Two Geniuses:

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The Billy and the Beast

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This is a fan-fiction of the original *Commander Keen* PC game series.

Content warnings

This book discusses themes of violence, death, trauma, gender dysphoria, and abandonment. Reader discretion is advised; this book does not target the same audience the *Commander Keen* series targeted.

For Caroline, Cade, and Alex

Note: *Commander Keen* is the registered intellectual property of Id Software.

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Chapter 1

Eventually, once he had tapped his pencil on the paper enough times, the bell finally rang. Ms. Stafford walked by and looked at what Billy was doing, and he was up to his usual self -- his watch battery died, and he didn't think to put a battery receptacle in any position that would permit a quick changeout.

“Billy, why would you take your watch apart? Wait, did you break it and have to tape it back together?”

“Nah, I got tired of my old one and built a new one. Check out this electroluminescent screen! Oh, and look at this 68HC12 processor! Here's the dead battery... I salvaged it from my parents' old wireless home phone.”

“Hold on. You mean to tell me that you... built your own watch?”

“Yeah! It isn't hard at all -- I just read the Motorola manual, took the screen from my old fried Game Boy, put an electroluminescent night light behind it, and it works just like that!”

He was no more than 8 years of age, and that high school chemistry class was no match for his supreme mind; after all, having an IQ so high that it ran off the scale does that. Some tests put his IQ at 179, but one of his friends put his IQ at 314. As such, Billy kept his mind occupied with all manner of projects: his home's backyard was adorned by freshly-cut grass and a wooden Club House that he built, fronted with a *KEEP OUT* sign on the front.

As the sun set on that warm March evening and Billy took the trek from the bus stop to his home, he remembered a very fond memory; a memory of four years ago.

> At 8:12 AM, on a hot August day hosting the first day of school, Billy sat idly while the teacher ran through roll call. “William Joseph Blazkowicz the Second?”
>
> “Here! But, umm, call me Billy!”
>
> Three entries later, it was finally time for the person sitting in front of him... whose name was, apparently, “Mortimer Jackson McMire.”
>
> Now, Billy knew the McMire family for two reasons: Molly McMire was not only his babysitter his mom hired, but also the first person Billy ever tested his brain-mirroring machine on. David McMire was also a personal

friend of his father, and the two worked together at a community observatory on astrophotography projects together.

Every recess, Billy and Mortimer hung out and talked about their projects to each other -- to Billy's amusement, Mortimer did most of the same things Billy did! After school, the two used their amateur television stations to visually converse with one another; they would talk for so long every evening that Mortimer's mom would come in to his bedroom and unplug the power strip his video camera, TV set, television transmitter, and ham radio were all connected to.

The duo's friendship grew, but, one day, they had an argument about the ethics of "hypothetically enslaving aliens." Mortimer was adamant that it was morally okay to do so, but Billy (not being one who had any friends outside of Mortimer at all, really) argued that such a position was completely unwarranted. Billy yelled into his radio's microphone and sneered into the camera until his mom stormed into his Club House, told him it was time for dinner, and ended up doing the same thing Mortimer's mom did.

Mortimer was never really the same after that. Billy, saddened by the loss of his only friend, fell deeper into his projects. All he wanted to do was to be *understood*, even if it was by an artificial intelligence or an alien he could barely communicate with.

All Mortimer talked about was how smart he was.

Mortimer was a strange person, but not in the traditional sense of "hyper-eccentric future millionaire." For his case, it was more of a "where are this kid's parents" and "the parents he does have are clearly emotionally abusive" -- they would constantly drive him to absolute perfection, and no failure would suffice. He had to get a perfect score on every test at school, had to have a beautiful girlfriend (which he never really got along with), had to have his mother drag him around to plenty of nonsensical things as "power-moves," and be all-around *perfect.*

The school counsellor noticed Mortimer's antisocial behavior -- not asocial, but full-on antisocial. He would constantly talk about subjugation, destruction, and bringing ruin to his enemies; Mortimer became a total *social outcast* on account of his poor choices of words in social scenarios, crazy antics, and perceived insanity.

The sun began to set as the rays of light pierced the hazy sky.

As Billy opened the door to his Club House, he sat down at his desk. He was working on a radio-receiver-like project that he had neither named nor found all the

parts he needed for, so he figured he would continue chipping away at hanging out with the only friend he had.

He flipped the switch on the back of the terminal to the on position, and powered up the processor cabinet. Once the fans reached peak speed, he inserted the RT-11 boot disk, flipped in the address of the loader ROM into that PDP-11/70's front panel, and off it went. Once the command prompt appeared, he ran his one and only friend: *ELIZA*.

It was just so bland, he thought, and all he could do was long for a sense of adventure in his boring, dry world. As he stared at the lame responses from that nonsensical program, not having the wherewithal to continue, a sudden gust of wind blew through the window and flipped the pages of a notebook sitting below the windowsill.

Billy looked over, and it was a drawing he had made a year ago: a “simplistic” design for a space-faring vehicle.

He flipped through the pages at a great speed while they primed his memory to recall what he had made last Spring. Looks like he lacked almost everything he needed to make this, and those old dredgey textbooks on the Apollo Program were not about to be applicable to this.

Four months later, having worked nonstop twelve-hour-days on his invention, Billy took a step back to admire his work. He had melted down thousands of soup cans from the neighborhood recycling bins, raided the house for all manner of interesting parts, laid up casting molds, and nearly completed a literal spaceship.

The control system was another microcontroller hackjob, except this time, he didn't need a PDP-11 to do something important -- he had the latest and greatest 68HC12s (just like his watch) that he had gotten for his recent birthday a few weeks ago. The cockpit was shielded by ten of the same car windshield taken from junkyard cars down the street, and adorned with all manner of borrowed devices: the flight controls and input to the reaction control system was provided by a joystick he had borrowed from his brother's Nintendo 64 (the controller being a dual-joystick unit bearing a cat's-scratch logo), the electrical systems were powered initially by a car battery he borrowed from his mom's car (only for it to be supplemented by an alternator being driven by a gas turbine impeller), propulsion was provided by the base of the home vacuum cleaner layered in about a hundred layers of tin foil to protect the plastic, and fuel consisted of about six “borrowed” bottles of Everclear he lifted from his father's liquor cabinet.

The only things he had left was to come up with a navigation system, check everything thoroughly for air leaks, acquire some gas cylinders to replenish the internal

atmosphere, figure out how to scrub the cockpit of carbon dioxide, calculate the weight... and, he fell asleep writing his to-do list.

Just before school started back up in August, Billy conducted some “test flights” around town. He had employed a genius method of getting the craft to lift off of the ground, and without being shot down by the military, was able to make it to and from school without needing his mom to take him in the car... or ride that slow, stinky bus.

His teachers could hardly believe it... they knew that kid had a bright future. Even through it all, though, the overwhelming feeling of loneliness still gripped that young boy's mind.

Once he had made it back home, he looked at the night sky as he lay on the grass in the yard; he saw Mars, and looked at some of the astrophotographic images his dad and his friend, Mr. McMire, had taken. There was Mars, that fascinating world with its sandy red surface, occasional lake, and pale blue atmosphere not far off from Earth's.

Nobody from Earth had ever been: not because humanity couldn't make it, but because humanity had long observed (especially since the age of the telescope's existence) dots coming and going from the surface. By 1996, every government on the planet agreed with almost certainty that there was some kind of advanced lifeform there! Everyone knew that some of the “alien abduction stories” were true, and some people even claimed to have videotape of spacecraft landing on Earth -- some people, starting back in the 70s, reported that some strange-looking creatures would come and raid their houses for strange things: hula hoops, teddy bears, pogo sticks, candy, and more.

All of this started on July 20, 1976; the Viking 1 Lander spacecraft, Humanity's finest achievement of that year, accidentally crash-landed in a Martian government building. Sounds of some kind of screaming could be heard before the device went offline.

Martian life is rather strange -- there is only a handful of species living on the planet; of those, the Yorps and Gargs are the most plentiful. The Yorps developed a very strong mind and a weak body, whereas the Gargs developed a weak mind and a powerful body. The Gargs ruled the planet with an iron fist, subjugating the Yorps but not in a violent fashion. The Gargs assembled a rather standard power structure: the King ruled the lands with his mind, rather than his body. This was because some Gargs were born with a rare mutation wherein they had both a sound mind and a sound body -- these Gargs traded their anger for intellect, and built cities, towns, roads, bridges, shrines, learned to write, developed culture, and even built teleporters!

Of course, nobody at NASA put two and two together that the Humans had started trouble on Mars, but they certainly had. When the Viking 1 lander hit the ground, it completely misfired and struck the Garg King's head! With the despotic king now dead, the Yorps escaped their enslavement and the less-than-intelligent Gargs lost their telepathic pacification from the mind of the King.

Though nobody alive during Billy's time knew this, the Gargs were genetically related to another alien race: the leading race of planet Tanamaar. Several thousand years ago, the Martians learned to travel through space; their first destination was Earth, where they helped the rather advanced civilization of Egypt construct some magnificent pyramids. In the modern age, once they mastered travel amongst the Solar System and rest of the Milky Way galaxy, they learned an Earthly language and combined it with the writing system of the Nalorians -- the so-called *Standard Galactic Alphabet.* Containing thousands of glyphs, the Sapient Gargs (who, unlike their feral brethren, were not angry about literally everything around them) selected ones that coded for English (that they had learned by listening to broadcast AM radio stations from Earth, specifically the big and powerful clear-channel stations like *WLW* in Cincinnati, Ohio, not far off from where Billy was from: Milwaukee, Wisconsin), and began to record their culture.

Two years later, the Martian people were living far less stably than they were before. With the King gone (thanks to that botched landing of the Viking lander), Mars was open to visitors. Now, the Milky Way Galaxy had been seeded with a common form of life while the galaxy was forming (compliments of bacteria evolving from organic molecules in the hot, dense soup of the early galaxy), so the humans of Earth bore a strong genetic resemblance to, say, the Vorticons of *Vorticon VI*, or the Chozo of *Tallon IV.* On account of this, they all emerged consciousness in a similar way: they all told stories, they all developed language, and they all (at least partially) developed writing.

Chapter 2

Standing in an awkward scoping position on a cool Fall evening, Billy stared at Mars through the telescope his dad had given him for Christmas a few months ago. One, two, three bright flashes of light. It was 7:32 PM on that warm day, and he had completed his so-called Bean-with-Bacon Megarocket a few days ago -- all of the soup cans he melted down were of that flavor when he raided the dumpsters behind the school week after week to acquire enough metal.

He spent probably 15 minutes going around and re-“borrowing” all of the parts he needed from his parents'. After some quick maintenance, Billy opened up the top hatch and crawled in. He wasn't really fit to fly; adorned with a purple T-shirt with the school logo on it, a random pair of blue jeans, and red Converse shoes, he was... almost ready to fly.

He was missing one thing, though: under one of his desks, he had “permanently borrowed” his brother's football helmet -- a yellow-green-white Green Bay Packers replica.

If he was about to make a name for himself, he needed a name! Sitting in the cockpit, he thought about what that would be. Captain Billy? No, too generic. Warrior Billy Blaze? No, that was actually his name. Commander Bill? No, reminded him of a computer company. Oh, he had one! Commander Keen!

Commander Keen -- Defender of Earth!

Keen flipped the old lightswitch on the dashboard that started up some fuel pumps; the 200-proof alcohol flowed into an engine based on a design from an amateur rocketry book (which somehow had information on NASA's RS-88, which burned ethanol and oxygen gas). He reached behind him to open a garden hose valve which regulated oxygen gas pressure, then pushed on a big red grill starter button.

The clicks of the button converted into a powerful wooshing noise as the engine started up.

There was a slightly old laptop from 1994 that he had found on the side of the road, and its weak battery was about to die -- he couldn't have that, that meant no navigation with his star chart program and orbital mechanics program! No matter, an HVAC damper valve was there to serve him by diverting some engine power into a centrifugal turbine (which in-turn drove an alternator, another junkyard find).

His mom's car's battery was starting to get low, so he pulled the lever to allow some compressed CO_2 to flow into the damper's control pneumatic. The alternator whirred up as the multimeter embedded in the dash displayed a rising system voltage.

The vacuum cleaner, being hinged, provided a simple thruster that could pivot to face down or straight out the rear of the spacecraft; when it was down, some of the flow would be diverted into some insulated metal pipes to go out two thrusters at the front. That way, he could achieve vertical take-off and landing -- something the US military had yet to perfect on their billion-dollar fighter jet program.

The craft shook as the engine throttle increased, and the simplistic Nintendo joystick controlled damper valves in the thruster tubes with ease. He set it to full throttle, and he shot up at a great speed -- another win for making the craft light-weight, he thought. Once he was a few thousand feet off the ground, two of his ham radios (both of which he had scanning the 120 MHz aviation band on repeat) picked up signals of several radar systems observing his presence; in a mad dash to get away and not get shot down, he shut the damper valves for the front thrusters, cranked the elevator to pitch up, flipped the thruster from 90° to 0°, and off he went.

The formed glass shielding on the front actually worked, and he was high above the planet he called home. He could no longer use his atmosphere-dependent ailerons/rudder/elevators, so he would have to maneuver with his auxiliary thrusters. Another win for the divertable-output engine!

His old laptop in the cockpit took in position data from gyroscopes, and he clicked a button to compute a flight path to Mars. Pretty typical transfer orbit, but, he didn't have 7 months for travel... he had 3 hours, tops. He cranked the throttle to the max as he accelerated to 73% the speed of light in that lightweight spacecraft, and he bolted towards Mars.

Asleep at the flight yoke reading a book, a bright flash of light accompanied by no sound rocked Keen from his distraction. A Martian spacecraft (clearly marked with a red circle with spots on it) had just shot down... some kind of... well, he didn't know. It was purple with blue accents, and his thermal camera showed that it was made of a material mostly penetrable to IR -- the warm planet below formed the source for that IR.

He dizzingly flew around the wreckage without being noticed or cared about (presumably because he was not marked for either side of this “conflict”), and came up to the atmosphere. He jolted around to try to find a clear patch to pass through (it was the turbulent season on Mars then), and shot through a gap between two storm clouds. The flames of re-entry consumed his view, but the temperature and pressure readings were all normal. He never added a landing gear, so his only option was to perform a vertical landing.

He flew close to some kind of clearing amongst a city, and had a rather smooth landing.

A big puff of Martian dust poofed out as he stepped onto the surface and took a deep breath. The atmosphere smelled very faintly of tar and smoke. As Keen wandered off to examine a nearby hill that had a stone tablet sticking out, five aliens (about the height of Keen) scrambled to his ship and dismounted various parts. Keen hid behind the hill, but, the damage had been done.

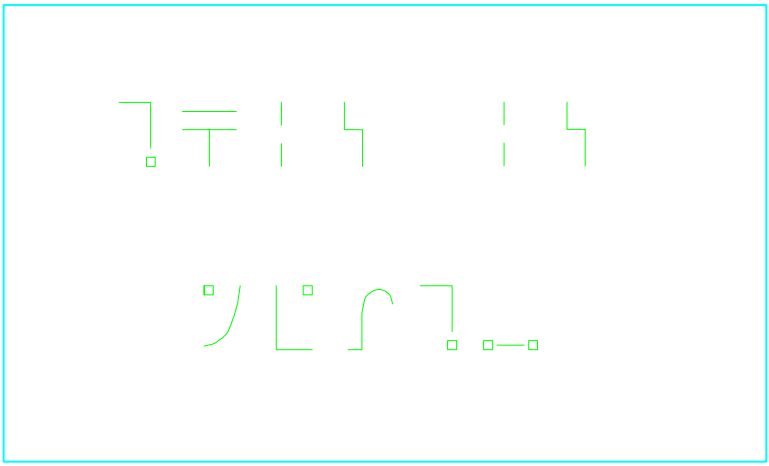
Keen was marooned on Mars.

> We Vorticons, from Vorticon IV, have long held a fascination with the *Sol* system. While none have been able to make it to Sol III where the Humans reside, recent expeditions have led to the exploration of Sol IV, referred to as "Mars" by other denizens of the Sol system. Inhabitants of Mars include the Yorps and the Gargs, which both experience extreme divergence in intelligence and skill -- it appears that the Gargs have either bred the Yorps to be friendly, mindless drones or have subjugated them to "benevolent captivity" for so long that they are essentially a class of slaves amongst the planet.
>
> Our star, Axius Prime, is approximately 437000 standard distance units from Sol. Our spacecraft permit travel to their system in as little as 25 cycles, but we have only been able to actually visit for a few ten thousand sweeps. One day on Mars is approximately equal to one cycle on Vorticon IV, and it appears to also be true for Sol III.
>
> While we have not been able to land on Sol III, at least one native of Sol III has made it to us. He calls himself "The Grand Intellect," and he has given our top scientists meaningful competition in their knowledge of physics and craftiwork subjects. He was somehow already proficient in *Omnispeak* when we encountered him in his landing spacecraft, and was able to communicate immediately.
>
> However, as of late, the Vorticon General Administrative Council seems to have undergone some rather odd changes. They no longer seem to be controlling their own decision-making process, and recent governmental action has raised many suspicions as to who is *really* leading the planet.
>
> Alas, with regards to Sol III, a future landing mission is planned; we hope to complete this within the current cycle.
>
> - *VGIM, Section 7 ("Sol System")*

The blue-ish four-foot-tall jackal-like bipedal Vorticon soldiers took his battery, his flight control stick, his fuel tank, and his vacuum cleaner thruster system before running off at a dizzying speed. When Keen determined it was safe, he exited from his defensive position and ran to see the damage.

The removal was almost surgical, like someone knew he was coming and wanted to inflict a very specific amount of damage on him. After all, Keen was here trying to figure out what was going on above...

Stunned by what had just happened, Keen walked a mile to the nearest city. It was some kind of *border town*, and the entire place was filled with happy Yorps frolicking about with their new-found freedom. As he walked through the town, he noticed various signs written in some kind of language:



Just next to that sign, on a table, lie some kind of raygun; it looked very similar to a design of his own, but sub-par and some of the parts were sized wrong. Was it based on his own design? No matter, he was interested!

Now, Keen's own “raygun” was a device that fired simple gas-stabilized plasma blasts with a high static charge, which would stun the peripheral nervous system of the individual who had the misfortune of being on the receiving end of one of its projectiles. This model, on the other hand... well, Keen fired at a nearby potted plant (with strange yellow leaves) and it went up in flames!

Needless to say, this was no Neural Stunner; this was a proper raygun.

Wonderful, more signs that he couldn't read. He managed to make it through the city after a brisk walk (and even more encounters with those happy-go-lucky Yorps), and was back out in the desert; he saw a conical building in the distance, and he began walking towards it.

The inside was dark, lit only by four lights at the top; there was a stairwell that winded around the outside and an entrance at the bottom. Not being one to miss anything, he went inside and walked up the spiral layout to the top, the ground

covered with X-square-pattern tiles. At the top, he found a stone statue of a Yorp -- when he touched it, he heard a voice in his mind:

> It is too bad that you cannot read the Standard Galactic Alphabet, human.

He took his hand off the statue and observed the halo around the Yorp's one eye on its ostrich-like support shaft. “What was that?!” When he touched the statue again, he heard the same voice in the same tone, but jerked his head around to find the source of the audio.

Nothing.

There was a plaque that looked like it had been recently cut, and the number of letters matched up perfectly with the message. He whipped out a pen and miniature spiral-bound notebook he had in his back pocket, and began to transcribe the message on the plaque and line the characters up with the voice. They aligned perfectly, and he felt vindicated that maybe he could read this “Standard Galactic Alphabet” thing after all!

He walked down the long spiral staircase as the Martian sun rose further in the background, and scouted his next destination on the way down: from his vantage point, he saw about three clusters of a few large buildings and two more of those shrine towers.

Off he went to one of the two shrines, specifically the closer one. Inside, there was a pyramidal staircase that led up to what looked like a pogo stick on a stand. He climbed the bricks and took it -- a sign by a nearby door had a message... except he could read it.

> *BEHOLD THE HOLY -POGO- STICK.*

For some reason, *POGO* was written using the standard Latin alphabet; not only that, but the stick was manufactured by a brand he knew the name of!

He looked up and saw the source of heat for the shrine -- gas burners that expelled their heat upwards, where a big fan at the top of the cone circulated it down to the ground. Well, that was that; his next stop would be one of those bigger buildings.

When he entered one of them, four Yorps came up to him and nearly pushed him into some spikes arranged in what looked like an animal-defense pit. He donned his pogo stick to hop over the gap, and went up to a door; it wouldn't open, and it was marked with an**A** Standard Galactic glyph. He tried to stick his notepad's paper-mache cover in the card reader, but it was properly-designed and yielded no opening.

He continued his trek for the key, and eventually found it in an adjacent building. At the top, there was a rather furious Garg blocking access to the desk where he saw the card resting; when he entered, the Garg charged him. He tried to hit its head with his pogo stick, but it caught the toy with its teeth and launched it against the wall. It sprung off the wall, and shot out a glass window! Defenseless, Keen took the raygun out of his back pocket, forgetting to bring his Neural Stunner from back home.

He aimed at one of the Garg's four legs, and shot it clean off with a blast. As the creature's blood rushed forth from its severed leg, it bolted out the door Keen came in and down a stairwell... leaving a trail of blood on its way.

Keen could feel the fear blasting through him as his ears rang and his heart pounded. That was... too close. *Too close.* Alas, he grabbed the card and went on his merry way. There were no signs of the injured Garg, except for the fact that the blood trail did not appear to lead out of the building. Upon exiting, he found his pogo stick resting in a dry ditch in front of the building.

He returned to the other building and the door opened right up when presented with the card. When the door opened, the same Garg from before charged Keen with even more fury than in the storage building; he tried the pogo stick trick again, and landed a clean strike right on the top portion of its head between its eyes.

The creature fell to the ground, stunned. Keen gingerly walked by, grabbed a *B* keycard, and left.

Now that he had two cards, he returned to the lobby of that building and climbed the stairs to the fourth level. He opened the door to a large hallway, and he saw one of those same jackal-like creatures talking to a rather-sane-looking Garg; they introduced themselves as a “Vorticon treasury security officer” and the Garg moved out of the way to let him approach the locked door. When the door opened, Keen could see his mom's car battery on the table.

He wondered if he could just explain his issue to the Vorticon guard -- after all, he looked rather friendly! Unfortunately, this friendliness was short-lived.

When the Vorticon noticed Keen, their eyes rolled into the back of their head and they let out a yell. Keen was terrified at what was happening when their eyes returned to the normal position, but were now red and black. Keen scrambled to look around for cover, but there was none that could be reached stealthily; the Vorticon drew their firearm, and screamed at the top of their lungs:

“Diiiiiee, you fuckerrr!!”

The Vorticon firearm shot clean through a banner hanging on the wall, and nearly ignited the plastic-esque material covering the wall. Keen drew his raygun, aimed

at the Vorticon, and fired a shot with his eyes closed; the scream was deafening and absolutely horrifying, and Keen tried to hold back tears at what he had just done.

The body had been reduced to a pile of ash, and Keen sneaked by. The smell was atrocious, but that door opened right up; Keen grabbed the heavy lead-acid battery and realized he now had to walk it all the way back to his ship.

Fortunately for him, though, there was a rolling cart nearby that had a number of hard-plastic writing tablets on it; he took the cart, with the writing samples too such that he would be able to learn the language (since it didn't look like it lined up with the normal English he had seen before).

Half an hour later and a quick trek back to his ship, he hid the battery in a hole in the sand. He returned to one of the other shrines, built just like the first one, and was told:

> The teleporter in the ice will send you to the dark side of Mars.

Upon closer inspection, the Yorp statue there appeared to have some kind of crystalline object embedded above its one eye; a panel on the statue bore an unrecognizable script save for one single bit written in SGA: “geti selesh.”

What did that mean?

When Keen exited the shrine, he noticed some kind of in-ground entrance! Upon entering, he realized it was a subway system of some sort. It looked like it had one destination, and the train car was already there; he boarded it, was the only one on board, and it began to move.

As he scribbled notes, the train whizzed through the transit tunnel at a breakneck speed. Once it finally came to rest, he walked out and noticed how much colder it was! Upon surfacing, he understood why: he was now in a polar region of Mars.

“Jeez. How fast was that thing going?”

The snow was thick, and seemed to have a number of chemicals dissolved in it; each footstep released an ozone smell. The steep grading angle of the sun resulted in it being rather warm; there was something in the snow that prevented it from melting straight away.

A collection of buildings and a shrine in a valley dominated Keen's view as he trudged through the snow towards that shrine. When he arrived, he could not get in directly... he had to dodge two Gargs in order to acquire a keycard that opened the shrine.

You will need a raygun in the end, but not to shoot the Vorticon...

Keen had a dazed look upon his face as he stared at the statue, bearing that same purplish crystal as the previous one. The Martians clearly cared a lot about building these shrines, so he had best keep that gun handy.

Not a moment too soon, a Vorticon guard entered the shrine at its bottom floor. Keen tried to stay hidden, but they let out a loud grunt and began approaching him at a blistering speed. Keen drew his weapon and clicked the trigger, but the gun malfunctioned just at the wrong moment!

It shot a projectile, but it was visibly weaker than the previous, more lethal shots he had taken with this. Maybe it didn't work so well in the cold?

Keen shivered with both cold and fear, the dim interior of the shrine warmed only by a gas-flame burner and a single lamp at the top. The projectile travelled through the air, and struck the Vorticon on its belt.

The belt flashed, then started smoking. When that happened, their eye color lost its red coloration and their voice changed rapidly.

“I, umm... I'm going to get get going.”

The Vorticon ran off down the stairs at a brisk pace, and Keen stared off at the igloos he could see nearby from the exit-door in the shrine tower's apex.

What in the world just happened?

It was noon on the Red Planet, and Keen downed two chocolate bars he had in a pouch on his belt. As he sat on the stairs to eat and rest, he pondered what he had done. The personality of that Vorticon changed drastically after he shot off the belt!

Upon finishing, Keen hiked over to the icy buildings a valley over. Despite being made *from* ice, it was actually quite warm; the outside portions were cold enough that someone had actually built a “snow-Yorp” ice sculpture! A cold storage building bore many floors, but could be quickly scaled -- the entire building was filled with cold provisions. At the top, Keen found a keycard.

Looking for somewhere to use it, he went next door and encountered yet another seemingly-possessed Vorticon guard. Keen once again fired at their belt, but this time... the warmth within the ice-cutting building meant that his raygun worked at full power. The projectile shot out at full power with great recoil, and landed right at the beltline of the guard.

The guard howled in pain for a moment, but it was only for a moment.

Their head shot off and experienced the eye-color change while it was flying through the air (having been severed from the Vorticon's host body). The blood shot all over the ground floor of the ice-extrusion room, staining the compressed ice sheets that lined the flooring.

The door opened, and there was his converted vacuum cleaner.

There was no sense in going all the way back to the landing site, so he figured he might as well store it in an empty large cabinet found in that icy shrine. One depositing later, Keen was standing in the middle of the icy field as the sun set.

The sky flashed, and Keen fell over.

> There is a hidden city. Look in the dark area of the city to the south.

Keen woke up as he gasped for air, face-down in Martian sand. He was no longer where he was; he turned over and surveyed the landscape.

A different kind of tower lay in front of him, markedly different from the previous four that he had seen. Barely able to focus his vision, he entered and slowly climbed the staircase to the tower's apex.

At the top, there was a statue of a Garg. As he struggled to hold it together, Keen touched the statue as he always did, and heard a loud sound coming within the confines of his mind:

> GAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRGGG!!

He felt a loud clap, caught his breath, and felt otherwise fine.

While he didn't know where he was, he stepped outside and saw a building made of what looked like red clay bricks. Arranged in a mazelike pattern, Keen wandered through the structure in search of... something. Keen was downright dizzy from thirst, but he marched on. While sniffing around for moisture, he ran across a dark hole that appeared to go into the basement of this building.

He slipped and fell on the sandy ledge, and fell into a room that was scorching hot. Off in the distance, though, he saw an underground pool -- he hopped right over with his pogo stick and drank water for a better part of an hour.

Because he fell into the hole, he couldn't really get out... there were no signs of any ladders, movable staircases, or lifting-stone-floor-plates that would lift him out of his predicament. Keen noticed a blue flame off at the other side of the underground extent hidden by two support columns, guarded by some kind of robot that randomly mis-fired a weapon very similar to his raygun. He was low on ammunition, so he didn't even draw it to take the robot down.

Since the robot appeared to be malfunctioning, he was able to slip by with relative ease! He approached the blue flame, and noticed that it wasn't actually a fire... it was actually some kind of... portal?!

When he existed the teleporting apparatus, he found himself in front of a very large building built from more polished red bricks. The place was somewhat mazelike, but was absolutely filled *to the brim* with valuable Earth objects. Based on this arrangement, it was pretty obvious to Keen by now that the Martians had formed a cult around Earth objects (particularly toys, for some reason).

When Keen exited the building's rear, Keen went back to the portal he came from (since he was ensconced in a valley by some very tall mountains on a portion of the planet that was currently undergoing its *sunrise).* Keen activated the portal, and it deposited him at what he quickly realized was the south pole of the planet (based on his compass and the angle of the sun, not to mention how cold it was once again).

As Keen walked out of the portal, his vision blurred and he heard the same voice of a Yorp fill his mind, even though he was nowhere near one of those psychically-active statues:

> You cannot kill the Vorticon Commander directly.

No matter, he would find a way... but he didn't want to kill another Vorticon! Who was controlling them? Was it the Martians? Were those friendly Yorps actually trying to lure him into some kind of trap such that the Gargs bite his head off? Was there something else going on? Was any of this even real?

His racing thoughts started to frustrate him. He looked at the bright Jupiter dot in the sky and thought for a minute.

"Right, yeah, one of those statues told me that I couldn't kill the... who was it... come on..."

"The Grand Intellect!"

No matter, though, there was a serious-looking building off in the distance. It looked almost like a castle, with a guard tower out front made of ice blocks. He came up to the guard tower, jittered the door, and it opened right up.

He drew his raygun, took cover, and slowly inspected the lobby.

There was nobody there, the entire place was *empty.*

Off he went up to the top by climbing a hefty ladder (something only a Vorticon could do), and he eventually reached the pinnacle. Right on the ground was a keycard, and... an unfortunate display of a dismembered Vorticon corpse.

This seemed unlike the Vorticon people to do! There's no way they were that violent...

Keen looked around the pinnacle after collecting the keycard, and he found some evidence as to who the perpetrator was. Sitting on a table up against the wall of the circular glassy-ice-domed tower was a bonesaw, a knife, and a wood-cutting saw.

Despite the small display of surgical equipment on parade, only the wood-cutting saw was bloodied. Whatever happened in there was gruesome and *very* painful.

The smell was starting to become appalling even though it was not that warm in there, and Keen slid down the ladder. Halfway down, a section of the ladder broke! As he fell twenty feet, he realized it wouldn't be that bad if he just crouched...

His shoes made a loud thud as he hit the ground, and he strolled over to the rest of the building. He heard a discharge of a raygun, and took cover as he entered the Vorticon Commander's Castle (as per the text on the sign).

When he made it to the second floor of the castle, he could see his fuel tank sitting next to a door... and a very mean-looking Vorticon prowled about in a rage, firing his gun erratically. Keen noticed that the ceiling of the room seemed to be suspended with some kind of chain that ran up an air vent -- he could see a red light emanating from there.

There was a ladder in the corner of the room just by the door, and Keen clamored up it in a haste without even have checked where it went. Turns out, it ran into a vent!

Keen crawled through the vent, and realized that so long as he didn't take the covering off the blower, he could come up to the 90° dropoff and observe the chain. He looked around, and realized what the point of this was: the blower was being driven by some kind of engine that could not be readily started or stopped, so whoever built the castle structure decided it would be easier to just raise and lower the ceiling to shut off the air circulation.

He noticed there was a lever that mounted the chain to a winch, and that pulling it would drop the ceiling...

He pulled the lever, and a loud clash of the ceiling falling was accompanied by the sounds of screaming pain amongst the sounds of breaking bones.

It ended quickly, but, that was another death Keen did not need to cause.

He went back to the floor, crossed over the collapsed ceiling, got his fuel tank, found his flight joystick in a metal box, and began his exit.

A teleporter that looked substantially more complex than the other Martian ones was adorned with two control dials that moved a reticule anywhere over the planet; he lined up the reticule with landmarks and mountains he knew were nearby his ship, and off he went.

But, drats! The vacuum cleaner thruster!

Well, it would be a mile walk to the train station, then a quick walk over to where he hid the device. As he walked towards the train station, he thought about what was going on here.

His mind raced as the panic set in, bought on in no small part by his hunger and thirst, and he thought about how bad it would be. What if he couldn't get off? What if the rocket wasn't even there? After all, he didn't see it on the way back because the sun had set... Furthermore, how would he even find it? He did have a flashlight, but it wouldn't last long.

Eventually, he made it to the train station and was relieved that the train was occupied by only a few Yorps. They all seemed much happier than he was, and were even happier than they were earlier when that Vorticon Commander guy was still alive. Nonetheless, the train arrived in one piece and it wasn't long before he was wheeling his vacuum cleaner back.

On the way back, a Yorp offered him an entire cake and a gallon of water! He stopped on the side of the short road to indulge in his newfound feast, and realized that the Yorp was talking to him that entire time through a telepathic means. Granted, he realized that the Yorp could not read his thoughts, but he found it amazing that such a thing was even possible at all.

The two talked quite a bit as the starry sky filled their view; the faint illumination of phosphor-doped panelling on the side of the road lighting their way. Keen asked what its name was, expecting to hear something he could probably not pronounce with his own speaking abilities, but it was Spot!

The two rode the train back, and Keen decided that it might not be a bad idea to take the little guy back to Earth! After all, a pet Yorp could be an amazing guide to the cosmos.

When the two made it back to where Keen thought his landing site was, he shined his flashlight and the retroreflective tape over some of the rubber cement on the Bean-with-Bacon Megarocket shined light right back at him! He hastily reassembled the craft, entered the cockpit with Spot in hand, initiated the take-off procedure, and kicked on the autopilot program as he napped on the way back.

The duo landed, and it appeared that about 20 hours or so had elapsed since he had been on Earth. His mom ran up to him and threw her arms around him.

“Billy, where in the world were you!?”

“Oh, you know, Mars! Check out my new friend!”

His mom starts screaming at the crazy realization of what she saw. “My goodness, what is this one-eyed green thing!”

Spot ran up to her and rubbed his eye stalk on her leg, making no sense of a threat at all.

“Okay, fine, you can keep him. But, you're feeding him!”

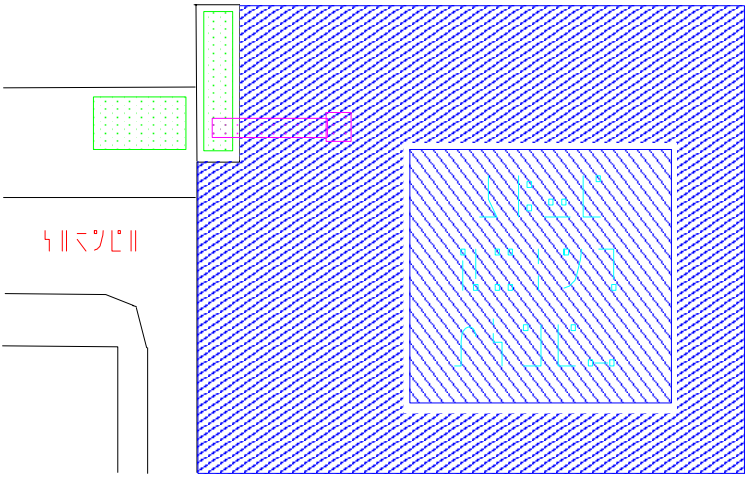
Chapter 3

Well, Commander Keen had somehow managed to avoid getting stuck on Mars. He was so tired that he had naught but a few hours of precious sleep unceremoniously interrupted by the sound of a handheld ham radio in his room.

"Whiskey alpha eight x-ray delta november, anybody on the repeater that might know what the... uhhh... what's going on in the sky?"

The ear-piercing sound of the repeater's Morse code every-ten-minute identification blasted out of the speaker and Keen jolted awake. He looked out his window at what looked like something he had seen before: there was a slightly-bloodied piece of paper he took from the severed hand of that dead Vorticon guard in the Command Castle back on Mars, and he whipped it out from his back pocket.

The text was written in the same Standard Galactic typeface that he had seen elsewhere on Mars; his translation key grew more and more complete as he explored the red planet's establishments. Closer examination raised some eyebrows:



BLUE PRINT ACME, whatever that meant. But, Sydney! Like, Australia! Keen took his spyglass that he normally used to look at antennas on radio towers and peered off into the great expanse above to see something he never thought he'd witness.

There were cannons mounted to this spacecraft, and they were all pointed at cities around the world. Was the Earth about to be blown up?

He noticed that there appeared to be an entry point near the back, not to mention that the craft itself looked like a Vorticon lying face-down on its chest. Before

doing anything else, Keen unfurled that blueprint once more to see the other city names on that schematic:

1. Washington
2. Moscow
3. Rome
4. Paris
5. London
6. Cairo
7. Sydney
8. New York

His heart raced at the realization that the Vorticons were about to blow up Earth. He bolted out the door, threw open the access hatch to his Megarocket, started it up at a dizzying speed, and took flight faster than that invention had ever seen. He blasted towards the ship, found the exhaust port he saw on the schematic, and fired an Attach-o-Ray (something he had built for his farmer uncle, who once needed an easy way of moving heavy farm equipment around his fields).

The Attach-o-Ray beam bounced off the covering of the exhaust vent, so Keen fired it again. Eventually, the electromagnetic suspension burrowed through the vent, allowing Keen to safely traverse into the mothership.

It smelt of machine oil, whirred with the volume of a thousand jet engines, and was swelteringly hot. The atmosphere was thick with humidity, but, Keen had a planet to save.

Keen turned around to find a downed Vorticon guard that got impaled quite badly by bits of the metal plate as it exploded from its sudden displacement, and their weapon was still holstered on their hip. Keen reached for it, but the Vorticon sprang to life -- Keen's arm was easily grabbed by the dying Vorticon, their claws about to burrow deep into his forearm. Keen kicks them in the face, and the grip releases; he reaches down for the firearm, and gets it.

When he did that, a small piece of paper fell out of the hilt:

> The Vorticon HyperPistol represents the state of the art of the Vorticon Defense Council Militia Force. Fed from a quantum pack in the handle, our new armament provides excellent protection against hostile wildlife in the star system we call home. By default, there is a control which modifies the projectile properties such that they shall never hurt another Vorticon*; may our peaceful race prosper forever!
>
> * - see Owner's Manual for details on altering this setting.

- HyperPistol informational flyer, Vorticon Defense Council

Peaceful race, huh. Yeah, pretty peaceful that they want to blow up Earth! He then recalled what he had seen last night on Mars -- there's no way that the Vorticons themselves are in control... right?

Stumbling through the vent, Keen finally found himself in a main hallway. To his left and right were two signs that had hand-written text lining up with two of the city names he saw on his blueprint.

Well, there was no time for sightseeing, this ship had to be disabled! Keen knew that if he started a senseless slaughter of the Vorticons, he would have another problem on his hand (not to mention blood on his hands). His solution was clear: a stealthy approach would be key to success here. No guns-blazing at all; just because he had a HyperPistol

He noticed rather quickly that there was a vent system that ran along each hall on the ship blueprint -- if he could get in there, he would be good to go. Since he *was* standing in a rather unprotected position, he needed to quickly make his way to an adjacent vent. Unfortunately, the blueprint was a top-down view and not a side view; it didn't show the vertical position of the vents!

Sadly, the “vertical position of the vents” ended up being “directly overhead” instead of “sensibly along the floor.” No matter, though! He could get up to them with... well... he didn't quite have a way up there. Fortunately, he realized rather quickly that he could steal a ladder from somewhere, climb in, then either get rid of the ladder or kick it to the ground once he was in the vent (of course, leaving it near the entrance was a sure-fire way of leaving the possessed Vorticons a hint as to his whereabouts). Keen crawled back into the maintenance area where he burrowed into the ship, and, lo and behold, a ladder with wheels!

A quick positioning later and he was ready to climb. Up he went...

...but he made too much noise. A pack of Vorticon Grunts noticed the commotion and slowly came to investigate. They didn't realize what was going on as Keen had already made his way into the vent, so he was able to escape unencumbered.

There inside, lit by faint green lights that glowed with an eerie tritium-and-phosphor shade, Keen began his navigation of the mothership. The entrance was not covered with a vent grating, but all the others were; he crawled up to one of the “control rooms,” and was able to see what was going to destroy the planet:

```
X-14 TANTALUS RAY CENTER
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Upon examination of the equipment in the room, Keen noticed a piece of paper sitting on a table next to some kind of activation switch; he whipped out his

spyglass to read it, and it revealed that cells from the so-called “Big Purple Space Amoeba” multicellular organism were used to generate power to run the Tantalus Rays. Furthermore, they were housed in a simplistic glass housing... one shot from his HyperPistol would ruin the power cell housing and expose the organism to toxic oxygen gas, which causes it to vacate all of its cellular energy and destroy nearby objects (Keen had done a pretty good job of mastering the Standard Galactic Alphabet).

Well, the objective was clear: if Keen shot out all of the BPSA power sources, all of the Tantalus Ray engines could be destroyed in rather quick succession. The HyperPistol was a rather loud device when it fired, but... if none of the Vorticon guards knew where the projectile came from, Keen could probably get off scot-free.

Before starting any more trouble, Keen reexamined his schematic and noticed some kind of “Home” living quarters. Maybe he could get more information there? Either way, the first job was to destroy the power sources; there's no way, he thought, that they would be able to repair anything in a timely fashion.

Up in the vent, Keen aimed his HyperPistol for the power cell, and pulled the trigger. The image of London on the monitor was suddenly blown out as the Tantalus Ray controller visibly exploded. The nearby Vorticons all ran up to help, but were seemingly unable to comprehend what was going on in their mindless, possessed gaze.

Keen moved quickly, and knocked out the other 7 Tantalus Centers within 15 minutes. The vent was large enough and Keen was short enough that he could just run from point to point. Once he had finished, he reconvened with his map... he still wanted to see those Home rooms that he found earlier.

With the halls empty now that all the Vorticons had been distracted (even the Vorticon Elite, who were either engineers or military commanders on the mothership, were fully distracted), Keen made his way to one of the two Homes. When he lowered the vent panel and crawled out (they were positioned higher in elevation than the other rooms of the ship, so the vents were at floor-level), he noticed entire rooms full of Vorticon Youths!

Why was a warship crawling with kids? Was this part of that Grand Intellect figure's plan to raise an army of warriors? A better question, why here? Well, Keen kept exploring to find out why.

His explorations were cut short when he opened a mechanical door and noticed a rather horrifying sight: it looked like a corpse in a display case, but the subject was lively and motioned for Keen to come over and have a chat.

“Young Human, please, close the door and come over here for a little chat.”

“Wait, how do you speak my language?!”

“Well, it's a long story... when the Grand Intellect took our planet and people over, some of us were wise enough to listen to his speeches over and over and see what the Vorticon Translator said in response. There is another elderly Vortiman on the ship with the same knowledge I have. Now, say, why are you here?”

“Your people are trying to kill mine! I came to fight back, starting with you!”

“Now, hold on now son, us Vorticon mean you no harm. See that belt up on the counter? Go grab that, please, and let us examine it.”

Keen ran over to a waist-high counter and collected the same kind of belt he had seen back on Mars.

“So, what's the story here, sir?”

“This is a device the Grand Intellect has forced our factories to manufacture. It is a mind-control belt that stuns the wearer with a paralyzing shock should they try to resist its wrath.”

“I knew it! I knew it! You people are being controlled by some other alien!”

“Oh no, not another alien. Remember what I said before about our languages? I speak Omnispeak, but also your language... whatever it may be called. My people are being controlled by one of yours.”

Keen wondered who it might be. The President? A Prime Minister somewhere? A collection of military generals of some nation? It had to be some Earth government that was trying to destroy their enemies...

“Oh no, the Grand Intellect is a young Human like you. He has some kind of machine-mind controlling all of the actions of the Vorticons that wear the mind-belt.”

Keen had just opened his mouth when the door began to slowly open. The Elder said “the light,” and Keen hit the lightswitch in a mad dash.

“These mind-belts have poor audio sensors and cannot see in the dark. Be still, and be quiet.”

The Vorticon Elite dazingly wandered around the room, and it was obvious that he could not see, hear, or even exhibit any signs of consciousness at all. Whenever he walked into an object, he grunted and seemed conscious for a few seconds; Keen had to stealithly walk around the room until the Elite decided to leave.

After about 3 minutes of super-tense parading around a table in the middle of the room, the Elder got Keen's attention once more.

“Now, you will want to leave this ship as quickly as possible. The Grand Intellect has given up, and, if you don't leave now, you'll be stuck with us.”

“But, what about you?”

“Don't worry about me. I'm here in this stasis tank out of boredom, not pain! Plus, the shielding on it keeps the mind control away!”

“Sir, thank you for what you've told me. Please be safe, and I'll take care of that not-so-Grand Intellect.”

Keen sneaked out of the room, back into the vent, and ran to the cooling port. He crossed the Attach-o-Ray tube into his ship (which, by some miracle, was still there), released the attachment, and launched back to the surface below.

Whew, now, maybe, he could sleep!

Chapter 4

Of course, in Keen's life, there was absolutely *no* rest for the wicked; hope didn't grow on trees. He did, for a moment, have some respite; Keen slept for probably 15 minutes or so... only to be rudely awakened by his own thoughts.

While he was asleep, he had a terrible dream of a Vorticon army (fully mind-controlled by that Grand Intellect figure, of course) coming to invade Earth... killing all humans, with him being the last.

Keen jolted awake from his daze, covered in sweat as he realized what the Elder had told him back on the mothership. It was still in orbit, but starting to leave Earth's gravity. If he went *back to* the mothership, he could probably hitch along for the ride back to whatever the Vorticon homeworld was.

Since it was early morning and his dad was about to get up, he ran by the kitchen to snag a water bottle full of coffee... he'd heed it!

Up he went, back into the sky... and docked back at the Vorticon mothership. They almost definitely had some kind of faster-than-light drive engine, so the trip to Vorticon VI would be speedy. After docking, he tightened the Attach-o-Ray and waited.

Perhaps 30 minutes had passed before the ship began to move rapidly out of Earth's orbit, away from the Sun. The ship accelerated rapidly, throwing Keen in his seat; not long after, Keen's view of the cosmos looked as if he had suddenly fallen inside a hole, only for it to look like he had just fallen out of another hole, upside-down!

“Whaaaaat?”

The mothership approached rapidly to a small planet on the outskirts of a very hot-looking star. As the ship slowed down, Keen saw a planet bearing five purplish islands amongst an ocean; the northern polar icecap looked quite a bit bigger than the southern analogue.

Keen hastily flipped the switch that disabled power to the Attach-o-Ray, and blasted into the planet's atmosphere. He managed to find a clearing between two stormclouds, and landed on a landmass on the southern hemisphere of the planet.

> Vorticon VI was formed from its protoplanetary disc around Axius Prime 4.9 billion cycles ago. The disc was rich in hydrogen, carbon, oxygen, silicon, phosphorus, iron, magnesium, nitrogen, and aluminum. Early single-celled lifeforms drifted throughout the hot, dense early universe, and landed on Vorticon IV a few billion cycles ago.

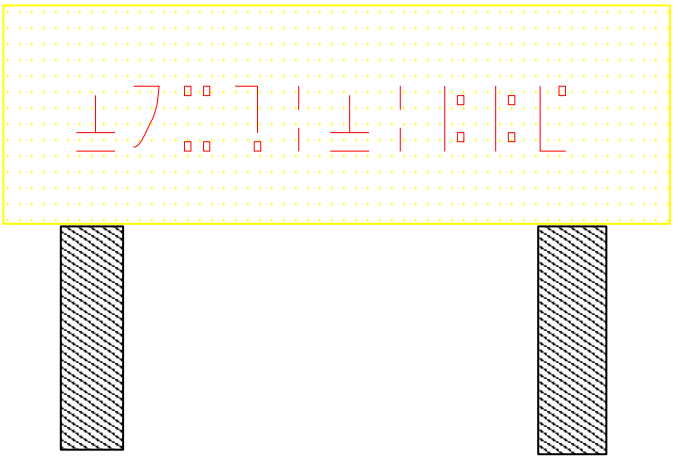
The strong optical output of Axius Prime permitted the evolution of lifeforms that harnessed the star's light for energy: photosynthetic life. This came in the form of haloarchaea that combined sodium chloride salts with energy from the star to prosper. Their distinct purple color was due to the retinal molecule they use to collect sunlight (which collects green light and reflects the red/blue hues).

Haloarchaea lives well in the salty ground, but was unable to beat out alternate forms of photosynthetic life that evolved in the multicellular era. These green chlorophyll-based organisms would eventually go extinct once multicellular organisms realized they too could use retinal for photosynthesis -- this resulted in all plant life on Vorticon VI having a purple hue.

- VGIM, Section 12 ("Terra Geological History")

Keen stepped out of the Bean-with-Bacon Megarocket and onto the crunchy ground; it smelled of fresh plants and was rather humid. Keen could see one of the two moons orbiting.

The entire island that Keen found himself on was dominated by a large city: Keen began his exploration on the outskirts by a sign labelled Vortiville.

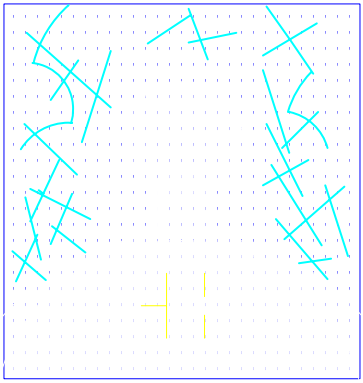


Keen wandered around the planet in search of information, and found an empty house. The door was open, but nobody seemed around... as he mosied on in, he found that there were several pictures in the house of the Grand Intellect, marked by signs that had a "GI" written at the bottom of a shadowy figure amongst lightning.

Keen remembered how on Earth, authoritarian leaders would often put their own picture amongst everything (even in peoples' homes), so that was definitely who was mind-controlling the populace. As he wandered up the home's staircase, he found a Vorticon Youth... but his peace did not last.

Out from behind a corner, a Vorticon woman burst onto the scene; she, too, had a mind-belt on. Flames grew in her mouth as she was about to spit fire at Keen, but his reaction time was superior -- he grabbed a nearby broom and jousted the belt with the handle tip.

The device broke off, the woman's eye color reset, and she came to. She looked at Keen, shrugged, and walked off... not one word, but none needed to be said. She walked right down to the living room, took the Grand Intellect's picture off the wall, and discarded it in a haste.



Keen continued crawling through Vortiville, and eventually made his way to Lower Vortiville. This city was bigger, so he opted to sneak by simply by staying low to the ground and sneaking amongst some bushes. When he had made it to West Vortiville (wherein all the buildings were painted a different color, presumably because of some kind of zoning law), the sky began to cloud up.

As keen continued his sneaking-around, he noticed that a few raindrops were falling. All of a sudden, every Vorticon within his view ran inside. Perplexed by this, Keen continued his journey in “peace,” but that, too, ended swiftly!

As the raindrops struck the ground, Keen heard a strong sizzling sound. He leaned down, exposing his back, and the raindrops fell upon him. The pain was searing as it dissolved his shirt, contacted his back, and partially melted the skin.

His helmet was partially melted by the acid rain too, leaving it covered in melted dimples on the top. He dashed for cover under what looked like a bus stop, and the strange glass covering the stop temporarily became cloudy with every drop.

The rain was brief, and, by 5 minutes' time, it was gone. Right next to that bus stop was a park fronted by a sign reading “Valden Park;” Keen went over to investigate. A Vorticon family was walking by, so Keen took shelter in what looked like some kind of school classroom; upon the wall, the same Grand Intellect silhouette picture hung with impunity. At the front of the classroom, displayed by two displays of unknown technology, *EARTH* appeared in the standard Latin alphabet... accompanied by its Standard Galactic transcription.

Keen paused for a moment. *What was going on here?*

Keen exited from the classroom and took a brief stroll through the park, the ground still sizzling from the rainfall. Coming up to a waterfall that drained into a pool, Keen examined a mysterious hole in the pond -- it appeared to lead somewhere, and he could see the water flowing over a ladder's rungs. There was no way he could just climb an inundated ladder, but a quickly-built dam just upstream from the drain hole would allow him to descend without drowning.

Keen found a sign campaigning for someone who was apparently running for office, General Vorshington. His sign was more useful than his campaign in the moment, so Keen took it, lodged it in the stream downstream from the waterfall, waited on the small pond to drain, and descended.

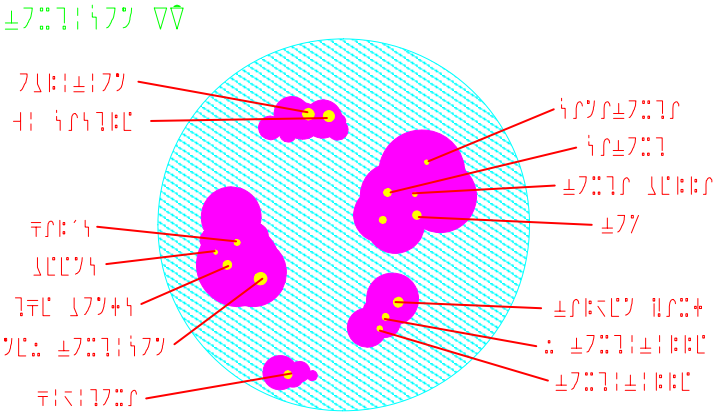
Inside, there appeared to be a bored-out tunnel beneath the city that was filled with equipment. A small water-treatment filtering plant was installed in that tunnel, and the giant computing equipment that controlled it was present nearby. As Keen crawled through, he heard footsteps but couldn't observe where they were coming from.

Keen flipped on a lightswitch, and a Vorticon dressed in black nearly landed a punch straight to his face! Keen jerked back, but the Vorticon's mobility was not as good as his. Keen's first instinct was to grab his HyperPistol, and down the VortiNinja went.

> VortiNinjas represent the greatest evolution of the Vorticon Defense Forces. Having only faced extraterrestrial intruders a few times but with perfect dispatch, our VortiNinjas are more than adequate for planetary defense. If increased combat power and readiness is required, the HyperPistols may have their stun functions disabled and used (or a variety of surface-to-air missiles may be launched from underground missile bases).

- Vorticon Defense Council

After Keen escaped the area just before the dam back-up ran over the sign, he made a mad dash for literally *anywhere* else that wasn't filled with VortiNinjas! In his sprint, he ran across a rather useful-looking sign:



Huh, *VORTICON 12?* Oh, right, yeah, the Vorticon count using base-3!

Keen wondered what the transportation mode between the islands were -- there were large extants of ocean between them, so it likely was not a train system; likewise, there were no signs of airplanes anywhere.

Walking up to a shore, Keen noticed a very tall and very thin tower. After 5 minutes of walking up to it, Keen noticed that it was a teleporter system! He dialed in an interesting-sounding location, “New Vorticon.”

When the teleporter apparatus started up, Keen was blasted with a lungfull of cancerous ozone gas; his vision filled with a view of a distant starsystem for a brief moment as he was transported to the other side. Upon walking out, he found himself in a massive city -- a subset map at the entryway listed several boroughs of a seemingly-large city.

Keen started out on a city street, but there were way too many people around... in response, he trudged out of the place as quickly as he could! As fate would have it, he ran into yet another teleporter.

It looked like it had been haphazardly modified, and an SGA *MM* was emblazoned on its housing. As he approached it, it whirred to life -- it beckoned to him with a cry of despair and malfunctioning electronics.

The machine activated spuriously as he got close, and he was wisped away into a strange land. It looked like some kind of distant starfield engulfed his view as he

fell upon some kind of flat disc that looked like the rings of Saturn; as he crawled up, he looked onto what he had been thrown into.

There were bubbles of what appeared to be entire universes, and the surface upon which he stood appeared to be impossibly thin and *impossibly rigid.* The atmosphere he inhaled was thick, and at a rather high pressure... his head pounded as he stood up.

"You can try, but you will not win."

The strange voice echoed through the unusual place with a whisper, but it felt like the loudest sound he had ever heard. As soon as it stopped, some kind of green hole with a black background opened up and swallowed Keen whole once more.

> Despite the dedication of our research staff, our engineers do not yet fully understand the intricate details of our teleportation apparatus we have deployed throughout our planet. Occasionally, for unknown reasons, travellers will be deposited into some kind of "in-between world" that lies in some strange place with a very strange scale.
>
> This has only started to occur after the conquest of the GI.
>
> - *Journal of Vorticon Science Headliners*

He awakened in a field, in front of him was a large tower: it was accompanied by some rather large stormclouds, lightning occasionally striking the metallic structure of the tower in the distance. As the clouds faded, Keen could see what he was looking at: the tower was finished with a large Latin-uppercase *M* at its apex. Everything dawned on him as he realized what he had stumbled upon.

The wind blew a sign against a pole, it read "Castle of the Grand Intellect" in the usual SGA typeface. There was some writing at the base that said "CGI," but the handwriting looked *all too familiar* from a student in one of his grade-school classrooms.

Keen started the approach to the tower as the sun, too, was setting on this part of the planet; the air was a considerable bit colder, and Keen observed some icy peaks to his left (facing north). As he continued up, he began to hear the loud sound of the screams of... *someone.*

The moans of pain and suffering transformed into loud clanks, growing ever louder as his approach grew closer and closer. The wales of the dammed began to take a psychological toll on the boy, only for it to be interrupted by a rather curious sight:

A fleeting dot jet away from the tower's rear with decent speed. The color of its trail? Red.

Keen hurried faster to the tower, taking only a minute to stop to drink some water he had. He soon made it up to the gates of the structure, which was fashioned like a traditional drawbridge; upon walking close enough, the drawbridge lowered and the large gate lifted up.

Keen wandered into the dark, smelly, and seemingly-hastily-constructed corridor. The lower level of the place was lined with cells, one of which had a very gaunt-looking Vorticon.

“Hey, you! You in there! Are you okay?”

The Vorticon man was just barely conscious, his eyes glassy from something. Keen figured that he was extremely dehydrated, and he ran to a sink in the corner to fill up his water bottle.

It was covered in blood, and there was no soap to be seen.

Despite his disgust and holding back vomit, Keen refilled his water bottle from the seemingly-clear water at the sink. It didn't smell, and it didn't look cloudy, so he figured it was fine...

He hastily ran back to the cell to give the Vorticon man the water bottle, and he reached out with a very shaky hand to grasp it. As he drank, Keen looked around: he seemed *relatively* secure in his current position, but the population of this torture-castle did seem to be dwindling.

The Vorticon man spoke with perfect English, something he had not yet seen on the others.

“Did he use you too, Billy?”

“Wait, how do you know my name? Uhh, who are you?!”

“I'm, uhh, well, I guess you could say I'm a POW. Sergeant Barkley, VMS Defense Forces.”

The man's face looked sullen, and he spoke with a tired tone.

“VMS?”

“Vorticon Mother Ship. I saw you there, but I got captured when that GI freak showed up just as we were warping back to Terra.”

“Terra? Guess that's what you guys call this planet?”

“Yup. Some people call it Vorticon VI, but Terra is our, if you will, *colloquial term.*”

“So, you got captured. Who did the capturing?”

“The GI himself, or, at least, he looked like he was the GI. Mentioned something about the... this kid named Billy who my dad was apparently talking to.”

“Oh, your dad was the elder?”

“Yup. Imprisoned by the GI too. The GI claimed you were 'plotting his demise' or some such thing, and then I got caught up in it.”

“Hang on Sgt. Barkley, what happened to your dad, the Elder?”

“Well, sadly, I couldn't help but notice that he isn't... he isn't around anymore. I felt a disturbance in my psychic abilities a few millicycles ago.”

“How do... how do you speak my language?”

“Some of us have been associating ourselves with the inhabitants of your home world for longer than you will readily realize.”

The duo's conversation was interrupted once again by the sound of a blood-curdling scream. It didn't sound like the other Vorticon screams, though -- this one was *different.*

“Uhm, Billy, we should probably get going and figure out what that was.”

Keen noted that the sound came from down a dark hall that seemed to curve around, and the duo entered. Neither one had any form of flashlight or anything, and Keen kept getting the feeling that he was being watched.

“It's probably nothing... after all, I've got some serious Vorticon military brass with me!”

After a few moments, they found themselves facing down another hallway lined with prison cells. This time, the situation was much different. Keen trodded through the hall, and noticed that Barkley was leaving bloody boot-prints in his wake. Keen turned around and saw where they came from: a stream of blood ran out of one of the cells.

“That n'arn't Vorticon blood, kid.”

The cell from whence it came was dark, and Keen couldn't see the back wall. Barkley had a lighter, and struck it; with what little illumination the flame provided, Keen saw some kind of machine that held a person upside-down.

Keen also saw a corpse, his body divided in two bilaterally.

Keen recoiled from the vision, barely holding onto his stomach contents. He regained his composure long enough to realize who he was looking at -- the man was rather old, but he knew it anywhere.

It was his grandfather, Grandpa Bill.

It had become abundantly obvious to the duo that the Grand Intellect was actually the Grand Torturer, and that they were in rather dire straits being lost in this house of horrors. Keen turned back to face Barkley, and told it like it was.

“Uhh, sir, that is my grandfather.”

“Yes, he was bought in here perhaps two days ago or so. He was powerless as the mechanical-suit-wearing figure dragged him in.”

“Mechanical suit?”

Keen stood in silence for a bit, and the loud thud sounds returned. He grabbed Barkley's hand and ran full-speed towards the exit, which led up a short spiral staircase.

When it opened up, the two found themselves in a large room. It was dim, but Keen's eyes adjusted to reveal a rather large exosuit... not unlike the one he had seen in that *Aliens* movie he watched when he was a kid. This one, though, was way bigger.

The loud thuds came to a stop as Keen focused on the suit operator.

It was none other than exactly who he had feared it was.

Keen looked upon the face of his rival: Mortimer McMire. This wasn't a carefree rivalry like the kind he had partaken in in the past, it was more like the rivalry between Hitler and all of those who opposed him. Keen wished his rivalry was so simple; he wished he could just challenge Mortimer to a fantastical Pokémon Duel or something like that. Instead, he was drawing his HyperPistol to kill him and shred the body.

A sign on the wall that read Mangling Machine featured its text written in white paint, and the suit stomped around aimlessly. Keen and Barkley were up on a balcony and had not yet been noticed, and some other Vorticon dashed in at the base.

“My lord, I have executed the pestilent child's grandfather. Will this get me a promotion? Please!”

“**NO!** You imbecile, I wished to question him and learn of his grandson's life, not for you to kill him!”

The left leg of the Mangling Machine exosuit began to move, and the two-and-a-half-story-tall contraption hastily squashed the Vorticon.

Keen heard the cracking of bone and the gushing of blood as a dark red stain remained where the Vorticon once stood. The black football helmet rotated to show the visage of Mortimer's face, staring directly at Keen and Barkley.

“I see you've found me, Billy. Does that make you feel smart? What is it in that disgusting brain of yours that bought you to this place? And, your Vorticon friend. He is a traitor to the Vorticon government, you know?”

“I know good and well what I did to the General Council was honest and correct! They were allying with you and I tried everything in my power to stop them!”

“Come on, Commander Crank! What are you gonna do? Run? Good luck, the doors are all about to lock! You'll die in here! You and your loser friend you rescued!”

Keen had a look of confusion and disgust upon his face.

“Look, Mortimer, these Vorticon people are not your pawns! They aren't your slaves! Do you not understand how many lives you're ruining by coming to this world? You've ruined this precious world! These aren't some do-nothing boring space aliens like the worms of Krackaus, these people have a real culture and real history!”

“Oh, shut the hell up! What are you? Are you going to color your hair purple next and tell me how women should have more rights, or how gay people should be allowed to get married?”

“Gentlemen, we've had gay marriage protection laws here on Terra for centisweeps!”

“Well, excuuuuuse me for wanting to make lives better! Is that all you got, Mortimer McDonalds? Your stupid Mangling Machine's rule of this planet is **OVER!**”

Mortimer sneered as he realized he had just easily given up on a simple philosophical debate... maybe he wasn't as smart as he thought he was.

Keen realized the joints of the Mangling Machine were exposed, and that he could easily shoot them with his HyperPistol. He thought everything was fine until an ear-splitting-loud series of sounds filled the room.

His vision blurred with each sonic burst, and Barkley donned what looked like earmuffs. He had an extra pair, and threw them at Keen -- they had been hanging on his belt for the entire time the two had been exploring the castle and Keen never thought to question the man as to why he had those.

Keen donned the earmuffs and drew his firearm. He pointed right at the shoulder joint, and pulled the trigger.

The bright cyan flash illuminated the corner of the balcony where Keen had fired, and the room lit up a split second later with the explosion of the arm joint. The arm fell to the floor like limp noodle falling off a fork.

Keen and Barkley bolted around to the other side and repeated their assault, and the Mangling Machine was now armless. Keen was looking for a way down when Barkley ran off, and --

“Commander Keen! Here! Tie this rope to the balcony, and let's swing down after you shoot out the knees!”

Keen aimed for one of the knee joints and pulled the trigger. The heavy beast fell to the ground with no resistance, its head being sheared off along with the balcony from its wall attachment.

Keen and Barkley slid down the rope just as it happened, the balcony crashing onto the head assembly of the exosuit in their wake. Keen ran over to the center where Mortimer supposedly was, and examined what he thought was his foe's corpse.

The face was shiny and quite obviously not that of a real, living person.

It was a decoy!

Keen and Barkley began the long trek home; Keen made it to his ship, and Barkley stayed back home. On the way back, Keen examined an envelope of papers that Barkley had given him. It contained a drafting for some kind of what appeared to be a radio transceiver, except it used some strange parts he did not have at his disposal. He shook the envelope, and, sure enough, two tiny integrated circuits fell into his hand.

Now to figure out what that's all about...

Chapter 5

A quick read of the drafting and a weekend spent in his clubhouse netted Keen another device: a Photachyon Transceiver, a device that the Vorticon used to maintain communications at galactic distances. It used some kind of quantum entanglement method to receive signals at great distances instantly, bypassing the otherwise (possibly) lightyears worth of travel time the radio photons would have to take to connect both sides of the communication.

Keen pointed its receiver optic over the night sky and spun the receiver dial, hearing nothing but static. Keen presumed that he had incorrectly assembled the device, but, then, in a dash of luck, he picked something up!

> .....oment of great triumph...ast the Milky Way will be.....terly destroyed.....can stop us now. We will remake the galaxy in the name....Gannalech. Power to our race! Power to the Shikadi! May our.....swi....blood!

“The Shikadi? Who the heck are they?”

Keen stared off into the sky, wondering how they even planned to destroy the galaxy. He looked down at his Neural Stunner resting on an old wall-mount plate that once held a flintlock pistol, and his daydreaming was interrupted by none other than his own mom.

“Suppertime, Billy!”

“Aw, nuts!”

Billy had just kicked off the engine warmup procedure on the Bean-with-Bacon Megarocket when his mom appeared at the clubhouse door. He drew his Stunner and fired a shot -- his mom was stunned right in the doorway, and totally safe in her positioning!

He heard his dad coming around the corner: “Honey, what's the matter?”

“Double nuts!”

Another well-placed Stunner shot, and the family wouldn't question him for at least 15 minutes! He would be gone by then!

But... then came the question. Where would he go?

Looking at a hastily-drawn list of planets hanging on the wall, he noted that the inhabitants of Gnosticus IV owed him a favor for... something.

It was a relatively short flight, he would be able to arrive in a better part of 4 hours at full c-speed. Along the way, he thought back to what he had seen back on Vorticon VI; he hadn't really fully processed the feelings he felt in the GI's command castle. He heard his own grandfather die, and was the first to discover the corpse.

He wanted to tell his parents, but what would they think about that? Billy was always assumed to be telling fantastical stories at school that weren't grounded in reality, even if he bought in physical proof that they were real. Sure, he was in the gifted-kids program, but that didn't result in the grown-ups taking him any more seriously. He didn't have any camera, and he didn't fancy returning to that castle.

Keen's heart raced and his eyes became teary as he thought about everything he had witnessed. Barkley looked so calm and collected from the outside, but Keen could somehow understand and infer his emotions... both of those were simultaneously terrified and sad.

His racing thoughts started to frustrate him as Gnosticus IV came into view, and he pierced the planet's cloudy atmosphere for another smooth landing.

Keen's Notebook, page 147.

Gnosticus IV seems to have people on it! Like, real people! I picked up a distress beacon from them, and it was due to a threat of an invasion by someone claiming to work for the “Gannalech.” I have no idea who that is, but the invasion turned out to be a whole load of bunk! There wasn't hardly anyone around on their peaceful world, but I did meet a new friend.

Princess Lindsey! She used to be known as Princess Lincoln, but somehow she converted herself from a guy into a girl! She said that an alchemist in the Shadowlands prepared her an elixir that changed her hormone levels or something like that, but I thought that was pretty cool regardless! She's super nice and smart too!

The Shadowlands are really cool, too! It's dotted by a few small villages that nearly all of the people of Gnosticus IV live in, and there's some pretty cool variance. I do wonder, though... where did those people come from? How did they make it to the planet? Why do they like to build so many pyramids?

Keen landed east of the Shadowlands in a place that housed the Oracle, a machine that could somehow correlate past events to current events to predict future events with staggering accuracy. Upon stepping out of his ship, a rather young-looking man runs up to him.

“Oh, Captain Keen!”

“That's Commander Keen.” Billy corrects.

“The- the Shikadi were just here, and they kidnapped the members of the High Council! They took them to the Shadowlands, far to the west.”

“They didn't just kill them?”

“Impossible. They are immortal,” said the Page as his voice trembled. “So, they just made sure they weren't available to activate the Oracle.”

“Well, I'll just go get them then,” Keen says.

“Umm, but, Captain Keen, they also left a bunch of horrible creatures and traps to guard them!”

“Well, I'll just go get them *carefully*, then!”

Keen turned to walk out the door of the meeting house the two dragged each other into after Keen's landing, and spun around to see the Page.

“Oh, and if you call me Captain Keen again, I'm taking you with me!”

After the exchange finished, Keen took a note of the strange place he was in. He was at the apex of some kind of tower, and there was some form of flying pinnacle that hovered above the apex. The entire thing had a curved look to it, and the the interior was an almost sterile, porcelain look. The doors came and went with the touch of the Gnosticene who touched them, and bridges materialized out of the thin air to provide safe passage over seemingly bottomless chasms.

Keen re-boarded his vehicle and set a course just to the east, to the Shadowlands.

Chapter 6

Keen touched down near the coast, adjacent to a village. He was all alone, and he was on a quest: he had to find those councilmen. For better or worse, they were immortal; alas, this did not mean that Keen had much time to burn -- those Shikadi were still out there (presumably) working on their plan to blow up the galaxy.

Keen stumbled into a place labelled “Border Village” and took a clever look of the environment. The buildings appeared to all be much older and simpler with respect to the city he had seen before; the tower that housed the Oracle looked almost like a 100-story-tall porcelain casting sculpture.

Keen pondered why that might be the case.

“Why would that tower with the Oracle be so well put-together and these buildings look like something from ten thousand years ago, when people first started building buildings?”

> The humanoid residents of Gnosticus IV are rather strange in the sense that they appear to not only be immortal, but also augmented by some form of external chemical energy source that provides an antioxidant effect, chromosomal telomere extension, and tumor-suppression. This energy comes in the form of organic molecules dissolved into chromium-laden beryl lattices; the effective formula for this mineral is not too dissimilar to emerald: $\mathbf{Be_3Al_2(SiO_3)_6}$
>
> Not much is known about the history of Gnosticus IV, other than the fact that there was, at some point, a race of alien creatures that lived on the planet (and presumably evolved there). Only one sample of these aliens has been recovered when the Vorticon Exploration Corps landed on the planet 54 decasweeps ago.
>
> These aliens possessed superior strength but also appeared to have experienced substantial genetic mutation; no genome samples were captured from either the humanoids or the aliens.
>
> Alas, Vorticon explanation of this world is rather limited. Only a few scouts have dared to venture onto its surface.
>
> - *VGIM, Section 16*

Keen entered one of the buildings, and there was a pole he readily descended. Down in the basement below, there was a pool of some kind of seemingly very corrosive liquid; the smell of hydrochloric acid gave it away. Adorning the pool

was a statue of some kind of giant slug, wearing a crown. It was clearly intended to be in jest, as Keen had encountered some slugs like the type in the statue before -- they would crawl amongst the ground and occasionally release a corrosive liquid from their digestive tracts.

Keen ascended a pole at the opposite end to return to the surface, and found that he had seemingly skipped the rest of the village. Alas, there was more village ahead! He trudged towards a place he was unsure of the name of, and it was more of the same architecture style. The place seemed so archaic, and so unloved...

Keen wandered into yet another house-like building, and saw that there were seemingly spots on the wall that hinted at the place being formerly inhabitated. Some more investigation of the place revealed the name of the fine village he was exploring: “Hillville.”

He continued onwards, and ran into some kind of post that had a bicycle. Someone had left a note on it that noted that Keen could take it, written in a bizarre SGA script cursive that he had only seen back on the Vorticon homeworld.

As he pedaled around the Shadowlands, he went straight to the north towards some kind of massive crystalline structure off in the distance. As he got closer and closer, it became more and more obvious that it was a city, carved from a bluish quartz-like mineral, mounted in the side of a mountain. Keen entered this place, marked by the name “Crystalus” at the front.

The place was rather simple, and it did not appear that anyone was there long-term; Keen figured it was some kind of tourist attraction for the ancient peoples that lived on this planet. Granted, it was rather cold; Keen unravelled the jacket tied around his waist and donned it as he progressed further into the seemingly-rather-empty palace of wonder. His fate would come true as he stumbled upon one of the immortal Council Members!

“Oh, thank you so much for rescuing me! I'll return to the Oracle chamber immediately.”

Keen looked upon the back wall of the large open room where he found the Council Member, and noticed what appeared to be a painted-blue plank over a spot on the wall. He went over to it, gave it a solid push, and to his amazement...

The wall gave in with ease, and exposed a long, squarish tunnel lit only by what appeared to be radioluminescent tritium tubes on poles.

It was very cold in the tunnel, so Keen moved quickly. The closer he got to the edge, the more and more it began to fill with snow. Knowing how cold it was about to be, Keen whipped out the liner for his jacket from his backpack, and in it went.

After half an hour or so of walking, Keen emerged in some kind of large, carved-out room; a large vehicle-sized door opposed him as he examined the area. It was exceedingly cold, and bits of ice fell from the ceiling as he entered. The room was illuminated by some kind of large, capsule-esque object hanging at the center -- a blue light faintly glowed from the bottom of it.

Keen approached the vehicle door, and it opened with little effort. He entered some sort of vestibule, and the doors cycled. When the outer-facing door opened, he found himself blown cold by a gust of frigid wind.

He stumbled outside in the cold to note that he was, seemingly, staring down a frozen cliff: his vision was filled with snow and ice everywhere. More pertinently, though, was the presence of more of those body-sized containers. He noticed a smaller door a few feet from where he stood, and went to investigate it. Touching some kind of control sensor, the round door hatch snapped open to reveal a short hallway into a larger room.

In the middle of the large room rested some sort of large round seemingly-movable platform; above him, there was a catwalk that spanned all but the side of the room he was standing by. A stairwell in a hallway to his right took him up to that catwalk, and he quickly ascended.

A glass door hatch seemed to protect some sort of tunnel that led deeper into the facility, the tunnel barely lit by what little emissions from electroluminescent cords lining the corridor were still working. The cold smell of rotten flesh was suddenly disrupted when Keen tripped over a wire that resulted in the corridor being illuminated.

It was some kind of conveyor tunnel for more of those hanging pod things. The ground was slick with ice, and Keen's shoes were not up to the task of not turning the tunnel into an ice rink. Keen came up to a sheet of ice blocking his path, but a nearby bit of a metal pipe shattered it with ease.

As he made it to something that resembled a stop where the giant pods would embark and disembark from their rail-bound journey, Keen couldn't help but notice that the rest of the tunnel had collapsed -- whatever happened here, it had clearly happened an *extremely* long time ago. Better yet, nothing here looked even remotely similar to the Gnosticus architecture he had seen before...

The doorway to the landing dock opened to a rather cold and rather confined futuristic-looking series of hallways; there appeared to be windows that looked into rooms, with some seriously strong mechanical doors blocking entry. At the end of the hall laid some kind of blocker that appeared simultaneously real and not real.

As he slowly traversed the H-shaped hallway that provided access to the experiment rooms, he realized that a pipe had burst above one of the doors and com-

pletely frozen it in place. Unfortunately for the former inhabitants of this place, the same water (now ice) leak resulted in the shattering of a vent cover along the floors. Keen went over, bent down, and crawled right in.

The environment he was in was almost sterile, there were no signs of life anywhere to be seen. When he emerged from the duct, he found himself in some kind of biology laboratory. Everything was alien and not fit for human usage, but he did manage to find a plate inscribed with a rather interesting message:

> My name is Tahrgun, and I am a researcher at this facility. I am writing this to have a record of my experiments. When "The Great Tragedy" occurred, many fled the danger within the research center. However, at the guidance of Priest Chatoya, a few of us stayed in order to perform analysis of, and experiments on, Griever anatomy.
>
> Our hope is to reverse the transformation by administering a solution of processed Green Energy to subjects brought to the facility. I want to believe we can succeed.
>
> Cryopods containing subjects are arriving at the lab almost daily. The pods put them into cold hibernation and maintain minimal life functions. Operation of the cooling equipment has been deemed absolutely essential, so the system has been designed to continue functioning even if the entire facility were to fall into low-power mode. Similarly, thorough inspection and repair of Cryopods is one of our highest-priority tasks.

Keen's knowledge of Omnispeak was good enough to read the orthogonal printed inscription on the plate, but Keen truly wondered what he was reading. What was a Griever? Did those pod things actually contain... bodies?!

The strange floating lock was not as sophisticated as it seemed. When Keen approached, the radial armatures that came out from its center all folded up, and the lock fell to the floor with a gentle descent. Down he went, down through another stairwell and to the next floor below. He wandered through yet more labs, but one room in particular caught his attention...

There were six of the Cryopods sitting on stands, two of them were in un-ideal condition. The first one had had seemingly some kind of coolant leak, and it had resulted in the freezing of the specimen inside. The lifeless corpse was halfway enclosed in solid ice, it stuck in a timeless position of ungodly pain as it looked as if it was crying out... but there was no help.

The second one had a much more unfortunate fate. It had suffered seemingly some kind of abdominal wound and was then frozen, but half of its body looked different from the other half; the top half looked soft and smooth, whereas the bottom half

looked animalistic and *much* stronger. The chest wound had burst, resulting in the specimen's digestive organs existing outside of the body.

Keen came over to the alien creature and examined its digestive system. Rather than the normal intestines he had seen in his school science textbooks, this was different: a clear, almost translucent, series of four corkscrew-spirals hung out of the creature. Inside, Keen could see what looked like small chunks of a green crystal... similar to something he had seen before.

Keen's heart pounded with horror all the while; the closer he got to the open pods, the more and more he heard a horrible, garbled sound in his ears. He looked frantically around to try to see where the sound was coming from, but it seemed to come from all directions.

Keen got control of his wits and left the room; unfortunately, he took a wrong turn and headed deeper into the facility. This time, though, he stumbled into a different area: a large, relatively-open room that appeared to contain either a giant blower, generator, or pump system. It consisted of three triple-vane rotors with bearing-type wheels (and central hub mounts), mounted into a large horizontal circular tunnel in front of him.

A fading chromoholographic projector showed a diagram of the machine and a meter that had a lightning icon on it. He figured it was a generator, and sought a way to restart it.

His plans were cut short by him rounding a corner in the generator room, going down a small ramp, and then looking under the ramp.

He had to focus his vision to take note of what he was seeing: it looked like two Yorps, covered in ice in the frigid room. One looked slightly different from the other. Keen moved out of the way to not block what faint light came from two lights at the other side of the oblong room, and noticed three more Yorps... or so he thought.

Upon closer inspection, it was one more Yorp, but another seemed to be in a state of... *mutation?* Its mouth was substantially larger, and one of the two eye stalks had just started growing. Nearby, one of those same green crystals sat encrusted too in the ice.

Keen *knew* he was not on Mars. Could it be that these creatures, the Yorps and Gargs, actually originated from Gnosticus IV... and is it also possible that the strange aliens he observed before too once inhabited Mars?

Keen's mind began to heat up as he contemplated what to do here. He figured that if he activated the generator, it would un-thaw the lab... and let loose all manner of

horrid creatures that were sure to kill him. Undeterred, he left the generator room and took a different path through the hallways.

Keen found himself in a storage room of sorts, the air much more humid than it was elsewhere. When he entered, a gas tritium lamp fell and illuminated the room. To his utter amazement, there was one of the Councilmen!

Or so, he thought. On a second look, the Councilman was encased in a rather serious amount of ice -- it would take a lot of melting to get him out. Being in a storage room, he grabbed the gas lamp and took a look around. There were many metal/glass containers of chemicals, one of them bearing the pungent odor of gasoline. He took it, and was just about to pour it out around the Councilman, but realized he had no way of igniting it...

He rummaged around a drawer-like storage unit, and with the number 78 written in an (or at least, as he had been told) older version of the SGA numeral system, examined the inside. Therein, there was a rolled-up ball of wire, and it neither corroded nor did much of anything when he examined it. He was unsure of what it was, so he returned it and kept looking. He went to another draw, this one labelled 19, and found another roll of wire. When he took the drawer out, a bit of it fell on the icy ground and instantly burned up. Perfect! He wasn't sure what it was... but whatever it was, it was some kind of reactive metal he had best not touch directly.

He took the jar of gasoline (or some other such similar hydrocarbon) and started pouring it out around the Councilman. He went back for the sample of reactive metal, and it was fortunately still there (he was almost certain he wasn't alone in the room, and that it wouldn't be there when he returned).

The flames ignited with great vigor, and he left the room as to not die of smoke inhalation. Some three minutes later, the door opened and the Councilman walked out.

“Hey, you! I saw you when you came in, but wasn't sure if you were here to rescue me or kill me!”

“Oh, uhh, hi! Are you one of the High Council Members? One of the ones that I need to rescue?”

“No, no, the Council hasn't been arranged yet. They will be soon, though!”

The Gnosticene paused.

“Wait, I must not know what hour, day, or cycle it is! How long was I frozen for?”

“Honestly, sir, you know probably more than I know. I came here to hunt the Council Members that guard the Oracle. I was in some place named Crystalus, but then I stumbled into this... lab thing. Where am I?”

“Oh, the Chro- Oracle, sorry, has guardians now! Wonderful! To answer your question, you are in a research lab that the inhabitants of our world once used thousands of cycles ago before we came to be.”

“Previous inhabitants?”

“We called them the Lamorn, and once lived peacefully with them. You may have not noticed this, but the Oracle is actually not just a clever guessing machine... it is a portal to times of the past, present, and future.”

The two began to walk through the halls, and the Gnosticene continued.

“We once had a key to activate the Oracle, which the Lamorn called the Master Teleporter, but it was broken up into many pieces. We had to hide the pieces of the key, and I came to the Chanatanaoya Laboratory to do my job.”

“Wait, why did the key need to be broken up?”

“When we arrived on this planet through the Master Teleporter some few hundred cycles ago, we quickly began to assist the local population with their civil works projects. They were working on a geothermal power plant, but they discovered that some kind of green crystalline chemical energy was coming with the magma.”

“Is that like the green crystals I keep seeing?”

“Correct, friend. You see, I was once an engineer at a geothermal power plant on Earth a few hundred cycles ago. How did you arrive?”

“Oh, I flew here on a spaceship of my own design! It can approach 99.999% the speed of light, and I go even faster if I swing by a few black holes on the way here!”

“I see. Well, I should probably tell you that the Lamorn Master Teleporter teleports across both time *and* space, so I really have been here for about five hundred years or so.”

“Wait, how is that possible? Are you also immortal? How is that even possible?”

“The Green Energy Crystal discovery was an important thing for the inhabitants of this world, This was once a peaceful planet, inhabited by such creatures like Lamorn, Zilds, Yorps, and all manner of wild creatures.”

“So, those dead bodies were Yorps! Those are all over Mars!”

“Oh, so that's where they went after the Great Tragedy.”

“The... wait, I read about that!”

“The Great Tragedy was a world-shattering event for us. We still haven't recovered, and it's been centuries. While I helped work on a geothermal power plant, some of the other men went to aid with the drilling of a mine. All the way down at the bottom, we discovered something that changed this world forever.”

The Gnosticene and Keen were now nearly out of the facility, and had made it back to the room with the large elevator platform that seemed inoperative.

“You see, every now and then, a Yorp or a Lamorn would be born with a strangely-wired brain. These creatures, with their upgraded brains, had the ability to somehow hold psychic connections with those around them. We thought that these amazingly powerful abilities were very rare, until we found something at the bottom of the mine.”

“What was it?”

“The Viewros Crystal. Not the Green Energy Crystal, no, the Viewros Crystal. This crystal, when embedded in the heads of either a Lamorn or Yorp, greatly augmented its bearer's mind. They would gain the psychic abilities once thought to be a once-in-a-generation rarity. The Viewros Geti Selesh.”

“Wait! I know that! From... uhh... Mars! From a Yorp statue!”

“That may be the statue of Salayoon, my boy. He was my brother's best friend, and the implantation of a Viewros Crystal converted her from a simple, mindless animal to a true genius. There were certainly others, but Salayoon was the first.”

“She, uhh, her statue seemed to have some connection with, I think, the teleporter that went to the dark side of Mars.”

“I don't know... I didn't know the Yorps made it to Mars. That had to be the work of Captain Kennedy, who reactivated the Master Teleporter shortly after the Great Tradegy to allow those who were yet unharmed to escape.”

“You still haven't told me what caused that,” Keen said as he had a look of astonishment upon his face.

“Well, once we had started to work with the Lamorn to implant the crystals into the foreheads of the Lamorn people, my team at the Kanasanyana Power Plant got to work extracting the Green Energy from the magma. It was an impurity that crystallized along the walls of our metal pipes, so we had to get rid of it. Well, somewhere along the way, one of my team members got some of the material on her hand. She was perhaps 68 Earth-cycles, erm, years old when she was working with us, and her hand was rejuvinated and youthified in moments upon contact with the mysterious material.”

Keen looked at the man, who was hundreds of cycles old but barely looked to be breaking 40.

“One thing led to another, and some of the biologists in this very lab used their strong Lamorn minds to discover that it was preserving our DNA and nourishing our cells. To add even more fuel to the fire, it sent tumor-suppression mechanisms into overdrive... none of us looked old after we experimented with Green Energy Crystals. The dust itself would get into our lungs, diffuse into our blood, and that was that.”

“Well, that doesn't sound like a Tradegy at all!”

“That part came soon after. We had a bright idea to bring life to the desert around Chron- the Oracle Tower, and we filled a giant capsule with a liquified version of what we extracted from the magma. We launched it into the sky with the hopes that it would rain down lifegiving compounds, but it just ruined everything...”

“When the Green Energy fell upon the surface with the Lamorn walking about with Viewros Crystals embedded in their forehead, they were driven mad and mutated rapidly. Our once valiant friends turned into Grievers, and I'm sure you saw their mutated state as you explored this facility.”

The two were now halfway through the tunnel back to Crystalus, the man talking slowly and with great emphasis on what he was saying.

“The Yorps suffered a similar fate, but it took longer to manifest. Some had made their way through the Master Teleporter to, I now know thanks to you, Mars. I'm not sure how those went.”

“Well, uhh, they were super angry! Like, at everything! For no reason!”

“Yes, this too was the fate of the Lamorn. Oh yeah, who are you?”

“Commander Keen, sir!”

“Wonderful to have you here. Shall we return to the Oracle?”

As the sun began to set on the alien world, the tinges of the moon came into view. Before not too long, the duo had found themselves back at the pinnacle of the tower in the desert.

Keen and the old Gnosticene stood at the top of the Oracle Tower, the Oracle itself mounted upon a platform in the center. There were no other councilmen, but then the elevator to the top descended. Keen paid it no mind, since it wasn't like anyone could fall in (a series of blockers rose around the periphery of the round elevator platform).

While he wandered about the top to try to get a good look at the Pinnacle suspended overhead, the old Gnosticene spoke.

“If you wish to get up there, you will need to be psychically active. You, unfortunately, are not... and there is no way to make the lift to the Pinnacle descend otherwise.”

“Ah, drats.”

Keen looked off into the distance, waiting on *something* to happen. The sunset was rather beautiful, and this world didn't look too far off from Earth. In the distance, he could see some great pyramids and a massive tree.

Just as Keen began to daydream about having a girlfriend that actually cared about him, the elevator blocker rails encircling the central elevator platform hole lowered. He looked on as the elevator platform surfaced, with quite a number of people on board.

“Oh hey Barkley, where'd you come from?”

“I saw you flying in, and I was hunting down my friend who is currently stationed on a moon in this star system!”

Amongst Barkley's company were eight Council Members and Princess Lindsey.

“I had quite a time rounding all of these men up. I went through pit mines, caves, a desert oasis, two pyramids, an island that was perpetually on fire, and had to go for a dive in what I think was a giant well!”

> The Shadowlands, in particular, are known for their unusual locations. There are pyramids that appear to have been built long ago, islands that seem to have extremely unusual perpetual weather or natural disasters, and many strange cities. The cities appear to have been built long ago, but were actually built by the current residents.
>
> Further exploration of these locations is pending approval from the Exploration Council, provided a treaty can be signed.
>
> - *VGIM, Section 16*

Keen looked at Barkley, who appeared to have several cuts on his arm.

“Hey Sargent, what's with all those cuts on your arm there?”

“About an hour ago, I was looking for the last Council Member. The Council Page told me when I landed my Sparker-II by your ship that you had already went out to

hunt them down, and I figured I'd give you a hand. I rounded up quite a few because a Council Scout found me halfway on the way to Hillville where he thought some of them were, and off I went to those pyramids. I found a back entry into every one of them, which made quick work. I acquired a SCUBA set from Princess Lindsey, and adapted it to fit my face. The last location on my docket was this giant pit mine."

"Please don't tell me you went there," the old Gnosticene murmured under his breath.

"I had no other choice, it was where the last two Council Members were."

Keen had a confused look on his face while Barkley continued to speak.

"The big elevator at the middle of the mine, uhh, that's how I made it down there. It stopped halfway down, but I pressed a button to make it continue. Down at the bottom, there was a large... uhh..."

The Councilman's voice made Barkley slightly jump: "cocoon?"

"Yeah, a large, somewhat larger than your people or the Vorticons. It was large, smelled of strange materials, and there was some kind of green liquid leaking out of it."

"Oh. You must've encountered one of the..."

Keen looked at the old Gnosticene, waiting on him to finish.

"Evolved Grievers."

"What's a what?"

"An Evolved Griever. You see, the former people that lived on this world before we inherited it were reduced to wild animals by an experiment that went wrong at my hands. We tried valiantly to work with the Lamorn to improve their world, but now it's full of sadness and forgotten dreams. And the Lamorn have evolved out their minds... the creatures you encountered in that mine are just evolved Lamorn that once loved this fruitful world."

By then, Barkley was visibly scared and the hair on his snout was sticking straight up.

"I had to kill one of those," Barkley exclaimed, "with a gun and a blade! You mean to tell me those were once as smart as the inhabitants of Terra?"

"In fact, they were much smarter than your people or even my people"

“Well, smart or not, I eventually resuced your Council Members here from the depts of that cave. Now, here you go, Commander Keen!”

The old Gnosticene went up to the Oracle as it sat atop its pedestal, and was quickly revealed to be the Head Councilman. The mysterious apparatus activated, and purple sparks radiated from its top.

Everyone stood in silence as the machine began to speak.

“The Shikadi race of shadow beings from the far side of the galaxy.”

“They are building an Armageddon Machine and are planning to blow up the galaxy with it, then rebuild it to suit their needs.”

“They live on the third planet of the Korath system, which is 71,000 light-years from Gnosticus IV. The Armageddon Machine is almost complete.”

An image materialized from the purple particles, but it was nondescript. Keen knew it was meant to represent the Shikadi, but it wasn't much to go off of.

Alas, Keen spent half an hour thanking everyone in attendance and began the trek back to his ship. He had a lot of travelling to do... he just hoped that it wasn't raining back on his folks!

Despite seeming like a primitive alien species, the original inhabitants of Gnosticus IV are far more intelligent than us. While evidence is slim and seems circumstantial, information provided by Wolarian traders provides fascinating insights into the technological affairs of the species.

There is a famous story of a Gnosticius Xenomorphic Individual (an autonym for these people is still forthcoming, but the Wolarians propose “Selesh-Lamorn”) who travelled to several distant star systems (including Sol III) in seek of biological wonders. Armed with some form of apparatus that was able to shrink and safely capture large creatures, this explorer of the cosmos collected some of the largest and most impressive creatures of Sol III using the apparatus they built.

Some of these creatures scaled to massive statures, and not all were land-based -- some were ocean-based. This individual wielded a collection of six spherical encapsulation apparatuses around their belt, and was able to achieve major social dominance by using these creatures to their advantage in battle. According to the Wolarian story, this individual would throw the encapsulation pod containing a creature to wield in battle, and a large organism would be summoned forth as a result. The mechanism in which these operate is currently unknown.

Chapter 7

Safe and sound back on Earth for a pit-stop, Keen figured he would take a break -- after all, he'd been all over the Shadowlands and endured quite a struggle only to make it back to his folks... and it was indeed raining. Alas, there was no time for boredom; Keen decided he would head out tomorrow and hope for the best.

That meant he had something rare: *free time!*

He rolled over to another desk where a crisp Amiga 1200 he got for a birthday present two years ago. He had some interesting games he had pulled from a shareware BBS, and one of them was a real piece of work: Darkstar Sailers! Keen clicked the icon on the Workbench, and the game loaded right up!

Epilogue

15 years later

As the morning dawned through the window, Billie woke up to the sound of pots and pans banging around in the kitchen. Out the window, the old Blaze family residence could be seen down the street; Keen's older brother, Robert “Bobby” Blaze lived there now with his wife and kids.

The old Keen Club House stood to this day.

Billie had left that Club House behind years ago. Now, she was in college, and had changed significantly from where she was before.

For one, she slowed down in life. She wanted to get two doctorates by the time she was 25, but self-reflection changed her life goals significantly -- no longer did she want to be the best there ever was in terms of power and knowledge, she instead now sought to be the best *person* she could be: be as kind as possible, help as many people as possible, and things like that.

Sure, Mortimer had tried to destroy Earth, but Billie knew that more death and destruction wasn't the answer. Mortimer was just *misplaced* in life, all he needed was someone that cared about him. His family beat him into the ground mentally every day, demanding nothing but absolute `PERFECTION`, no matter what the cost was.

Who could blame a sad, lonely child for wanting to destroy the world, when the world had treated him so poorly? If all he knew was pain and suffering, why would he act any different and embrace the world that bought him so much dread and sorrow?

She ran over to her bathroom to touch up her makeup job; she always had to look *on cue*, especially for an important university meeting later! Her outfit was radically different from what she used to wear -- black graphic tee shirt, black jeans, a beanie adorned with various pins, a black belt (with two chains hanging off of it)... but she still wore those Converse shoes.

Billie rummaged through her desk drawer in her bedroom and came across a file folder labelled “Do Not Discard;” inside, she found the letter Mortimer left her on the bridge of the Omegamatic; it still had the stain of machine oil on it, and still smelled of burnt rubber like the place from whence it came.

Billie was so far over her head back then, so obsessed with fixing everybody else's problems (even if they were the problems of random alien races), that she couldn't even fix her own problems.

Looking at up at the calendar hanging on her wall, she was due for something she did every week. She reached over for a glass vial, drew a syringe to some unit measurement, stuck it in, drew the liquid, and injected it into herself. She breathed a sigh of relief as the lifesaving elixir hit her brain.

Upon her desk lay a three-year-old birthday card that her parents, Lt. Barkley, and even the Vorticon General Administrator had signed!

She just couldn't stop thinking about Mortimer. What was he up to? Where even *was* he?

“Hey Lily, can you help me find someone?”

Lily took her headphones off to hear what her girlfriend had to say, partially deep in the trance of scrambling eggs.

“Yeah... sure. Who are you after?”

“I need you to find me someone named Mortimer-something-McMire. J for the middle initial, I think. Uhh, Jackson, yeah. ”

After enough public-records-request searches, the duo found their guy.

“Waupun Correctional Institution? Wait, no, that was 4 years ago. Hang on, can you find out what he did?”

The Wisconsin court record document flashed up on her monitor, and there it was: *aggravated assault.*

“Wait, what? Hang on, look at that, Billie. See? Charges were dropped, what, 3 months ago? Looks like he's back home now.”

“Well, where's that at?”

“Looks like he's just north of us now, up in Dayton. Just off Highway 48. Quick drive from here in Cincinnati.”

Billie grabbed her backpack, Lily coming in fast behind her, and the two went up to the engineering building roof where the Bean-with-Bacon Megarocket rested. It was getting rather old, but now fully registered (and several other people had copied its design to great joy and fun).

Off they went for a short flight, and Lily made a call to a nearby Marine Corps recruiting office to see if they could land there. “All clear,” the man who answered the phone said!

Mortimer's house looked old and run-down, and it was the same place that Billie remembered him living in (even when she was a kid). She knocked on the door, and a rather unkept and tired-looking young man answered the door.

“Hey, wait a minute, you look familiar!”

“Mortimer, I wanted to, uhh...”

Lily was in shock at the despair that young man was in; she could see piles of dishes through the front door and smelled the stench of body odor upon him.

“Just, please don't... I'm... I'm sorry. Everyone I had is gone now.”

“Mind if we come in?”

“Yeah, sure. Make yourself at home, at least as best as you can.”

The place was riddled with blueprints, electrical schematics, open textbooks, and enough spare parts to build an entire city. On top of an old piano stood obituaries of people that shared the McMire last name: Matthew McMire died in a car crash, Martha McMire died from cancer, and Molly McMire died from a respiratory infection.

“Keen, all I ever wanted to do was to be like you. You were so nice, and kind, and... you never resorted to violence, but I couldn't get anyone to understand me. I always hated myself, my family rejected me when I came out, and then they ended up all dying. I rejected them because they rejected me, but, now, I've got nuthin' left.”

“Mortimer, you're... like... like me?”

“Yeah, like you. I think there's a reason we originally stuck together back in school, but you were free to do whatever and I wasn't. I turned that envy into a foaming hatred for you and everyone else who didn't worship me. Even the Shikadi... they worshipped me but they couldn't even call me what I wanted to be called. I... killed a lot of people, and caused a lot of people to kill people on my behalf. The one friend I had on Terra ended up killing your grandfather... when I found out this happened, I panicked and nearly lost my grip on my own sanity.”

“No, I mean, like me right now as you see me now?”

“Yup.”

The realization struck Billie in the face like a bus colliding with her. If Mortimer was just like her... well, that meant the only way to restore their humanity was to do what she did.

“Mort, come with me. I know just what to do.”

The three scurried over to the BwB resting across the street, got in, and off they went.

“You know, back in the day, I had a Shikadi raid your ship here and leave you this note... riiiiight here.”

Billie reached down and pulled out a sheet of paper sandwiched between a keyboard plate and metal panel.

> Billy,
>
> If you are reading this, I would like to meet you and discuss my future. I am getting over my head here.
>
> Mortimer

When the trio eventually landed, Billie dragged Mortimer into her place. She bought them in, told them to take a seat, drew a new syringe, and told Mortimer they were getting a “vaccine.”

“Vaccine for what?”

“Fate.”

“Now pick a new name and come back in a week. Oh, and if you want, train your voice!”

Mortimer's voice changed on a dime to something that sounded exactly like Billie's perfectly-passing girl voice.

“Don't worry, I've been practicing that ever since I met you!”

The End

Author's Notes

There are several things that may be “loose ends” to the reader; here are some useful pointers to try to clear those up:

- **Blaze Family**

  Grandfather: William Joseph “B.J.” Blazkowicz *(deceased, Vorticon VI)*

  Grandmother: Julia Marie Blazkowicz (Peterson)

  Father: Arthur Kenneth Blaze (Blazkowicz)

  Mother: Susan Elizabeth Blaze (McMichaels)

- **Billie Blaze disposition**

  Transfem (for 3 years), lesbian, well-off, and stable.

- **Who is Billie's girlfriend?**

  Lily Sanders, also transfem/lesbian (began her transition alongside her girlfriend)

- **What did “Geti Selesh” mean?**

  The reason the planet Tanamaar was mentioned is because this fan-story takes place in the same universe as the *Metroid* series, but 500 years before. This is a phrase in the Lamorn language that refers to a psychic crystal.



Part Number: BILLY
File Number: KEEN

Printed in U.S.A.

