



*Issue #4*

# ***The Hub***

*a Unioverse™ Backstory*

MALCOLM WATCHED THE ALIEN bio-machine warily. Would it attack him? Or did it have some other purpose? General Alvarez had given him a direct order to avoid conflict; this was first contact, and every decision would have implications that rippled far beyond this moment. Permitted to pull the trigger only if his life was on the line, Malcolm studied the machine for any cues as to its intentions.

After a few tense moments, beams of electric blue light blazed from the machine's eyes and scanned Malcolm's gun. Wherever the beams hit, they functioned like x-rays, displaying a detailed hologram of the gun's inner architecture. The blue lights turned off – and one of the tendrils lashed out toward Malcolm.

As the tendril wrapped around his forearm, Malcolm dropped into a crouch and shot the machine in the middle of its central sphere. The tungsten bullet – which the D.o.D. gearheads had said would puncture the thin exoskeleton – hit a field of energy that absorbed the bullet's momentum in rippling waves. The ineffectual slug clattered on the metallic floor.

The machine released Malcolm's arm and grabbed the gun. A second tendril joined the first and pierced the side of the weapon just above the handle. There was an audible SNAP, and then it handed the gun back to Malcolm.

As the machine floated away, seemingly no longer interested in him, Malcolm examined the damaged weapon. The firing pin had been broken into several pieces. *It figured out how to disable the gun,* thought Malcolm. *Probably not the first time it's had to do that.*

That's when the pain hit him. Malcolm looked down at his arm: the tendril had punctured his envirosuit. The integrity of the internal systems weren't compromised because the suit was designed to seal off exposed areas, but he was still in danger if the air around him was toxic.

Malcolm called up data on his visor-screen and relaxed; while the atmosphere was too thin to breathe and the temperature was near freezing – 13% oxygen and -15 Celsius – it wouldn't damage his exposed skin. What threw Malcolm, however, was that, according to his suit's systems, both numbers had been rising since his arrival. Either his suit was malfunctioning... or this place was in the process of making itself hospitable.

Pulling off his glove to get a better look at his injury, Malcolm noted that his brain was telling him he had a cut on his biceps while the actual damage was a laceration on his wrist. He had heard of pain displacement as a result of neurological trauma; had his jump somehow rewired his synaptic pathways? Was that even possible?

He knew that something had happened to his mind while he careened through that otherworldly place. But there would be no way to know what was going on inside his head until he made his way back to Mars, where the medical team would analyze every inch of him.

Malcolm grabbed a sealant spray from a pocket in his suit and treated the superficial wound, which stopped bleeding almost immediately. He studied the cut, which looked like it had been made with a scalpel.

Back on Mars, the tendrils had always been cylindrical and edgeless, and that's how they appeared on this machine until it had gone for the gun. *It can instantly alter its shape based on purpose,* thought Malcolm. *Adaptive nanotech – way beyond anything we can do.*

But that concern soon became secondary when Malcolm made a series of deeply troubling discoveries: his fingernails were missing, the tips of his fingers no longer had fingerprints, and there was no hair on the back of his hand or on his forearm. What was going on?! What had the transpod trip done to him?!

It took Malcolm a minute of deep breathing to reestablish some sense of equilibrium. To take his mind off of what was happening to his body, he thought about what he was here to do: observe.

He could jump back to Mars right now – which would hopefully reverse whatever had happened to him – and report what the jump was like and what he had seen so far. That urge was countered, however, by his sense of duty: he needed to collect as much intel as possible before heading home.

Malcolm knew that this mission, while extraordinary, was a balancing act just like any other: he had to weigh the worth of the data he could gather against the possibility that remaining here could put his return to Mars at risk.

When analyzing the situation through that lens, Malcolm decided that, despite the issues with his brain and body, he was going to stay here and explore. General Alvarez, President Fuller, his family: everyone was depending on him to return with answers, not questions. So he headed out of the building into the unknown.



He simply wasn't prepared. How could he be? The enormity – of this space and moment – was overwhelming. Malcolm had trained for months, but none of the holographic hypotheticals came anywhere close to the truth.

He could feel his brain struggling to process the overload of information, both visual and sensory, and had to stop and gather himself or risk losing consciousness.





While the jump itself had been surreal and challenged his perception of reality, the place the jump had taken him to had instantly altered his understanding of life in the universe.

Despite having his helmet light at full power, Malcolm couldn't see much detail around him, because a dark, dense mist – *created by the rapidly evolving atmosphere?* – loomed over everything.

Given what he could make out, though, he was convinced that he had jumped to a massive alien space station, and he was in the middle of a sprawling landscape of monumental structures. Some of them, as well as the skybridge beneath his feet, were made of the same alien alloy as the ships on Mars. Others, however, were clearly made of stone.

His mind tried to make sense of these latter buildings by calling them Mayan temples, and the comparison made sense: many of the buildings were tall and tiered, and tapered to a point, some of which were illuminated by blue pillars of light. But there was something distinctly different about them, decidedly alien; when you spend your life surrounded by structures that are designed for your species, Malcolm realized, you can feel, in a profoundly human way, when they're not.

The “presence” Malcolm had felt back on Mars suddenly appeared inside his mind. Surprisingly, he felt a profound sense of relief.

He had been worried about what or who would be waiting for him when he emerged from the transpod, but he hadn't expected this degree of solitude. Until the presence had arrived, an elemental fear and foreboding had been building inside of him, fueled by one unavoidable question: where was everyone?

It didn't make sense to Malcolm. Why did the presence coax him here, a place seemingly devoid of life? This empty station, which felt like a vast mausoleum, reminded him of Pompeii, a once-thriving

city frozen in time, holding the last remains of a dead civilization. Volcanic ash from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius had claimed Pompeii, but what could possibly have led to the mass exodus that had happened here?

As if in response to his reservations, the presence encouraged Malcolm to follow the guide. *Guide?* thought Malcolm. *What was it talking about?*

Suddenly, there was a pool of light in front of Malcolm – much brighter than the beam from his helmet – coming from a small drone that hovered above him. Was it another model of the machine that had disarmed him? It was made of the omnipresent silver metal and radiated the same blue light, so Malcolm assumed that it was.

The guide immediately started moving, lighting a path for him, but Malcolm hesitated. Could he fully trust the presence in his mind? His training required him to exercise caution; it would be a mistake to assume that he could divine the intentions of an alien intelligence.

He had reasons not to take this leap of faith: the jump had damaged him – the issues with his arm and hand were proof of that – and he had been injured by the machine. Still, the presence had invited him to use the transpod, and he was now on a space station with artificial gravity and an atmosphere.

And there were other signs that he was welcome here, too: the bio-machine had left him alone after disarming him, and the guide was here to help him navigate this cavernous space. On balance, Malcolm decided, the presence seemed benevolent.

The most convincing argument, though, the one that ultimately swayed his thinking, emerged from a soldier's understanding of threat assessment: if the presence controlled all of this tech, and it wanted to hurt him, there was nothing Malcolm could do to stop it. He was at its mercy. And thus far, it had been merciful.

As Malcolm looked at the structures around him, all of which seemed to have suffered extensive damage in some long-ago war, he began forming a list of questions he wanted to answer before heading home.

Did whoever built this place go extinct, and that's why it was empty? If not, where were they? Clearly, a lot of sentient beings once lived here. How long had they been missing? Did they kill each other off in whatever conflict had ravaged these buildings?

While following the guide through the dead city, heading ever higher up ramps and stairs into the gloom, Malcolm noticed some blue lights floating in the distance. When they got close enough, he could make out that they were massive versions of the bio-machine, three to five times as big as the one he had encountered by the transpod, some of them holding large cerulean crystals.

To Malcolm, it felt like the space station was waking up, and that the machines were attendants, workers, servants perhaps? Was the presence controlling all of the tech in the station and telling these Servitors – they needed a name, so he gave them one – to place the crystals to serve as street lights and beacons because Malcolm had arrived?

Was he special in some way? Or was he just the first traveler to come here in a long time? If the latter was true, why was that the case? Perhaps that's why the presence was so welcoming: after ages alone, it was eager to embrace a new arrival.

Had it been hibernating in the sands of Mars, waiting for someone to find it, and then, like a virus, moved from human to human until it found Malcolm? Was it possible that its reach extended further, and it had influenced his path before he left Earth for the first time? If an alien species had conquered space, couldn't it also have transcended time? Nothing seemed impossible anymore.







The bizarre disfiguration of Malcolm's hand was the one thing that didn't make sense to him. Was this simply the price one had to pay to travel by transpod? Or had something gone wrong? Was the system not equipped to handle humans?

*Wait*, thought Malcolm. *Something's different*. The pain from the Servitor laceration had moved from his biceps to his wrist, where it was supposed to be. Malcolm took off his glove to see how the wound was healing – and was shocked to discover that he now had fingernails and fingerprints again!

Everything was back to normal. And yet there was nothing normal about any of this! What had happened to him during the jump? And why had that process reversed?

That's when Malcolm realized it hadn't reversed... the process had simply finished.

He was a clone.

Back on Earth, cloning technology involved an EMS recombination process that allowed for the rapid acceleration of genetic growth.

That had to be what was happening here, although this post-jump tissue development was much faster and appeared flawless. Malcolm must have left the transpod before his body was fully formed; no wonder the presence had tried to keep him confined!

If he was a clone, though, what was happening to his body back on Mars? Was the transpod keeping it alive? Was there another Malcolm – the original one?! – reuniting with his family after the apparent failure of his mission? If a version of him had remained on Mars, no one would have any idea that the jump had been a success!

And then there was the body/mind problem inherent in cloning: creating a body was one thing, but constructing a mind was an exponentially tougher task.

Geneticists on Earth had not yet mastered the impossibly complex task of replicating a human consciousness. But who knew what the creators of the transpod technology were capable of? If they had digitized his mind and transmitted it into a clone here on the space station, what version of him was back on Mars? Could a consciousness be in two places at once?

Lost in a sea of questions, Malcolm blindly followed the guide – which he decided to call a Navitor – as it floated ahead of him.

Suddenly, instead of walking on the metal floor of the station, he was stepping out over a pitch-black abyss! He pinwheeled his arms to try to regain his balance, but it was too late: he plummeted down into the darkness.

As Malcolm fell, he noticed small blue lights embedded within thick black cables that serpented down the side of the chasm.

Malcolm had seen these cables – made of the now-familiar alien alloy and punctuated by nodes of light every ten feet or so – all over the station, connecting every metal structure in a seemingly haphazard web of unknown purpose. His training and survival instincts kicked in, and he reached out to grasp one of them.

He missed.

A second try, more desperate this time. He strained for a horizontal cable that stretched across the expanse. Success! But only temporary: too much force, he was falling too fast, and his hand was wrenched free.

A third and final shot: Malcolm wrapped his one gloved hand around a vertical cable, pliable but tough, and slowly applied additional force as it whiplashed around him.

He wrapped his other arm, which he had been inspecting when he fell, over and around the cable so that he could use his torso to help slow him down.

After fighting gravity for what felt like forever, but couldn't have been more than a few seconds, Malcolm eventually arrested his momentum, and he was left swaying in the void.

The ledge, barely visible in the Navitor's spotlight, was at least 500 feet above him. It would be a long, dangerous climb back up, and right now, it was taking everything he had just to hold on. Malcolm knew that his own body was in peak physical condition, but if he was actually a clone, he had no idea what this replica could do.

As he looked up at the Navitor, only a tiny constellation of blue pinpricks of light at this distance, Malcolm realized that if he didn't find the strength to climb, three things would be true:

His mission would be a failure.

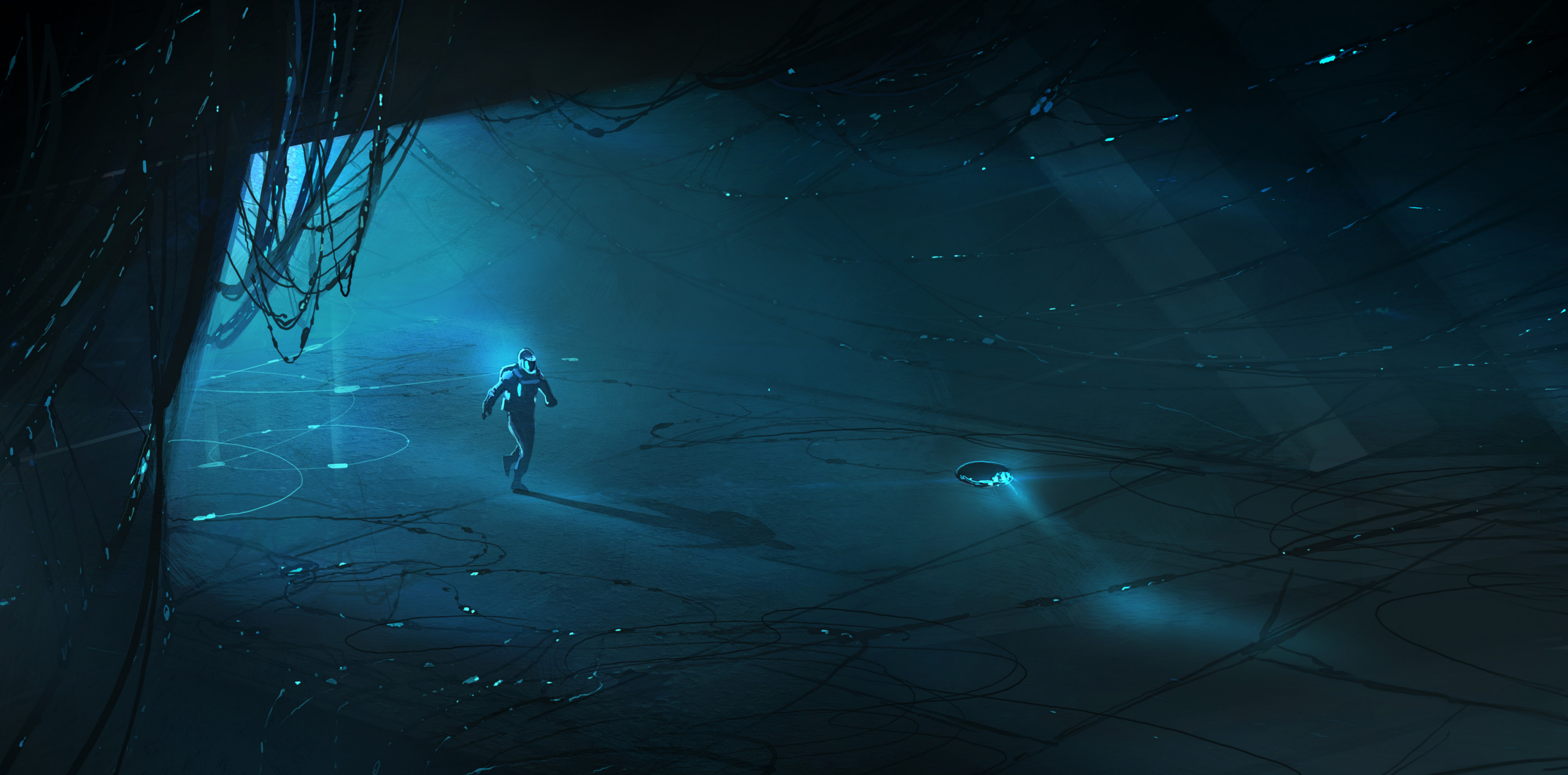
Rayla, Duni, and Niran would never know what had happened to him.

And he'd never understand why the presence, assuming it controlled the Navitor, allowed him to nearly fall to his death.

The first two were inevitable if he didn't get answers to the third: if he was going to get back home, he needed the presence to help him.

And right now, it seemed utterly indifferent to his fate.

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**Backstory**

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**The Hub**

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