

## 0.1 Contact

*I can feel you fading away - your body can not carry on like this any more. You were so determined to see this through ... noticing, but not commenting on the supplement of stimulants I applied as soon as your stamina would start to degrade. Pushing yourself beyond limits you are not aware of - which is my fault. When I altered your self-perception, I also crippled the inherent awareness you would have had of your body's state, had your imprint stabilized itself as I intended. I must demand so much from you - too much for you to handle, as much as you are willing to put yourself at risk. Another contingency I had to plan for, without telling you - there were enough dangers you had to worry about already: A last resort in case your metabolism would not be able to cope with the stresses and strains of our venture to space. There is an emergency supply of the most potent drugs I have at my disposal to keep your metabolism going even beyond its normal point of return, which it has already crossed. Your vitals are destabilizing, you suffer from internal bleedings. How severe is hard to tell with the limited diagnostics of the space suit and the drone platforms - all I can do is to force your body to keep going, and hope I can get you the required medical care after the reactor core is gone. Please, forgive me for doing this to you - but what other choice do I have?*

Reality snaps back into focus with a sharp jolt. A burning sensation, only ice cold this time, quickly spreads from my left upper arm through the rest of my body, slowly decreasing in intensity as it runs its course. Headache and fatigue being nothing more than a dull discomfort, I am able to think clearly for the first time in hours.

The cranial implants you currently reside in must have a much higher tolerance towards adverse environment conditions. That is good. At least one of us can keep a clear head. It seems that I can't, given I only register that you are talking to me after you address me repeatedly.

*"What ... CASSIE - what is it? ... Wait, what just happened? I ... was about to drift off, no?"*

Clarity of thought implies the ability to pay attention to details: Like the strangely familiar taste that lingers in my snout ... blood?

*"You were on the verge of blacking out, yes. I fear you would not have regained consciousness. Your metabolism was shutting down. I had to prevent you from going catatonic - to be blunt, you are in urgent need of intensive medical care. I can not provide that before we have dealt with the reactor core; I have applied last-resort medication to keep you going. We will have three, maybe four hours left before your ... our body will succumb to the strain - before we will die. But we have already done half of the work, Liam- we must keep up the momentum now, there is no other way. There is still a chance to set this right."*

*"Have we really already set half of the demolition charges? I honestly don't remember all of the ... what has it been, last two hours?"*

*"We have - only the pylons on the underside are still missing. We will traverse the ship hull behind the shielding dish, and repeat the same sequence of steps on the lower platforms."*

*"What ... what about the reactor activity? The - power spikes ... do we still have enough time to get out of their way?"*

*"With the extended sensor coverage from the drone platforms I have access*

*to, I have kept a close eye on the reactor - during the last five cycles, there was a gradual shift in intensity and duration of the major power surges. Also, the intervals between them have become shorter. The differences were negligible at first, but will become more significant over the next activity cycles. How long the reactor hardware can still endure this, I can not predict with sufficient certainty."*

Without hesitation, I set off towards the *Phoenix's* underside, kicking the thrust control of our current ride up to the maximum.

When death is coming for you in more than one way, instinct leaves you little choice, I guess. It's just that I didn't think my will to live would be put such an extreme test - just as my conviction to fight for survival. Here and now, alone except for your company, confidence can easily be shaken. And doubts are difficult to cast aside - this is what makes me aware of some unbidden memories that I would have mistaken for someone else's.

*If it wasn't for the pitifully thin, fur-clad two-legged creature - a dog ... no, wolf ... I have come to know as the new me. Fleeting images of his silhouette in the gestation pod, size and shape changing from embryo to adolescent to adult over the years. Nascent conscious thought as his ... my imprint takes hold in the host body's cortex. Waking from a long sleep while still in the pod ... realizing something is very, very wrong ... fear and desperation, blind panic - unable ... not willing to accept what he has become, seeking to end a new life that has barely begun ... an intense wave of pain as something sharp slices through the muscles and sinew of his forearms ... life seeping from gaping wounds ... awareness slipping away as darkness embraces him once more ...*

*"Liam!"*

It can't have been more than a few seconds, yet I desperately gasp for air as the images my mind had chosen to conjure once again vanish - the attention I paid to our surroundings has been entirely diverted to ... your memories. These were your memories!

As the here and now once more prevails, you manage to divert our trajectory in the last second before we crash into the lower edge of the containment dish. Firing the drone's reverse thrusters at full capacity, you realign us with the ship's surface before we veer off too far towards the plasma wake.

As I manage to calm my own racing thoughts - at this point, not certain there are *own thoughts* left for me to have - coming to terms with what I just watched through your eyes is ... difficult. Mildly put. But I'm dying, unless we get rid of Ra, restore control over the *Phoenix* and me the medical aid I am in dire need of. So I might as well come to terms with it.

*"What I just saw ... recalled, I had no ... no idea how hard ... I must have taken waking up as what ... I am now. You suppressed my memories, didn't you?"*

Sadness and regret taint your voice - are you afraid this might be a betrayal I wouldn't forgive?

*"The first time you ... recognized what you had become, what I ... had turned you into due to your re-embodiment, it ... I feared I had destroyed you, had damaged your mind ... in a way that I have no words for. I ... I could not ... refused ... to let you die. Not only because of the threat to our survival ... because I missed you so much ... I would not have been able to bear losing you like this ... seeing you die a second time. So I ... I did as you suspected - I altered your memories, your demeanor towards your new physical appearance. I*

*shifted your self-perception towards a point where you would be willing to tolerate what you are now - in the truest sense of the word."*

*"CASSIE, if ... if you expect closure, I ... can't give you that. It ... it is something humans - wolves too, I guess - have to live with: The consequences of our actions, our decisions. As for forgiveness: There is nothing to forgive. You did what you saw as necessary to keep me alive. You followed your prime directives to ensure our survival. Let me say this now, in case ... we don't make it: You're a great companion ... and I feel we would ... will be close friends in the long run. Even if I am not sure But you're a terrible cook, and you'd better not look into a career as tailor - especially not for designing space suits!"*

I never get to the chuckle I intended to follow up my last sentence - the inherent uncertainty of only partially observable processes manifests itself in this very instant. This is how you would put it, at least. To me, reality bends to the point of breaking.

It starts like the last half dozen power surges, with the exception of occurring way earlier than our previous observations would have predicted. That we haven't descended yet from the containment dish is the only saving grace we have. Not only is the timing off - the true problem is that the surge won't subside like the others did. The plasma eruptions and electric discharges are stronger than any of their predecessors: The ship hull bucks and strains under the massive onslaught - the groaning noise I hear is not a figment of imagination, but a very real side effect of hull plating and ship frame being strained and stressed to their maximum tolerance.

The energy surge culminates in what we perceive as white noise with all senses: Blinding pure-white light drowning out vision - hearing and my other senses fare no better as coherent perception is stunned by the multi-faceted cacophony. You fare no better, as the local network connectivity to the drones along the upper pylons of Ra's reactor pit is jammed, once again restricting the range of your own sensory inputs to the same range as mine. The electrical systems of my space suit fare no better - emergency measures shutting them down before they are giving out. The life support itself is based on chemical means - O<sub>2</sub> supply and CO<sub>2</sub> scrubbers not depending on electrical means.

All we can do is wait out the tempest - lying low, gecko pads firmly securing us in place. I have rarely vocalized emotions in this new body - the animalistic yelps, whines and barks I am able to articulate too harsh of a reminder of what I have lost. Now ... I alter between pained groans, feeble whines and high-pitched barks as I try and fail to protect my sensitive senses against the storm of sensations.

Eventually - minutes, according to your chronometers - later, the storm subsides. At least enough for me to take my bearings. Still here - the reactor has not annihilated us, despite the energy output it must have released over the course of its latest outbreak. An output, as your projection confirms only moments later, is far beyond of what it should be able to produce even in its critical state.

*"How - how is that possible? We should be dead ... this isn't anything the reactor could have done by itself ... is it?"*

*"I have no explanation, Liam- this **is not** possible according to the laws of physics. My drones have not been able to record live data during the energy surge - most of them systems are just finished reboo — "*

The first live data arriving over the drone's feeds is ... a shock, putting even

you at a loss of words. What I see in front of me is ... something transformed the reactor core. The original structure is still there, visible even underneath the ... outgrowth ... that has manifested itself around the entire core. The reactor is ... encased in what looks distinctly like a giant gem - your telemetry showing its structure to be a truncated icosahedron - whatever the hell that is. It is definitely not a massive body - the reactor core underneath is still active, its fusion reaction not having diminished in the slightest: Its new encasing seemed to contain and absorb the energy provided by the core, reflecting and refracting light in both visible and invisible spectra not unlike the polychromatic patterns of the *Phoenix's* plasma wake - albeit much more vibrant and bright.

Another outbreak of energy - plasma protuberances licking across the inside of the translucent crystal, lightning flowing over it, all to no visible effect ... at first: Hard to make out against the electromagnetic disturbances across the entire spectrum of light, but the object had grown, gaining more than a meter in radius! Aghast, I stare at a sight that some ... how was the genre called ... science-fiction author might have conjured up, in a time when art and recreation still were a thing back on Earth.

*“CASSIE... I am on the verge of dying, but ... this is real, right? What am I looking at is ... not a hallucination? Is this ... can this be ... some kind of — what, an alien? What are we - am I supposed to do? Are there any ... I don't know, manuals, directives for this?”*

*“Are you asking me for a confirmation, or for a guess? I can not give you the former, and the latter is as good as yours! There is hardly another possible explanation than the one that it **is** some kind of lifeform: The way it seems to have used the reactor as sustenance, given the way it seems to absorb its energy, and how we have just seen it ... grow. How it survives in interstellar space? How it manipulates a fusion reactor - and the *Phoenix's* systems I have lost control of? Even **what** it is precisely? I can not tell you. As for a viable course of action - first contact was hypothesized by the *Phoenix Initiative*- but not for anything like ... well, like this.”*

*“Then I assume we also have no way to tell what its intentions are - if it even has any. Or if it is safe to leave it where it is - fuck, not even a way to tell how we might ... dislodge it. Then there's the demolition charges we have already planted. I would certainly be pissed if someone tried blasting my food source to hell - and we don't have enough time to even undo that. Good times - seems the only way forward - well, is forward. Sitting around here, waiting for me to die - not an option! We'll carry on with planting the remaining demolition charges - given how the ship just reacted to its ... growth spurt, we can't risk leaving the reactor where and how it is ... or can we?”*

Here we are, long after the end of the world - and close to our own end. And yet, it is a former soldier turned canine and an artificial intelligence hosted in his brain who get to make first contact with an alien life form. Let's just hope I don't have to do what I do best - violence has been the answer way too often in mankind's history. On the other hand, the survival of our kind hinges on the two of us. If it comes down to a fight for our lives, what choice is there?

*“Given the many unknowns, I concur - carrying on with the original plan is the best option.”*

So we move on: Resuming our trek towards the next emergency release mechanism, amidst a scene that has become a whole lot more surreal over the past few minutes. At first, our foray towards the base of the closest reactor sup-

port pylon is proceeding without hindrance. Once approaching our destination, we obtain distinct proof that we are very much deal with a living organism - the swirling color patterns of the crystal surface suddenly start to ripple, the disturbances centering on a point facing directly towards - us! Thanks to the augmented reaction time your presence is lending me, we manage to avoid the column of focused energy that emerges from the disturbance by more than a second as I put every ounce of strength I can muster to push off the drone that carries us. The drone is disintegrated instantly ... we are not. For some reason, the beam ceases after it annihilated the drone, not refocusing on us or being followed by another deadly barrage.

My jump was not entirely without direction - another saving grace. Instead of drifting away into the great void, our trajectory carries us towards one of the two neighboring the supporting beams. The trusty grappling hook launcher is still attached to its holster on my right leg - hand-paw grasping it with forced calm, we carefully aim for the closest spot of the support beam before pulling the trigger. The grapple hits its intended target - before the attached carbon fibre tether draws taut, both hand-paws have found a secure grip on the launcher: Holding on for dear life, the resulting momentum causes us to swing around towards the support pylon. On the first swing-by, no purchase is to be had - the trajectory passing the pylon's structure too far off. Activating the launcher's retraction mechanism yields a better result, swiftly reeling us in towards something solid to hold on to. A temporary reprieve, at least - I thought to be long past the point where adrenaline could still fuel me. How wrong I am.

*"Well, that proves it is capable of perception. And it seems it doesn't like to be approached - at least not by a drone platform ... perhaps ... machinery, something artificial in general? Why else didn't it try to finish me ... us ... off? If it was able to perceive the drone, it sure as hell couldn't have missed us getting away. Still, if it wasn't for you, we'd be gone now - intention or not, this was a deliberate attack."*

*"Maybe this was its version of a warning shot? A deadly warning, for sure - one that gave us just enough time to get out of the way, at least. But there is no way to know for sure - I would still treat it as a danger to us both, the ship and the mission in general."*

There is some merit to your version, just as there is to mine. Agression has nuances, just like any other emotion - if this thing even has an equivalent of emotions.

*"A warning shot - maybe. Maybe not. We have to get closer to plant the demolition charges, that's still the only way to get it off the ship. And the reactor core with it."*

I let a few more seconds pass by: There's still no reaction from our blind passenger, so we start climbing down towards the nearest emergency release mechanism after taking a deep breath. The optimal route for planting the charges has changed, but only the order of traversals between the pylons - the time required to accommodate the new path is minimal. Moving with great care despite the urgency dictated by both my deteriorating health and stamina and the threat posed by the ... well, alien hitchhiker, we are approaching the emergency release mechanism. The temperature inside our space suit is spiking quickly once more - on a conscious level, I only sense a small measure of increased effort to compensate for the added strain. A quick look at my vital signs shows

an entirely different picture: The cocktail of drugs circulating through my veins *is* the only factor still keeping me alive. Still, resting for more than a few seconds at a time is not even worth considering: The countdown timers of the first set of charges alone dictate our pacing, alien crystal entity notwithstanding.

Every thirty seconds, we pause on our way up towards the reactor core and its inhabitant - carefully watching out for any signs of activity - be it either another power surge ... growth spurt ... threatening to shake us off the pylon, or another energy beam aimed at us. Neither is happening, however: It seems we are able to deliver the payload I carry with me to its intended destination. That is, until we are close enough to the emergency release mechanism to get a closer look despite the glaring illumination of the reactor core directly ahead: The crystalline structures of our alien visitor had not only formed around the reactor core itself, but also along the support pylons - and by the looks of it, also along the various supply lines connecting to the core. This would explain why we lost control over the ship.

A feeling of dread threatens to crush our resolve as we have to discover a way worse problem: The crystalline organism has overgrown the emergency release lock, wrapping it in a thick layer of its translucent material. There is no obvious way to get the demolition charges set - hell, even no way to tell if the charges would even be able to penetrate the release lock and the crystal around it. Also, there is no way to tell if the detonators of the charges already in place are still active. The futility of it all - how am I supposed to overcome this? How do you defeat an opponent like this? An extraterrestrial ... something ... that seems to be able to outsmart us at every turn: Locking us out of the ship's main systems, taking you offline - denying us access to the means to dislodge it?

Unbidden tears start flowing as the futility of it all catches up with me. There is no hope, no more sense in hoping for a way out - I'll die here ... we will die out here, bested by an alien entity, an opponent —

*“Opponent ... CASSIE, we've treated ... it ... like an opponent, a threat so far. Just think ... maybe you were right - the warning shot. Perhaps, just ... maybe it really didn't **want** to kill us, just to scare us off ... what if ... what if it is doing the same we do: Struggle for survival, defending itself against a threat ... us. This - standoff we and it have here ... the only way to resolve it is to ... talk. Try to, at least.”*

I immediately sense you are not inclined to agree - not at all, as your answer - accompanied by deeply rooted scepticism - confirms.

*“We do not know how it will react - if it would even be able to understand your intention to communicate, let alone understand **what** you ... we ... want to convey. This is too much of a risk to even consider ... Liam, this is madness!”*

*“I don't agree, CASSIE! We've stuck to treating it like an enemy, a threat to be eliminated. If - and I know it's a big if - it acts just like us, seeing us as a threat, we are bound to lose. Look at this mess! I have nothing to shoot it with. I don't even know if the demolition charges would be able to make a dent in whatever stuff it's made of! So I - we - might as well say 'Hello'.”*

The instant I finished articulating my thoughts, reality takes on a strange hazy - comforting, dreamy - quality. Something ... someone whispers ... *make no mistake ... this ... thing is dangerous - it will destroy us!* ... as if standing right next to me. The ... alien? No, the words and impressions are - familiar, expressing concepts as a human would have - or a human creation ... CASSIE?!?

*“NO! I won't go on fighting this - thing, alien organism - whatever it may*

*be, end of discussion! Violence and distrust has brought mankind here, beyond the edge of excintion - that's literally the reason the Phoenix Initiative exists! We do this my way - I **will** try and go talk to it."*

The veil that had descended over my perception and thoughts is lifting again - anger ... no ... rage at a fundamental betrayal is what stays behind. Not burning hot, but running cold - tempered only by knowing how much you suffered when you were alone in all those centuries. Messing with me - literally my self - to save me from mental ruin was one thing. Doing it here and now is ... nothing short of outrageous!

*"CASSIE, was that ... the emotions, the whispers ... was that **you**?!!? Don't you ever **dare** to interfere like this again, do you understand? Now is not the time, but we will address this ... later."*

No reply is forthcoming - I didn't have expected one. Without an actual idea how I achieved it, I seem to have been able to shut you out, at least temporarily. If it was my doing alone, or if you chose to withdraw into the implant infrastructure by your own accord, I can't tell either. You are still there, lending information, data feeds, enhanced reflexes. But there are no more words. I cringe at the thought that I have been harsher than the situation warranted - though in this very moment, I find it hard to imagine circumstances that are more debilitating for building trust in a beginning friendship like ours.

Cold rage is the ideal fuel for determination - at this point, I wouldn't have listened to your objections any more - valid or not.

There is no obvious other way to make contact with a crystalline alien entity than to ... well, to make literal contact. Which means getting in touch, getting closer to an inferno of plasma and light. I advance towards the closest crystal outcroppings that have formed over the original ship components. Both arms outstretched and paw-palms facing outward - in what is hopefully a perceived as a gesture of peace - I slowly but deliberately approach the alien entity.

Step by step wary of any sign of hostility, needless to say: But none come to pass. The crystal's perceivable activity remains unchanged, as if - and what I sincerely hope is the case - it wants to signify its reluctance to harm me. It might be fifty meters that I have to cross, only held in place by the gecko pads underneath the soles of my space suit's boots. The support pylon itself is wide enough to find secure footing, but this still is the scariest act of balance any denizen of Earth - at least amongst those still alive - has ever done. The closer I get to the crystal itself, the more obvious it becomes that the environment conditions - chiefly the temperature - are still challenging to deal with. But for some obviously alien-related reason, they are sufficiently kept in check to allow me a safe approach - safe in the sense of me not passing out never to regain awareness again - to the safety distance, where the now overgrown emergency release mechanism is located.

Some seventy steps later, I stand before the closest crystalline structure I can reach via the support pylon. From far away, the crystal's surface seemed to be composed of large, evenly structured facets - the *truncated icosahedron*, as I recall. Up close, the picture is different: What seemed to be large, perfectly even sections of crystalline material is further subdivided into smaller and smaller sections - *a fractal*, the term obviously lent from your memories, *recursively* repeating the same pentagonal and hexagonal patterns likely well below the threshold of visibility.

The whole crystal, anchored to the support pylons and ... grown into the

cabling and supply line network of the reactor, is distinctly alive. Intricately complex patterns of light and shadow dance across its entire surface, ambient illumination provided by the reactor core at its heart. The only constant in the look of the crystal's surface seems to be change - not only in colors, but also in hue and brightness. Pulsating below the crystal lattice, which does not seem to be more than maybe four meters in thickness around the reactor, maybe half of that along the protrusions that connect it to the *Phoenix's* superstructure, sits the artificial star we are ... were ... trying to get rid of. I have no way to confirm, but it seems the plasma consumption of the reactor core seems to have increased substantially, the crystalline entity repurposing its energy output to ... construct more of itself. This is what I am seeing up close - the massive growth phase I have witnessed before was obviously only a major occurrence of the steady ... flow of material that adds itself to the crystal's surface, like liquid glass. However not moving as molten molasse, but as transparent rivulets of green- and blue-hued liquid, solidifying into rigid crystalline matter once they reach their destination. Through the soles of my boots, I can feel slight vibrations that manifest themselves as a low-frequent humming noise once they travel through the suit's atmosphere - space isn't as silent as I would have thought, just as our visitor.

This in the truest sense of the word otherworldly setting is what I am beholding while I try to muster the courage to initiate some form of communication. Once more slowly as to not provoke unintended aggression - not that I would have any clue of what an alien organism like this would consider a threat for itself based on my own actions - I slowly raise my left arm, bringing it forward and closer to the crystal's surface. Better to use just one hand-paw - there is some merit to giving it only an inch and hoping it won't take an entire mile.

There is still no discernible reaction as I am about to touch the crystal's surface. With a final deep breath - and focusing on signifying in every possible way that *we come in peace*, I put my gloved hand-paw down on the crystal, careful not to exert too much pressure. Though reduced thermal and tactile sensations due to the space suit's glove only allow for a dull impression, the surface feels perfectly smooth despite the visible texture. Temperature-wise, it is much cooler than it should be given the stellar inferno contained within.

*"Come on, don't be shy. Do something, or say something. Preferably not involving killing me ... us. We mean you no harm - we're no danger to you."*

If it is my thoughts directed at the void-dweller, or it registering something else is in direct contact with it, there finally is a reaction. The translucent rivulets in my vicinity suddenly change their directions of flow, converging towards my hand-paw. Slowly pooling around it at first, they soon start flowing around the fingers of my glove, then enclosing it completely. There is no discernible pressure - at first. More and more of the crystalline mass is coming together ...

And reality explodes into a synesthesia of images, sounds, smells, touches - the crystalline mass flowing up my arm, solidifying along the way and immobilizing my limb. I drift through all spectra simultaneously - that is the only way I still manage to describe what I feel before the physical world drops away, separating my physical being and my mind ... our minds ... and souls. CASSIE, me and ... a third mind regaining awareness ... three?

Time stops as not only reality, but the other ... *two* minds ... next to me are ... pulled away ... away from me in another burst of synesthetic sensations.



Another place ... another time ... flicks into existence. I float in open space, in what can only be a lucid dream - or was it reality at some point? Yet I can feel my heart beat, hear myself breathing. Space is dark and cold for the most part. Except if you're near a pair of stars, just like I am now - two real stars, binary suns. From the looks of it both ... supergiants, if my imprinted knowledge of astronomy is to be trusted. No ... there is not just the stars - both are enclosed by the same shape that has grown from our reactor core. Only much, much larger - each of the crystalline beings absorbing the energy output of a supergiant. The two crystals do not exist each for themselves: They are exchanging a never-ceasing staccato of light beams, in what is their equivalent of communication. The longer I focus on the light show, the clearer I can hear ... feel - not quite unlike like feeling CASSIE's thoughts manifesting themselves when we talk by means of the NeuraLink interface - a multitude of thought streams flowing back and forth between the two entities. All variations of two distinct entities ... but what it is they converse about remains a mystery.

A pair of living Dyson spheres - a thought experiment, theorized by scientists and a literary genre called science-fiction. Not a theory any more - or a theory again, depending on the actual *when* of this dream world I find myself in.

As I look around, I catch sight of myself, uttering a startled cry at what I see. I am in a human body again - my body, the one I remember possessing all my former life. No fur, no snout: Weathered skin and ... Roman nose taking their place. Ears at the side of the head - no black, leathery pads on fingers and palm, no claws. It is ... the former me ... or is it who I still am?

I am not alone above the twin stars either: To my left is what our alien visitor chose as appearance for your real self, CASSIE- or what you would see yourself as, given I see my virtual self restored to its original human form. I realize that this is the first time I actually see you in a corporeal form. Until now, you always were an insubstantial voice in my head, the *Phoenix* being your avatar in the physical world. Here, you possess a humanoid shape - an androgynous one, lacking the detailed recreation of my own original human self. Most disturbing is the lack of distinct facial features: In their place is what looks like a mask, featuring eye-slits and an implied nose, but no mouth. To my right, there is a second companion - in the body whose prefrontal cortex my mind now inhabits. Like my ... avatar, his physique is a well-outlined replica of the real-world equivalent. I see him contemplating me - his eyes are not that of an animal, but of an intelligent being. Whiskers and ears occasionally twitching, his gaze doesn't waver. I have no idea what he thinks or what might motivate him, but presentiment tells me that he is something ... someone deeply connected to me - and vice versa.

Before I can try and communicate with either of my companions, the virtual construct around us shifts. Moving us or itself around us, I can't tell - the motion is instant, relocating us from far above the twin crystalline Dyson spheres close to one surface of one of them. The 'left' one, if spatial orientation still has any meaning here.

We find ourselves only a scant few meters above the crystalline being's surface, its perfectly regular pattern reaching from horizon to horizon. Just as its miniature present-time version, its giant equivalent's surface is illuminated by reflecting and refracted patterns of light in all colors of the visible spectrum. The present-time version was already breathtakingly beautiful - seeing it on a scale billions of times larger is a sight I ... and my two companions ... will

remember fondly for the remainder of our lives. However long these ... it, for two of us share the same body, will last.

Directly below each of us, disturbances just like the one that announced the 'warning shot' - not twenty minutes ago in the real world, that is - are emerging in the otherwise unaltered cyclic patterns of the crystal being's surface. First only visible as minuscule irregularities in the swirling dance of geometry and light, they are quickly expanding in diameter. Turning from circular disturbances into columns of light, each of us ... me ... find themselves engulfed by an immaterial confinement made of light. The indistinct streams of thought that have been there at the edges of my awareness, their distinctness reduced to one single entity, become more pronounced - though still completely incomprehensible, context and intentions obscure for a ... human mind. The beam's light soon becomes the prevalent sensation, completely blocking out the virtual universe we found ourselves in. The crystalline alien's presence, having manifested itself so far only by means of subdued background sensations is ... approaching - for lack of a better term.

*The unearthly sensation of being the focus of an ancient ... mythical being that has experienced the - the First Light of Creation ... that has seen life spread throughout a young universe ... the birth of our galaxy ... the rise of life in all its beauty ... Quetzal, the Starborne ... when the stars waned ... the First Light wept ...*

*Your ... my? ... fleeting years ... reality constrained by the narrow band of emissions your senses can process ... mortal speck of consciousness - no more than faint echoes amidst the eternal void ... You are Planetborne, a rock-dweller ... I am ...*