ever meant something to someone lost on a mission had a place on the Wall.

“This is beautiful,” Acacia said finally, and I could tell she truly meant it. Her quirky smile had been replaced with a calm, sad curl of her lips.

“Yeah,” I said, looking at my own offering. It had taken a lot of courage to finally put something up here when I'd first arrived. Everyone was giving me hell over Jay's death, and they'd already started a little monument to him on the Wall. He'd been important to a lot of people; his was one of the largest sections. Someone had tacked up a picture of him, someone else, a sketch. There was a funny little drawing on one of the mess hall napkins that was apparently an inside joke, and a book with a note that said thank you.

That was most common on Jay's part of the Wall—the thank-yous. In different handwritings, different languages, different

colors and ways. They were all taped or projected or drawn around Jay's photo. Mine was one of them, made from the rocks and pebbles of the world where he'd drawn his last breath.

Acacia caught me looking, and turned her attention to the portrait of Jay. "Who was he?"

Though I'd expected the question the moment we stopped at his picture, I still had to take a breath before I could answer. "Jay. He saved my life," I said shortly. "And I got him killed." It's funny how one's need to impress someone is completely forgotten in the face of honest emotion.

"Did you mean to?"

I turned to look at her, aghast. "No!"

"Then don't blame yourself," she said, not looking at me. "If he was protecting you, he knew what might happen."

"He died because I didn't listen to him," I said, trying to keep from snapping, but it was hard. "I ran off to help a mudluff, even though he told me it was dangerous."

"You mean Hue?" She asked. I nodded.

"He was stuck. . . . I didn't know what he was, but he looked scared. Turns out, he was scared—he'd been trapped by a gyradon." After Jay's death, I'd done some research and found out exactly what the thing had been that had attacked us. It hadn't made me feel any better, but at least I'd felt a little less like a dumb kid who didn't even know what happened well enough to explain it to anyone.

Acacia nodded, apparently recognizing what kind of monster

it had been. “You were right, though. And you saved Hue.”

“Yeah,” I said, looking back at the Wall. Jay for Hue. Was that a fair trade? Hue had saved me from getting caught by HEX once, and in turn enabled me to save my team. . . . But maybe if Jay hadn’t died, everything would have gone differently. Maybe we wouldn’t have been trapped by HEX in the first place, wouldn’t have needed saving . . .

It was enough to give me a headache. I looked at Jay’s portrait, silent, until Acacia spoke again.

“How many of them did you know?”

“Just him,” I said with difficulty. The admission made me feel guilty, like I didn’t deserve to be standing in front of all this loss, untouched. Survivor’s guilt, they call it. Knowing the name of it didn’t make it any easier to live with.

“You’ll know more,” she said. “Eventually.”

Oddly, the comment didn’t irritate me. She wasn’t trying to be smug, or show that she knew more than I did. I knew it was true. You don’t fight a war without expecting casualties, and as much as I’d work to not let it happen, I knew more of us would wind up as memories on the Wall. Probably even me.

“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”

She took my hand.

I showed her the port room—there was some debate over whether or not it was called that because you could teleport to other parts of Base Town from it, or because it was on the far left side of the ship—and looped back around through the second

row of lockers to show her the mini theater and the arcades, then took her through the library back to the classrooms. Most of the classes were done for the day, but a few of my teachers were still coming and going.

I got us out onto one of the higher decks in time for her to witness another phase transition. One of InterWorld's more insidious features was its ability to move both forward and backward in time, spanning a period of more than 100,000 years. And just to make things harder for HEX and the Binary to track us, the soliton array engines were also programmed to go "sideways" in time as well; in other words, they could cross the Dirac walls from one parallel Earth to another. The number of altiversal worlds we crossed to, and the time we stayed in each one, was determined by spells based on quantum randomization; there was absolutely no way to break the code pattern.

For the last two weeks we'd had the wards on maximum and the air filters going full blast, because this particular Earth was celebrating its particular anniversary (if that's the word) of the K-T extinction event, which had pretty much wiped out Barney the dinosaur and all his extended family. Only now was the raw, bloody sunlight beginning to break through the global cloud cover, and what it showed wasn't pretty: a scorched Earth, carpeted with the charcoal of what had once been a magnificent old-growth forest.

"Your ship can time travel?" she asked, after I'd explained what the phase shift was. She seemed incredibly interested, and I

was a little too grateful that she was finally asking me a question I could answer.

“Yes and no,” I said, trying to give her the same kind of non-answer she always gave me. It didn’t exactly work. She just looked at me, and the expectant way she raised her eyebrows made me elaborate further. “We’re traveling on a randomly set path, on parallel dimensions of the same three worlds. The ship goes backward and forward, but—”

“But it can’t anchor at will,” she said authoritatively, giving a knowing nod. “You phase to destinations set by a random variable on those three worlds, but you’re still anchored to the alphastream.”

I didn’t have any clue what she was talking about, but that was more or less par for the course at this point. She seemed satisfied at my nod; what she’d said sounded right, anyway, and I knew we never time traveled beyond going back and forth on our base worlds. I turned to lead her out of the upper deck, down to the class halls. The windows around us were still coated with a thick layer of dust and ash.

“Hey, Jayarre,” I said as we passed through one of the open doors. Unlike the school I was used to, we never called teachers by their last names and “Mr.” or “Ms.”—after all, some of them didn’t even have last names.

Jayarre focused on me—I thought he’d been looking at me anyway, which was why I’d said hello, but it was hard to tell with the monocle—and gave a cheerful smile accompanied by

an exuberant wave. Jayarre was the Culture and Improvisation teacher. He hailed from an Earth more toward the magic side of things, where he'd once explained that all the world was, literally, a stage. I didn't really understand it beyond that, but he had the look of a circus ringmaster and the disposition of your favorite uncle. "Hello, hello! Showing the lady around, are we?"

He also, like most of the other teachers, often seemed to just know things.

"Yeah," I said, pausing in the doorway. "This is Acacia Jones."

"Well met, my dear, well met!" He rose and crossed the room in three giant steps to shake her hand. She didn't seem at all rattled. "Are you enjoying your tour du jour, madame?"

"Vachement, monsieur!" she responded, which I recognized from Basic Language Studies as an emphatic agreement.

Jayarre's eyebrows rose almost to the brim of his top hat, mustache lifting with his grin. "Merveilleuse, ma bichette!"

"I was going to show her the Hazard Zone," I interrupted, only to have those eyebrows turned toward me next.

"Were you, now? Well, why not, why not? If she has prime clearance, I see no way at all in which this could go even remotely wrong!" Jayarre was kind of like Jai sometimes, except that instead of using words with lots of syllables, he just used a lot of words. "Perhaps I shall join you on your wondrous journey!"

I hadn't anticipated that, but before I could come up with any possible reason he shouldn't, someone else passed by the door.

"Office. Meeting," she said shortly, turning to glance at

me. Jirathe was the Alchemy teacher, and never used two words if one would do. She looked as human as me, save the minor quibble that her cells were made from ectoplasm instead of protoplasm. As a result, her body was sort of a uniform translucent gray when she wasn't moving. But when she was . . . well, the human body is made of more than six trillion cells, each one mostly water. Whenever Jirathe moved, it was like six trillion prisms catching whatever light there was. Or, to put it another way, it was like a rainbow exploding.

“Should I head back to the briefing room?” I hadn't heard anything over the speakers, but maybe something important was happening.

“No.” Jirathe gave Jayarre a significant glance, then continued down the deck, through a shaft of crimson sunlight that made her bare arms and shoulders ripple like a fireworks display.

Jayarre murmured, “Sorry about that, my boy. Sounds like senior staff only.” He turned back to Acacia, taking her hand and pressing a kiss to her knuckles. “Lovely to meet you, my dear. Perhaps we can exchange pleasantries another time, but now I've got to dash. à bientôt.”

“Enchanté!” Acacia called over her shoulder as we parted ways, and I noticed several of the other teachers filing out of their classrooms and heading in the direction of the Old Man's office. What was the meeting about? Acacia, probably. Was he going to revoke her clearance? No, he'd have no reason to. . . . He wouldn't have given it to her in the first place if he didn't

trust her.

“It’s about me, I bet,” she said cheerfully. If she was sharing any of the same thoughts as I, she seemed completely at peace with them.

“Probably. That doesn’t bother you?”

“It’d bother me if they weren’t having a meeting,” she said, and I paused to glance at her. “You’re fighting a war here, and you’ve suddenly got a stowaway on your boat. Wouldn’t you call a meeting to make sure everyone knew about a potential threat?”

“The Old Man didn’t think you were a threat.”

She tilted her head at me. “You sure? He gave me clearance, but do you really think he’s not making sure everyone knows it, just in case?”

I thought about that for a moment, going over what she’d said and the way she’d said it. “Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“A potential threat.”

“You’re a Walker, aren’t you? You move between dimensions. You know that ‘potential’ is a heavy word.”

I couldn’t help it; I smiled, just a little. “True. So you are a potential threat.”

“Sure I am,” she said, looking at me seriously. Her eyes, as I noticed before, were unmistakably violet, not that she looked anything other than human. Aside from her circuit-board nails, that is. “Or I’m an ally. You think that’s only up to me?”

Behind us, reality shimmered, twisted, and re-formed into

a completely different, though no less extreme, environment. I tore my gaze from Acacia's to find that we were hovering over an equatorial glacier. Welcome to Snowball Earth, where for millions of years even the oceans were frozen solid. I glanced back at Acacia to see if she'd noticed the small time jump. She was looking out the window as well, with an odd, peaceful smile.

"No," I said in response to her last statement, and she smiled at me. The heating elements kicked in as I turned toward the physical training section of the ship, but I was pretty sure that smile could have warmed me up by itself.



CHAPTER FIVE

THE HAZARD ZONE IS like the best virtual reality game ever, except that on occasion—or even most of the time, really—it will try to kill you. It's the Holodeck and the Danger Room combined, with five stages of different variables and conditioning. It's not that stage 1 is entirely harmless and stage 5 is real danger—the different levels merely indicate how badly things will hurt you. Some of the challenges are real, some of them are illusory, and all of them are programmed with random or hidden variables: A rock appears under your foot as you're trying to dodge a series of spears, or a swarm of hornets is stirred up by the particle blast you've just diverted into a tree.

Getting hurt in the Hazard Zone is like a rite of passage.

Everyone does it at least once. You're not really one of us until you've been sent to the infirmary with a third-degree burn because there was the tiniest bit of doubt in your mind that the fire-breathing salamander that just leaped out of the cave could really hurt you.

You learn fast. I did.

My first Hazard Zone injury was better than some (J/O had broken a servo when part of the ground had actually caved under his weight) and worse than others (Jerzy Harhkar's only injury had literally been a paper cut during an "attack on the school" scenario). I'd stumbled onto a spinedog variable while training in a jungle simulation. If you've never met a spinedog, don't feel bad; I hadn't, either. It seemed likely that they had those spines for a reason, and that they knew how to use them—what I hadn't known was that part of the reason (aside from the obvious) that they were called spinedogs was their choice of habitat. Not wanting to disturb their nest, I'd ducked around the nearest tree, putting a hand on the bark to steady myself—

—and nearly jumped out of my skin as the tree swelled up like a puffer fish. Hundreds of tiny, wooden needles stabbed into my palm, and not only had I stumbled back into the path of the simulated HEX agent I'd been playing cat and mouse with, I failed the sim because I couldn't draw my blaster with my arm numb to the elbow.

It was hardly the most painful thing I'd ever experienced, but having those needles removed was no fun at all, and using my

hand was difficult for two weeks afterward. It hadn't even left me with any cool scars to show off.

Acacia was looking at the empty room with the kind of interested skepticism we all start out with, but I really didn't want to drag her to the infirmary after her first session. "It doesn't seem very big," she commented finally, crossing from one wall to the next in about twenty-five big steps.

"Not until you're running for your life from a cyborg velociraptor, no. The floor is made of anisotropic treadmills that move with you when you run. The scenery moves around you. Makes it feel pretty real, once you get over the fear that it's gonna malfunction and send you smack into a wall."

Acacia giggled. "Has that ever happened?"

"Not that I know of, but I'm always afraid it will."

"I would be, too." She paused. "Can we . . . ?"

I hated having to tell her no. I wasn't sure why, but I did. "Nah. Only a few people have the codes, and they're all . . . not here. Right now." I was also hesitant to remind her of the meeting—which was most likely about her—going on upstairs, even though she hadn't seemed particularly concerned. I just wanted her to feel welcome . . . after all, she might be staying. "Probably tomorrow, though. People use it all the time, and you're a guest, so I'm sure we could fit you in."

"That's okay. Is there a kitchen around here? I'm starving."

"Yes," I hedged a little. Kitchen meant mess hall, and mess hall meant people, and people meant awkward. At least in this

situation. “But it’ll probably be pretty full . . .”

“I don’t mind. Which way?” She smiled cheerfully at me, and I felt my heart and stomach collide. I was pretty nervous about having to introduce her to everyone who’d been calling her my girlfriend.

“Uh, back the way we came.” I turned to go, offering a hand to Hue as he met us at the door. Hue didn’t like the Hazard Zone. He’d popped in to see me once in the middle of a simulation, and I thought he was going to have a coronary—if mudluffs even have hearts. He’d turned a confused grayish, then a few different shades of red or pink, all of which seemed to mean alarmed, then he’d basically turned into a multi-colored disco ball. If anyone in the room had been prone to seizures, Hue would have done them in right then. Then he’d vanished, and I hadn’t seen him for almost a whole week. To tell the truth, I’d been getting worried by the time he finally showed up again.

I’d tried to ask him about it, but hadn’t gotten much of a response. He seemed confused any time I’d brought it up. The one time I’d been sort of “linked” with him, I’d gotten an impression of the In-Between making perfect sense, from his point of view. I suspected that, for Hue, being in the Hazard Zone was like how my mom used to get sick on virtual reality rides at theme parks; she’d say that because her body wasn’t doing what the world around her was telling her it was doing, it caused a weird dislocation. I guess being a multidimensional life-form in a room full of 3-D special effects and things that weren’t actually

what they looked like must have been a little bizarre.

Walking through the halls with a girl on one side and a mudluff on the other was, as I'd mentioned before, a little weird. I mean, I knew I was the odd one out as far as many things went—and let me tell you how much fun it was living with a bunch of people who are as similar to you as people could get and still being the odd one out—but this only served to reinforce it. I was the one who'd gotten Jay killed. I was the one who'd been captured by HEX. I was the one who'd made friends with a mudluff. I'd stumbled into a HEX trap a second time, lost my entire team, been kicked off Inter-World, and somehow regained my memories and found my team again. And I was the first redheaded J-named person to bring someone new to the base. No one else here could say any one of those things, let alone all of them . . . and here I was again, standing out, with my girl friend (not “girlfriend,” mind you) and my mudluff friend, wandering through the halls like I hadn't a care in the world.

Really, it was no wonder some of my para-incarnations still disliked me.

“Deep thoughts?” asked Acacia, and I realized I was neglecting my duties as tour guide. We'd passed through several hallways without my saying a word, not that there'd been anything interesting to say about them. They were hallways. Some of them had doors that led to other hallways.

“No, sorry. Just thinking about . . . the mess hall. You're gonna get swarmed,” I warned her, unsurprised when she merely

assured me she'd be fine.

"I can handle it," she said—and then I opened the door.

Okay, so I'd like to say a mob of redheaded, freckle-faced Walkers surged forward like paparazzi, asking questions and clamoring for our attention. It's what I was expecting, honestly. In retrospect, I'm pretty sure Acacia would have been able to handle that, no problem. What actually happened was like something out of one of those old horror movies, or teen chick flicks where there's the dreaded embarrassing school scene.

I opened the door, and all noise stopped.

Just stopped. Everyone stopped talking. One after the other, everyone trailed off in the middle of a sentence, all eyes turning to Acacia and me.

Then, like a wave rolling slowly over the shore, the chatter started up again—muted, hushed—from one end of the room to the other. Slowly, most of them turned back to what they were doing—eating or chatting or reading or enjoying some kind of handheld media—and the noise level rose again, though nowhere near to what it had been before.

It was probably one of the most unnerving things I'd ever experienced, and that's saying a lot.

Acacia seemed to be of much the same opinion. I didn't think anyone could tell from inside the room, but she was leaning slightly toward me. Hue was practically settled on my shoulder like a parrot, but he tended to do that when we were around a bunch of people.

“This is the mess,” I said to Acacia, not bothering to raise or lower my voice. I was just giving her a tour; it didn’t need to be a big deal. “Kitchen’s open. It’s not gourmet, but most of the stuff tastes okay when you get used to it.”

“Let me guess: vitamin-enriched condensed protein?” Acacia walked casually over to the buffet table with me.

“Yep. Just like Mom used to make,” I joked, noting that the mention of Mom only brought a slight pang of homesickness instead of the crippling, gut-wrenching sadness it used to cause. I didn’t know how to feel about that, or about Acacia’s knowing look.

“Yeah,” she agreed, her expression contrasting with something a little softer in her voice. “If Mom was an army chef.”

I watched her pile food onto her tray with reckless abandon, apparently not needing any help to figure out what was what. Or she just didn’t care. She was hard to read, and I didn’t want it to look like I was trying. A sudden instinct for chivalry bubbled up from somewhere inside me, and I carried her water glass and protein shake to a table for her. She hadn’t asked, and didn’t do anything other than look faintly surprised as I took them, but she gave me a nod of thanks as I set them down. I still wasn’t sure where the instinct had come from, but the simple nod—not sarcastic, not teasing, not anything but grateful—made me glad I’d done it.

“I actually love these,” she commented as she bit into a grainberry, one of the few Earth-grown things on the menu.

I couldn't stand them, but I kept that to myself. "So, where are you from?" I'd refrained from asking thus far, certain I wouldn't get a real answer, but I was dying of curiosity. How did she know so much about InterWorld and every other world?

"Around," she answered, with a mysterious smile and that little shrug. The smile was kind of enticing, like she was daring me to ask more.

"Well, how old are you?"

"That's so rude. Do they not teach you manners on this boat?"

"Several cultures' worth," I informed her, for once thinking fast enough to keep up. "And in some places, direct questions are a sign of respect."

She took a drink from her shake, giving me that faintly appraising up-and-down look. "I'm not from one of them," she said finally, but she still sounded playful.

"Okay. That narrows it down to a few million different possibilities." Despite her continued lack of real answers to any of my questions, I was enjoying the game. I didn't actually mind that she wasn't telling me anything. I just wanted to learn more about her, and even though I wasn't getting any facts, I was learning what she was like. It was something.

I wasn't the only interested party, though, and after keeping a respectful distance for a while, people started trickling over. The crippling social anxiety I suddenly felt was alleviated by the fact that not one person used the word "girlfriend" in front of Acacia, which made me feel both profoundly grateful and

incredibly confused. They'd teased me to no end without her there; wouldn't it be more fun to tease me in front of her?

Maybe not, on second thought. Despite the fact that we all came from very different places, we were all basically the same person, and I know I'd been humiliated enough times in school that I wouldn't do the same to my worst enemy, let alone to one of my para-incarnations. It was actually kind of comforting, and I found that now that I wasn't wrestling with social paranoia, I was enjoying seeing Acacia give the other versions of me the same kind of runaround I'd been getting.

"How long are you going to be here?" someone finally asked: Jirho, a smallish version of me who came from a darker, colder version of Earth. He had big, pale eyes and a light coating of fur all along his skin, which basically made him look like me if I were a stuffed animal. He also had claws and pointed canines, and hadn't taken well to the nickname "Plushie."

"Until I'm called back."

"To where?"

"Where I came from."

Hue (who had shrunk to the size of a baseball and settled himself in the hood of my jacket for most of this time) suddenly floated up beside my left ear and disappeared with a faint pop. I blinked, automatically turning my head toward the noise—and the familiar sound of the alarm went off, pinging twice to silence us. Then the Old Man's voice came over the PA system.

"Walkers, we have a Code Mercury."

All noise in the room, which had already lowered to a few murmurs, stopped completely. In the entire time I'd been at InterWorld, we'd never had a Code Mercury. I knew what it was, of course, as I was versed in all technical terms and alerts and procedures.

They'd found a Walker—undiscovered by Binary or HEX—on one of the fringe worlds.



CHAPTER SIX

JUST SO YOU UNDERSTAND exactly what a huge deal this was, let me explain some things. The Multi-verse is everything, all the infinite possibilities and worlds that ever have existed, or might, or will exist. The Altiverse is a comparatively small part of that, a swirling maelstrom that contains all the infinite possible Earths that have existed, or might, or will exist.

Then, there's the Arc. Think of it like a crescent moon—you can only see part of it, but the rest of the moon is still there, shadowed. The Arc is the bright part: a slice of the whole picture, the visible worlds that exist on the spectrum. The dark part is where all the possibilities and probabilities exist, those little alternate realities that get split off every time a major decision is made.

One side of the Arc is heavy with magic, the other with technology. The Earths existing around either side of the Arc

are known as the fringe worlds. Fringe worlders are all the more valuable because the worlds they come from are so heavily influenced with science or magic that the Walkers tend to be more powerful than us middle worlders. The ones who come from the magic side can do anything from fly to cast spells, and I'm not talking like Jo can fly, with wings if there's enough magic in the air. I mean just fly, because they will it to be so. Because they're magic enough to manage it even without the atmosphere they're used to. Ones from the science spectrum are more like J/O—from what I've heard, he's the closest to a fringer we've gotten in a few decades.

The fringe worlds almost never yield Walkers anymore; HEX and Binary hold sway on opposite ends of the spectrum, and they grab up all the Walkers they can find. Sometimes we get a blip here and there, but we've never been able to get out there before they get snatched up.

The giant screen at the back of the mess hall was alight, and every eye was on it. Would the new Walker be from the magic end or the science? How long before Binary or HEX would find them?

“We don't know their status yet, but Upstairs leads me to believe it has the potential to be disastrous if we don't get them. Joeb, Jerzy, Jonha, Jorisine, and Josy—suit up.”

A low murmur went through the room. Four of those names were senior field ops, and no one had ever heard of the Old Man sending that many at once on any mission. If this failed,

four teams would be off the grid until they could be split and reassigned.

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