

Annica

Starseed Ambassador

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Contents

Chapter 1: A Universe With Pie	1
Chapter 2: Extracurricular Activity ...	8
Chapter 3: Needs Improvement	26
Chapter 4: Circles Within Circles	44
Chapter 5: Down the Rabbit Hole	57
Chapter 6: Back to Basics	77
Chapter 7: Above and Beyond	90
Chapter 8: Critical Review	103
Chapter 9: Show Your Work	126
Chapter 10: Passing Grade	138

CHAPTER 1

A UNIVERSE WITH PIE

Annica awoke to the delectable scent of fresh apple pie wafting into her bedroom. The fragrance of baked goods had become common since her mother started a small baking business from their kitchen, but still, Annica doubted she would ever tire of it.

She yawned and stretched, then kicked off a light blanket. The late summer air was warm enough that she hardly needed the blanket at all. She groggily sat up and pushed her long blond hair through an elastic hair tie. She would take the time to neatly braid it later, but for now the prospect of breakfast pie took priority.

Annica was 14 years old. She was tall for her age, but she otherwise looked a few years younger. She never wore makeup, and her sense of fashion never developed beyond jeans and plain T-shirts. She had large, pale blue eyes that focused so intensely that others sometimes found direct eye contact uncomfortable. Regardless, few other kids found her presence intimidating – she smiled easily, with a genuine warmth that naturally calmed those around her.

Still in her pajamas, she left her bedroom and hurried toward the kitchen.

“Ah, so that’s what it takes to wake you up!” Annica’s mother Mavis proclaimed with a knowing smile.

It was still a bit before nine o’clock – really not very late at all, Annica thought. She would be starting ninth grade next week, and she was still savoring her last few opportunities to sleep in. The transition to high school would be particularly significant; her last school enrolled kindergartners through eighth graders, and middle school had essentially been an extension of elementary school.

“Here, try this,” Mavis said, handing Annica a spoonful of extra apple pie filling from a large mixing bowl. “This part is ready, but you’ll have to wait for the full presentation.”

Mavis was a plump woman no taller than Annica. She had round, prominent facial features that were often exaggerated by a broad smile that left creases around the corners of her eyes. Her hair was dark, but even if it weren’t, it would still be apparent to most that Annica was adopted.

Annica grasped the spoon and shoved it into her mouth. “Mmmm,” she said, her eyes closing in contentment.

“Good?”

Annica removed the spoon from her mouth and opened her eyes wide. “We’re going to be rich!”

“Three more orders this morning!” Mavis said in a sing-songy voice.

Annica looked at the spoon. “There’s brown sugar in this, right?”

“Yes! I’m trying something a little different. What else do you notice?”

“Hmmm, I think I’m going to need another spoonful to answer that,” Annica bargained.

“Ah, of course you will,” Mavis replied with a sly wink. She grabbed a clean spoon, dipped it into the bowl of filling, and offered it to Annica.

Annica took a slower bite and concentrated. “Maybe some honey, and... bits of rosemary?”

Mavis lightly clapped her hands. “That’s right!”

“It’s really good,” Annica affirmed with a nod. “Is there anything you *didn’t* put in here?”

“Well,” Mavis said, resting one hand on her hip and pointing with the other, “you know what Carl Sagan used to say: ‘If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.’”

Annica laughed. “The whole universe? Is that what’s in this?”

“In a way, yes.”

Annica furrowed her brow and tilted her head.

Mavis busily turned her attention back to her baking process as she continued talking. “Think about it, Annica. Where do apples come from?”

“An apple tree?”

“And where do apple trees grow?”

“The Earth?”

“And where did the Earth come from?”

Annica blinked several times in rapid succession. “It’s too early in the morning for this, Mom.”

Mavis laughed heartily, enough to jiggle her belly a bit. “You can’t create an apple pie without creating the whole universe first! Even if some things seem unrelated to each other, nothing can exist independently from the whole.”

Annica rolled her eyes. “Okay, I’ll be sure to write this down in my journal. In the meantime, can I have some more pie filling?”

“*One* more spoonful, but wash one of those spoons first!” Mavis commanded, pointing a large wooden mixing spoon at Annica.

Annica hastily washed a spoon with the kitchen sponge, then used it to scoop up the biggest glob of pie filling she could possibly balance.

Mavis shook her head and sighed. “Okay, that’s on me, but now I’m cutting you off.” She yanked the bowl away from Annica. “There are some leftover muffins in the fridge if you’re still hungry.”

Annica jammed the spoonful of pie filling into her mouth. Without removing the spoon, she opened the refrigerator door and took out two muffins from a sealed plastic container.

“Honey, come look at this!” Annica’s father Daryl bellowed at Mavis from down the hall.

“Daryl, I’m busy! You’ll have to come out here if you want to show me something!”

Daryl trotted into the kitchen holding an oversized laptop. As with Mavis, few would reasonably mistake Daryl for Annica’s biological parent. He was a squirrely man with sparse, wiry dark hair. He was usually slouching, and his small, circular glasses were always a little crooked. His nose was angular, and his beady eyes were frequently darting around.

He carelessly brushed aside an assortment of baking supplies and set his laptop on the kitchen counter.

“Oh yes, just make yourself at home,” Mavis grumbled.

“This is important! Look!”

Daryl’s laptop had a video of the night sky from their home security camera loaded up. He angled the screen in Annica’s and Mavis’s direction, hit the “play” button and stepped back.

After about five seconds he burst out, “There! Did you see it?”

Mavis released an exasperated sigh. “See what, exactly?”

“Watch!”

Daryl excitedly rewound the video and played it again. After the first five seconds, he thrust his finger at the screen. “There! Right there! You saw it that time, right?”

Annica absentmindedly dropped both dirty spoons into the dishwasher and took a bite from one of her

muffins while walking over to the laptop. “I didn’t see anything,” she said through a mouthful.

“Okay, I’m going to play it back at one tenth speed,” Daryl said, rewinding the video again and adjusting the speed downward. He hit “play” one more time and dramatically stood back.

Annica squinted at the video showing the night sky over their house. Near the upper-right corner was a small white orb moving left, then right, then left again before zipping out of view. It was barely perceptible, and Annica figured it could be anything.

“That light?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes! You saw it, right?”

“Sure, I guess,” Annica replied with a shrug while taking another bite of her muffin. “What do you think it is?” she asked through another mouthful.

“Oh, don’t get him started,” Mavis groaned while opening the oven door to check on her pie.

Daryl clapped the lid shut and picked the laptop up off the counter. “I can tell you what it’s *not*,” he said emphatically. “It’s not a satellite. It’s not an insect. It’s not a plane. It could possibly be a drone, but for that to be the case—”

“Daryl, honey,” Mavis interrupted, “how’s your job search going?”

Daryl pursed his lips. “I have another interview next week,” he said with an index finger raised in the air.

“Oh, that’s great!” Mavis exclaimed, making a point to exaggerate her enthusiasm. “Do you need anything to prepare? Maybe a new tie? We could go shopping later today – Annica still needs school supplies...”

Annica and Daryl loudly groaned in unison. Mavis folded her arms and rolled her eyes while Annica and Daryl flashed smirks at each other.

“I know, I know,” Mavis mockingly conceded. “Being an adult is hard. Starting high school is hard. But we’re all big boys and girls here, right?”

Annica took the final bite of her first muffin. “If aliens land and take over the planet, do I still have to go to school?” she asked with deadpan facetiousness.

“Yes,” Mavis said, matching Annica’s tone of feigned sincerity. “In fact, going to school will be even more important. The aliens are only going to want smart people running their new society. The rest will be sent to the salt mines.”

“Well, at least I’ll have a job!” Daryl said chipperly.

Annica chuckled as she took the first bite of her second muffin. Mavis shook her head and giggled under her breath.

CHAPTER 2

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY

Annica finished her first day of high school without speaking to anyone at all.

The day began with first period biology and second period world history. The 90-minute classes mostly consisted of syllabi review and some basic instruction, without the social introductions that were more common at Annica's last school.

She ate alone during lunch. This came naturally to her; she didn't know anyone she would consider a friend, and she didn't feel inclined to assert herself into any social circles. It wasn't that she disliked other kids, but she was never really sure what to talk about, and she felt perfectly comfortable being alone. She had always preferred large, open social settings without the pressure of direct one-on-one interactions. Barring that, her own company was sufficient.

She picked up a salad from a food cart and sat on an isolated bench away from the main Quad area. Between bites of croutons and dressing-soaked lettuce, she read a bit of *Alice in Wonderland*. She was about halfway through the book, after spending a good portion of her summer vacation reading through classic literature.

Several students shot Annica odd glances, puzzled by the sight of a freshman actively choosing social isolation on the first day of school. Annica paid them little attention. She was in her own world – one where climbing social hierarchies had no importance at all.

Immediately following lunch was gym class. She remained completely silent while changing her clothes in the locker room before the class began, somewhat surprised that other girls used this time to socialize. Annica hadn't been required to change into different clothes for physical education in middle school, and the whole situation seemed weirdly out of place to her. Why, she wondered, was an educational institution that was so strict about dress codes during other classes now forcing its students to strip down to their underwear in front of each other? She wasn't ashamed of her body, or really all *that* self-conscious, but regardless, the principle of the matter felt degrading. She hurried through the process as quickly as she could.

Annica was again surprised and a bit perturbed when the gym teacher started the class by asking the students to run several laps around the football field. The temperature was at least in the lower 90s, and after just 10 minutes Annica was already red-faced and soaked with sweat. Her heart was pounding, and instead of breathing rhythmically through her nose she was gasping for air through her mouth. Middle school physical education had mostly consisted of light recreational activities after a bit

of stretching – nothing nearly this uncomfortable. The laps were followed by push-ups, jumping jacks and various other aerobic and anaerobic activities. By the end of the 90-minute ordeal, Annica’s neatly braided hair had turned into a frayed mess.

The day ended with fourth period geometry. Even after changing out of her gym clothes and cooling off a bit, Annica still felt sticky and gross. She could tell that her natural body odor had overpowered the deodorant applied that morning, and she guessed others sitting nearby could probably tell too. The whole situation was highly unpleasant, and concentrating on math proved difficult.

She felt great relief when the final bell rang. She shoved her geometry textbook into her backpack and hurried off campus. Her house was about a mile from school, and the walk home provided a much-welcomed opportunity to clear her mind. The first half mile was a fairly typical suburb; little spacing lay between the single-family homes behind manicured lawns, and several stoplights directed after-school traffic.

The last half mile of Annica’s walk took her down a single-lane, pothole-filled country road running through the outskirts of town. Traffic was almost non-existent here, and the houses were more derelict, with significant spacing between each one. Large fields of dry, overgrown grass home to noisy summertime crickets bordered the road and stretched for miles beyond each property.

“There she is!” Mavis greeted as Annica walked through the front door of their home. “How was your first day of high school?”

Annica shrugged and dropped her backpack against the wall. “It was okay, I guess,” she said apathetically while removing her shoes.

Mavis raised an eyebrow. “Well, what happened? Did you make any friends?”

Annica plopped down on the couch and leaned her head back. “I don’t think I talked to a single person all day,” she confessed.

“No one at all?” Mavis asked with concern.

Annica inspected the frayed hairs in her braid. “Having gym class during third period isn’t great,” she said, ignoring Mavis’s follow-up.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s like...” Annica’s voice trailed off. “You’re in this normal school day, and then you’re forced to change your clothes in front of strangers, and then you’re out running in the sun and getting all sweaty, right after eating lunch when your stomach is full, and then you’re just supposed to get changed and go back to class like nothing out of the ordinary happened?”

“Well, yes,” Mavis said matter-of-factly, taking a seat in a chair across from Annica.

Annica dropped her braid and looked up at Mavis. “Should I bring my gym clothes home tomorrow so you can wash them?”

Mavis paused while dredging up memories of her own high school experience. “I think gym clothes are usually washed after the end of the week.”

“Whaaat?” Annica whined. “God, they’re going to be a biohazard by then!”

“Annica, you wear dirty clothes all the time,” Mavis sighed.

“Yeah, but not after pumping ninety minutes of sweat into them!”

Mavis took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. “What else happened at school?”

“And it’s like, you’re just sitting there in your own filth while trying to do geometry,” Annica continued, ignoring Mavis’s attempt to change the subject. “Do I need to roll deodorant across my entire body or something?”

“Why didn’t you talk to anyone at school?” Mavis pressed, trying to change the topic more assertively.

Annica shrugged and scuffed her feet on the floor while casting her gaze downward. “I don’t know anyone. What am I supposed to talk about?”

“You can introduce yourself. Talk about your hobbies, what kind of music you listen to.”

“Barf,” Annica retorted, looking up at Mavis. “What about the weather? Should I talk about the weather too?”

“I know you don’t like small talk, Annica,” Mavis said with a slight air of sympathy, “but it’s how you make friends.”

“Why would I want to make friends with people who like small talk?”

“So talk about something else, then.”

“Like what?” Annica asked, looping the conversation back to the beginning.

Mavis paused before deciding on a different approach. “What did you talk about with your croquet friends at your last school?”

From fifth grade through eighth grade, Annica had spent all of her recesses playing croquet in her old school’s soccer field. It started out as a solo activity, but she gradually got more and more attention from fellow students until it had about 20 participants at any given time.

“Anything that came up, or the game itself, or nothing at all,” Annica replied. She redirected her attention back to her braid, undoing the frayed mess so it could be neatly redone.

“Do you think you might want to join a club?” Mavis asked.

“I don’t know. God, Mom, it’s my first day! Maybe, maybe not. It just seems kind of forced though, doesn’t it? Like if you want to play a sport they have all these structured games and pressure and everything. And if you want to be a cheerleader or something they might reject you entirely. With croquet, anyone could pick up a mallet and play for a few minutes and leave if they wanted. Plus, who cares about who wins or loses at croquet?”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find something,” Mavis said, standing up from her seat. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some baking to do before dinner.”

Annica, Mavis and Daryl sat down for dinner a few hours later. Daryl mostly talked about his latest job interview that afternoon – it seemed to go well, he said, but he’d need to wait a while to hear back. Mavis was still experimenting with her baking recipes. She got two more orders that day; one was for a cherry pie and another was for a cheesecake. It wasn’t enough income to support the whole family, but, she emphasized, anything was better than nothing. Annica reiterated her displeasure with summertime third period gym class for Daryl’s sake.

“At least they don’t make you take public showers anymore!” Daryl said in response to Annica mentioning her discomfort with changing in the locker room.

“Wait, what?” Annica gasped. “Did they really do that? I thought that was just a thing in movies!”

“It was more normal for older generations,” Mavis explained.

Annica dropped her fork to her plate. “I swear, is the entire high school experience just designed to humiliate kids as much as possible?”

“Well, they stopped, didn’t they? You get to keep your dignity now, and your sweat too!” Daryl said with a hearty laugh.

Annica stared at her plate of food. “I’m going to save this for later,” she said, standing up from her seat. She

grabbed a small plastic container from a cabinet and filled it with unfinished beans, broccoli and mashed potatoes.

She then retreated to her bedroom, put on some music through her headphones, and pulled out *Alice in Wonderland*.

A few hours later, she was sound asleep in her bed.

* * *

“Hey! Annica!” an unknown girl’s voice whispered.

Annica sat straight up, wide awake in the darkness. “Who’s there?!”

“Oh good, you’re awake!” the voice responded.

Annica frantically looked around her room. There was enough dim light coming from her window that she could make out a few shadows, but she couldn’t see anyone.

Suddenly a bright light shined through the window, and she clearly saw a young girl sitting at the foot of her bed.

“Hi!” the girl said. She had a big, goofy grin on her face, and she waved her hand as she spoke.

“Jesus Christ!” Annica exhaled while scrambling backward in her bed. She pulled the covers up to her face and peered over the top. “Who are you?! How did you get in here?!”

“You left a door open,” the girl replied. “Well, metaphysically speaking, anyway. My name is Maya. Please don’t be afraid! I promise I won’t hurt you.”

Maya looked about six or seven years old. Her facial features were rounder than Annica’s, but otherwise they could easily pass as sisters. Maya’s pale blue eyes were even larger than Annica’s – so large that they seemed a bit unnatural. She had medium-length blond hair tied into pigtails with big silver ribbons, and she wore a form-fitting blue jumpsuit made of soft, elastic fabric that covered her whole body.

“If you have to promise you won’t hurt someone, maybe it’s a sign you already did something wrong!” Annica blurted out. “Mom! Dad!”

“They can’t hear you,” Maya said. Her tone was calm and friendly enough that the words didn’t sound as menacing as they otherwise might have.

“Why are you here?” Annica asked. “What do you want?” She could feel her heart pounding from adrenaline rushing through her system.

“Hmm, I’m afraid there’s no short answer to either of those questions,” Maya said with a slow shake of her head. “But that’s okay! You’ll get the long version.”

Annica’s field of vision was quickly overwhelmed by a blinding white light. She sealed her eyes shut, but even through her eyelids the light seemed brighter than the sun.

When the light subsided, Annica carefully opened her eyes and found herself in some kind of spaceship. The floor and ceiling were metallic, and the walls were lined with various control panels with blinking colored lights. Between the control panels were large windows. Other than Maya, the ship seemed empty.

“Come!” Maya said with a smile, gesturing for Annica to follow while walking toward the nearest window. Annica was frozen. It took all her conscious effort to join Maya at the window. She peered outside and saw the roof of her house.

Annica felt dizzy. “I’m dreaming,” she said distantly.

“Close, but not quite,” Maya replied. “It’s true that you were asleep when I came to you. And it’s true that this experience you’re having isn’t *entirely* physical in the way you think about physicality. But it’s not really the same as a dream experience either. It’s somewhere... in between.”

Annica struggled to respond. “In between?”

“Yes,” Maya confirmed. “Humans have a very rigid view of the fabric of reality, that everything is either physical or non-physical – that dimensions exist entirely separate from each other. The truth is much messier and more complicated than that. Physical and non-physical worlds overlap. The end of one dimension bleeds into the beginning of another. Membranes that separate realities are riddled with permeations.”

Annica leaned her hand against the window. “I need to sit down.”

“I know this is a lot to take in! But you’ve learned all of this before. Your natural memory retrieval process will assist with the conscious assimilation of what I’m telling you.”

“Okay, yeah, I’m definitely sitting down now,” Annica said, plopping to the cold metal floor. She remained upright only briefly before collapsing onto her back.

Annica was still fairly confident that she was merely dreaming, but the hard floor felt so real. She pinched her forearm, and that felt real too. She grabbed a handful of loose hair and inhaled – it still had a scent of shampoo mixed with sweat from gym class. Her senses were as visceral as ever. She felt awake; her mind was lucid.

“Am I going crazy?” Annica wondered aloud.

“If you were, you wouldn’t think to ask that,” Maya said reassuringly while sitting down next to Annica. “You’d be one hundred percent convinced that I was real. No one would be able to convince you otherwise. The fact that this doesn’t seem real to you is actually a mark of sanity!”

Annica took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling of the ship.

“Although,” Maya continued while pursing her lips and tapping her chin, “if you used that logic to convince yourself that you weren’t crazy, and you then became certain that all of this was real, then it would undo the logic to begin with. A conundrum, to be sure!”

Annica wondered if reading *Alice in Wonderland* right before bed was a bad idea.

“Come on, stand up,” Maya said assertively, offering her hand to Annica. “There’s something else I want to show you.”

Annica uneasily extended her hand. Maya grabbed it, and pulled Annica back to a standing position.

“Look out the window,” Maya said.

Annica approached a window and looked outside. Her house grew smaller as the ship moved away. At first it was gradual, then the streetlights below zipped by in a blur as the ship moved at an impossible speed. And yet, Annica didn’t feel the slightest bit of acceleration or movement.

“How is this possible?” Annica asked, turning her attention to Maya. “This ship’s movement, I mean.”

“Oh, simple!” Maya cheerfully replied. “The ship distorts space-time in order to create an artificial geodesic. The ship basically ‘falls’ along this geodesic in order to move at speeds that would otherwise be impossible, without limitations imposed by inertia or atmospheric resistance.”

Annica furrowed her brow. “A geo... what?”

“A geodesic! You know, the shortest two-dimensional line between two points in three-dimensional space. Aren’t you studying geometry?”

“Yes,” Annica replied, feeling herself relax a bit from Maya’s levity. “I have taken exactly one day of ninth grade

geometry. We haven't gotten to curving space-time geodesics yet."

"Oh!" Maya said. Annica couldn't tell if Maya's reaction was serious or if mock surprise was meant as a follow-up to her joke.

"Well, that's okay!" Maya continued. "Honestly, this isn't that important. Quick, look out the window again!"

Annica looked outside. The city lights were gone; it was pitch black below.

"Where are we?" Annica asked.

"Over the ocean!"

Annica felt a slight vibration through her feet.

"...and now we're in the ocean!" Maya said.

"Why... Why are we in the ocean?"

"Home base!"

Annica felt a tiny change of movement in the ship, as if it had lightly bumped into something. One of the ship's walls opened up almost instantly, revealing a hallway.

"Come on!" Maya said. She took Annica's hand and led her through the open doorway.

The two girls hurried through a corridor. It was mostly glass, supported by thick metal arches. Exterior white orbs illuminated the murky ocean water, exposing several jellyfish drifting by. Annica broke her stride as she stared at the mesmerizing sight, but Maya tugged her forward, keeping them at a brisk pace.

"Here we are!" Maya exclaimed as they reached the end of the tunnel.

Annica gasped at the sight before her. They were inside a gigantic dome structure, with glass walls separating the interior from the dark ocean outside. The space was brightly lit and filled with hundreds – if not thousands – of strange humanoid alien beings bustling about. Some were convening around what Annica thought might be food carts. There were dozens of benches for sitting, giant bioluminescent mushroom-like trees in planters, and bright prismatic chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Annica inferred that this room was just the central hub of an enormous undersea city; along the walls were dozens of large open corridors through which hundreds of humanoid beings were coming and going. At the center of it all was an enormous amethyst crystal water fountain surrounded by stone statues of complex geometric shapes, rising high as if altars of gods.

The alien beings varied in appearance, but they all walked upright and looked humanoid. Some were indistinguishable from humans – Annica noticed several groups of tall blond Nordic-looking men and women wearing blue jumpsuits similar to Maya's. Others resembled aliens typically depicted in human pop culture; they were about three feet tall and apparently nude, with thin limbs, large heads, gray skin, and large, black, almond-shaped eyes. Some beings looked like large humanoid cats wearing golden gem-encrusted armor, while others appeared to be humanoid mantises wearing red robes.

Annica was speechless. The assault on her senses and her worldview was like nothing she had ever experienced. And yet, in an odd sort of way, on some level, it all seemed... familiar.

“You don’t *consciously* remember this,” Maya said, as if reading Annica’s thoughts. “But you’ve been here many times before.”

Before Annica could respond, Maya quickly added, “In other lifetimes, I mean.”

Annica tilted her head. “Other lifetimes?”

“Yes,” Maya confirmed. “You’re a starseed, Annica.”

“I’m a...” Annica struggled to finish her question. “A what?”

“A starseed,” Maya repeated. “We all live many lives. It’s common for most of those lives to occur primarily on a single planet. Sometimes, when a soul has incarnated many times on the same planet, it chooses to incarnate on a different planet. In your case, that ‘different planet’ is Earth.”

Annica took a moment to process the information. “I need to sit down again.”

Maya took Annica’s hand and led her to a nearby bench.

“You remember all of this between incarnations,” Maya continued as they both sat down. “When you shed your physical body at death, the consciousness you’re experiencing now is reabsorbed back into your ‘higher self,’ or ‘oversoul.’ From there, your next incarnations are

planned, with regained awareness of any incarnations you've already had."

"But we always forget? I mean, during each lifetime?"

"For the most part, yes. But with all lost memories, there is a bit of subconscious retention. This information all seems at least a little familiar to you, doesn't it?"

Annica was still reeling from what she was being told, but she gave a subtle nod to confirm that, on some level, these concepts didn't feel *entirely* foreign.

"My people have lived in this city for thousands of years, coming and going through your sky," Maya continued. "Sometimes you notice us, sometimes you interact with us, and sometimes you even work alongside us." Maya turned to face Annica as she spoke the final line.

"How?" Annica asked, in complete bewilderment.

Maya smiled. "I'm glad you asked! The time is approaching for open contact with the citizens of Earth. We have been preparing both ourselves and your people for this contact for many, many years."

Maya's smile turned into a big grin, and her eyes lit up with excitement. "Annica," she said, pausing before her next words, "we've chosen you to be our ambassador. That is... if you're interested?"

Annica froze. "Y-yes," she stammered after a short pause. "I'm interested." The words seemed to leap from her mouth all on their own. They took no courage; saying anything else would have been far more difficult.

“That’s wonderful!” Maya exclaimed, embracing Annica in a hug.

Annica timidly hugged her back and looked out over the city. *This can’t possibly be real...*

Maya released Annica from their embrace and looked deeply into her eyes. “You have no idea how much this means to us, Annica! You’re going to alter the course of human history! Your mission will have a profound impact through countless generations, shaping the future in ways beyond what you can possibly imagine.”

Annica felt a deep anxiety overtaking her mind. *What did I just get myself into?*

“Umm, what, exactly, will I be doing?” Annica asked.

“That will become clear with time,” Maya answered. “You will have further contact with us. We will give you the necessary training. It will be on you to fulfill your mission, but we promise you won’t have to do it alone.”

“But what is this ‘mission?’” Annica asked. “And how...” She struggled with her next words. “How can any of this *possibly* be real?”

“We understand that this is a lot to take in. You walk a difficult path, Annica. Not everything will make sense to you as it occurs. But you have to trust yourself, and you have to trust me too. Can you do that?”

“I... don’t know,” Annica stammered. “Why was I chosen for this?”

“The answer to that will also come with time. Everything is being very, very carefully orchestrated.

You're at the center of it all. We need you to help us, but we don't want to overload you all at once."

Annica was already overloaded beyond words.

"I believe this is sufficient for now," Maya said. "We will be in touch soon!"

Annica's vision was again overwhelmed by a blinding white light, and she awoke back in her bedroom. She bolted upright in bed and immediately started hyperventilating.

CHAPTER 3

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Annica spent the next two weeks in a daze. She didn't know if what she had experienced was real, or unreal, or, like Maya said, somewhere in between.

The experience being entirely physical seemed unlikely – how, for example, could she have materialized through the walls in her house? And yet, the memory felt real; it wasn't obscured by the fog of forgetfulness that clouds the memories of dreams.

There were two possibilities: Either what Annica had experienced was “real” in some way, or she was experiencing an extreme hallucination. She pondered the two possibilities and was unsure about which disturbed her more.

The experience was magical, but also tinged with a kind of fear that Annica had never before experienced. The longer she sat with it, the harder it weighed on her psyche. The human mind, she realized, was not equipped to easily absorb information of this nature. It hit her in the pit of her stomach, and she found it difficult to think about anything else – it was as if her day-to-day life were progressing on its own, in the background, without any direct involvement from her.

She still hadn't received any further contact from Maya. The lack of follow-up contact was adding to Annica's "hallucination" hypothesis – with each passing day, the experience became easier and easier to write off as being purely imagined. But if it was all purely the result of psychosis, why wasn't *that* continuing either?

Annica's mind was a complete mess. Even if Maya was telling the truth – that Annica really was chosen as some important "starseed ambassador" – the uncertainty surrounding the whole situation left Annica barely functional in the normal physical world. After two weeks of living in this state, she was losing sleep and feeling increasingly agitated.

Mavis and Daryl were waiting in the living room when Annica arrived home from school one day. They were both seated on the couch with serious looks on their faces.

Annica immediately felt the tension in the air. She removed her backpack and let it fall to the ground. "What?" she asked flatly.

"Please have a seat," Mavis instructed.

"Am I in trouble?" Annica asked as she dropped her body into the chair facing the couch.

"Oh, no no no," Mavis and Daryl quickly assured her.

"Honey," Mavis began with some reticence, "we've been noticing some unusual behavior from you recently."

"Sorry," Annica replied. "I've just been stressed out lately."

“Is it something you want to talk about?” Mavis asked.

Annica sat in silence. She wouldn’t even know where to begin, and she was quite certain that nothing she could say would sound any different from “I’m still thinking about a weird dream I had a few weeks ago.”

“Is it something you’d want to talk to anyone about?” Mavis rephrased.

“What do you mean?” Annica asked.

“Annica,” Daryl chimed in, “your mother and I have been talking a lot lately, and we’d like to suggest that you see someone after school.”

Annica narrowed her eyes. “See someone?”

“Noah Abelman,” Daryl clarified.

“I don’t know who that is.”

“He works at your school,” Daryl added.

“Doing what? Jesus, just tell me what’s going on already!” Annica snapped.

“We’d like you to talk to a therapist,” Mavis said bluntly.

“You’re sending me to a shrink?” Annica asked defensively. “Why?”

“We’re not ‘sending’ you, to be clear,” Daryl quickly replied. “We’re just... suggesting.”

“Okay, fine, ‘suggesting,’ why?” Annica demanded.

“You’ve seemed really withdrawn lately,” Mavis said, her eyes heavy with deep concern.

Annica folded her arms and leaned back in her seat. “I told you, I’m just a little stressed out right now. Starting high school and all that.”

Mavis leaned forward and clasped her hands. “Is there anything particularly stressful about high school?”

Annica made a “pfff” exhalation sound before speaking. “Oh, you know, homework, tests, boys, gossip, where to sit in the cafeteria. Normal high school stuff or whatever.”

Mavis took a deep breath in response to Annica’s obviously insincere answer.

“It’s not *just* the past two weeks,” Mavis said. “There are other reasons too – it’s something we’ve been discussing for a while. Your teachers spoke with us late last year.”

Annica furrowed her brow. “They did? What did they say?”

“That you often seem... troubled.”

Annica rolled her eyes. “Yeah, the world is a troubling place. What else did they say?”

Mavis hesitated before answering, “That your attitude toward authority could maybe be a bit healthier.”

“Who told you that?” Annica demanded.

“Well, Mrs. Peterson, for starters.”

“Mrs. Peterson? You mean the teacher who gave me detention because I argued with her when she tried telling the whole class that seasons change because the Earth gets closer and farther from the sun?”

Mavis didn't respond, so Annica continued, "Seriously, you shouldn't be teaching science to kids if you don't understand how seasons work. Why does she think the seasons are different in the northern and southern hemispheres?"

"Okay, fine," Mavis conceded. "We also received complaints from Mr. Harrison."

"Oh god, Mr. Harrison!" Annica groaned, pressing her wrist against her forehead. "The one who got angry because I took too many bathroom breaks? Why are bathroom breaks even limited in the first place? When you gotta go, you gotta go. Do bosses limit employees' bathroom breaks in the professional world, or is this just something that adults think is okay to do to kids?"

"Some jobs do have limits around that, actually," Daryl said, trying to be helpful.

"Well, maybe if Mr. Harrison took more bathroom breaks he'd be able to dislodge that giant stick in his butt," Annica muttered. "And maybe I'd have more respect for authority figures in general if they acted a little more respectable," she added with a raised eyebrow, looking at Daryl and then at Mavis.

Mavis tightened her lips in frustration. "And you don't have any friends!" she blurted out. Her eyes widened as she immediately regretted saying the words.

"Ha!" Annica chuckled back. "So that's what this is *really* about? You want to send your daughter to a shrink because she's a loser with no friends?"

All three sat in silence for a moment, with gazes cast downward. Annica was the first to speak again: "I had the biggest birthday parties of anyone at school!"

"That's because you always invited everyone in your class," Mavis calmly replied, looking back up at Annica.

"Okay, fine," Annica acknowledged. "But I played with other kids every day at recess."

"Yes, and we think it's *wonderful* that you got half your school involved in croquet," Daryl said, also looking back up.

Another pause descended upon the room.

"I mean, seriously, croquet of all things!" Daryl added with a grin. "What other school in the whole country had kids playing croquet at recess?"

Annica smiled. "It was fun."

"But," Daryl continued with an index finger raised in the air, "how many of those kids do you stay in touch with?"

Annica wrinkled her nose. "In what way?"

"Well, in any way," Daryl replied with a shrug. "Phone, internet—"

"Is that what you want?" Annica interrupted. "For me to be another teenage zombie glued to my phone all day?"

"No, that's not what I meant," Daryl said with exasperation, throwing his hands in the air.

"Look, Annica," Mavis said, projecting warmth with her eyes, "we promise, we're not *making* you go. It's up to you. If you decide not to go, we promise you're not in

trouble. But we love you, and we want what's best for you. As a favor to us, would you please consider going just once? If you don't like it, we completely understand. You can forget that we ever brought any of this up."

Annica crossed her arms and looked up at the ceiling. "Fine, whatever. If it's really that important to you, I'll go."

* * *

Three days later, Annica reported to her school's administrative office after her classes ended.

"How can I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"I'm here to see Noah Abelman," Annica answered.

The receptionist looked at her screen and clicked her mouse a few times. "Annica?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Perfect. Please have a seat and we'll call you momentarily."

Annica removed her backpack and set it on her lap as she nervously took a seat in the lobby. She fiddled with her braid for a few minutes before a tall man emerged from a hallway past the receptionist's desk.

"Annica?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, standing up.

The man gently smiled and extended his hand for a handshake. "Hi, I'm Noah Abelman," he said while

shaking Annica's hand. "You can call me Noah. Please follow me."

Annica sheepishly followed Noah into his office, and he shut the door behind them.

The office was just large enough to comfortably fit two individuals. To the left of the entrance was a small desk with a laptop and a single stack of tidy papers. Behind the desk was an abstract blue and green painting next to a wall clock. There was a large window across from the doorway that overlooked the school's football field, and scattered across the walls were a dozen miscellaneous plaques, awards and certificates.

"Have a seat," Noah said, gesturing to a large chair in the center of the room with soft, oversized cushions.

Annica set her backpack against the wall and sat down. The cushions in the chair were so soft that she sank several inches. After a full day of sitting in hard plastic desk chairs, the thick padding was particularly welcome.

Noah pulled a smaller, simpler chair from behind his desk and dragged it out to face Annica, leaving several feet of empty space between them. He grabbed a notepad and pen from out of a desk drawer and sat down.

"Thank you for coming in today," Noah said warmly.

Noah was a handsome man in his early thirties, with a square jaw and prominent cheekbones. He was professionally dressed with freshly ironed navy blue slacks, a white long-sleeved dress shirt and a deep purple tie. His hair was short, dark, curly and neatly gelled. He wore

rectangular glasses with thick frames, which didn't really match the rest of his face – like he was Clark Kent and only wearing them as part of a disguise.

“I know this can't be easy for you,” Noah began, setting his notepad on his lap. “Is there anything particular on your mind that you want to talk about?”

The memory with Maya immediately flashed through Annica's mind, but she dared not speak a word of it. “I don't know,” she said with a shrug, looking at the floor. “I only really came here because my parents wanted me to.”

Noah nodded slightly. “Yes, I spoke with them on the phone. Mavis and Daryl, right? How would you describe your relationship with them?”

“Good,” Annica answered sincerely, looking up and establishing eye contact. “I mean, we argue a bit sometimes, but nothing serious.”

Noah jotted down a few quick notes on his notepad. “You're adopted, right?”

Annica shrugged nonchalantly. “Yes, but I was an infant when it happened. Mavis and Daryl are the only parents I've ever known.”

“So you never met your biological parents?”

Annica shook her head.

“Did you ever seek them out?”

“No,” Annica said flatly with another shrug. “Why would I? They gave me up before I could speak. Maybe they're my biological parents, but they're not my 'real' parents. Mavis and Daryl are my *real* parents.”

Noah scribbled a few more brief notes into his notepad. “That’s a healthy attitude, I think,” he concluded. “How is school going?”

Annica hesitated. “It’s going okay, I guess.”

Noah paused for a moment, pursing his lips as he searched for his next words. “If you could describe your biggest complaint, or your biggest problem with school, what would that be?”

“Oh, man,” Annica chuckled as she leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. “Are you sure you want to get into this?”

“Of course,” Noah politely encouraged. “That’s what we’re here for.”

Annica felt herself starting to relax. “I have third period gym class,” she said, slumping deeper into her chair and shaking her head.

Noah tilted his head and furrowed his brow. “Is there a problem with that?”

“It’s not great.”

The puzzlement on Noah’s face intensified. “Why?”

“Okay,” Annica began as she sat up, leaned forward and clasped her hands, “so you eat lunch, right? And your stomach is all full of food. Then you have to change your clothes in a room full of strangers and run around in ninety-degree weather, sweating everywhere. Then you’re expected to just change into your normal clothes and go back to class as if the whole thing was totally normal.” She

delivered her speech with hardly a breath between sentences.

“Oh, wow,” Noah said, adjusting his glasses before jotting down a few more notes on his notepad. He looked back up. “So this really bothers you, then?”

“Yes!” Annica exclaimed as if it were obvious. “How could this not?” She briefly paused before continuing, “Think about it. How would you feel? You’re all neatly dressed, and your hair is styled, and you spend your day working in an air-conditioned office. How would you react if your boss came in one day and told you to get changed in front of everyone and then run around outside in the heat for an hour between therapy sessions?”

Noah nodded and shifted in his chair. “Yes, I think I see what you mean.”

“And it’s, like...” Annica gesticulated in the air as she struggled to find her next words. “This is how everything is, you know? If you’re a kid you don’t have any control over your life. You’re constantly being told what to do by adults – where to go, what to say, how to behave. You get no say in it.”

Annica threw her hands up in exasperation and continued, “And sometimes they just expect you to go along with things that they themselves would never be okay with. Adults are so dismissive of kids’ problems. They’re always like...”

She lowered her voice and mockingly impersonated an adult, saying, “Oh, you’re just a kid. You don’t have bills

to pay. Your problems are nothing compared to what adults have to deal with.”

Annica continued in her normal voice, “But if adults had to deal with half the stuff they subject kids to, they wouldn’t stand for it!” She pounded her fist on the arm of her chair. “Are you really going to sit there and tell me that your coworkers would be fine with being told that they need to get changed in front of each other and then run around outside in the heat for an hour in the middle of the day as part of their office job?”

Noah calmly wrote down a few more notes. “I can’t say I enjoyed gym class either,” he said, still examining his notepad. He looked back up. “But every stage of life has its own set of problems.”

“And I’m not dismissing that!” Annica snapped. “I’m sure paying bills and raising kids is hard. But we all agree that it’s hard, right? Why is it that when it comes to kids’ problems, society just laughs it all off like they’re nothing?” She firmly clutched both arms of her chair while awaiting Noah’s response.

“Would you like to try changing your schedule?” Noah asked, responding to Annica’s intensity with polite sincerity. “Maybe switch gym class to the mornings when it’s cooler, or fourth period, so it’s not right after lunch, and you don’t have a class afterward?”

Annica’s eyebrows shot up. “Can I do that?”

“Sure. It’s early enough in the year, and it sounds like this is really bothering you.”

“Oh,” Annica said, quickly deflating. “Uh, yeah, actually. Could I move it to first period?”

Noah flipped back to an earlier page in his notepad. “You have biology first period, right?”

Annica nodded.

“We could move that to third period if you’d like. Then move gym to first period. You’d still need to change your clothes afterward, but at least the weather would be a bit cooler, and you could come to school already dressed for gym class. Plus you’d have more control over when you eat beforehand, since it wouldn’t be immediately after lunch. Does that work for you?” Noah asked his question with a hopeful tone, as if he had a personal vested interest in Annica finding the resolution acceptable.

Annica timidly looked down before responding, “Oh, uh, yes.”

“Great,” Noah said, noticeably relieved. “I know this doesn’t really address your underlying complaint – I mean, gym class is still a graduation requirement after all, and taking it is still mandatory. So I guess adults are still bossing you around in that sense.” He glanced out the window before continuing, “I understand that there are deeper issues at play here, and there isn’t a simple answer to human society being one giant hierarchical control structure with kids lacking meaningful agency.” He looked back at Annica. “Maybe over the long run we can figure out some more impactful solutions, but for now I hope this schedule change helps a little bit.”

Annica's eyes were searching the room; she was still processing the turn of events, particularly Noah's articulation of her frustrations – as if he had pulled his words straight out of her mind. “Oh, uh, yeah, I think this will be better,” she said, looking at Noah and smiling faintly.

“Perfect,” Noah said with a broad smile. “Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?”

Annica again thought about her experience with Maya. The urge to share was stronger now, but she was still terrified to discuss it out loud.

“That's really my main issue,” Annica stated, unsure of how convincing she sounded.

Noah positioned his pen over his notepad. “How are you getting along with the other students? Have you started making any friends yet?”

“Oh, god,” Annica responded with a nervous laugh. “What did my mom tell you?”

“She expressed concerns,” Noah answered carefully. He pivoted to a more upbeat tone and added, “But she also mentioned something about croquet. My understanding is that you started some sort of club at your last school?”

“Well, calling it a ‘club’ would be a pretty generous way of describing it,” Annica said nonchalantly. “Basically in fifth grade I just started knocking a ball around in a field. Some of the teachers complained – they said it was dangerous to bring a croquet mallet to school, because it

could be used as a weapon.” Annica absentmindedly kicked her feet out. “That made me pretty upset. Did my mom say anything about my ‘unhealthy attitude toward authority’ during your talk with her?”

“That didn’t come up specifically,” Noah answered innocently, refraining from invoking the previous topic they had just discussed.

“Well, it was stupid! Baseball bats are fine, but croquet mallets aren’t?” Annica shifted in her chair before continuing, “Anyway, my parents convinced the school to leave me alone about it. So I’d go into the soccer field during recess and hit the ball through the little wired gates.”

Noah raised an eyebrow. “All by yourself?”

“Yeah, why not? Golf can be played solo. It’s basically like putting in golf, except you have this big wooden mallet hitting this big ball, and you can set the wired gates wherever you want. It’s just objectively better!”

“I never really thought about it that way,” Noah said, looking off to the side with his pen to his lips.

“Yeah, no one does! Who thinks about croquet to begin with? Anyway, so I’m having fun by myself, and one day a younger kid comes over and asks what I’m doing. So I explain it, and I let him hit the ball a few times. He enjoys it, and he wants to keep going. Then another kid notices and comes over. Then another, and another. A few weeks later there are a dozen of us all playing croquet out in the soccer field.”

Noah's eyes widened. "And you're all sharing the same ball and mallet?"

"At first, yeah, but when I told my parents what was happening they bought a full set of mallets, balls and gates. So that way we could actually play the game for real. I had to learn the rules for the first time. I made some modifications, though – just to simplify it a bit, and make it easier for people to come and go. After a couple of months my dad even bought a few more sets, just so a bunch of us could have a few games going at once."

"So you ran this all by yourself, then?" Noah asked with genuine surprise. "Recess croquet with Annica?"

"Yeah!" Annica said, beaming with pride. "I never really made any friends in my classes." Her voice trailed off, and she glanced out the window before continuing, "But I felt like I was friends with everyone once I got croquet going. The game has everything you want – you're outside, you're hitting a big ball through hoops, and you can talk about anything. It's so casual and relaxed. There are no awkward pauses, no forced small talk. No stupid drama. You can talk about the game, or you can talk about something else, or you can talk about nothing at all. It's like..." She drummed her fingers on her knees. "There was something really pure about it, you know? And *anyone* can play croquet. My last school had kindergarten through eighth grade. We'd have third graders playing alongside middle schoolers. Age didn't

matter. Everyone has fun hitting a big ball through a metal gate.”

Noah was frantically scribbling notes. He flipped a page in his notepad and continued writing.

“Do you still play?” Noah asked without looking up, still writing as fast as he could.

“No,” Annica answered flatly. “I gave away all the equipment when I graduated from middle school. I hope they’re all still playing it on their own, but I have no way of knowing.” She lowered her shoulders and stared at her shoes.

“Do you think you might want to start it up again here?”

“I don’t think so,” Annica harrumphed. “It was already weird enough in an elementary school soccer field. Playing croquet in the middle of the Quad at a high school would be weird even by my standards.”

“Maybe you could start a club?” Noah asked hopefully.

Annica shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know. But probably not, honestly. It just seems kind of rigid and formal that way.”

“That’s a theme as we get older,” Noah said, leaning back and clasping his hands. “But it doesn’t mean we have to stop doing the things we enjoy.”

“I’ll think about it,” Annica said dismissively while fiddling with the end of her braid.

Noah sat up, took a quick breath and sharply exhaled. “All right, Annica, I am sorry to say that we’re out of time today. I will talk to the administration here about getting your gym class schedule changed, and someone will give your parents a call once that goes through. If you’d like to come back, this time slot is available once a week every Thursday. Is that something you think you might be interested in doing?”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Annica replied with a bit of a jolt, letting go of her braid. She was surprised by how fast the session had passed and how relaxed she now felt.

A dampened smile crept across her face. “That would be great.”

CHAPTER 4

CIRCLES WITHIN CIRCLES

Almost three weeks after Maya's first visit, she appeared again, seated at the foot of Annica's bed during the night.

"Hi!" Maya announced.

"Jesus!" Annica exclaimed. She couldn't tell whether she was still awake, or in a lucid dream state, or some other altered state of consciousness entirely. In any case, her heart was pounding – *that* part, at least, felt real enough.

"The fear response is normal," Maya assured her.

"Of course it's normal!" Annica shot back. "You're an interdimensional alien appearing in my bedroom unexpectedly in the middle of the night! Have you ever considered greeting people during the daytime, maybe in a public place?"

"Hmmm, daytime," Maya contemplated while looking upward and tapping her chin. "Yes, I can see the logic in that. I'll run it by the Council."

Annica remembered that she might need to be asleep for Maya to appear, or something? The rules were still unclear.

“Anyway!” Maya said while clasping her hands. “It’s time to get started on your training. You *are* still interested in being our ambassador, right?”

Annica’s heart rate was beginning to slow, but only a little. “I think so. But honestly, these past few weeks haven’t been great for my mental health.”

“You’re still not sure if this is real, right?”

“Please tell me *that* response is normal too.”

“Yes, it is,” Maya confirmed. “This is part of the activation process. I’ll admit, starseeds don’t have it easy. First you feel alienated here on Earth with the human population, then you feel terrified when your soul family contacts you. You’re simultaneously in both worlds, but not fully in either. And the whole time you’re left questioning your sanity and struggling to function.”

Annica paused to consider Maya’s words. “Does it get easier?” she almost whispered.

“Hmmm, sort of,” Maya said, tilting her head from side to side. “On one hand, yes, the issues you’re struggling with now will get easier. But then you’ll get new issues, which will be... harder.” Annica noticed Maya biting her lower lip while saying the final word.

Annica winced. “So it’s just a treadmill?”

Maya shrugged. “That’s what growing up is all about, right? You master one area, and then the universe throws something new at you. If life is ever easy, it’s only for a short while.”

Annica's anxiety from Maya's presence was starting to wane, but the gravity of what Maya was saying added a new layer of discomfort.

Annica took a deep breath. "I think I understand," she exhaled while slowly nodding. "So what's next?"

"You haven't fully absorbed the reality of this yet," Maya replied with searching eyes. "Is that fair to say?"

"Yes, that is definitely fair to say."

"So let's work on that!" Maya said cheerfully, hopping off the foot of the bed.

Once again Annica's vision was overwhelmed by a blinding white light, and once again she found herself back on the ship when the light subsided.

"It's time for lesson one!" Maya announced.

Annica looked around the ship. It appeared the same as before – empty and metallic, with windows and flashing mechanical instruments lining the walls.

"Okay, so one *small* disclaimer," Maya divulged while making a little pinching gesture. "This ship isn't exactly how you would literally see it 'objectively' from the 'outside,' if that makes sense. It's more a representation of how your mind interprets the essence of where we are. From a purely physical perspective this craft just looks like a white light – at least from a distance."

Annica thought back to her father's security camera footage. "But you would still see... something, right?"

"Yes, something different."

“So *something* is still there, then?” Annica pressed. “It’s not entirely non-physical?”

“That’s right,” Maya confirmed. “Like I said before, there’s some dimensional overlap between the physical and mental planes of reality. This allows those of us more on the mental end of the spectrum to manipulate your reality in ways that otherwise seem impossible from a purely physical perspective.”

Annica scratched her temple. “I think I get it, sort of. And this is why you contact us through our sleep, right?”

“For the most part, yes,” Maya answered. “It is not impossible for us to manifest physically and interact with you entirely in your layer of reality, but it takes more effort, and our access to the higher-dimensional mental realm is limited during this manifestation.”

Maya paused, then flashed a sideways smirk before continuing, “We’re not *all*-powerful, you know! I mean, sure, more powerful than humans in the whole ‘manipulating reality’ department, but honestly not by *that* much in the grand scheme of things. If you were like ants to us, we wouldn’t be interacting with you to begin with.”

Annica nodded slowly, trying her best to understand. “I see. You’re saying we’re more similar than different.”

Maya winked, clicked her tongue and pointed both index fingers at Annica. “End of lesson one!”

Annica’s eyes flickered about while she retraced the conversation in her mind. “The point about us being

similar, or the first thing about the ship's appearance being mental?"

"Oh! I meant the point about being similar, but they're both good lessons. Okay, time for lesson two! Or, three, however we're counting them."

"Actually, wait," Maya said, tapping her chin. "This is more of a demonstration than a lesson. But it's sort of related to the ship thing with regard to mental constructs forming our interpretations of physical reality, so maybe this is still lesson one. I will have to think more about this later. But for now, come!"

Maya gestured for Annica to follow her to the closest window.

"Sometimes starseeds get an initial 'confirmation' experience," Maya began. "The exact experience is different for everyone. You won't be able to use it to prove anything to anyone else, but it should help with the whole 'Am I just going crazy?' issue for yourself."

Annica took a deep breath. "That's definitely some help I could use."

"To emphasize!" Maya exclaimed. "This will *not* make others think you're less crazy. In fact, it will probably do the exact opposite." She clasped her hands. "But all right, here we go. I need you to think of a shape."

"A shape?"

"Yes, any shape."

"Umm, okay, I think I've got it," Annica said, closing her eyes and imagining a circle.

“Good start!” Maya congratulated. “Now add a few more shapes to that circle.”

Annica’s eyes popped wide open. “Wait, you can see my thoughts?”

“Of course! I told you, we’re more on the mental end of the spectrum of reality. Your thoughts are as clear to us as physical reality is to you.”

Annica felt a little uneasy. “Isn’t that a violation of privacy?” she mumbled.

“‘Privacy’ is a very human concept. Are you violating someone else’s privacy when you observe someone’s physical movements?” Maya asked while pointing at Annica dramatically, like a lawyer interrogating a witness.

“Maybe,” Annica replied with a defensive look, “if I’m staring, or if I’m peering through the windows of their house.”

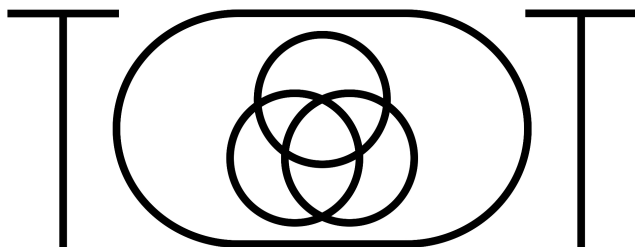
“Well, I’m in your house now!” Maya said with a grin. “Now come on, let’s add some more shapes to that circle.”

Annica reluctantly closed her eyes and imagined two more overlapping circles, like a triangular Venn diagram. She briefly considered the absurdity of closing her eyes to imagine something in a world that was already at least partially imaginative, but still, it helped her to concentrate.

“Okay, better,” Maya encouraged. “Now add some more!”

Annica’s mind turned to croquet. She imagined a big oval loop around the circles to signify conjoined curved

metal gates, then she added two large vertical lines to the sides. She topped these lines with smaller perpendicular lines to denote the heads of the mallets.



Annica scrunched her face and opened one of her eyes. “How’s that?”

“Perfect!” Maya squealed, hopping up and down and lightly clapping her hands. She quickly shifted into a quarterback stance. “Okay, now hold that image!”

Annica squeezed her eyes shut again and focused on the simple geometric pattern in her mind. Seemingly on their own, the lines in her mental imagery started to glow brightly. It was subtle at first, but the light quickly became overpowering.

In a reversal from normal conditioning, Annica opened her eyes to escape the blinding white light.

“Ah!” she gasped while wincing. “Does *everything* have to be about bright white lights with you?!”

“Light is the foundation of the universe!” Maya stated with an air of pride. “You know, ‘let there be light’ and all that. But that’s a lesson for another day. For now, class is dismissed!”

“Wait,” Annica protested, “but I haven’t gotten any kind of confirma—”

Before she could finish her sentence, she snapped awake at home in her bed. The second experience with Maya was just as visceral as the first, but Annica still couldn’t discount the close association with sleep and the possibility that they were both elaborate dreams.

It was a Sunday morning, and Annica felt especially relieved that she didn’t have school that day. She felt dizzy, and she had a mild headache. Her eyes felt puffy; she was still running a sleep deficit, and the sleep she *was* getting was particularly restless.

She turned to lie on her back, then stared at the ceiling. Her hair was abnormally tangled, and her breathing was rapid and shallow. She closed her eyes and focused on slowing her breath.

In... out... in... out...

The second experience wasn’t as mind-shattering as the first, but it still brought similar emotions. Annica again felt discomfort with either the possibility that the experience was “real” in some sense or that she was simply losing touch with reality.

But now curiosity was starting to take hold. When she first told Maya that she was interested in being their ambassador, her mind was overwhelmed. She couldn’t fully process the gravity of the situation, but she knew she couldn’t reasonably say “no” when asked to serve as an intergalactic ambassador. A “no” here would have taken

more courage, just as she would have struggled to tell her parents “no” when they “suggested” she meet with Noah.

The meeting with Noah went well, Annica thought, and now she was warming up to Maya as well. Perhaps she felt pressured at first, but she had still reaffirmed her willingness to participate in both situations without overt duress, and now the decisions were starting to feel more like her own. She wanted to see Noah again, and she wanted to see Maya again too. She didn’t know exactly where the path with Maya would lead, but she was excited to find out.

Starseed ambassador. The title had grabbed hold of Annica’s mind. She thought about the mundane public figures she was studying in history class, and how low the threshold was for making it into a history book – or at least low relative to *this*. She would be world famous for thousands of years.

Annica shook her head strongly, as if this would dislodge the thought from her mind. *This is crazy*, she thought. *I am going crazy. This is not real.*

“Mavis! Annica!” Daryl shouted from outside their house. “Come out here! Quick!”

Annica sat up. She crawled out of bed and put on a pair of slippers, but she didn’t change out of her pajamas or even bother putting her hair through an elastic tie.

“Mavis! Annica!” Daryl repeated. His voice was more urgent this time.

“Yeah, yeah,” Annica grumbled under her breath.

Mavis was wearing a bathrobe when she met Annica in the hallway. It was only then that Annica realized it was still fairly early in the morning.

Annica and Mavis exited through the back of their house, toward Daryl's voice. He was standing about 50 feet from the edge of their backyard patio, in a field of tall grass that bordered their property.

"Look!" Daryl shouted, pointing into the field.

Annica didn't see anything. She looked at Mavis, who only shrugged.

"Come here!" Daryl commanded, gesturing for them to come to where he was standing.

Annica usually avoided the field on account of ticks, but she decided she could check for them later. She walked toward Daryl, taking large steps to minimize her contact with the tall grass. Mavis followed closely behind.

When Annica got closer to Daryl, she noticed that there was a clearing in the grass ahead. It was about 20 feet wide, as if a giant tractor had driven perpendicular to their property and pushed the grass down.

Daryl's eyes were wide, and he was running his hands through his wiry hair. "Crop circle!" he hollered. "We have a crop circle!"

"Pranksters?" Mavis suggested as she caught up to where Annica was standing. She was doing her best to lift her bathrobe above the grass, but with little success.

"No, it's a real one!" Daryl shot back. "I saw another light this morning on the security cam footage, and—"

“Daryl,” Mavis interrupted.

“What?” he asked, dropping his arms to his side and staring at her intently.

Mavis didn’t say anything more. She had a worried look on her face, and she shook her head.

Annica’s heart was pounding. She briskly walked past her father and into the clearing where the grass was pushed down.

“It forms a giant loop!” Daryl said to Annica as he joined her in the clearing. “Maybe a quarter mile around.”

A loop? Annica’s thoughts immediately jumped to the mental image she had conjured aboard Maya’s ship.

“Is there... Is there anything in the middle?” Annica asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” Daryl replied. “I just checked this part of the formation before calling you two down here.”

“I’m calling the police,” Mavis said, joining Annica and Daryl in the clearing.

“I don’t think the police can help with this,” Daryl scoffed.

Annica walked to the other side of the clearing, then pushed through more tall grass. Sure enough, within about 20 feet she saw three overlapping circles of grass that had been pushed down.

Oh my god oh my god oh my god... Annica felt a giant lump in her throat. *No, this is impossible...*

The danger of ticks was gone from Annica’s mind. She turned to her right and sprinted through the grass

toward the edge of the pattern where one of the “mallets” would be. It was there too, right where she expected it.

“Okay, okay, okay,” she muttered under her breath. *Jesus Christ, this is real. This is really real. Oh my god oh my god...*

Annica again focused on slowing her breath. She pushed through the grass separating the mallet from the main loop, then followed it back to where Mavis and Daryl were still standing.

“It’s not just matted down!” Daryl argued to Mavis. He pointed forcefully to the ground. “Look! The stalks are interwoven. Do you see this?”

“Daryl, you’re acting crazy!” Mavis argued back. “It’s just grass that’s been pushed down! A few teenagers probably came out here with some planks and rope and—”

“*The stalks are braided together!*” Daryl interrupted in hysteria. “Mavis, *do you see this?* They’re not just haphazardly crushed to the ground! *The stalks are interwoven!*”

“So what?” Mavis demanded. “What exactly does that mean, Daryl?” She gestured wildly with her hands. “Tell me what that means! Tell me what you think happened!”

Daryl lowered his head in silence.

“Annica,” Mavis choked as she approached her daughter, “look, your hair is full of dead grass.”

With tears in her eyes, Mavis started nimbly picking out pieces of dried grass from Annica’s hair and tossing them to the ground.

Annica was speechless. Maya's words echoed through her mind: *"This will not make others think you're less crazy. In fact, it will probably do the exact opposite."*

What could Annica say? "Mom, Dad, I psychically made this crop circle last night in my sleep with my new interdimensional alien friend"?

Annica was jolted by the realization that her father might actually believe her. Her mother wouldn't, and where would that leave the family dynamic? Their lives would be forever changed, and for what? What good could come from anything she could possibly hope to explain?

The experience was meant only for her, Annica realized. It was the most significant event of her life, and she had to keep it a secret from the two people she loved the most.

Annica forced a smile. "Thanks, Mom," she said through tears of her own.

Mavis removed the last few pieces of grass from Annica's hair. "Let's go back inside," Mavis said, putting a consoling arm around Annica's shoulder. "I'll make you some pancakes."

CHAPTER 5

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Annica was already carrying a heavy sleep debt the day the crop circle appeared, and she hardly slept a wink the following nights. By Thursday morning her eyes were burning and bloodshot; the red veins contrasted sharply against her pale blue irises. She had lost her appetite, and she started putting her hair into a ponytail rather than braiding it. It became an even bigger mess than usual after first period gym class.

She didn't feel nervous at all when she entered Noah's office for their second session. The delirium from sleep deprivation dulled her connection to the outside world – the anxiety she felt walking into his office a week ago felt like it was from another lifetime. She plopped into the big, comfortable chair in the center of the room and instantly felt more relaxed than she had for days. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, letting herself sink into the cushions.

"I'm glad you decided to come back," Noah greeted cheerfully, pulling up his chair and setting it several feet across from Annica.

Annica rolled her head around to stretch her neck, with her eyes still closed. “Yeah, no problem,” she said listlessly.

“How have you been this past week?” Noah inquired before grabbing his notepad and pen from his desk. “How is first period gym class working out?”

Annica slowly opened her eyes. “Oh, good. Though I have to carry around a duffel bag now.”

Noah glanced at the duffel bag sitting next to Annica’s backpack against the wall, then he looked back at her. “For your clothes, right?”

“Yeah... It’s kind of annoying, but still better than having to change twice, I guess.”

Annica zoned out while staring at the duffel bag, leaving her mouth hanging slightly open.

Noah looked down at his notepad, then looked back up at Annica without writing anything down. He bit his lower lip while taking in her bloodshot eyes and disheveled hair. “How are your other classes going?” he asked with obvious concern.

Annica closed her mouth and shifted her attention back to Noah. “No complaints,” she said robotically.

Noah paused. “And your home life?”

“Good.” Annica’s attention drifted around the room, and she absentmindedly twirled a bit of unbraided hair around her index finger.

Noah left space for Annica to elaborate, but when she didn’t, he carefully prodded further. “Are you making any

friends? Have you given any thought to that croquet club?”

“No and no.” She dropped the strand of loose hair, slouched deeply into her chair and stared at the ceiling.

Noah pushed his pen against his lips while observing Annica’s disposition. “Is there something specific you want to talk about?”

She suddenly felt a rush of adrenaline shooting through her system. *YES*, her mind screamed. *OH MY GOD YES*.

She was fully alert now. She sat up straight and opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

“It’s okay,” Noah assured her. “This is a safe place. You can talk about whatever you’d like.”

Annica took a deep, shaky breath. “I don’t know,” she said, trying to hold herself together as tears formed in her eyes. “What if it’s crazy? Like really, *really* crazy?”

“We don’t use that word here,” Noah said calmly but firmly. “Every one of us has challenges.”

Annica half-rolled her eyes before elaborating, “Okay, but there’s challenges, and then there’s, like, *challenges*, you know? Like what if I get committed or something? What if I say something *so crazy* that...”

“Annica,” Noah said, leaning forward. His eyes were full of compassion. “Are you thinking about hurting yourself?”

“No,” she quickly responded. “I’m not, I promise.”

“Are you thinking about hurting anyone else?”

“No,” she quickly replied again.

“Has anyone else hurt you, or touched you inappropriately?”

Annica emphatically shook her head. “No, it’s not that.”

“Okay,” Noah acknowledged, leaning back. He continued with a tone of heavy emphasis, “If the answer to any of those questions is ever ‘yes,’ I need you to tell me. But outside of those subjects, everything you say here is completely confidential. Do you understand?”

Annica hesitated before speaking. “Okay, but like, what if I’m so crazy that you load me up on anti-psychotic meds or something?”

“I’m a licensed therapist, but I’m not a medical doctor,” Noah assured her. “I don’t have the authority to prescribe any medications. At most I could write you a referral, but I wouldn’t share specifics with a doctor.”

Annica slowly nodded a few times as she processed this information. She absentmindedly wiped palm sweat onto her knees while taking a deep breath.

“Okay,” she exhaled, shaking her hands dry. “So, I don’t think this is something you can really help me with, but it’s like... I can’t get my mind off it. And I feel like I can’t talk to anyone about it, not even my parents. So it’s just... rattling around in there. And I can’t focus on anything else.”

Noah tilted his head with a look of sympathy. “Maybe just getting it off your chest would be helpful in some way?”

Annica scrunched her mouth to the side of her face. “Yeah, maybe. I’ll give it a shot, I guess.”

She paused before continuing. “Okay, here we go,” she said, shaking her hands again. “So, uh, I made a crop circle.”

Noah raised his eyebrows and looked at Annica over his glasses. “You made a crop circle?”

“Oh god, the short version sounds just as crazy as the long version!” Annica lamented, burying her face in her hands.

“No, it’s okay,” Noah assured her while waving his hand to the side. “I’m just trying to understand what you’re saying. You mean with planks and rope?”

“No, I mean...” She glanced out the window, struggling to begin the full explanation. “Okay, let me start over. A few weeks ago I was ‘visited’ by someone, or something. She looked like a little girl, but she claimed to be from another layer of reality, like one that’s more mental or something? She appeared in my bedroom while I was sleeping.”

Noah pushed up his glasses. “So in a dream, then?”

Annica exhaled loudly, making a “pfff” sound. “I don’t know, maybe. It didn’t feel like a dream, though, and I remembered it clearly afterward. She showed me

things... I was on board a ship, and she took me to a city at the bottom of the ocean.”

Noah listened silently. His pen was positioned over his notepad, but he wasn't writing anything down.

“So I thought, ‘Okay, probably a dream,’ right?” Annica continued. “Or a hallucination, or whatever. But then she came again a few nights ago, and she said she was going to give me a ‘confirmation’ experience. She had me imagine some shapes, and then the next morning those same shapes appeared in a field right next to my house.”

“That’s fascinating,” Noah said without a hint of condescension. “I can see why something like this would be on your mind so much.”

“Right?!” Annica exclaimed, running her fingers across her scalp. “Like, what am I supposed to do with this experience? How am I supposed to live a normal life if I’m being visited by interdimensional aliens? How am I supposed to just take classes, and write essays... And how do I fit this into my whole mental model of reality? I didn’t think aliens could possibly be real, and now this. So what else could there be? Are vampires real too? What about ghosts, or bigfoot? I mean I’m kind of kidding but not a hundred percent, you know?”

“Yes, incorporating extraordinary experiences into daily life can be extremely challenging,” Noah sympathized, slowly tapping his pen against his chin.

“Annica,” Noah carefully continued, “I am not discounting the legitimacy of what you experienced. But

the human mind can be a very tricky thing, and I think it's important to be aware of some of its tricks before we rush to any conclusions."

Annica's energy deflated, and she narrowed her eyes at Noah. "So you're saying it's not real, then?"

"I am not saying one way or the other," Noah replied before cautiously selecting his next words. "But it sounds like you yourself are not sure whether it's real or not."

"Well I *wasn't* sure, before the crop circle. That part was definitely real – both my parents saw it. And the pattern was exactly what I imagined the night before."

Noah glanced out the window while formulating an explanation. "Sometimes the human mind can retroactively create false memories in order to fit current experiences. Is it possible that you formed the memory of the dream experience after seeing the formation by your house?"

Annica vigorously shook her head. "No, because I *knew where to look*. I asked my dad if there were circles inside the outer loop, and he didn't know, but *there were*. I knew that there would be vertical lines on the edges too, and they were *also* there when I checked."

Noah tapped his pen on his notepad. "Is it possible that you saw the pattern before going outside?"

"No," Annica emphasized. "It's not visible from my room."

Noah tapped his pen against his notepad again. He still hadn't taken any notes during the session.

“Let’s go back a bit,” Noah said, gesturing his pen in the air. “You mentioned meeting a girl. Did she give you a name?”

“Yes, Maya.”

“Okay, so Maya took you onboard her ship, and then to a city. What did she say to you, exactly?”

“Let me think... She talked about the nature of reality, saying that there’s some fluidity to dimensions, or something? She said there were other beings with a presence here on Earth, that they basically lived at the bottom of our ocean, but they come and go through the sky.”

“Did she say anything about you?”

“Yeah,” Annica said hesitantly, looking away and absentmindedly rubbing her tricep. “She said I was chosen to be an ambassador to humanity, on their behalf. She said we all have soul histories spanning multiple lifetimes, and most of my lifetimes had taken place off of Earth.”

“I see,” Noah responded. He shifted his weight in his seat before continuing, “Annica, I’m going to give you some general information. I am not going to say that this applies to you necessarily, but it’s something I want you to be aware of. Like I was saying before, the mind can be a very tricky thing. Sometimes it can behave in ways that seem very strange to us, but there are often patterns to this strange behavior. You acknowledged earlier that these experiences could be hallucinations, correct?”

Annica nodded begrudgingly.

“And now you’re citing a, uh...” Noah’s voice trailed off, and his mouth hung open while he grasped for his next words. “...a... *sense*... of grandeur.”

“You mean a delusion?” Annica snapped. “That is the phrase, isn’t it? ‘Delusion of grandeur’? You think I’m schizophrenic, don’t you?”

“I am not in a position to be making that diagnosis,” Noah assured her. “But even if I were, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Annica leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms while looking off to the side.

“Annica, I just want to help you,” Noah said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. “Thank you for sharing this with me today. I really appreciate it, and I promise it is completely confidential. Whatever the reality of the situation is, I can see that it’s a tremendous weight on your shoulders, and you’re handling it as well as you can. I want to help you with that, as much as possible.” He adjusted his glasses before continuing, “I know it’s not easy, coming to a new school, leaving all your croquet friends behind, having these strange experiences, and being told that you’re a starseed on top of all that. But I just want you to know that—”

“Wait!” Annica interrupted, bolting upright. “You just used that word!”

Noah sat up and tilted his head. “What word?”

“‘Starseed’! You just said ‘starseed’!”

“Well, yes,” Noah acknowledged. “But you just told me that.”

Annica forcefully shook her head. “No! I told you Maya said I lived multiple lifetimes off Earth! I never used the word ‘starseed’!”

Noah’s face went red. “That is the correct term, isn’t it?”

“But how did you know?!”

Noah set his pen and notepad back on his desk.

“Tell me!” Annica angrily demanded. “Tell me how you know that word!”

“Annica,” Noah said, doing his best to project composure, “this is a fairly common term.”

“WHAT?!”

“Please, Annica, try to keep your voice down.”

Annica took several long, deep, violently fast breaths through flared nostrils.

“So this is... *a thing?!*” she screamed in a hoarse whisper.

“It is becoming more commonly reported in recent years,” Noah acknowledged. “Particularly among children.”

Annica’s eyes widened. “So it’s real, then? This is real?”

“I didn’t say it was ‘real’; I said it was commonly reported.”

“But you’re saying other kids are having this same experience?”

Noah waved his hand. “Well, the specific details are different for everyone, but...”

“But same basic idea?” Annica interjected.

Noah was silent.

“You’re saying other kids are reporting this too?” Annica pressed. “Are there any from this school? Who are they? I need to talk to them.”

Noah peered over his glasses. “Annica, you know I can’t share that information, just like I can’t tell anyone else what you’ve shared with me today.”

“Ugh!” Annica exclaimed in frustration, slapping her palm on the arm of her chair. “My mom is on my case about not being able to make friends because I can’t do stupid small talk, and now you’re saying I can’t talk about *this* with other people who have gone through the *same thing?*!”

“You might be able to find a support group,” Noah said, scratching the back of his head. “But I can’t assist with that directly.”

“Online, right? Will I find information about this online?”

Noah visibly winced. “You will have to use a lot of discernment with what you read online.”

“But there’s more information online, right?” Annica asked again, sounding increasingly hopeful. “About starseeds?”

Noah took a deep breath but was otherwise silent.

Annica glanced at the clock and saw that the official time for her session ended about three minutes ago. She smiled and stood up from her chair.

“Thank you, Noah,” she said in a hurry with a half-bow. “You were right. I feel a lot better getting this off my chest. It’s been really great talking with you today.”

“Annica,” Noah said sternly, his eyes filled with deep concern, “don’t lose yourself in this. Please, promise me you won’t lose yourself in this.”

Annica grinned. “Same time next week?”

She picked up her backpack and duffel bag and briskly left the room.

* * *

Annica sprinted home from school. She flung the front door open, dropped her backpack and duffel bag to the floor and pulled off her shoes while hopping toward her bedroom.

“Hi honey,” Mavis called from the kitchen.

“Hi Mom, can’t talk!”

Annica heard parts of a follow-up question from Mavis, but she wasn’t able to piece together the full context. She slammed the door of her bedroom shut and turned on her laptop.

Only after sitting down at her desk did Annica realize how out of breath and sweaty she was. She focused on taking deep breaths while fanning herself with her T-shirt.

Annica started by diving head-first into every starseed-related search she could think of. These searches yielded pages upon pages of material related to galactic councils, higher-dimensional beings, DNA activation and metaphysical principles. Whether the information was true or not, it was certainly asserted with complete confidence across countless blogs and amateur websites. Specific alien races were described; some were completely foreign, but others matched what Annica had witnessed in the undersea city.

The information was overwhelming, and most of it didn't perfectly match with Annica's own experience. But the alien races were the common thread. She decided to take a step back from starseed-related searches to focus on the broader topic of alleged extraterrestrial contact.

She read at least a dozen personal accounts of encounters with extraterrestrials – again some experiences seemed similar to hers, but others were wildly different. Some people claimed to have ongoing psychic contact with extraterrestrials, and others claimed to channel information from them while in a trance state. What caught Annica's attention the most were a handful of famous incidents allegedly occurring on a purely physical level.

A logger claimed to have been taken onboard a ship; he was missing for days, but only reported feeling like he lost a few hours. Does time move differently in the presence of these beings? Did his physical body really

disappear and reappear? Annica wondered if her physical body had still been present in her bed during her meetings with Maya.

A thought flashed through Annica's mind: If a three-dimensional being could remove an object from a two-dimensional plane, a two-dimensional being would theoretically witness that object disappearing and then reappearing wherever it was put back. If four-dimensional beings existed, could they manipulate three-dimensional objects in much the same way, causing them to disappear and reappear from a third-dimensional perspective? The concept strained Annica's imagination.

Back to her research, she read another story about a couple who was abducted during the 1960s. Under hypnosis, the woman described a pattern of stars that was later verified by investigators. But there were inconsistencies in the hypnosis, and was it possible that she had seen some map of the stars before the event took place? Annica remembered Noah's question about possible prior knowledge of the crop circle before she saw it; now Annica had the same questions about this woman's story.

Annica was most captivated by an alleged event involving a large group of schoolchildren in Zimbabwe who claimed to witness an alien ship landing right by their playground. The children described the beings moving in strange ways, as if in slow motion, possibly phase-shifting between physical reality and some other

not-entirely-physical dimension. Were these beings, like Maya, somewhere along a non-physical spectrum of reality?

Annica became more convinced than ever that *something* was going on. Most serious people were reluctant to invoke aliens specifically, but what else could it be? This possible explanation was a common thread, and it matched perfectly with her own experiences.

Something odd, Annica noticed, was that many people claimed to have had experiences since they were young children. Others claimed that they couldn't remember their experiences clearly, and details only came out during hypnosis. Annica briefly pondered why her own situation was different in both regards: *Did I somehow demonstrate being qualified for the ambassador role, and they're only just now "recruiting" me?*

"Annica! Dinner!" Mavis shouted from down the hall.

Annica glanced at the time on her laptop and could hardly believe how fast the hours had flown by. She peeled herself away from her screen, quickly brushed her hair, then hurried to the dinner table.

"Well, look who decided to join the world," Mavis jested, setting down plates of food.

"Sorry," Annica said in a huff while taking a seat. "I'm just a little distracted right now."

"Is it something you want to talk about?" Mavis inquired with widened eyes.

Annica busied herself laying a napkin on her lap without responding. Mavis sighed as she sat, and Daryl entered the room and sat down a moment later.

“How was school today, Annica?” Daryl asked while loading up his plate with green bean casserole, white rice and a couple of dinner rolls.

“She’s been in her room all day and doesn’t want to talk about it,” Mavis answered before Annica would have reasonably been able to respond.

Annica silently added several scoops of rice and casserole to her own plate.

“All right, well, I think today’s interview went a little better than the last,” Daryl said between bites of bread, taking the hint to change the subject. It was only yesterday that he received his latest official rejection from his last round of job interviews.

“That’s great, honey,” Mavis encouraged while serving her own plate of food. “I’m sure you’ll get something soon.”

Only when she started eating did Annica realize how hungry she was, after skipping breakfast and only eating a single slice of cheese pizza for lunch. Despite the dinner being a bit plain, it tasted as good as any freshly baked dessert she had ever eaten.

“I didn’t get any orders today,” Mavis confessed. “But I have a few new recipes I want to try out – maybe they’ll generate some buzz.”

“Well, just let us know if you need any taste testers!” Daryl said, grinning with a mouthful of food. His mouth was closed, but his cheeks were still bulging. “Right, Annica?”

Annica weakly smiled back while scooping out another helping of casserole.

“Nice to see you have a healthy appetite today!” Mavis observed.

“Yeah, it’s really good,” Annica said before taking another bite. “Is this a new recipe?”

“No, it’s the same as ever,” Mavis replied. “Daryl, do you think you might want to try applying for—”

Annica didn’t even hear the second half of Mavis’s question. Her mind had completely returned to the research she was conducting online. She wolfed down the rest of her food, thanked her mother for preparing it, then loaded her dishes into the dishwasher.

“All right, see you tomorrow morning I guess!” Mavis hollered as Annica retreated back into her bedroom.

Once she was back at her desk, Annica immediately resumed her research. The topics became increasingly fringe the deeper she went. It seemed to be fairly common knowledge that these beings were higher dimensional and not entirely physical, which matched with Annica’s own experience, and with what Maya had explained to her. From there, details got sketchy, and Annica’s mind was flooded with questions: *Were they fifth dimensional, or ninth dimensional? Or maybe some of both? What did*

those numbers even mean, exactly? Did “dimensional” refer to spatial dimensions, or some other concept?

Based on her research, it seemed that most of these beings were benevolent. Annica was sure that Maya had to be benevolent. Or at least, she was pretty sure. But according to some sources, malevolent beings sometimes posed as benevolent beings in order to earn people’s trust. A small-but-plausible doubt crept into Annica’s mind: *Could Maya be one such malevolent being, presenting herself as a little girl in order to seem less threatening?*

Annica kept digging deeper. The further she explored, the more sinister the details became. Earth was a prison planet, many claimed; humanity was tightly controlled like animals in a zoo, with higher beings actively suppressing humans’ spiritual and technological development. Whether or not this was literally true, Annica certainly felt subjugated by human authority, so extrapolating this feeling to higher beings wasn’t a large mental jump.

The beings in charge of running the “prison planet” that was Earth were described in terrifying detail. They allegedly fed off of negative conscious energy emitted from humans. By keeping everyone in a constant state of strife and discord, they gorged themselves on human suffering like gluttons at a buffet.

The next research topic sent Annica’s hairs standing on end. The world – the *human world*, specifically – was allegedly heavily populated by people who weren’t what

they seemed. Some were shapeshifting extraterrestrials in disguise, often occupying positions of power: the politicians, the billionaires, the “elites” pulling the strings of human history.

But *even worse*, others were allegedly not conscious at all. They were called “backdrop people” or “non-player characters” (“NPCs”), referring to characters in a video game whom the player has no direct control over. NPCs were described as empty, soulless vessels, existing primarily to teach lessons to the “real people.” Annica wondered if they too were involved in dominating humanity, like malevolent robots guarding a prison.

Annica felt an intense wave of nausea. She quickly regretted eating as much dinner as she had, even if she was running a caloric deficit. The thought of dominance, control, deception, darkness, evil... It was all bad enough on a purely human level, but what if it existed on an even higher level as well?

She wanted to toss it all out of her mind. This would have been easy a month ago. She could have read these websites and laughed at the ridiculousness of lizard people serving in Congress. *But now she had her own experience.* It wasn't exactly the same as the experiences reported by others, but it was still an experience beyond what was commonly accepted in human culture. How could she now trust the same mainstream human narrative that denied the reality of what she had seen with her own eyes?

Where was the explanation for the crop circle experience in what was considered “rational” thought?

She had no choice, she felt, but to defer to those who acknowledged the reality she was directly experiencing. She didn’t know how they knew what they knew, but she knew what *she* knew, and if others claimed to know something similar, why should she not listen to whatever else they might have to say?

Annica wrestled with the new and sometimes conflicting information she was receiving online. She felt her old worldview crumbling; she didn’t yet know what would take its place, but she knew it would be something vastly different from the mental model of reality she had held for most of her life.

How exactly she would form this new worldview, or what information it would incorporate, was still unclear. She soon realized, however, that there was only one path forward: She had to take it all in. *All of it*. She didn’t have to commit to believing any of it – not yet, anyway – but she had to at least be *aware* of it. Only then could she try sorting through the pieces to form a new coherent model of reality.

She continued her feverish research before eventually collapsing onto her bed, fully clothed, at a bit past two o’clock in the morning.

CHAPTER 6

BACK TO BASICS

“Hi!” Maya’s voice chirped.

Annica quickly examined her surroundings. She seemed to be in some sort of classroom, without having any awareness of how she got there. There were no desks, but there was a large backlit, softly glowing whiteboard against a wall. At the center of the room was a mesa-shaped metallic platform, emitting colorful holographic geometric images above it. The room was otherwise empty.

“Where am I?” Annica asked, completely disoriented and uncomfortable with the thought that she had been transported somewhere without her knowledge. “Am I in the ship, or the undersea city?”

“We are somewhere new today!” Maya cheerfully answered.

“Where?” Annica asked, looking around nervously. “Is this place ‘real’?”

Annica still felt a gut-level, animal-like fear in Maya’s presence. It was more manageable now; Annica could consciously override it, for the most part. But still, it hadn’t disappeared entirely. Annica wasn’t sure if it was a lower instinctive part of her mind that simply needed to

be suppressed, or if it was a higher intuitive warning of legitimate danger. She had presumed the former, but her recent research led her to now consider the latter.

“In your terms, you would call this place, perhaps, twenty percent ‘real’ and eighty percent ‘unreal,’ with ‘unreal’ being what you would consider purely mental,” Maya explained. “In this context, what you call physical reality is about ninety-nine percent ‘real’ and one percent ‘unreal,’ and what you consider to be waking imagination is about one percent ‘real’ and ninety-nine percent ‘unreal,’ once the degree of astral overlap is taken into consideration. Does that make sense?”

“Not really,” Annica answered, feeling increasingly distrustful. “Why did you bring me here?”

“It is time for lesson number three! I decided that our last meeting counted as two lessons, just as an update there,” Maya said with an enthusiastic grin.

“I’ve been getting a lot of ‘lessons’ lately,” Annica said wearily. Even in what she presumed to be a sleeping state, she still felt mentally exhausted.

“Yes, you are on a highly accelerated path right now. This is normal! We wish to offer you assistance in your studies.” Maya winked and gave a big thumbs-up.

Annica grimaced at Maya’s excessive cheerfulness. “Okay, let’s start with a *simple* explanation of how much of this is real, or how much of anything is real.” She shook her head. “I have no idea where to draw the line anymore.”

“Yes, your mental construct of reality is dissolving. Please remember the lesson about the ship! Let’s start with the basics.”

Annica scratched her head as she thought back to the lesson about the ship, but its relevance wasn’t immediately obvious. Something about things not literally existing as they appear?

Maya turned to the structure at the center of the room projecting the colorful holographic shapes.

“Much of your confusion is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of what reality is to begin with,” Maya said in a slightly deeper tone, as if imitating the voice of an adult schoolteacher.

“You mean atoms?” Annica asked. By now her lingering fear had mostly subsided, and she was curious about where Maya’s lesson plan was going.

“Yes!” Maya gleefully affirmed. “And within those atoms?”

“Protons, neutrons and electrons?” Annica answered, briefly thinking back to a middle school chemistry lesson.

Maya snapped her fingers. “Right again!” She then started pulsating her hands as if holding an invisible, quivering ball between them. “But actually, most of what we consider an atom is empty space, between all the protons, neutrons and electrons. It’s a lot like how the macro universe is also mostly empty space, between all the galaxies and the stars and planets within those galaxies. And even the protons and neutrons aren’t the smallest

units of physical matter. They're made up of little quarks, and between those quarks...?" Maya's voice trailed off, and she leaned an ear forward expectantly.

"...more empty space?"

"Right! Basically, the more you zoom in on an atom, the more it's all just empty space. When you finally get down to the fundamental 'matter,' it's ultimately just energy." Maya opened her hands up to the ceiling, as if to liberate the invisible quivering ball.

Something clicked in Annica's mind. "Like what Einstein said, right? Something about matter converting to energy?"

"Yes! But it's less of a 'conversion' and more that they're fundamentally just the same thing to begin with. What you call 'matter' is really energy vibrating at a low frequency, which allows it to hold a persistent form in physical reality."

Annica rubbed her forehead as she paused to consider this statement. "So nothing is real, then? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Well, the energy is real!" Maya countered, holding up her index finger. "And it follows persistent laws, which have very real consequences. If you physically injure yourself, for example, you will cause the energy that makes up your body to form a new persistent pattern, and you might find this new pattern highly unpleasant."

Annica thought about this information for a moment. “So how is this any different from how I’m already thinking about physical reality, then?”

“Good question! Just as matter is fundamentally energy if you break it down far enough, what do you think energy is, fundamentally, if you break *it* down far enough?”

Annica didn’t even know how to process the question. “I have no idea,” she said with a shrug.

Maya jumped into the air while raising a fist. “Consciousness!”

“Huh?”

“Look,” Maya said, gesturing to the holographic projector at the center of the room. The geometric shapes morphed into three human figures, walking in the same direction as if on a treadmill. They were translucent, composed of red wires. Dots of green light swirled around them.

Maya proceeded, “Everything we know as ‘form’ is basically a holographic projection, emitted from – and existing within – the One Mind.”

Annica scrunched up her face. “‘One Mind’? Are you talking about God?”

“We don’t typically use the ‘G’ word,” Maya said, pressing her fingertips together. “It implies something anthropomorphic, or separate from us and what we’re currently experiencing.” She wagged her finger and continued, “The reality is neither. ‘Source’ may be a more

appropriate term, but It goes by many names: the All, the One, the One Self, the Great Spirit, First Cause, the Creator, the Cosmic, the Divine, the Absolute, the No-Thing, Consciousness Infinity—”

“Okay, hang on, back up,” Annica interrupted, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Are you telling me *everything* is consciousness?”

“A rock isn’t exactly pondering its place in the universe, but there is at least *some* degree of primordial awareness that runs through all things, yes.”

“But how? A rock doesn’t have a brain.”

“That is correct! But look,” Maya said, gesturing again to the holographic projection. The green lights were still swirling around the three figures, but now they were also flowing in and out of the figures’ heads.

“Your commonly accepted model of the brain is backwards,” Maya asserted. “It’s less of a computer and more of a receiver, like a radio antenna. It doesn’t *generate* consciousness; rather, it tunes into consciousness that’s already there. This consciousness is an infinite, all-pervasive unified field, filling the ‘void’ of what we might otherwise consider the aforementioned ‘empty space.’ There is only one such field in all of reality, spanning across an infinite number of what your people would call universes.” Maya stretched her hands out wide in both directions while spinning.

“Then why do we turn into idiots if we get brain damaged, if our brains are just tuning into an infinite

consciousness that already exists outside of it?” Annica asked, still highly skeptical of what Maya was telling her.

Maya abruptly stopped spinning and placed an index finger on her lips while she searched for the appropriate metaphor. “Well, what happens to the picture quality of a television set if it has poor reception? Be careful, though, with using the phrase ‘outside of’! Not only is all of reality a projection of the One Mind, but it exists *within* the One Mind. Think of it like a dream state, only it’s shared by everyone. There is a shared structure of physical reality, but if you were to zoom out of your dimension, you would find that there is no objective ‘space’ in this plane of existence any more than there is objective ‘space’ between characters in a video game, if you were to zoom out and look at the physical hardware storing the code.”

“Okay, that actually brings me to something,” Annica said, tapping her foot and thinking back on the concept of NPCs that she had researched. “If even rocks are conscious, and all of reality is just a holographic projection anyway, then how can I know whether another person is conscious in the same way that I am? How do I know the world isn’t filled with robots?”

“Annica,” Maya said, her voice turning somber. She stepped closer and took Annica’s hand, holding it tightly while staring deeply into her eyes. “You are walking a very difficult path. You are seeking truth where absolute truth is virtually impossible to attain. You will be bombarded

with deception. Some of this deception is harmless, but some of it is truly, truly dangerous.”

“But how can I know?” Annica asked, flicking away Maya’s hand. “How can I know what’s real or not? I was struggling enough with that before today’s lesson about how nothing is fundamentally real to begin with!”

“Our minds are real,” Maya countered. “Our consciousness is real. Our awareness of the present is real. And, most importantly, every single human on your planet is just as real as you are.”

Annica shook her head in frustration. She thought back to the information she studied about deceptive dark beings. “How can I know you are what you claim to be?” she asked accusingly. “How can I know you’re not a dark, evil being masquerading as a little girl, giving me false information about reality and appointing me as a subservient ambassador only to cause more harm than good?”

“You can’t,” Maya said flatly.

The response caught Annica off guard. “I... can’t?”

“No,” Maya confirmed.

“Then...”

Maya’s countenance remained grave. “Annica, we don’t want you to worship us, or to blindly follow us. We don’t want your people to do this either. We *want* you to be skeptical, to distrust us a little bit. I *want* you to question and doubt everything I’m telling you.”

“But why?”

“Because we don’t wish to infringe upon your free will, for starters. But more importantly, we need you to follow your own moral compass.”

Annica was silent.

Maya continued, “We are aware of the research you were conducting last night. The Council was very concerned; it’s why this emergency session was called.” Maya’s eyes sparkled warmly as she continued with deep sincerity, “Yes, Annica, there is evil in the world. There is suffering. There are dark beings, some of which are incredibly powerful and may very well be defined as ‘demons’ by your people. I am not denying their existence, nor the influence that some of them exert upon your world.”

“So it’s true, then?” Annica asked. “That Earth is a prison planet, and we’re all being controlled by evil creatures that feed upon human suffering?”

“That would be a very simplistic way of characterizing only some of the many beings that interact with your species.”

Annica unconsciously clenched her fists. “So how do we fight them? How do we break free of their control?”

“You cannot fight them directly,” Maya answered firmly. “To do this is to play their game by their rules. They have the home field advantage, and you will lose.”

“Then how? How can we stop them?”

Maya placed one hand on her hip while gesturing openly with the other. “You need to grow up, as a species.

You need to become too powerful for them to control you. That's why we're here, and why we've chosen you – to help accelerate this process. We cannot do this for you, but we can push you along; we can nudge you in the right direction.”

“What direction is that?”

“Love.”

Annica raised an eyebrow. “Love? You're kidding, right?”

“I am not,” Maya confirmed. Annica looked at Maya incredulously, but saw no hint of a reaction.

“But...” Annica struggled to find her next words. “You basically just told me that Earth is enslaved by demons, and we're supposed to, what, send them flowers?”

“You don't need to love their actions, or the way in which their personality screens have distorted the One Light from the One Consciousness. You don't need to be complicit in their behavior, or to abstain from preventative action if you find yourself in a specific situation where a specific act of evil is being committed in your direct presence. But what you must be very, very careful of...”

Maya took a long pause before her next words, ensuring that she had Annica's full attention.

“...is ever believing that they are separate from you – the *real* you, the essence of your being, deeper than the human personality you know as Annica.”

Maya continued, “The most righteous among us has at least a little bit of darkness, and the most evil among us has at least a little bit of good. We are all somewhere on this spectrum. We all draw our consciousness from the same One Light, and we bend this light through our own unique personality prisms. Sometimes the light refracted through these prisms is beautiful, and sometimes it is unpleasant, but it’s all coming from the same Source. You cannot ever, ever forget this.”

Annica was silent.

“Let me show you something else,” Maya said, pointing back at the holographic projector at the center of the room. The green dots of light circling in the air were now black, like particles of soot. They swirled around the figures, entering and exiting through their heads. The red wires composing two of the figures darkened, but the third figure held its vibrant red color. When the black dots swirled within this figure’s body, they transformed into white light. These light particles radiated from the figure; when the others absorbed these specks of light, their frames brightened again. Within a few moments, all of the dark specks swirling through the air turned to white light.

“Everything in reality is a dance of energy,” Maya said, dancing on her toes and emitting sparks of white light from her palms. “Whether it’s the physics of rain falling from a cloud or the emotional energy swirling around a romantic couple having a fight, everything has a natural flow to it. Nothing is separate from this flow; everything

we think, say and do has some impact on the energy of the whole system.”

The holographic projector turned off. Maya continued with a tone of subtle urgency, “We need you to help us transmute this energy, Annica. Our dimension is less solid than yours – our version of ‘matter’ vibrates at a higher frequency, one in greater alignment with pure love. In spatial terms, our dimension overlaps with yours, in the same way that different radio frequencies overlap in the same air. For our two worlds to have open contact, our frequencies need to be closer together.”

Annica was doing her best to process everything Maya was communicating. “Frequencies of consciousness?”

Maya smiled. “You’re getting it!” she said, her voice turning lighter again. “Just as matter is fundamentally energy, and energy is fundamentally consciousness, consciousness is fundamentally love. Love, therefore, is the most fundamental building block of reality. Sometimes its outward expressions are distorted, but if those distortions are cleared out, love is naturally all that remains.”

Annica wasn’t sure if she followed what Maya was saying. “I still don’t understand what my role in all of this is.”

Maya reached up and put her hands on Annica’s shoulders. “You’re the bridge, Annica. You are a starseed, but you have also lived among the people of Earth. We need you to reach out to them on our behalf, to help them

understand us, so that all of us can live together in harmony, on the same plane of manifestation.”

As Maya’s words sank into Annica’s mind, she was reminded of the awe she experienced upon first seeing the undersea city.

“I know this is a lot to take in,” Maya said, “but we chose you for this because we know you can do it. You’re our starseed ambassador, Annica, and you’re going to change the world!” Maya leaped into the air with a raised fist to punctuate her statement.

Annica was nearly speechless. “I will do my best,” she managed to say.

Maya grinned. “We know you will. But for now, you need to get some sleep!”

CHAPTER 7

ABOVE AND BEYOND

“Annica! Come on!” Mavis shouted while pounding on the door to Annica’s bedroom. “You’re late for school!”

Mavis flung the door open. “You’re still in bed?!” she exclaimed. “And your clothes... Is that what you were wearing yesterday?!”

Annica’s eyes felt like they were sealed shut. She wiped away some eye gunk and forced them open.

“Get ready!” Mavis commanded. “NOW!”

Annica dragged herself out of bed and checked the time. *Oh no, I really am late*, she thought. She realized that she wouldn’t have time to eat breakfast or take a shower. She hurried to the living room and grabbed her duffel bag, then brought it back to her room. It was a Friday morning, and the gym clothes were unambiguously due for a wash. Annica grimaced from the smell while pushing her head through the neckhole of her gym T-shirt. She tossed her normal school clothes into the duffel bag, then grabbed her hairbrush on the way out of her bedroom.

“I’ll drive you,” Mavis said, picking up the keys to the family car. Normally Annica walked to school on her own, sometimes with minimal interaction with her parents.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately,” Mavis chastised as she and Annica buckled their seatbelts.

“I told you, I’ve just been stressed,” Annica answered defensively, quickly brushing a few of the larger tangles out of her hair.

Mavis started up the car. “Did you see Mr. Abelman yesterday?”

“Noah? Yeah.”

“What did you talk about?”

“That’s private,” Annica said dismissively, still brushing.

Mavis sighed as she came to a stop at a red light. “Is there *anything* you can tell me?” she pressed, shifting her attention from the road to Annica.

Annica silently stared straight ahead while pulling her hair through an elastic tie. She waited for the light to turn green before asking, “What do you think caused that crop circle?”

“Oh, that nonsense,” Mavis muttered under her breath. It was the first time since the incident occurred that anyone in the family had spoken about it. “Probably just teenagers.”

Annica waited until the car was only a block from her school before saying, “Maybe just one teenager.”

“Why?” Mavis asked, struggling to split her attention between Annica and the road. “Did you see something?”

Annica waited until Mavis pulled up in front of the school. “I see lots of things,” Annica said, opening the car

door and grabbing her backpack and duffel bag. “Thanks for the ride, Mom!”

Annica leaped out of the car and slammed the door closed before Mavis could respond, then she hurried over to gym class. It was already in session out in the football field, with students stretching in single-file lines.

“You’re late,” the gym teacher scolded.

“Sorry.”

“You need to get a tardy slip from the office.”

“It’s only a few minutes!” Annica pleaded.

The gym teacher pointed in the direction of the administrative office. “Go. Now.”

Annica turned around and rolled her eyes. She dropped off her backpack and duffel bag in the locker room, then walked to the administrative building. It was an abnormally cool late September morning, and a passing breeze cut right through Annica’s shorts and T-shirt. She considered how much colder the weather would be in a couple of months. *Maybe switching gym class to first period was a mistake...*

She got her tardy slip from the administrative office and returned to the football field, where the students had transitioned from stretching to jumping jacks.

“Here,” Annica grunted at her gym teacher while handing over the tardy slip. She found a place in one of the rows and joined the other students in their exercising.

“Twenty push-ups!” the gym teacher barked. “Go!”

Being forced to press her hands against the dirty ground felt even more degrading than usual. Annica was more exhausted than she had ever been, and the latest encounter with Maya was still fresh in her mind. *Starseed ambassador!* The title was once again dominating her thoughts.

She felt like she was gliding through the hallways on her way to second period world history. The other students seemed even more distant than usual; she felt as if she were observing their behavior from a higher plane of reality, with a new hyper-focus on their mannerisms and background chatter.

She barely caught a complete sentence of her world history class; the significance of the information Maya had imparted was still sinking in. If this information were true, then Annica now had a more comprehensive understanding of metaphysics and spirituality than all of the world's major religions, to speak nothing of those who knew nothing of spiritual matters at all. She couldn't help but feel a sense of pride and superiority creeping into her psyche – subtle at first, but undeniable as the day wore on.

By the time lunch began after second period, Annica still didn't have much appetite, despite not having eaten since dinner the night before. The chronic sleep deprivation combined with the complete mental overload left her wondering if she was at risk for developing a stomach ulcer. For lunch that day she purchased a single bag of tortilla chips, which she nibbled while seated on a

bench along the outskirts of the Quad. Normally she preferred to eat farther away from the crowd, but today she felt inclined to silently observe her classmates.

Annica's peers truly seemed to be in another world. Most were clustered into isolated social groups: laughing together, shouting across the Quad, or just chatting casually. Annica now felt like she had a deeper understanding of the underlying flow to the conscious energy of their behavior, but regardless, she had never felt more alienated.

Annica thought back to everything Maya had taught her; it was still sinking in, but it was also tinged with a strong sense of familiarity. It was as if she had always known it, and she was now simply remembering the information rather than learning it for the first time.

If this is true, then that's how it would be, Annica thought. If she really was a starseed, if her consciousness really was projecting into her physical body from a metaphysical layer of reality that had a much greater scope of awareness, and if some subconscious element of these memories really did carry over between lives, then everything she was currently experiencing was perfectly natural.

Jesus, this is actually real...

Annica's mind turned to the question of what "starseed ambassador" even meant. Maya had never given any specifics, and Annica still wasn't sure what the official

duties of this role would entail. Without these details, she was free to fantasize.

She imagined a bright white light hovering over the center of the Quad. It would descend slowly, and gradually the students would start to notice. They would point to the sky, elbowing anyone staring at their phones. Perhaps the bright white light would appear as a metallic flying saucer as it got closer to the ground. Students would clear an opening, and the spaceship would land softly in the center.

Everyone would be speechless, circled around the craft and staring with dropped jaws. No one would dare take a step closer, but no one would run away, either – after all, who could possibly miss the first contact event between humans and an intelligent extraterrestrial species?

Annica would confidently walk through the crowd, toward the ship. A ramp would lower, and Maya would come out, along with a small group of alien beings Annica had seen in the undersea city. Annica would bow to them, perhaps, then turn to face her classmates, and introduce the strange visitors as her family, or perhaps as her friends – either way, she would emphasize that these benevolent beings only wished the best for humanity.

Annica closed her eyes and savored the feeling this experience would bring. Union between the people of Earth, and the higher forces operating behind the scenes! She would be the bridge between the two worlds. The longer her mind dwelled on this, the more she realized

how much she *yearned* for it, from the deepest corners of her soul. She understood now what her life path was, what her purpose was, and why she was uniquely qualified to fill such a monumentally important role.

“Annica?” a familiar voice asked. Annica’s eyes snapped open.

Standing before her was a boy she knew from eighth grade. His name was Adam, and he was a regular player during recess croquet. He was a short, goofy-looking kid with a wide nose, a bowl cut, and a few red spots of acne forming on his chin.

Annica was always delighted to see him during the croquet games – he was sincere and friendly, and he always gave the game just the right amount of seriousness. Whenever someone new joined the group, he would always help Annica with explaining the rules and ensuring that they felt welcomed.

But in the present context, Annica froze. She took a small handful of tortilla chips out of the bag and shoved them into her mouth.

“Oh, hi, Adam,” she said, crunching through a mouthful of the dry, salty food.

“Hi,” he said back with a nervous smile. “Sorry, was I interrupting something?”

“Oh, uh, no,” Annica stammered.

“All right, cool, cool... So, uh, do you usually eat lunch out here?”

“Yeah, sometimes, I mean, usually not, no.”

“Yeah, all right,” Adam said, scratching the back of his neck. “So, uh, some of us from eighth grade eat lunch together. Jessica, Richard and Amanda. You remember them, right?”

Annica nodded while swallowing her mouthful of chips. It was at this point that she realized she should have also gotten a drink.

“Yeah, all right,” Adam repeated. “So, I don’t know, if you ever, uh, like if you ever need a place to eat lunch or something, you know, or, maybe you’re good here?”

Adrenaline shot through Annica’s system. Her heart was pounding, and she had to focus on her breath to keep from hyperventilating. It was the same base-level, animal-like fear that she had felt in Maya’s presence, yet somehow even worse.

“I think I’m okay,” Annica blurted out. *Adam, I like you, but please, please go away*, her mind was screaming.

“All right, no worries, no pressure or anything,” Adam said. His gaze turned downward, and he twisted the front of his left shoe against the pavement. “So, do you still play croquet at all?”

Annica grabbed another handful of chips and bit into them, sending countless crumbs falling to the ground. “No,” she said flatly through the mouthful of food.

“Oh, really? That’s too bad.”

The two were silent for 10 full agonizing seconds. Annica chewed her mouthful of chips; the crunching seemed impossibly loud.

“We had a lot of fun,” Adam eventually added. He smiled shyly while twisting his shoe against the pavement again. “We were just talking about you – the group of us, I mean. It was something kind of special, you know?”

“Well, it was weird,” was all Annica could think to say after swallowing.

“Yeah, I guess so... I mean, middle schoolers playing croquet of all things, alongside elementary school kids.”

The two went silent again for another agonizing pause.

“You could always play with the lunch group again, if you wanted,” Annica eventually offered.

“Yeah, I know,” Adam replied. “But it wouldn’t be the same without you.”

Annica froze. She felt so dizzy that she wondered if she might lose consciousness. She said the only words she could think to say: “It wouldn’t be the same *with* me, either.”

“Yeah, all right,” Adam said, his voice noticeably quieter. “I guess it’s just a dumb game for kids, right? Anyway, sorry to bother you, but, um, it was good to see you, Annica. I hope you’re doing well.”

Before Annica could even consider what to say in response, Adam spun around and walked away so fast that it looked like he might break into a sprint.

Annica sat completely stunned. She had always liked Adam. They had shared countless hours of fun together during recess croquet, and she never felt nervous around

him before. And yet, here in this context she felt like a frightened animal, every bit as terrified as when coming face-to-face with a literal interdimensional alien.

She rolled up her half-eaten bag of tortilla chips and stuffed it into her backpack. She then retreated away from the Quad, returning to one of her regular benches near an empty hallway along the edge of campus.

When the ending lunch bell rang, Annica dreaded going back to class. She was still exhausted from sleep deprivation, had hardly eaten anything since the night before, and she was still reeling from the information she had recently learned from Maya and her own online research. The awkward interaction with Adam was the final straw that pushed her past a breaking point.

I need to go home.

She picked up her duffel bag from her locker and walked toward the campus exit. She had never been truant before, but she figured whatever punishment lay in store couldn't be any worse than reporting to the administrative office first.

The weather was still cooler than usual during the walk home – Annica was now unambiguously having regrets about switching gym class to first period, but by now this felt like the least of her problems.

When she was a block away from her house, she could hear her parents arguing inside. She couldn't make out the specific words, but she could immediately tell that it was heated. She hurried toward the front door and hid just

outside, listening intently to what they were shouting at each other.

“I don’t blame you for not getting *this* job, Daryl!” Mavis yelled. “Or any one particular job, okay? But it’s been two years now! *Two years* since you were laid off!”

“I’m trying as hard as I can!” Daryl shouted back.

“Are you? Are you *really*, Daryl?”

“What about you? I don’t see you going to any interviews lately!”

“*I started my own business!*” Mavis shot back, louder than anything that had been said so far.

“What, selling muffins out of the kitchen? How much revenue has that generated over the past week?”

“At least it’s *something!*”

“It’s never going to be enough, Mavis! It’s never going to be anywhere near enough!”

“So what, then?” Mavis asked. Annica could tell that Mavis was on the verge of tears. “We just keep living off of Annica’s college fund?”

“I told you, *I’m trying as hard as I can!*”

“What about *saving* some money once in a while too, huh? The expensive laptop, the security camera equipment, the...” Mavis’s voice trailed off.

“The what, Mavis?”

Mavis hesitated before answering, “Did you really need to outfit half of Annica’s last school with croquet equipment?!” The words hit Annica in the pit of her stomach, as if a physical blow had been delivered.

“She *loved* croquet!” Daryl shot back, twisting the sensation in Annica’s stomach into pure nausea.

“I know, but couldn’t you have stopped after the first set? Did you really need to buy so many?!”

“She was friends with half the school!” Daryl defended, his voice now receding. Annica had to strain to listen in horror to his next words: “It’s the only way she’s ever been able to make any friends.”

There was a long silence before Mavis said, “I know.”

“What do we tell her?” Mavis asked after another long silence. By now her voice was at normal volume, and Annica could barely hear her through the front door. “About the college fund, I mean.”

Annica had never really cared about the college fund. She didn’t even know how much money was in it. But she never cared about it less than she did at this moment.

The croquet equipment was a burden, her mind blasted to the forefront of her consciousness.

She shattered through a new breaking point she didn’t even realize she had. Fighting back a wave of dizziness, she threw her backpack and duffel bag to the ground, then took off running.

She ran down the street, toward an empty field several blocks from her house. She crashed into a sea of chest-level dead grass, and plowed forward as hard as she could.

I don’t want to be here anymore! she screamed in her mind. She had no idea where she was going, other than just “away.”

MAYA! DO YOU HEAR ME?! TAKE ME AWAY FROM HERE!

Annica stopped dead in her tracks at the sight that appeared before her. A white orb, high in the sky, was making a rapid descent.

She completely froze and stared at the object. *Oh my god, is this really happening?*

Doubt crept in. *Am I even sure I want this?* she asked herself. *YES*, she affirmed in her mind to any psychic beings who might be listening in. *I want to leave here!*

The orb drew closer. When it was within about a hundred feet, Annica could make out a metallic saucer-shaped craft hidden behind the bright white light.

The light became blinding, and Annica lost all awareness of her surroundings.

CHAPTER 8

CRITICAL REVIEW

Annica collapsed to her knees as soon as she felt solid ground back beneath her feet. It was a hard, metallic surface, and she inferred that she was back onboard the ship she had first visited in her quasi dream state. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Maya rested a hand on Annica's shoulder. "This is normal," Maya assured her.

"What about *any* of this could possibly be considered 'normal'?" Annica wailed.

Maya's voice was more muted than usual. "The feeling of separation, losing friends, feeling like you don't fit in anywhere, becoming more distant from family members... It's all part of the starseed awakening process."

Annica pulled her hands away from her face, stood up, and wiped her tears with the sleeve of her shirt. "I just don't know what to do," she choked out.

"That's normal too. It will all be okay."

Annica felt a slight vibration in the ship. A moment later a wall opened to reveal a corridor.

"Are we back in the undersea city?" Annica asked.

"Yes," Maya replied. "Come with me."

Maya took Annica's hand and led her through the glass corridor, back to the city that Annica had witnessed during her very first experience with Maya.

"I still don't know how 'real' this place is," Annica said, starting to regain some of her composure. Her fear toward Maya was now completely gone; in its place, she felt a familiar comfort. The idea that they were part of the same soul family didn't seem so far-fetched anymore – Annica was coming to regard Maya as the sister she appeared to be.

"In your terms, this place could be considered ninety percent 'real' and ten percent 'unreal.' It is our most remote outpost relative to our home dimension, pushing into your reality almost entirely. If your submarines knew exactly where to look, they would be able to find this physical dome structure, with minimal visual distortions."

"What about that other ten percent?"

"This city still exists within a 'bubble' of sorts; the laws of physics here aren't exactly the same as elsewhere on Earth. It is more mental, and 'solid' matter isn't quite as solid – though we still need to hold back the water pressure from your ocean."

"I see," Annica said. She wasn't sure if she entirely understood, but she was gradually growing familiar with the idea that physical matter, energy and consciousness were all fundamentally the same "stuff" that existed in different states along the same spectrum of reality.

Maya led Annica past the central courtyard that Annica had seen during her first visit. It was just as populated, with strange alien beings watching Annica and Maya as they walked by. Annica suddenly became very self-conscious of her appearance – her clothes were speckled with pieces of dried grass, and her hair was a complete tangled mess. She felt everyone’s gaze upon her, from the small gray beings with black almond-shaped eyes to the tall Nordic men and women dressed in blue jumpsuits.

Maya took Annica through one of the many long, curved hallways leading out of the central hub. The hallway was metallic and arched, and lined with doors. It reminded Annica of a hallway in a hotel; it stretched for hundreds of feet until it curved out of sight.

Maya stopped in front of one doorway about a hundred feet into the hallway.

Letting go of Annica’s hand, Maya said, “This room is reserved for you. You are welcome to stay as long as you’d like, and you are free to leave at any time. Please make yourself comfortable. When you are ready, your training will continue.”

Maya paused, then looked deeply into Annica’s eyes before adding, “That is, of course, assuming you are still interested in serving as our ambassador?”

“Yes,” Annica replied without hesitation.

Maya smiled. “Good.” She pressed a button on a control panel against the wall, and a metal door instantly

opened. Maya gestured for Annica to enter. “There is a similar control panel inside. You can use it to open the door at any time.”

“Thank you,” Annica said with a nod. She walked inside and the door shut behind her.

Annica surveyed the room. Like the rest of the city, it was metallic and completely immaculate. There was a bed in one corner, and a large, soft-looking egg-shaped chair situated next to a desk. A short hallway led to a bathroom with a sink, shower and toilet. *I guess this layer of reality is still physical enough for that*, Annica thought.

Along one wall was a small closet area. Annica looked inside to find several blue jumpsuits that seemed to be her exact size. She felt the material with her fingertips – it was elastic, like nylon, but much softer than it appeared.

Feeling grungy from missing her morning shower, doing gym class in sweat-soaked clothing, and running through a field of dead grass, Annica decided to give the private in-house alien shower contraption a try.

On the bathroom wall was a plaque that read, “Desire-activated. Manual controls unnecessary.”

This must be part of that ten percent.

Sure enough, merely stepping into the shower caused dozens of jets to spray water instantly, at exactly the right pressure and temperature.

As soon as the shower was done, Annica was instantly dry. Even her hair was dry, in addition to being perfectly soft and straight, as if it had just been thoroughly

brushed. She dressed in one of the blue jumpsuits and approached the bed.

She felt more exhausted than she had ever been in her life. She pressed her palm against the mattress to measure its softness; it seemed to be a sort of memory foam material, but its resistance didn't increase as she pushed her palm in deeper.

She lay down on it, and it felt like half her weight instantly disappeared.

Is this part of that ten percent too, or is this just how tired I am?

Annica closed her eyes and truly relaxed for the first time in weeks. When she opened her eyes, she couldn't tell whether a few seconds had passed during a long blink, or if many hours had gone by in a deep, dreamless sleep. Either way, she felt fully refreshed.

There was a knock at the door. "Yes?" Annica shouted, bolting upright. "Come in!"

The door opened, and Maya was standing just outside. "Feeling better?" she asked.

"I am, thank you!" Annica said, the words seeming to spring from her mouth with an energy of their own.

Maya leaned half her body into the room and raised her eyebrows. "Feeling... *hungry?*"

Annica was suddenly aware of how famished she was. "Also yes!" she replied.

"Come on then!" Maya said with a grin, gesturing for Annica to follow her.

The two walked back to the main courtyard area, and Maya led Annica toward what Annica had previously assessed to be some kind of food cart.

“Greetings, ambassador!” a tall blond man in a blue jumpsuit said to Annica as she approached a counter area. “What will you be having today?”

Annica looked around for a menu or food on display, but she couldn’t find anything. “I... have no idea. What do you serve here?”

“Whatever you’d like!” the man replied.

“Literally!” Maya added with a wink.

“‘Literally?’” Annica asked. “So if I wanted my mom’s apple pie—”

“Here you go!” the man interrupted, handing Annica a thimble-sized cup of fluid.

Annica took the small cup and stared curiously at its contents. The fluid was golden, like butter, and it had the viscosity of gravy when she swirled it around. She held it up to her nose and was surprised to find that it had no odor at all. Annica frowned.

“Give it a try!” Maya urged.

Annica shrugged, then drank the liquid in one sip. As soon as the fluid hit her tongue, her taste buds instantly registered her mother’s apple pie. It wasn’t just an allusion to the general flavor; it contained everything about the whole experience – the warm, gooey filling, the thick slices of apple, the rich cinnamon and brown sugar, and the buttery, flaky crust.

“Whoa!” Annica exclaimed in wide-eyed amazement. “It even simulates the... chewing? Like the chunks and texture and everything!”

“Yep, it’s all just brain signals!” Maya said, clearly delighted at Annica’s experience. “Eat as much or as little as you like of any flavor you can imagine. The underlying substance is the same, and your body will automatically absorb the optimal amount of calories and nutrients, whether you eat a little or a lot!”

“Umm, this could be dangerous, if I’m ever expected to do anything else,” Annica laughed. She already felt fully satisfied, as if she had just eaten a complete meal, but she wasn’t uncomfortably full either.

“Okay, chocolate mint Nanaimo bars!” Annica requested, citing what she believed to be the highest level of euphoric sensation that human taste buds are capable of registering.

This, too, did not disappoint.

Approximately a dozen dessert thimbles later, Annica decided to cut herself off. “All right, what’s next on the agenda?” A small belch immediately followed her words; she placed her fingertips against her lips to hide an embarrassed smile.

“There is still much you need to learn, before you are fully qualified to serve as our ambassador,” Maya said a bit sternly, as if switching to a different mode.

“Well then, let the lessons begin!” Annica exclaimed, feeling reinvigorated for her monumental role.

Maya smiled. “Come with me,” she said, gesturing toward an ornately carved stone bench situated right in front of the giant amethyst crystal fountain at the center of the plaza.

Annica followed, and they both took a seat.

“Do you mind if I braid your hair?” Maya asked. Annica’s hair somehow wasn’t tangled, despite flowing freely outside of any kind of braid or ponytail.

“Oh, go ahead,” Annica answered, turning her back to Maya.

Maya gently sectioned out several strands of Annica’s hair and began braiding. “Tell me what you understand, or what you remember of your lessons so far.”

“Hmmm, let’s see,” Annica said, pausing to think. “Various dimensions bleed into each other in the fabric of reality, all of reality is fundamentally mental – though some of it is more ‘solid’ than other layers – and we’re all experiencing subjective fragments of a single infinite consciousness. Oh, and love is at the center of all of this, somehow. Right?”

“Yes,” Maya said approvingly as she continued to braid. “You have the basics right, for the most part. But you are still a bit confused by some of the details.”

“It’s quite a lot to take in,” Annica admitted, feeling only the slightest tug at various points in her scalp as Maya braided more deftly than anyone else ever had, Annica included.

“You were wondering during your research about the term ‘dimension,’ and whether it referred to spatial dimensions or some other concept.”

“Yes,” Annica acknowledged, feeling uneasy at Maya having word-for-word awareness of her exact thoughts. Even if Annica felt accustomed to Maya’s presence, she didn’t yet feel fully accustomed to the complete lack of mental privacy.

“The term ‘dimension’ is perhaps a bit misleading and sometimes causes confusion with your people,” Maya began. “We’re usually referring to different layers of spatial reality vibrating at different frequencies, often in the same physical space, but not on the same ‘plane,’ in that they can’t always directly interact with each other. The term ‘densities’ might be more accurate than ‘dimensions’ to describe the planes on which the signal for these layers of reality vibrate.”

“I see,” Annica said, hardly understanding at all.

“Consciousness, like its expression in matter, operates differently at different densities,” Maya continued as she gently took another strand of hair and began braiding it with the others. “That is where we will begin today’s lesson. Look into the fountain.”

Annica turned her attention to the fountain and saw several jets of water forming a pyramid.

Maya continued, “At the top of the pyramid is the highest level of consciousness – the One Consciousness,

or Unity Consciousness. Your people sometimes represent it as the ‘All-Seeing Eye.’”

As Maya spoke, a white hologram of a single eye appeared at the top of the water pyramid. Annica immediately felt uneasy at the sight of the image; it was the same eye often associated with “the Illuminati,” featured on the back of American one-dollar bills.

“Your culture has unfortunately built up a negative association with this image,” Maya said in response to Annica’s mental reaction. “But, fundamentally, it represents *you* – the *real* you, the universal ‘I am’ awareness at the core of everyone’s consciousness. As we align more and more with our authentic selves across countless incarnations, our soul personalities become larger and more refined while traversing up the pyramid through each density.”

After Maya spoke, the water pyramid lit up with all the colors of the rainbow – from red at the bottom to a deep purple near the top, just below the white eye.

“Consider consciousness as being like a rainbow,” Maya said. “At the very bottom in red we have first density, or what you would consider inert physical matter. It has no self-awareness or complex thought, but because all exists within the One Mind as consciousness, it has a very primordial sort of awareness.”

“What you call ‘life’ begins in second density,” Maya continued as the orange band just above the red base glowed more brightly. “Plants instinctively ‘grow toward

the light,' and animals develop what you unambiguously recognize as consciousness, even within your rather rigid definitions.”

“Is this where humans fit in?” Annica asked.

“Not quite,” Maya responded. Her tone became more childlike as she added, “Humans are a step higher, in third density – upper third density, to be more precise, on the cusp of graduation! You are fully self-aware, and you have an innate sense of non-physical spiritual realms. You imagine, you aspire, you ponder life’s big questions, and even the non-spiritual among you feel a sense of awe and wonder when gazing out over a sunset.”

“By fourth density, conscious experience starts to graduate beyond physicality,” Maya continued. “This is where my people fit in, admittedly at the lower end. We are consciously aware of spiritual realms, we have direct awareness of our cumulative third density lifetimes, and we can manipulate physical matter with thought alone.”

“And beyond fourth density?” Annica asked.

“That’s where things get a bit hazy for us,” Maya admitted. “We suspect that fifth density is a sort of collective planetary consciousness, and sixth density would be analogous to a star.”

“Wait,” Annica interjected, trying to follow along while looking at the indigo band on the pyramid, “aren’t stars first density matter?”

“Yes!” Maya cheerfully confirmed. “But what you observe as a physical star is a lower-dimensional ‘shadow,’

sort of like how three-dimensional objects cast two-dimensional shadows. The full essence of a star as it exists on its native plane is pure sixth density consciousness, radiating this consciousness out to its orbiting planets. Any beings inhabiting those planets tune into this consciousness. So, in a way, what humans experience is really your sun's experience, as if your minds are really inside of it."

Annica scrunched up her face as she failed to follow what Maya was saying. "I thought you said these higher levels were 'hazy' for you."

"Well, yes," Maya answered. "But at least this much is self-evident. Now! By seventh density you're basically at a galactic level, preparing to go through the black hole at the center."

"What, uh... What happens when you 'go through the black hole'?" Annica asked uneasily.

"Now that *is* hazy for us," Maya answered. "But we suspect that black holes in one universe form Big Bangs in another universe. Essentially first and what we might call eighth density are the same, since experiencing 'everything' is the same as experiencing nothing. The universe we know essentially exists because of an explosion of eighth density consciousness forming first density matter. The eye at the top of one pyramid forms the base of another!"

Annica looked at the eye at the top of the pyramid and took a deep breath. "I think I understand. Sort of."

“Great!” Maya said, taking another strand of Annica’s hair and starting to braid it with the others.

“All right, now here’s where things get important,” Maya continued. “Consciousness cascades from the top of the pyramid down to the base. The One Consciousness at the top, the Eye, is ultimately what drives the formation of matter – the binding of protons, neutrons and electrons into atoms, and the binding of molecules into nucleic acids.”

“Allowing for life?” Annica asked.

“Yes! Or, at least, what you recognize as life. Consciousness then begins its ascent upward, back to the Source. And along this return, it’s perpetually guided by the levels above it.” Maya paused as she continued braiding, leaving space for Annica to speak.

“‘Guided?’” Annica asked.

“Right!” Maya confirmed. “Plants alter minerals in the soil. A chimpanzee can pluck a flower or throw a rock, and there’s very little that a flower or rock can do to resist.”

Annica grew uneasy. “This sounds less like ‘guidance’ and more like ‘control.’”

“I suppose you could call it that,” Maya acknowledged, taking yet another strand of Annica’s hair and adding it to the braid. “In the same way that most animals have nearly complete control over physical matter, humans have nearly complete control over other animals. Your technology manipulates reality in ways far beyond

second density animals' comprehension, and you can put most of them into a zoo if you wish."

Annica narrowed her eyes. "Are we a zoo to you?"

Maya paused before answering, "Not *exactly*..."

Annica twisted her neck to look at Maya. "That's not reassuring."

Maya finished Annica's braid with a gentle tug. She stood up from the bench and sat cross-legged on the ground, facing Annica directly.

"I understand this might be a hard concept for you," Maya said. "You've spent your whole life feeling subjugated by authority figures, and now you're learning where humans fit into the grand scheme of existence. I don't want you to see us as your 'owners,' or your slave masters. We just want to help humanity ascend as much as we can. We want to uplift you, to help you step into the light. We want you to join us in fourth density, but you need to evolve more before that can happen."

The word "evolve" stuck in Annica's mind. She looked around the city square, really focusing on the tall, blond, human-looking beings wearing blue jumpsuits.

"It's odd how much your people look like me," Annica said with suspicion, as something started to click in her mind. "Is that a coincidence?"

"What do you mean?" Maya asked. Annica detected a hint of hesitation in her response.

“Well, I was adopted, and I never knew my biological parents... Am I one of you? I mean physically, biologically?”

“Oh, no!” Maya quickly responded. “I promise, you are one hundred percent human. You’re not part of the hybrid program.”

Annica’s blood went cold. “The what program?”

“Oh!” Maya responded somewhat cheerfully. “The hybrid program. You missed that in your research. We’re accelerating the natural evolutionary process by cross-breeding your people with ours.”

Annica felt like her brain was hit by a hammer. “By practicing eugenics?” she asked with disgust.

“No no no!” Maya quickly replied, wagging her finger. “We’re not actively culling anyone, and we don’t express any favoritism toward any particular skin pigmentation of your species. We’re accelerating all races equally!”

“But you’re... controlling our biology?”

“In a very select set of circumstances, yes. Most hybrids aren’t aware that they’re hybrids, however.”

“That’s a theme with how you interact with us, isn’t it?” Annica asked, trying to maintain composure. “That we don’t give our consent, and most of us aren’t even aware of what you’re doing?”

“Of course!” Maya said innocently, as if oblivious to how the information was affecting Annica. “Consider how much interacting with us shattered your psyche, and you’re a starseed! Now take the average person and—”

“The memory loss,” Annica interrupted, remembering her research. “That’s a thing you do, isn’t it? Wiping people’s memories?”

“It is often what you might call a ‘best practice,’ yes,” Maya acknowledged.

“Have you done this to anyone I know?” Annica interrogated.

Maya paused before answering, “Noah has been one of our greater success stories.”

“*Noah?!*” Annica shot back with widened eyes. “You’re... interacting with Noah? *And wiping his memories?!*”

“Annica, please understand,” Maya said in a soothing tone. “We’re only trying to help humanity, as much as we can. Noah is a kind soul, who interacts directly with hundreds of children in emotionally intimate and vulnerable settings. By offering him comprehensive training during his sleep, we can help him subconsciously channel our—”

“But he’s not even aware of it!” Annica interrupted. “He doesn’t know he’s working with you, does he?”

“Not consciously in your physical world, no. But on a subconscious level—”

“You’re using him like a puppet!” Annica interrupted again. Her heart was pounding, and her hands were tightly clenched into fists.

Maya’s voice remained calm and matter-of-fact, deepening as she spoke. “In assisting with humanity’s

spiritual ascension, we are aiding Noah with his simple goal of helping every child in his office as much as he can. The ripple effects of his actions have far-reaching impacts, which we believe are far more significant than his personal memory loss. Consider that the forgetting process is perfectly natural in humans – you do not retain your memories from early childhood, nor mundane details of everyday life. You forget most of your dreams, and even traumatic or otherwise significant events are often discarded from your minds, by your own psychological processes. We are not imposing anything unnatural upon you.”

“That doesn’t make it right!” Annica snapped. “Just because something is natural doesn’t mean it’s okay to impose it on someone without their knowledge or consent!”

“Annica, please. We’re only trying to help.”

“You’re controlling us like animals!”

“Well, in the hierarchy of conscious beings...”

Annica felt her blood boiling. She looked at the pyramid in the water fountain with disgust, having particular disdain for the eye at the top.

A question popped into Annica’s mind. “Maya,” she began, “tell me something. How many times have I been to this city? During *this* lifetime, that is.”

“What... What do you mean?” Maya stuttered.

“*You can read my thoughts, Maya!*” Annica shouted. “*You know exactly what I mean!*”

Maya was silent.

“It’s a simple question, Maya!” Annica pressed. “The answer is two, right? You took me here once before, during our first meeting, and I’m here again now. So that would be one, two.” Annica held two fingers up to Maya’s face. “Tell me I’ve been here twice!” she fumed.

Maya remained silent.

“I noticed something odd during my research,” Annica continued, briefly regaining some composure. “Other starseeds have had experiences earlier in childhood, and others report memory loss. But I’m different in both cases, right Maya? Tell me, *how many times have I been here?!*”

“Hundreds,” Maya nearly whispered.

“*HUNDREDS?!*”

“Annica, please...”

“*YOU’RE WIPING MY MEMORIES?!*” Annica screamed.

By now other beings in the city were taking notice of the conversation. They started to gather in a wide circle around Annica and Maya.

“We’re only trying to help,” Maya said softly.

“Help? You’re trying to help?” Annica shot back, her face turning several shades of fuchsia. “This is what ‘helping’ looks like to you? With your control over physical reality, you could end world hunger, couldn’t you? You could give us free energy and interstellar travel! You could free any oppressed people from any

authoritarian regimes! You could give us the answers that religions have spent millenia trying to find! You could cure all health conditions! Right? Tell me, Maya, are you incapable of doing *any* of these things?”

Maya looked away and rubbed her shoulder. “I don’t know that we could necessarily cure *all* health conditions...”

Annica flailed her hands wildly. “You’re spouting all these fluffy platitudes about elevating consciousness, but you could *actually help us!* Instead, what do you do? Zip around in white orbs in our skies? Doodle crop circle formations in our fields? Abduct little girls from their bedrooms, wipe their memories and tell them they’ve been chosen to be some great ‘starseed ambassador?’”

“I know our methods seem strange to you, but—”

“Shut up!” Annica snapped. “I’m tired of your lies! I need answers, Maya! *Real* answers! Let’s start here: Am I actually a starseed? *Are ‘starseeds’ even real?!*”

“Why does that matter?” Maya asked. She stood up and placed a hand on Annica’s shoulder. “Annica, do you remember what you told Noah when he asked about your biological parents? You told him they didn’t matter; it was your life *now* that mattered. So why is the ‘starseed’ label so important to you? Why does it matter who or what you were in a past life?”

Annica pushed Maya’s hand off her shoulder. “*Because you’re lying to me! That’s* why this city seems familiar, right? Not because of subconscious memories

from past lives, but because of erased memories from *this one!*”

Maya clasped her hands and pleaded, “I apologize for any deception, but you really *are* important to us, Annica. We really *do* want you to be our ambassador.”

“Why would I want to be an ambassador for you?!” Annica spat. “What is my grand mission, exactly? You never even told me what my mission is! Do you need me to round up my people like cattle, so you can dominate them and wipe their memories too?”

Maya stared deeply into Annica’s eyes. “No.”

“Then what?” Annica asked, staring firmly back into Maya’s gaze. “*What is my mission?*”

Maya was silent, and her stare intensified. Annica could see, behind Maya’s eyes, the intelligence of a highly advanced being. Annica now directly understood that Maya wasn’t really a little girl. The little girl image was just a projection. There was something much, much larger behind those eyes.

“That is something you need to figure out on your own,” Maya said stoically.

“Forget it!” Annica blurted out, standing up from the bench and towering over Maya. “I’m done! I’ve had it! I’m done with all of you! I never asked for any of this! You just pulled me into this world and filled my head with metaphysical nonsense, and for what?”

Annica’s eyes welled up as she continued, “What good did any of it do? You just gave me a mental breakdown!

You pulled me away from actual reality under the illusion of teaching me about some abstract higher reality! You created a distance between me and my family, between me and any chance of making new friends! You created my problems and then pretended to swoop in like some savior!”

“You’re wrong, Annica,” Maya replied in a completely monotone voice. “You *did* ask for this. You chose this. *All of it*. You chose it in another manifestation, before physically incarnating, and beyond that, you chose it in this lifetime, during the hundreds of times we spoke in this very city.”

“*How can I know that’s true if you’ve wiped my memories?!*” Annica screamed. “*Give them back! GIVE ME BACK MY MEMORIES!*”

“That would be... inadvisable. Consider how difficult it was for you to handle our initial visits. Now imagine a sudden integration between your present personality and one with full awareness of—”

“Then I’m done!” Annica declared while stomping her foot. “You hear me? DONE! You said I could leave this place at any time, right? I’m free to go, aren’t I? Or are you keeping me here like a caged animal?”

“We are not keeping you here against your will,” Maya calmly assured her. “Your request to leave is granted.”

Annica’s vision was suddenly overwhelmed by a blinding white light.

* * *

“ANNICA!” Mavis cried out. “Oh my god, Annica! You’re here! You’re back! Are you okay? Are you hurt? *What happened?*”

Mavis threw her arms around Annica and hugged her tightly while sobbing.

“Annica?! Oh my god, Annica!” Daryl shouted while running over to join them.

Annica slowly blinked as she surveyed her surroundings. She was standing in the driveway outside her house.

She struggled to speak. “How long was I gone for?”

“You were gone for an entire week!” Daryl answered, his voice hysterical. “Annica, *where were you?*”

Annica looked down at her clothing. She was still wearing a blue jumpsuit.

With tears streaming down her face, Mavis pulled herself away to get a better look at her daughter. She narrowed her eyes and reached behind Annica’s back.

Mavis’s face turned to pure befuddlement as she held Annica’s braid. Her mouth hung open momentarily before she hoarsely whispered, “Your... hair...”

For the first time, Annica examined the braid that Maya had crafted. It was the most intricately interwoven, complex pattern Annica had ever seen. There were a dozen

strands forming elaborate geometric shapes, without a single hair out of place.

“Mom, Dad,” Annica said, teary-eyed but filled with new confidence, “there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

CHAPTER 9

SHOW YOUR WORK

“Sorry I missed our last session,” Annica said while delicately sitting down in Noah’s office.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” Noah said with relief, taking a seat across from her. “The whole town was worried about you.”

Annica blushed. “I didn’t realize I was gone for that long,” she almost whispered.

Noah opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Annica’s disappearance was legally treated as a “teenage runaway” situation, but rumors spread quickly after several people reported witnessing the craft that took Annica from the field. Annica wasn’t sure what Noah had heard, or what he believed, but she surmised that the reality of what occurred was at least a possibility in his mind, particularly after what she told him during their last session.

Annica smiled weakly. “You were right... about losing myself.”

“But, you... I mean, *literally*,” was all Noah could say. He tightly closed his eyes and shook his head. “I’m sorry. Let me start over. I really like your new hair.”

“Oh!” Annica responded, her face brightening up. She held her French braid and gave it a close inspection. Unlike her last braid style, this one went all the way to the scalp. It was much more tightly woven, and it was hardly frayed at all this late in the day. “Thank you! My mom helped me with it. It can survive gym class much better now.”

Noah smiled, then picked up his notepad and pen. “Where were you?” he asked with hardly any inflection of a question, as if he already knew the answer but just wanted Annica’s explanation.

Annica dropped her braid and took a deep breath. “With ‘them.’”

Noah’s eyes widened. “Did you tell your parents?”

“Yeah,” Annica chuckled while shaking her head.

“How’d that go?”

“Honestly,” Annica said, “better than expected.”

Noah pushed up his glasses. “What did you tell them, exactly?”

“Everything I told you, for starters. That was certainly an... experience. My dad believed all of it right away, and he had about a billion questions. My mom was more quiet, but she wasn’t dismissive either.”

Noah nodded. “Well, you *were* gone for an entire week.”

Annica perked up. “Yeah! That part she couldn’t deny. When I explained what happened during that week, I think that’s when it started to sink in for her. I swear I’ve

never seen her go so pale. She just kept saying it was a lot to process, and she wanted to talk more once she had a chance to... absorb it all, I guess.”

Noah sat in silence for a moment. He stared at his blank notepad, then tapped it with his pen a few times before setting them both on his desk.

“Annica,” he said with a deep curiosity in his eyes, “what... *happened*, exactly?”

“I had a bad day,” Annica began, letting her eyes wander the room. “I left school early, and I overheard my parents fighting. They were talking about me, and how I can’t make any friends. Apparently they’re having financial problems too, and the croquet equipment was a burden.” Her eyes returned to Noah. “I know it sounds silly, but I lost it. I ran off and begged Maya to take me away. She did, and I ended up back in that undersea city. I had a chance to recover, then Maya explained some more metaphysical concepts.”

Annica paused before continuing. *Do I tell him?* she wondered, thinking about Maya wiping Noah’s memories. She felt deeply uneasy, being reminded of her very first session with Noah, and how reluctant she was to talk about any of this. Perhaps she would tell him later, but for now that particular detail carried too much weight.

“I learned... other things,” she said hesitantly. “I got it out of Maya that they’ve been wiping my memories.”

Noah nodded. “That is commonly reported with these sorts of experiences.”

“Yeah, and I *knew* that, from my research. But I just thought I was different somehow, like I was special. I didn’t think they were doing that to *me*.” Annica looked up at the ceiling and shook her head.

Noah uneasily ran his hand over his hair. “How did you react?”

“I was *livid*,” Annica said, kicking her feet out and looking back at Noah. “God, I was so, so angry. I swear I’ve never been that angry in my entire life.”

“Because you felt violated?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t just that. Maya told me about this whole... hierarchy of control, with beings that are far more powerful than humans. And I was already having a hard enough time being a kid in a world run by adults, you know? I’ve always wondered, when I grow up, will it still be the same? Will I be just as frustrated with police, and governments, and bosses at my jobs?”

“I think it’s natural for everyone to feel at least a little bit of frustration with systems that have power over them,” Noah sympathized.

“Yeah, but I felt *a lot* of frustration. And that was just with the human layer. Learning that there are all these new metaphysical layers of aliens and higher dimensions... We’re under their thumb. We’re like animals to them.” Annica’s voice grew louder and more urgent as she continued, “They can completely dominate us however they want, and we’re utterly powerless to stop them. They can take us from our bedrooms, whether we’re awake or

asleep. They can wipe our memories. They can..." Her voice trailed off, and her eyes welled with tears.

Annica shook her head and continued, "They can tell us we're special, that we're chosen, that we're part of their soul lineage. That we're 'starseed ambassadors.' It's just all so overwhelming, because our minds aren't designed to handle something like this. It almost feels like this whole thing would be easier if it were all in my head, you know? Or it would be easier if they were being open and direct with us. But the reality is something in between, and that's just so frustrating, because it's impossible to know what's real and what isn't."

Noah listened carefully with his fingertips pressed against his temple. "So you've given up that label, then? You're no longer a 'starseed ambassador'?"

"Well, that's sure what I told them!" Annica said with a bittersweet smile, wiping away a tear with the palm of her hand. "Boy oh boy, *did I tell them.*"

Noah laughed. "I'm sorry," he said with a light cough. "I meant no disrespect. You're saying you told them off?"

Annica grinned. "Oh yeah. They sure got a piece of my mind, I can say that much."

"How did that feel?"

"It felt... good, honestly. *Really* good. It was like, I had this lifetime of pent-up frustration with all these layers of control, and learning about this new layer totally set me off, but once I spoke up about it, they let me go.

And I was back with my parents, and I felt calm. It was such an enormous release.”

“And how do you feel now?”

Annica raised her eyebrows. “Better, honestly. Like, way better. I feel like... I’m not even angry anymore. Not at them, or at anyone, really. I don’t know, maybe they’re not so bad after all. They never hurt me, or held me against my will. They respected me following my own moral compass – *insisted on it*, in fact – and they never asked me to do anything I thought was wrong. And I *did* feel drawn to them, on some level.”

Annica bit her lower lip. “I think they *are* trying to help us, but they’re striking this delicate balance between wanting to help us grow, but also not wanting to interfere too much. They want us to learn, but they can’t just give us all the answers, if that makes any sense. I guess when I think about it, maybe they’re not so different from how parents treat their kids, or how governments treat their citizens. And maybe that’s not as awful as I originally thought.”

Noah stroked his chin. “Did they ever tell you what your mission was, exactly? As a ‘starseed ambassador?’”

Annica shook her head. “No, they didn’t.” She chuckled before adding, “And it’s been driving me crazy!”

“So you haven’t given up on the label entirely, then?”

Annica sighed. “I don’t know. Honestly, even after all that, I still don’t know if ‘starseeds’ are a real thing. They were misleading me at least a little bit, and it’s pretty clear

by now that I'm not going to be doing any press conferences at the United Nations or anything. But..." Annica's voice trailed off.

Noah sat up. "But you think there maybe *was* something to that label?"

Annica frowned. "Maya told me I had to figure it out on my own. And I just keep turning that over and over in my head."

"Did she give you any clues?"

Annica shrugged and stared at the ceiling. "None that I can think of. Most of what she told me was abstract metaphysical stuff."

"Well, maybe if you run through what she told you, we can figure this out together," Noah said hopefully.

Annica turned her attention back to Noah. He was staring intently. When Annica looked into his eyes, she was reminded of the last time she looked into Maya's eyes – there was some form of higher intelligence behind those eyes, beyond Noah's human personality. Annica felt goosebumps forming on her skin.

They're here, she thought. Her mind went back to Maya's explanation about how they were "using" Noah. His goals were in alignment with theirs, Maya had explained – they both simply wanted to help the children in his office as much as possible. Maybe Noah wasn't consciously aware of their presence in this moment, but his subconsciousness had the memories of his presence in

the undersea city; that “aspect” of him, Annica realized, was now guiding his words.

“Okay,” Annica exhaled, smiling weakly and feeling a tingle going down her spine. “So there are dimensions that overlap with each other, on a spectrum from purely physical to purely mental. That’s the first thing Maya explained. And physical matter is ultimately just consciousness, at the most basic level.”

Noah nodded. “That’s a fairly common metaphysical concept. Did Maya provide any particular details or elaborations that stand out in your memory?”

The holographic humanoid wireframes from the third visit with Maya flashed into Annica’s mind.

“I don’t know how significant this is, but she showed me, like, these wireframes of humans, and when these sparks of light radiated out from one person, they went into others, and this consciousness was transformed somehow.”

“Why was that demonstration significant to you?”

Annica shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess because it was just a different way of thinking about consciousness, like it’s its own thing, and not just something our brains create. And it has... its own properties, its own fundamental nature.”

“What can you say about that ‘fundamental nature’?”

Annica realized that there was an important detail she had overlooked. “Maya said it was love. Thinking about it

now, I guess I didn't take that as seriously as she wanted me to. Maybe it's related to my mission somehow?"

Noah smiled with his eyes. "You just mentioned that you weren't going to be giving any speeches at the United Nations. What other ideas did you have about your role as an ambassador?"

Annica blushed and broke eye contact. "Just, you know, silly things... Like an alien spaceship landing, and me introducing everyone."

"Well, that would be a standard ambassador role," Noah acknowledged. "But do you believe it's the role you're most suitable for?"

"No, I guess not," Annica confessed. "It's funny... Maya mentioned that we're all experiencing fragments of the same infinite consciousness, like it's all God's consciousness or something. But if that's true, then why aren't we all the same?"

Noah raised an eyebrow. "Did Maya give any clues about that?"

Annica remembered Maya's explanation about how the same One Light is refracted through individual personality prisms.

"Our personalities are all different," Annica said slowly, struggling to finish her line of thought. "And I guess... our individual life situations are different too." Her mouth remained open as if she had more to say, but after a moment she merely released a frustrated sigh, then looked at Noah expectantly.

Noah paused and glanced out the window. “Sometimes, in order to grow and develop, we need to step outside our comfort zones by trying completely new things. And sometimes our life mission is right in front of us – it’s something we’re already doing, that matches perfectly with our personality and life situation. It’s not always easy to know which direction we should take, but sometimes the answer is something in between.”

Noah turned his attention back to Annica and added, “Maya was right about one thing, though. It’s always something we need to figure out for ourselves. Do you have any ideas?”

Annica could feel the answer right on the tip of her mind. She could tell something was there; she was so close to grasping it. It was like most of her psyche already knew, but her conscious awareness was one step behind.

Suddenly, a memory came rushing back to the forefront of her thoughts. It was a small fragment of a memory, and parts of it were hazy, but one detail was crystal clear: She was in the undersea city with Maya, sometime during the last summer. *This is one they erased*, Annica immediately realized. In the memory, Annica was saying something to Maya.

“I’m not going to figure it out, after I forget... not unless you intervene.”

Figure what out? Annica wondered as her awareness returned to Noah’s office.

Another memory presented itself in response – one that hadn't been erased, from her last conversation with Adam: *“It wouldn't be the same without you.”*

“OH MY GOD!” Annica gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. *“You're kidding me!”*

Noah tilted his head. “Did something come to you?”

“The croquet club!” Annica exclaimed with complete confidence. She burst out laughing. “That's it, isn't it? That was my ‘mission’ this whole time!”

Noah smiled knowingly. “That sounds like a pretty good mission to me.”

Annica continued laughing. “This is so ridiculous! All of that... so I'd start a high school croquet club?!”

“It's been said that the universe works in mysterious ways.”

“Oh my god. It's like... this quote my mom gave me from Carl Sagan about everything being interconnected, and how you can't make an apple pie without making the whole universe.”

Annica leaned back in her chair and kicked her feet out. “So this is my apple pie, then?” Tears were now streaming down her face; she wiped them away with the sleeve of her T-shirt.

“I can help with the administrative logistics, if you decide to pursue it,” Noah said, taking a tissue from a desk drawer and handing it to Annica. “The forms and paperwork and all that.”

“Oh gosh, and the equipment! I’ll need to figure that out too. Maybe a bake sale? I don’t want to put this on my parents again.”

Noah folded his arms and nodded. “A bake sale sounds like a fantastic idea. Something tells me that this would more than cover the cost of the equipment.”

Annica glanced at the clock and noticed that their session was now five minutes past its ending point. She quickly stood up from her seat. “Well, this has been quite helpful,” she said with a short bow.

Noah smiled. “I’m glad,” he said, standing up and extending his hand for a handshake.

Annica moved past his outstretched hand, embracing him in a hug. “Thank you,” she said, “for everything.”

CHAPTER 10

PASSING GRADE

Two weeks after deciding to start her school's very first croquet club, Annica was taping up promotional posters in a hallway with Adam during lunch.

Adam approached Annica while she was taping up the final poster in her stack. "Hey, Annica, there's someone here who says she knows you."

Annica turned her attention away from the poster to see Maya standing next to Adam. Maya wasn't dressed in her usual blue jumpsuit; rather, she was wearing ordinary jeans and a bright yellow T-shirt with a retro 1960s-style rainbow design.

Annica was startled by the sight of Maya in this context, but it wasn't the same deep, gut-level fear that Maya had instilled in her before. Maya had a warm smile on her face; Annica didn't see her as merely an empty projection for some higher-dimensional entity. She wasn't a little girl either, though – she was something in between. For the first time, Annica felt fully comfortable with this thought.

Adam scratched his head. "Are you two sisters or something?"

“She’s family,” Annica answered calmly, without hesitation.

“Oh, uh, all right,” Adam replied, clearly still confused by the situation. “I’ll just leave you two alone then.”

As soon as Adam was beyond earshot, Annica quietly asked, “Are you physical? I mean, purely physical?”

“Yes!” Maya exclaimed with the same childlike enthusiasm Annica had first seen from her. “Like I said before, we *can* manifest physically! This is what you wanted, right? To meet during the daytime, in a public space?” Maya gleefully spun around in a circle.

Annica nervously looked around. “So others can see you and everything?”

“Yes! Your friend Adam did. And here, watch this!” Maya proceeded to intentionally bump into a student walking by. “Oh! Sorry about that!” she hollered as the confused student walked away.

Maya placed an index finger on her lips before adding, “I suppose from your perspective it’s possible for that student to be a figment of your imagination. I could demonstrate with another student if you’d like. Or perhaps a teacher?”

Annica laughed. “No, it’s okay. I believe you. But why are you here?”

Maya’s eyes lit up as she lightly clapped her hands. “I wanted to congratulate you personally on the completion of your very first assignment!”

Annica thought back to the last time she spoke with Maya. “Do you mean the croquet club, or me giving you guys a piece of my mind?”

“Oh! I meant the croquet club. But actually, they were both good assignments,” Maya said with a grin.

Annica crossed her arms. “So my little speech was an ‘assignment’ too?”

“Well, sort of. We knew you would express dissatisfaction with the situation, but we didn’t know exactly what you would say. The Council was actually quite impressed with your boldness!”

Annica took a step back. “So it was all planned, then? Even me going against the plan?”

“Yes,” Maya confirmed with a vigorous nod. “I know our methods seem a bit convoluted to you, but it was the most efficient way to give you the training and development you needed, as quickly as possible.”

Annica shook her head. “It’s just crazy. You know that, right? How completely insane this is?” She lowered her voice but added extra emphasis while continuing, “That interdimensional aliens came all the way out here and orchestrated this whole... event... so a high school freshman would start a croquet club? And *why didn’t you just tell me from the very beginning?!*”

“Two reasons, mainly,” Maya quickly responded. “First, your heart wouldn’t have been in it, if you had not come to the realization on your own. And second, we were concerned that you might not recognize the... ‘gravity’ of

your assignment without the necessary education and experiences first.”

“The ‘gravity?’” Annica scoffed. “I mean, okay, I get that this is what I’m supposed to be doing, but I’m not exactly ending world hunger or anything.”

Maya’s tone turned serious as she explained, “Annica, if you could view the human psyche through our eyes, perhaps this wouldn’t seem so strange to you. If you could see all the light that went into those children’s souls during your recess croquet – if you could see the ripple effect that this light had on their friends and family, radiating throughout all of humanity, permanently altering the course of human history, you would not be so dismissive of the significance of what we set out to accomplish with you.”

Maya continued, “You have to understand, Annica, that what seems extraordinary to you is mundane to us, and what seems mundane to you is extraordinary to us. It is much, much easier for us to traverse the physical universe and phase-shift through dimensions of reality than it is for us to create such a powerful ripple effect of elevating human consciousness. We recruited you for a reason, and that reason has not changed.”

Annica paused to consider Maya’s words. “But I rejected you,” she said. “I told you I wanted no part in what you were doing.”

“Yes, but that is not your decision to make.”

Annica raised an eyebrow, thinking back to all the times Maya asked her to confirm her interest in serving as their ambassador. “It’s... not?”

“No,” Maya confirmed flatly, “because there is no quitting who you are. Even if you seek to oppose us, you would do so because you’d feel it is right. You would be following your own moral compass, and seeking to elevate human consciousness. Whether you like us or hate us, whether you agree with us or not, our goals are in complete alignment. And as we each pursue these goals, our paths will overlap. You will always be working with us, Annica. The question has never been whether you will serve as our ambassador – the question is simply whether you do so consciously or unconsciously.”

“I see,” Annica relented. “I guess when you put it that way, I’d rather have conscious awareness.”

Maya gave a big nod. “Yes, you communicated this very clearly when you demanded that your memories be restored. The aspect of you with full memories is already working with us quite actively – we only made ourselves known to this aspect of you when your other aspect told us that you would otherwise not start your club. We began the reintegration process by returning a fragment of this memory to you.”

Annica felt uneasy, recalling the memory in question that she recovered during her session with Noah. “You have to know how unsettling this is, don’t you? To be

splitting people's personalities into fragments, only to reintegrate them later?"

"Yes," Maya acknowledged. "This is why reintegration for an individual human personality is very rare. The Council is making an exception for you with consideration for your impassioned plea, and with the strength of will that you have thus far exhibited. But in the grander scheme of things, beyond the level of human personality, this process is fundamental to the experience of consciousness. The One Mind splits Itself into infinite personality fragments, and as those fragments live and grow and transition beyond the physical plane through their numerous incarnations, they gradually coalesce during their return upward, back to the One Origin." A peaceful smile spread across Maya's face as she brought her hands above her head.

Annica looked at her sideways. "So you're just accelerating this process for me?"

"Exactly!" Maya cheerfully confirmed. "But Annica, please be warned that this will not be easy. Reintegrating with your lost memories from the non-physical plane will, how do I put this... It will be much more challenging than anything you have dealt with so far. Are you certain you wish to proceed?"

"Yes," Annica responded. As soon as the word left her mouth, even she was surprised at the lack of hesitation. "But," she added, glancing at the croquet club poster,

“could we maybe start in a few weeks or something? I have a lot going on right now.”

“Of course! You have a whole lifetime of service to humanity ahead of you; it would be wise to pace yourself. I will return when you are ready. For now, I wish you the best with your club and with your studies here on Earth!”

Maya crossed her forearm over her waist and took a short bow. She turned around and began walking away.

“Hey, wait!” Annica shouted after her.

Maya turned around. “Yes?”

“Do you think... uh,” Annica stuttered. “I know this sounds a little crazy, but, well, do you think you might want to play croquet with us sometime?”

“Oh!” Maya exclaimed. Her eyes went wide – Annica swore she had never seen Maya so surprised by anything. “That sounds like a lot of fun! I would love to, actually. But... are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“Of course,” Annica replied. She smirked before adding, “Granted, I’m still not *entirely* comfortable with how your civilization is interacting with my species, but my club only has one rule: *Everyone* is welcome.”

The End