

A Novel

EUGORIAN NIGHT SKY

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As our world changes in the blink of an eye, the words of this story are assisted by AI; the story itself was created, designed and constructed by the author.

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PROLOGUE

A fellow writer started discussing “What would happen if a Rogue planet came into the solar system?” He turned to me and said, " We should write about it. This subject wasn't my forte, so it would be challenging. To come up with a story and where to start. So I did, and I did with involving evolution. Where it started and where it ended.

Pasian Sea

The bright orange morning sun spilled through the apartment's sliding windows, casting shimmering reflections across the Pasian green sea. Inside, a soft copper glow stretched along the living room walls, quietly marking the arrival of a new Eugorian day.

Preparing their morning meal, Jesse paused and looked out toward the balcony. Her husband stood on the patio, still and silent, as though held captive by the slow, hypnotic movement of the ocean. A strong onshore breeze swept across the terrace, carrying a lone flower petal that danced along the railing. His silver-lined hair shifted with the wind, moving in quiet harmony with the sea below.

She wondered if he was truly happy.

Their polar holiday in the northern region was nearly over. She had hoped this place might offer them something more, a healthier life, perhaps even a future. But finding work in a tourist settlement like this had proven uncertain.

The settlement itself was built along the coastline, a string of seashore apartments overlooking the Pasian Sea. Inland lay the town of Guze, nestled within the narrow isthmus between the two great polar seas, Pasia and Jasper. To the south, a mountainous temperate forest gathered moisture and released it in steady annual rainfall, creating a rare tropical ecosystem within the otherwise harsh region.

The night before, Jesse and Daniel had wandered the coastal inlets. They climbed over jagged rock faces, walked barefoot across red sand, and pushed through

dense mangroves thick with swamp water. The waves had been immense, crashing endlessly against the pebbled shore with a deafening roar. The tide had swelled higher than usual beneath the looming presence of a large planet overhead.

When twilight finally settled, they returned to their apartment, retreating for their long-awaited daytime sleep.

Now, Jesse carried a platter of dried meats and cheese out to the terrace. She set it down gently and reached for Daniel's arm. Beneath her touch, his skin felt smooth and cool, his pale hair fine and upright against his albino complexion. Dark moles were scattered across his body, giving him the familiar speckled pattern of their people, the Polkans.

It was a defining trait: ivory skin, red vertically slitted eyes, and a mane of snow-white hair. A nocturnal race, the Polkans possessed heightened senses, keen night vision and a form of sonar that guided them through darkness.

Jesse smiled faintly, and they both sat down on the chairs provided. Together, they looked out across the sea toward the glowing sunrise, the only brief moment when they could safely enjoy the sun's warmth.

Born in the equatorial regions, their kind rested during the day and lived by night. The peculiar tilt of Eugoria towards the neighbouring ocean planet created shifting patterns of twilight, bending light into strange, ever-changing forms throughout the 42-hour cycle. This was their final night here.

Jesse already dreaded the journey home, a long, exhausting passage back to their cave in the equator.

Ferries across the sea, unreliable transport through the mountains, and rattling sand trolleys across the desert. Fifty-two hours of travel, stretching across multiple cycles, longer than most Eugorians could tolerate.

Their skills did little to help. Jesse's work as an archaeologist and Daniel's mining expertise were rare here, but not in demand. Guze thrived on tourism, marketing, entertainment, and hospitality. To stay, they would have to become something else entirely.

Jesse tightened her grip on his arm. "We need to..." she hesitated, waiting for his attention. "Catch the ferry before nightfall."

Daniel nodded, offering a small, distant smile before turning back to the sea. Jesse studied his profile. His expression shifted, subtle, but unmistakable. Concern. The quiet mark of sadness, he rarely spoke of.

They both felt it. The end of something brief, and the weight of returning to what awaited them.

Not long after the sun crested the horizon, they retreated inside and fell into sleep.

The bed trembled. Jesse stirred, her eyes fluttering open as the room shuddered around her. In the dim twilight filtering through the blinds, shadows seemed to shift unnaturally along the walls. Then, just as suddenly, the movement stopped. A hanging frame tilted crookedly.

An Eugorian quake, she thought. Common enough here.

She lay still, listening, waiting for another tremor. None came. Slowly, her body relaxed, and her eyes closed once more. Then it came again. This time, she felt it closer. She opened her eyes to find Daniel standing over her. His expression was tense, unsettled.

“Are we late?” she asked, still half-asleep.

He shook his head. His long white hair fell across his brow as he brushed it aside with a trembling hand. His voice faltered as though every phrase was a riddle.

“The illusion has failed me... I’m blind.”

Jesse frowned, confused. Daniel often spoke in strange, inherited phrases from his past, cryptic and poetic. But something in his tone felt different. The room was unnaturally quiet. The constant, comforting rumble of the ocean, always present, was gone. Daniel took her hand and led her to the balcony. The moment she stepped outside, her breath caught. She stared out toward the horizon, her mind struggling to comprehend what she was seeing. Then she turned to him, searching his face, before looking back again.

The sea was gone. Where endless water should have been, there was only emptiness, an exposed seabed stretching into the distance. Jesse’s heart tightened. This was no low tide.

The Steeples

Jesse looked down at her feet, now sunk deep into the cold, yielding mud of the exposed sea floor. Not far away, a silver ghoti writhed helplessly, its gills flaring in desperate, futile attempts to draw water that was no longer there. Where waves had once crashed, only scattered rocks and rippled sand remained, stripped bare by the ocean's sudden absence.

“What had always been hidden was now revealed.”
She thought.

The sea floor sloped downward into a vast canyon, its edge dropping away into a shadowed abyss. In the dim twilight, the far side was swallowed by darkness, unreachable and unseen. The sun hovered just below the horizon, casting a faint, dying glow that clung to the jagged edges of the ravine.

The canyon wall was slick, coated in a greasy, treacherous film that made every step uncertain. It felt as though the ground itself might give way beneath them, sending them sliding into the depths without warning.

And yet, the structures stood ahead. They were not far. Despite the danger, Jesse felt something stir within her. This was her calling.

As an archaeologist, she could not turn away. Her eyes traced the weathered grey rock faces as she carefully descended, studying their layers, their fractures, their silent history. Each step was cautious, deliberate. But the wonder was tainted.

She shuddered as she noticed the debris scattered across the slope, discarded remnants of a world above, now dragged down and left to rot. Among them, hagfish

writhed through the mud, their slick bodies twisting and flipping in the dim light. The sight unsettled her.

She knew little of the *Anguilla* species, and even less about the deeper workings of this ocean. It was alien to her, unpredictable, unknowable. And yet, she could not ignore the irony.

The same eel-like creatures, revered as divine by some, had provided the delicacy they had shared only the night before, their eggs, rich and prized. Now, here they were again. Not as a meal. But as something afar.

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It all began as they stood on the balcony, frozen in disbelief. Below them, the open forecourt buzzed with confusion. Jesse watched the expressions on the Polkan faces, wide-eyed, uncertain, as they tried to comprehend the impossible: the ocean was gone. The sea floor stretched outward where waves should have been.

She was struck by the crowd. The resort was usually quiet, almost deserted despite its luxury. More often than not, Jesse had dined in near solitude at the restaurant below. Now, it teemed with restless onlookers, all drawn to the unfolding chaos.

When they made their way down toward the shore, the scene grew more surreal. Thrill seekers surged forward in clusters, descending into the exposed canyon as if pulled by instinct. Overhead, aerial copters swept across the coastline, issuing commands through loudspeakers, urging the Polkans back. Their movements were urgent, almost frantic; officials clearly feared losing control.

Then came a sharp, piercing chirp. The crowd shifted instantly. Jesse looked up. A massive beast plunged from the sky.

Its hazel eyes locked onto its target as its talons stretched forward, seizing an unsuspecting Polkan. The creature beat its wings with tremendous effort, struggling against the weight, but it could not rise. After a few desperate flaps, it released its grip, dropping the victim back to the ground.

Jesse scanned the sky again and spotted more of them, an entire flock. Theropods.

Their eerie cries echoed across the coastline, uncannily like the wail of a crying infant. These large, vividly coloured predators were known to carry off creatures as large as dolphins. Yet seeing them hunt Polkans was deeply unusual.

“They’re confused,” she thought. Something has disrupted everything.

The crowd panicked. Bodies surged inland, pushing past Jesse and Daniel in a frantic wave. It became nearly impossible to move. Jesse felt Daniel’s grip tighten as he pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her to shield her from the crush. Around them, people scattered like startled birds, darting in every direction.

Above, the copters turned their attention to the predators, driving them back like herders corralling stray livestock. Eventually, the chaos thinned.

Daniel released his hold and brushed the sand from his clothes before turning to her.

“It’s better to be a coward for a minute than a dead man in a coffin,” he said, his eyes still fixed on the sky.

He glanced back at her, calmer now. “The danger has passed.”

Then, more quietly: “Hunger draws the wolf from the forest. We should avoid them.”

Not wanting to become prey, they hurried back to their accommodation.

From the safety of the balcony, they looked out once more over the transformed world. Jesse leaned against the railing. “The ferry isn’t leaving today,” she said. “If the sea has receded like this... maybe it’s just a rare low tide. It could return.”

Daniel smiled faintly. “The plant that grows slowly bears the finest fruit.”

Jesse barely heard him. Her attention had shifted. Out on the exposed sea floor, something caught her eye, a shape and looking somewhat artificial.

Even in the dim twilight, she could make out its outline, resting on a ledge along the descending canyon, as though it might tip into the abyss at any moment.

“What is that?” she asked, pointing.

Daniel followed her gaze. “Its presence is... significant.”

The seabed sloped sharply into darkness, and there, half-perched on the edge, sat what appeared to be a structure.

“A building,” he said softly. “Or perhaps... an illusion.”

He pointed again, further along the canyon. “Another.”
Jesse’s pulse quickened.

Since her childhood in the equatorial cave systems, she had been drawn to what lay beneath the surface. Her father, a miner with a gift for recognising buried

structures, had taught her to read the language of rock and crystal. Together, they had uncovered hidden layers of the world, veins of colour, fragments of history, traces of something older.

Now, that same instinct stirred within her.

Her work with Quartizon had only sharpened it, guiding excavation, preserving rare formations, and uncovering what others would destroy.

And now... this.

The exposed sea floor, the hidden structures and the impossible opportunity.

“Maybe...” she said slowly, “there’s a reason for this.”

She turned to Daniel, her eyes alive with curiosity.

“Maybe we could stay a little longer.”

She hesitated, then added, “We should wait until the sun drops, avoid the Theropods. Then we can explore.”

Daniel looked at her, then smiled.

“My path leads forward,” he said. “The way reveals itself.”

Jesse smiled in return.

The sadness that had lingered between them was gone, replaced now by something far stronger.

Wonder.

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Jesse and Daniel moved in single file as they descended into the steep ravine, the towering height of the building looming at the level where they had once stood. Their narrow path was abruptly cut off by a

stagnant pool of water stretching across the passage. There was no way around it, only through.

Daniel glanced back at Jesse and gave a small nod toward the pool. She understood immediately. *We're going swimming.*

Lifting her small backpack above her head, Jesse stepped into the murky water. The ground beneath her feet was soft and uneven, shifting with each step. Now and then, something unseen brushed against her, disturbing her footing. Beneath the surface, faint movements stirred, alive, numerous. A tingling sensation crept through her legs as she imagined the unseen marine life swirling around her. A shiver ran through her, and she quickened her pace to keep close to Daniel.

The water rose to her torso. Then, something seized her foot. In an instant, she was yanked under.

Daniel spun at the sudden splash. Jesse was gone. For a heartbeat, he froze, staring at the rippling surface. Then he edged back, eyes scanning frantically. "Jesse!" he shouted.

A hand burst through the water. He lunged forward, grabbing it tightly. As he pulled, resistance fought back, a heavy, living force, like hauling in a struggling catch. Gritting his teeth, Daniel heaved harder. Jesse's head broke the surface, her gasp sharp and desperate. A strangled, wordless cry escaped her.

Suddenly, whatever held her gave way. The release sent her surging forward, dragging Daniel off balance. They plunged briefly beneath the surface before re-emerging, still locked together. Without hesitation, Daniel dragged them both toward the edge. The pool, mercifully, was not long.

They scrambled onto the rocks, collapsing in a breathless heap. Jesse struggled to speak, her words tangled and incoherent as she gulped air. Daniel placed a steady hand on her pale, polka-dotted arm, grounding her.

The water behind them lay still once more. Whatever had grabbed her was still down there, or gone.

After a moment, Jesse managed to speak.

“Something... wrapped around my leg... then just let go.”

They retreated further from the pool and sat on a slick, slimy rock, catching their breath. Silence lingered between them. Daniel finally added in a low voice. “Do we continue when the unknown is not silent, but waiting?”

He lifted his gaze toward their destination. Above them stood a grey stone building, its structure stark against the ravine. A tall steeple rose from its roof, and on its front was a strange symbol: a cross-like figure, elongated and unnaturally stretched. A weathered wooden door sat at its base, gnarled and imposing. To the left, a winding path carved its way down the ravine toward the entrance, as if inviting, or warning, those who approached.

Jesse looked down at her leg. A vivid red mark circled it where the thing had gripped her, stark against her pale skin. It resembled the imprint of a long, coiling body, like a snake that had tightened and then vanished.

She tested her weight, and it held.

“I’m fine,” she said, more firmly now. Then she met Daniel’s eyes. “Let’s keep going.”

Without waiting, Jesse stepped forward, taking the lead as they made their way toward the structure. The stone steps rose before them, leading to the heavy wooden door. Jesse reached out and grasped the round handle.

The Time and the Book

The great door yields only after a heavy, reluctant push. Something resists from within, as though a spring-loaded force is holding it shut. Jesse leans into the narrow opening and spots the obstruction, an underwater plant branch jammed against the floor.

She rummages through her pack, retrieves a knife, and wedges the blade beneath the limb. With a firm slice, the stem ruptures, bursting like a pressurised bladder. She turns her face away instinctively, bracing against the foul stench released from within. Once the branch is freed, the door groans open wider.

Jesse steps inside. Daniel follows close behind.

Almost immediately, dizziness overtakes her. The world tilts. She stumbles through the archway, and Daniel catches her before she collapses completely. He guides her to a nearby bench where she slumps, eyes shut, clinging to stillness. He gently shakes her, urging her to remain conscious. After a moment, she stirs, then leans forward and retches violently.

Daniel steadies her, patting her back as she empties herself. Gradually, the wave passes. Jesse straightens, breathing shallow but steady now, her awareness returning.

“The plant...” Daniel mutters, scanning the space. “Gases, perhaps. Careful, this place does not belong to the rules we understand.”

Jesse lifts her gaze at him, wondering whether his riddle was the right thing to say. Her guts were on the floor, and he makes riddles. Her head shook in confusion, and she wanted to say what was on her mind, but decided not to.

The hall stretched out before them, vast and rectangular. Along its sides stood tall windows of ornamented glass, each shaped like an elongated cross. Rows of wooden benches line the floor in two neat columns, divided by a central aisle, all facing a raised stage.

Upon the stage, a podium and a pedestal rest. Behind them, an eight-branched candlestick rises, dark and solemn. Above it, a grand arched window looms.

It feels familiar, and yet deeply wrong. Like a memory or a misremembered occasion.

Her eyes drift to the bench beneath her fingers. Carvings stretch along the armrests, strange four-legged creatures whose forms are alien and unsettling.

Daniel moves ahead, drawn down the aisle toward the stage. Awe hangs heavy between them.

He circles the pedestal. At its top lies a circular plate, fitted with a slender post, a gnomon, casting a faint shadow across its surface. He glances upward. The light pours through the arched window, not naturally, but concentrated, as if the glass itself bends and gathers it. A lens of deliberate design.

“Remarkable...” he murmurs.

Jesse joins him, studying the plate. Fine engravings mark its edge, numbers, evenly spaced. The shadow stretches faintly across them.

“Time,” she breathes. “It’s measuring time.”

She traces the markings with her eyes. Forty-two divisions.

“A Eugorian day...” she whispers, realisation dawning. “Forty-two hours.”

Daniel follows her gaze upward again. Outside, twilight lingers, endless, unmoving. In this polar region, the sun never truly rises nor falls this time of year. The faint shadow exists only because of that dim, eternal glow.

“It may only work when the sun shows itself,” Jesse adds softly.

Daniel nods, then turns toward the podium and opens the book that rests upon it.

The pages are warped, the ink has bled, and the text is blurred by long submersion. Carefully, he closes the cover, revealing a title whose script is unfamiliar, almost unrecognisable. Yet... three words stand out, barely intact.

He opens it again, this time to the first page. Here, the ink has held. The letters are clear and legible.

His breath catches.

“How is it that these words speak in a tongue I know?” he says, voice low with disbelief.

Jesse looks up sharply. “What does it say?”

Daniel hesitates, as though the act of reading itself carries weight. Then, slowly:

“In the beginning... God created the heavens and the earth.”

Silence settles between them.

He looks up, eyes searching. “Who... is this ‘God’?”

Jesse shakes her head faintly, unease creeping into her voice. “I don’t know. But this place... it feels intentional. Like a sanctuary. Like someone built this... for something.”

Daniel returns to the text, reading quietly.

Jesse drifts away, careful of the sediment coating the floor. She settles onto the front bench, gazing up at the great window.

Shapes emerge within the coloured glass. At its centre, a human figure. Long hair. Arms outstretched. On either side, figures kneel, beggars, reaching upward.

Though dulled by time and sediment, the window comes alive in the twilight. Light filters through the coloured panes, casting faint, shifting hues across the hall.

Daniel’s voice breaks the stillness. “The first chapter... it says God created the Earth in seven days.” He lifts his eyes toward the window, toward the silent figure of light. Then, quietly:

“Has the Earth... already been created?”

The Tunnel

Jesse checks the time and exhales softly. “We should keep moving.”

Daniel closes the book with care, as though sealing something sacred inside it. Together, they turn and make their way toward the exit.

At the doorway, Jesse pauses. Her eyes drift downward to the front steps, where the path slopes gently away from the hall. They descend in silence, following the winding trail toward another structure in the distance.

The sun has already slipped below the horizon. Darkness settles, but not fully. Their nocturnal vision awakens, sharpening the world in unfamiliar ways.

Rust-eaten railings line the path, each one marked with the same recurring symbol, a plus sign (+), embedded deliberately into the metalwork. Jesse runs her fingers lightly along one as they pass. These barriers once guided others... helped them ascend.

Now, they guide no one.

The ground beneath their feet is drying. What was once submerged is slowly reclaiming air. It has been five days since the sea vanished. No tides, no return, no explanation and only absence.

Jesse had studied the terrain, tracing the flow patterns left behind. Everything pointed downward, toward the canyon’s depths. As though the ocean itself had been swallowed whole by something vast and unseen. A drain large enough to consume a world.

After the Theropod incident, the crowds that once filled the shoreline had scattered, or worse. When Jesse and Daniel began their exploration, they found

themselves alone. No voices. No machines. Even the Aero Copters had disappeared.

So they moved quietly, carefully carrying only what they could manage for a single day.

Anything further would require preparation they did not yet have.

Ahead, the next structure rises into view. Its domed roof stretches outward, sheltering a wide, open square. The entrance yawns without a door, an invitation, or a warning.

They stop just short of entering. Jesse peers into the dim interior. Something catches her eye, a railing positioned at the centre of the space. As they approach, the purpose becomes clear. It guards a stairwell. She leans forward slightly, peering down into the depths. The steps vanish into darkness.

Above them, high-set windows line the walls. Each is adorned with delicate ironwork, the same Plus symbol etched into every design. The railing mirrors it perfectly. Although it suggests a pattern and or language.

“This must lead somewhere below,” Jesse murmurs.

“Strange... but deliberate.”

Daniel glances at the time, then back at the stairwell. “We have enough time,” he says. “Shall we?”

Jesse nods.

Darkness does not intimidate them anymore. Their vision has changed, evolved. Sight is no longer their primary sense. Instead, they perceive the world through something deeper, something instinctive. Like sonar. Like feeling space itself, like switching between two different languages.

They begin their descent. The steps are slick, coated in a layer of green organic slime. Each movement is careful, controlled. Though the entrance above was wide, the staircase narrows quickly, forcing them into a single file. The air grows heavier, perhaps stiller.

They descend for what feels like far longer than it should, time stretching in the dark, until at last, they reach a landing.

There appears to be a small shrine lined with unlit candles and scattered trinkets. Offerings, perhaps of remnants of belief.

The Plus symbol appears again, carved and repeated at every surface.

They continue downward, and they reach another platform. This time, the space opens. To the left, a trackway emerges from the darkness.

Jesse steps forward, scanning the open space. The platform's height, alignment, and recognition settle in.

“It’s a train station,” she says quietly.

Daniel nods.

“Trains are for resources, not for Polkans,” he says.

The tiled walls are marked with text. Jesse approaches, brushing away residue to read it clearly.

“+ The End of the World +”

The words sit heavy in the silence. The symbol surrounds them.

Jesse turns slowly to Daniel, unease creeping into her voice. “This isn’t just a place,” she says. “It feels like a journey, perhaps a pilgrimage.”

She looks back toward the empty tracks.

“But where did they begin?”

Daniel doesn’t answer. He simply shakes his head.

Nearby, Jesse spots a faded map fixed to the wall. A single horizontal line runs across it, interrupted by four marked points.

She traces the points with her finger.

“Santiago... Pedrouzo... Sarria...”

Her finger reaches the final mark.

“The End of the World.”

Daniel leans in over her shoulder, studying it. A faint smile touches his face.

“Well,” Jesse says, stepping back, “now we know where it leads.”

Daniel glances toward the tracks. “What leads onwards has always been there; only now do we notice.”

They walk to the edge of the platform. There, resting silently on the rails, is a handcar.

Daniel looks up at her, a spark of excitement breaking through the tension.

“What does your mind say, now that it sees?”

Jesse considers it, then replies with another riddle.

“The path calls, but not for us, not now.”

He nods, understanding.

“We’ll come back,” she adds. “Prepared this time. For something longer.”

Together, they turned away from the tracks and ascended the stairs.

The Journey

It had been five days since their return. Back at the accommodation, they wasted little time before planning a longer expedition. Their first stop was the local library, where they searched for any trace of understanding of what they had seen.

There, they began to piece things together.

The steeple-shaped structure they had encountered was called a *church*. The underground rail system was known as a *subway*. In one of the books, they found an explanation for the Plus-shaped symbol they had seen, a *cross*, or *crucifix*. It represented religious belief, something their ancestors once followed in many forms. Yet the same symbol carried a darker meaning too: *crucifixion*, a method of execution, slow, deliberate, and merciless.

In the equatorial regions where they were raised, life was harsh and unstable. Belief in the supernatural had long since faded into irrelevance. Jesse concluded that religion must have been rejected in later eras, explaining why they had never encountered it before. And yet, in the Pasian region, remnants still lingered. They travelled to the town of Guze.

There, they found another building crowned with a steeple. A faded sign on its door read: *Guze Christian Church*. The structure stood silent and abandoned, worn by time. Behind it, they discovered something even stranger: rows of gravestones.

Among the Polkans, the dead were incinerated, their remains scattered across monuments of significance. Burial was unheard of.

Yet here, stone coffins lie embedded in the ground, each marked with an engraved name. They stood as if the dead still rested beneath.

Jesse leaned over one and whispered, “Is there a body under there?”

Daniel pressed his lips together, unsettled. “That’s... cruel.”

They moved on.

In preparation for their journey, they gathered supplies, a tent, blankets, cooking tools, and clothing. The tent felt unnecessary underground, but Daniel insisted. “We don’t know where this leads,” he said. “We might surface again.”

That day, lying side by side, sleep slow to come, Jesse stared into the room.

“If this was the end of the world...” she murmured, “then where did they come from?”

Water would be their greatest challenge.

Underground, they expected decay, stagnant, rotting pools. They would need filtration, minerals, and calcium tablets. Strong bones and clear vision would be essential.

By the time they reached the subway station, exhaustion clung to them. They hauled a handcart loaded with their gear, lifting it over obstacles, dragging it down stairs. Every movement drained them. Still, it served a purpose; it carried their supplies and gave them somewhere to rest.

As they paused, Jesse heard something faint in the tunnel ahead. Movement echoed far ahead.

She remembered the flapping eel-like creatures above and assumed these were similar. Food, at least, would not be scarce, though after weeks, even abundance turned foul. Rot had already begun to creep into the air. Worse still, other creatures had come. Land predators, scavenging the seabed. They would need protection.

Daniel carried a pistol for defence and hunting, and basic fishing gear.

When it was time, he climbed down onto the tracks. Jesse followed, lowering the cart with a rope. Together, they loaded it onto an old handcar, two-person operated, one on each side of the lever. At first, the mechanism resisted, jammed from years underwater, but Daniel freed the stopper, and with a groan, the cart began to move. The track sloped downward, which helped.

The sound was unbearable. Metal screeched against metal, echoing violently through the tunnel. Water pooled along the base, trembling with each vibration. Jesse covered her ears. Polkans had sensitive hearing, and the noise cut deep. Still, they pushed forward.

Obstacles littered the tracks, debris, fragments of a lost world. Daniel would stop, climb down, and clear the path. Then onwards again.

Then he saw it. Far ahead, something large was moving.

But when they reached the spot, it was gone.

“Did you see that?” Jesse whispered.

“There!”

Daniel slammed the brakes, sending the car into instant silence.

A low growl rolled through the tunnel. Something was there.

Daniel gripped the pistol and inched the cart forward. Water splashed somewhere in the dark... then stopped. He looked down at a footprint. It was massive.

“A gator...” he breathed. A walking snake, huge jaws, crushing force. But this, this was larger.

Jesse glimpsed its tail. It dwarfed anything she had seen before.

Daniel began reversing.

Too late.

The creature lunged, and its jaws clamped onto the front of the handcar, shaking it violently. Jesse clung on, heart pounding. The tunnel walls offered no escape, only confinement.

The cart lurched backward as the beast drove forward, pushing them with terrifying force.

Then, it stopped. The beast released them. Its eyes rose above its skull, cold, slit, and calculating. It slid beneath the cart. Jesse held her breath. Seconds stretched into eternity. Then it emerged at the rear and moved away. Then it was gone. Only silence remained.

Jesse exhaled, relieved, and turned to Daniel. “Let's keep going.”

The deeper they went, the higher the water rose, until it reached the platform itself. The handcar became useless. They had no choice. They would continue on foot.

“Santiago...” Jesse murmured, recalling the map. “How far?”

Neither knew.

“Have we reached the point of no return?” she asked.

Daniel hesitated. “Maybe. But we keep going.” Then, a faint breeze. It smelled fresh.

“Can you feel that?” Jesse said.

Daniel nodded. “Yes.”

They stepped into the water. It was warm, slick with unseen growth. Reeds brushed against their legs. It deepened, then, just as suddenly, began to recede. The air grew fresher.

Then, Light, a faint glow ahead.

“Ventilation shaft,” Daniel said.

A ladder stretched upward toward a small circle of brightness.

He looked up and was blinded; he waited for his eyes to adjust to the light, and they climbed with Daniel in front. At the top, a sealed lid resisted them, but Daniel noted a lever. He opened it, and the light flooded in. They emerged slowly, blinking against the brightness. They had reached the seabed.

Outside, the terrain stretched flat and silent. In the distance, another structure. Possibly another station. Jesse glanced back. They had come too far. They walked forward.

The ground was soft, with layers of sediment built over centuries. Once, this place had lived above water. Now, it told its history in silence. Jesse knelt, sifting through the earth. Layer by layer, the sediment of time was shown. Each colour, each texture, a story. She dug deeper, wondering about the moment the sea claimed the land.

The Roadway Passage

Occasionally, they passed shallow pools of water, each one avoided with quiet caution. The twilight air was crisp, refreshing, yet biting cold. Still damp from their earlier journey, Daniel and Jesse kept close, sharing what little warmth they could.

The pathway toward the subway station gradually revealed itself, winding through the distance like a forgotten scar across the seabed. The terrain rolled unevenly, dotted with water-filled hollows that reflected the dim sky. It had been over two weeks since the Sea had vanished, yet the signs of its retreat lingered, corrosion etched into the earth, the remnants of a world not long gone.

Beneath their feet, the seafloor had become a strange desert, sandy, soft, and unstable. Life here had not survived the change. Jagged boulder spires rose sporadically, like monuments to something ancient and lost. Off to the right, a vast pool stretched wide as a lake. Each step forward was a struggle; the ground sank underfoot, shifting like dunes, resisting their progress.

As the subway station came into clearer view, other shapes emerged along the horizon. Jesse slowed, pointing toward them.

“Have you seen anything like that before?”

Daniel, focused on his footing, finally looked up and stopped.

“Wow... the structures... they’re pointing at the sky.”

Jesse counted four enormous dish-like forms, each mounted on a rectangular base. They loomed silently,

angled upward as though listening to something beyond the world.

Daniel frowned slightly. “Radio antennas,” he said after a moment. “We used systems like these in training, to communicate across the surface.”

They had been moving for hours. Fatigue weighed heavily on them. Nearby, a cluster of boulders offered a place to rest, and they sank onto the cold stone.

A gentle northern breeze passed over them. The sun was beginning to rise, its faint glow brushing the horizon. Jesse realised they had travelled through the night and into the next day.

Their sensitive skin forced them to shield themselves from the light. Jesse pulled a solar blanket from her pouch, and together they wrapped themselves within it.

Huddled beneath its thin protection, warmth slowly returned. Jesse lay still, gazing out across the barren expanse. The twilight shimmered faintly across scattered pools, illuminating the remains of a dead ecosystem, fish, debris, and fragments of what once thrived. She studied the terrain, her mind turning to what she knew.

The Sea, she recalled, was divided into layers. The Sunlight Zone, rich with life, extends to two hundred metres. Below that, the Twilight Zone, dense with creatures, where most marine life existed. And deeper still, the Midnight Zone, a realm of darkness, where life created its own light.

When they had first entered this drained world, coral and seaweed had been everywhere. Now, there was nothing, bare sand and silence.

They had descended beyond the reach of life, below two hundred metres.

A sound shattered the stillness.

“Ark! Ark! Siss! Ark! Ark! Siss!”

Jesse stirred, eyes still closed. The noise echoed strangely, sharp and unnatural. For a moment, she wondered if she had dreamt it. She lay frozen, listening. She could feel the cold ground beneath her and sensed Daniel’s warmth beside her.

“Ark! Ark! Siss!”

Her eyes snapped open, and reality rushed back. Slowly, she turned her head and saw it. A massive theropod stood over them.

Its towering frame cast a shadow across their bodies. Feathered yet skeletal, its form was both majestic and terrifying. Its beak tilted skyward, its dry, ridged skin stretched tight across powerful talons. Its eyes were hidden, fixed on something far above.

Jesse did not move.

Across from her, Daniel was awake, rigid, alert, trapped in the same silent dread. Then, the creature shifted. Its head began to lower toward them.

Another call rang out in the distance. A faint “Ark! Ark! Siss!”

The theropod froze... then lifted its head sharply, drawn to the sound. Its wings unfurled in a sudden, sweeping motion, casting darkness over them for a heartbeat, and then it was gone.

It launched into the air, chasing the distant call. A final, louder cry echoed as it vanished into the sky.

Jesse exhaled sharply, the tension breaking all at once. She pushed herself upright, turning to Daniel.

“We need to be more careful,” she snapped, her voice edged with exhaustion and anger. Daniel nodded, already on his feet. He pointed toward the subway shelter ahead.

“Hurry... before it comes back.”

They ran across the ground, fighting every step, slippery, unstable, threatening to lose their footing. Patches of earth behaved like quicksand, forcing them apart so one wouldn't drag the other down.

Finally, they reached the shelter. Relief washed over them as they collapsed beneath its dome.

The structure mirrored the one they had seen before, a curved covering over a stairwell descending into the depths. Benches lined the interior in neat rows, enough to seat dozens. The railings and windows bore intricate cross-like designs, their craftsmanship both elegant and unsettling. Jesse's eyes moved across every detail. The windows, set between the roof and the wall, caught her attention. Each pane bore a marking, a letter, a number. She leaned closer.

“est 2753.”

She frowned. Jesse was no stranger to ancient structures, but this, this number was impossibly too low.

In a world where the current Eugorian year stood at 1,003,422... This place was not just old, it was something else entirely.

The Years

Realising the structure was over a million years old was almost impossible to grasp. By all logic, the metals should have long since corroded, eroded by centuries beneath the sea. Jesse theorised that the framework had

been coated in a chromium-like compound, something designed to resist decay. Whoever built this place must have understood the brutality of the Eugorian atmosphere. They had prepared for time... but not for the oceans to rise and swallow it whole.

Daniel glanced over and noticed Jesse standing motionless, her gaze fixed on the windows above. He followed her line of sight. Jesse heard the distant cry of the raptors; in that moment, she believed they were safe.

“Do you know what date it is?” she asked quietly.

Daniel hesitated. “Two-three-five twenty-two.”

Jesse pointed toward the faded lettering etched into the glass. “And that number, what do you make of it?”

Daniel squinted. “E... S... T... 2753.” He paused, the meaning settling in. “Established in the year 2753? That’s...” He shook his head. “That’s a very long time ago.”

Daniel’s upbringing in the equatorial regions had been practical, survival-focused. His education focused on enduring the harsh deserts, not on studying the distant polar worlds or ancient planetary history. He had heard stories, fragments of knowledge, but nothing like this.

“This place...” he murmured, searching for the words. “It’s like the world stands still while time moves on, untouched by decay, unchanged by age?”

Jesse slowly nodded, scanning the area. “Do we keep moving through the tunnel,” she asked, “or stay on the surface and explore those structures?” She gestured toward the bowl-shaped formations in the distance. She hoped they would stay. The thought of returning underground, of encountering the unknown creature

again, tightened her chest. But she knew they would eventually need to retrieve their gear.

Daniel looked up. The sun had climbed high, midday. The dome cast a welcome shield of shade against the relentless heat.

“Maybe we stay here for a while,” he said. “Rest before we decide.” Jesse agreed silently and lowered herself onto a bench, letting the stillness take her.

When she opened her eyes again, the world had changed. The twilight sun had vanished beyond the horizon. Rain hammered violently against the dome, and a cold wind howled through the entrance. Storms were far more common in the polar sector than in the equatorial deserts, but even so, the ferocity of it was overwhelming. The noise alone was deafening. Jesse sat upright and noticed that Daniel was gone.

She rushed to the entrance and peered out toward the bowl-shaped structures. Through the dim, storm-blurred light, she spotted a figure moving in the distance. Her night vision helped at close range, but beyond that, the darkness and rain swallowed detail.

“Daniel!” she shouted.

The wind tore her voice away before it could reach him. Between them, the land dipped sharply into a gully. Rainwater had already begun to surge through it, forming a fast-moving stream. As she watched, something else caught her eye, movement beneath the waterlogged ground. The surface rippled and flapped, as though something buried had begun to stir... like fish waking from a long dormancy.

“Why is he over there?” she muttered.

She wanted to go to him, but the raging water made crossing impossible. For now, she stayed where she was. Then something glimmered at her feet.

She knelt and pushed her hand into the soaked earth, scooping up a clump of soil. As she broke it apart, faint reflections shimmered in the fading light. Tiny fragments, metallic and bright.

“Gold?” She asked.

The nuggets were small, no larger than peas, but unmistakable. Her training as an archaeologist surged to the surface. Gold, formed in the violent deaths of stars and born through extreme cosmic events, was not something she expected to find scattered here.

She sifted through more soil, her fascination growing. The ground itself seemed laced with it, glittering faintly under the storm-dark sky.

The hail eased, softening into a steady rain. Now was her chance. She descended into the gully with care, stepping through the rushing water before climbing the opposite side. As she rose, she noticed shards of ice breaking away from the distant plume above. From her studies, she understood their significance. These plumes released water vapour into the atmosphere, fuel for the fragile balance of Eugorian life, sustaining oxygen and circulation across the planet.

By the time she reached the structures, the storm had quieted to a dull roar.

“Daniel!” she called.

No answer.

She circled the nearest building until she found a door. It resisted at first, then gave way with a groan. Keeping it

ajar, she stepped cautiously inside. The room was dim, shadows stretching across unfamiliar shapes.

Then, footsteps.

She froze.

Moving slowly, she edged toward an internal doorway and peered through. Inside, the room resembled a control centre, rows of benches, monitors lining the walls, remnants of what looked like a mining or operations hub. And there, Daniel.

He was hunched over a cabinet, rifling through its contents.

“What are you doing?” she snapped.

He jolted, startled, then turned. “Oh, hi.” He paused, as if collecting himself. “The gang of mystery is defeating the gang of knowledge.”

Jesse frowned, unsettled by his calmness.

Daniel turned back and pulled a container from the cabinet, placing it gently on the bench. His composure contrasted sharply with the unease building inside her. She wanted to scold him for leaving, but curiosity held her back.

He lifted the lid, and inside were rows of small data drives. Jesse stepped closer and picked one up.

“SIMP 2125,” she read.

Another. “Europa 13100.” Daniel gestured toward a faded poster on the wall. “Look at this.” They moved together to examine it. The text explained the purpose of the bowl-shaped structures; they were antennas, designed to maintain communication with Tellus, the ocean planet.

Jesse’s mind raced. Tellus... a sister world once known to harbour life. But as Earth warmed, it had become entirely submerged.

“Did anything still survive there?”

She returned to the container, sifting through the drives more urgently now. One label caught her attention.

“Earth 120065.”

She held it up, the weight of its meaning settling in.

“Whatever happened... the answers might be here,” she settled.

Cause and effect

Jesse understood that the small memory stick was no ordinary object; it was an advanced storage device. The real challenge lay in finding something capable of reading it. Daniel suggested they return to the mainland to search for such a device. Recognising the importance of their discovery, they retraced their steps through the tunnel.

In Guze, they eventually located a suitable device in a small computer shop. The attendant, visibly puzzled, disappeared into the back room to search for compatible equipment. When he returned, he asked cautiously,

“Where did you get this?”

Jesse hesitated, then replied,

“It was passed down from my grandparents.” careful not to reveal the truth.

With the device secured, Jesse and Daniel rented a bubble for a few days to rest. Seated on the lounge, they inserted the first card, “**SIMP 2125.**” A cable connected the player to a monitor in the apartment. The screen flickered to life with a message:

“From the archives of the Origins.”

A strange figure appeared, similar to the Polkans, yet different. Its pupils were black and perfectly round, its skin a muted beige. It began to speak... in their language.

The recording detailed a rogue planet, **SIMP2125**, entering the solar system. In the year 2125, the massive body, roughly fifty kilometres in diameter, had deviated from its path, drawn inward by the sun. Its trajectory shifted again under the immense pull of Jupiter. The consequences were catastrophic.

Jupiter's moons, Ganymede, Europa, and Io, were torn from their orbits and cast adrift. Europa, however, did not escape entirely. It was captured by Earth's gravity, becoming a second moon. As suddenly as it had appeared, SIMP2125 was flung back into the void.

The screen went dark.

Daniel turned to Jesse.

"Is this... known?"

She shook her head slowly.

"I was more focused on the presenter. It looked like us... almost as if we share the same origin."

Daniel remained fixated on the event itself, an ancient cosmic disruption that had occurred over a million years ago.

Curious, he inserted the next card: "**Europa 13100.**"

A different presenter appeared, another era, another voice. The recording described Europa as it once was: an icy moon, its surface sealed beneath thick layers of frost, hiding a vast ocean beneath. Heat from its core kept the waters liquid.

Over hundreds of thousands of years, everything changed.

Under the sun's influence and Earth's weaker gravity, the ice began to melt. Atmospheres formed. The hidden oceans rose to the surface. Life emerged. Europa transformed from a frozen satellite into a thriving, ocean-covered world.

Then, without warning, the footage degraded into static. The device powered down abruptly.

Daniel frowned.

"It's not the drive... something's wrong with the player."

But Jesse barely heard him. Her mind lingered on the revelation.

Could the ocean world above... be Europa?

The size and orbit didn't quite align, yet the similarities were impossible to ignore. Too many questions remained unanswered. They needed to access the final drive: "**Earth 120065.**"

They returned to the shop, but the attendant delivered disappointing news, the device was obsolete. The parts no longer existed. It couldn't be repaired.

Back in their bubble, they sat in silence until Daniel suddenly spoke.

"What if there's something at the antenna structure? We might be able to salvage parts."

Jesse hesitated. The thought of returning through the tunnel unsettled her.

"Is it worth it?" she asked quietly. "Maybe we should explore the surface instead."

More than thirty days had passed since the ocean vanished. The basin was drying, making the descent into the ravine easier. More Polkans had begun venturing deeper into the gorge.

Daniel helped Jesse down a boulder as loose stones shifted beneath his feet.

“What cannot be stopped once the first is set in motion,” he muttered.

The descent felt like a climb in reverse. The antenna dishes remained hidden from view, but far below, they could make out the train route. The depth of the gorge was staggering, something the tunnel had concealed.

Above them, the midnight ocean planet reflected sunlight, casting an eerie glow across the landscape. They moved quickly before dawn.

The stench of rotting fish filled the air. Jesse gagged, dropping to her knees as the smell overwhelmed her.

When they finally reached the antenna compound, something was wrong.

They entered through a secondary access point. Inside, chaos greeted them. Monitors hung shattered. Chairs lay overturned. The cabinet that once held the memory sticks had been ripped open and emptied. Someone had been there.

Jess turned to Daniel, her voice tight.

“What do we do now?”

Daniel shook his head slowly.

“The ice is melting,” he said, as though time itself were slipping away.

Jesse glanced toward the tunnel, dread tightening in her chest. The memory of the creature still lingered.

“Do we keep searching?” she asked. “There could be more... other places.”

She didn’t want to go back through the tunnel, but she knew it might be their only path forward. Daniel said

nothing. He simply turned toward the exit. That was answer enough.

They left the compound and headed for the train outlet. Dawn was approaching. Without speaking, they descended the subway stairs, disappearing once more into the dark.

The Cave

The stairway to the subway platform mirrored the last station they had seen. Jesse recognised the era immediately, the intricate railings, the etched silhouettes of antenna structures pressed into the walls. Markers. This place had once mattered. The scale of the infrastructure alone told her that.

When they reached the platform, a train waited in silence. It stood frozen in time, its doors half open, as though it had been abandoned mid-breath. Pale, undersea growth clung to every surface, thick, whitish, and broad-leafed, shaped by darkness. It filled the carriage like a living fog.

The doors still moved. Curiosity pulled them inside. Jesse stepped carefully, her footing uncertain beneath the slick, overgrown floor. Dan reached for her hand, steadying her as they moved through the first carriage. The train stretched on, car after car, each connected by narrow passageways. On one bench, Jesse paused.

Something about the shape felt... wrong. She focused, releasing a soft pulse of sound. The echo returned with a form she knew all too well, a Polkan profile.

“It can’t be...” she whispered.

Dan moved beside her, pushing aside the thick plant matter. Beneath it, a frame, a pile of bones.

Jesse reached out. The surface was slick, coated in slime. She recoiled instantly, her stomach turning as the stench hit her.

In the absence of light, her kind relied on other senses, touch, smell, and sonar. A controlled breath through her nostrils sent out a high-frequency pulse. The returning echoes mapped the world around her.

Slowly, she forced herself to continue. Her hands traced the figure. A body seated with stillness and preserved.

At the wrist was a metal band. She pulled gently, feeling resistance as organic tendrils clung to it. Then the faint rattle of chain links.

Her breath caught.

“...They were prisoners.”

The realisation settled heavily. This wasn't transport, it was containment.

She pulled back sharply, overwhelmed. “I've seen enough. The smell...” She turned away, fighting the nausea.

They moved into the next carriage. Dan slid the side door open, and a rush of cooler air spilled inside, carrying away the rot. Without hesitation, he climbed down to the tracks and reached up to help her.

Jesse jumped, landing awkwardly on the coarse stone below. She crouched, picking up a loose fragment; they were smooth and layered.

She brought it to her nose, then to her tongue.

“Mica,” she murmured.

The mineral was unmistakable, light, flaky, and faintly metallic. It had been mined for centuries, used in everything from construction to medicine.

For a moment, her tension eased. A memory surfaced: her father, a cave, flickering light dancing across mineral walls in shades of violet, blue, and pink. Beauty hidden in darkness. She looked up at Dan.

“Do we have a candle?”

He smiled, already reaching into his pack. A flick of the lighter, and flame.

The effect was immediate. Light burst across the tunnel walls, scattering into shimmering reflections. The cave came alive, glowing as though it held its own hidden sky. Both of them flinched, their eyes struggling to adjust. Even here, in this place of decay, there was beauty. But it didn't belong, the train, the prisoners, the suffocating growth. All of it preserved, waiting for thousands of years beneath water that had now vanished. Where had it gone? They were about to find out.

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They followed the tracks until the train ended. The light became too much. Jesse asked Dan to extinguish the flame, and darkness returned, thick and complete. They moved forward by instinct. The tunnel widened. The air shifted.

Dan slowed, sensing open space ahead. He climbed onto a raised siding and helped Jesse up beside him. The platform here was larger than before, but something was wrong. There were no stairs leading up. Only down.

A distant roar reached them, the unmistakable sound of rushing water.

Dan lit the candle again. The flame revealed nothing at first... then everything.

The space beyond the railing was vast, impossibly vast. The light barely touched the surface below. The echoes didn't return. It wasn't just a chamber. It was a world.

Far beneath them, a massive body of water stretched into darkness. The sound wasn't echoing, it was being swallowed.

Jesse's breath caught.

"This is where it went...the missing sea."

Dan stared into the abyss. "Behemoth," he said quietly. They descended.

At the water's edge, the scale became even more apparent.

The surface churned slowly, carrying debris, fragments of unknown origin drifting past in a steady current. Some sank and others bobbed like silent witnesses.

The flow pulled everything in one direction. Toward something unseen.

Jesse shivered.

"We need another way," she said. "This isn't safe."

Dan didn't answer. He was already moving.

"There," he pointed. A large floating object drifted just out of reach. "We can use that."

Before she could stop him, he jumped.

"Dan, wait!"

The current seized him instantly. Stronger than he expected.

He fought to stay afloat, one hand still holding the candle above the water. The flame flickered wildly as he drifted further away.

“Hold on!” Jesse shouted.

Then, he vanished. The light went out and darkness consumed the cavern.

“Dan?!”

Only the roar of water answered.

Time lost meaning. Jesse stood frozen, her breath shallow, her senses straining against the chaos of sound. The current roared like a living thing, masking everything else. He couldn't be gone. Not like that. Polkans could hold their breath for long periods, longer than most. She waited, listened and hoped.

Nothing.

Finally, she forced herself to move.

Her sonar pulses stretched outward, searching. The water below churned in a slow, spiralling motion, a massive, unseen whirlpool guiding everything toward the same fate. Then, something shifted.

A large object drifted closer, a raft. Her only chance. Jesse lunged forward and caught the drifting craft, immediately feeling the force of the current dragging it sideways. Hauling herself up, she found its surface flat but treacherously unstable, demanding perfect balance. She gripped the edges tightly, steadying herself against the relentless pull of the water. There was no turning back now.

The stairs were behind her, the only path to safety, but she refused to take them without Dan. Clinging to the craft, she let it carry her, silently hoping it would lead her

to the same fate he had met. Her voice echoed through the cavern as she called out to him, each sound magnified and thrown back at her from unseen walls. Then she fell silent, listening; only the distant roar of falling water answered.

Without warning, the craft jolted and stopped. It had lodged against something beneath the surface, pinned in place against the current. Jesse crouched low, sensing the obstruction below, a rigid, tubular frame rising from the depths. The cave around her felt vast and hollow; her echoes returned faint and uncertain. She was alone in a space too large to understand. Then, another shape.

Her sonar brushed against it: similar in structure, not far away. She pulsed again... and again. More forms revealed themselves, five, maybe more, each with the same protruding tubes breaking the surface like skeletal remains. Whatever this place was, it was not natural.

Carefully, she slid from the raft into the water. Her boots met solid ground just beneath the surface. The water only reached her ankles, glowing faintly with an eerie, submerged light. She steadied herself and reached for the nearest tube, her fingers tracing cold metal until they found a latch, a handle.

She hesitated, then turned it. A sharp click echoed. The panel lifted easily, held open by internal struts. She leaned over, peering inside, then glanced across the others. Their arrangement... their symmetry... Realisation struck. These weren't ruins, they were machines.

The glowing shapes resolved into something unmistakable, massive aircraft, far larger than any she had known. The tubes were cockpits. Wings lay

submerged beneath the shifting water. She was standing on one now.

Heart racing, Jesse climbed into the cockpit. The seat embraced her as she sat, hands instinctively searching across unfamiliar controls, switches, levers, a central joystick. She had seen craft like this from afar... but never like this.

Then something moved. She froze.

A long, serpentine creature slid silently across the dashboard, brushing past her feet before disappearing into the water below. Jesse exhaled slowly, forcing herself to continue. Focus.

Aircraft carried records, memory cores. If anything remained, it might hold answers.

Her hands moved quickly now, pressing, flicking, until a faint mechanical click answered her. Something had released. She searched until her fingers found it: a small, solid object, no larger than her finger, a memory device.

The same kind they had recovered before. She slipped it into her pocket and climbed back out onto the wing, her thoughts returning sharply to Dan.

He was still out there.

The current tugged harder now, dragging the raft toward a growing glow in the distance. The roar of water intensified, swelling into a thunder that vibrated through the cavern. Mist kissed her face, a waterfall.

The craft lurched violently as it reached the brink. The impact of falling water struck first, then everything vanished beneath the surge.

Jesse held her breath as she was dragged under, swallowed into a tunnel of light. The current forced her downward, then forward, enclosing her in a rushing

vacuum of liquid. For a moment, she was weightless, suspended between descent and release. Then, upward.

She burst back to the surface, gasping, her lungs burning as blinding light flooded her vision and then,

A voice.

“Daniel?” she called, her voice trembling.

“Here!” came the reply, distant but real. “Swim toward me!”

Relief surged through her. She pushed forward, cutting through the water until her feet found ground. Stumbling onto the shore, she kept her eyes shut against the overwhelming brightness, guided instead by scent... by presence. Then she felt him. She rushed forward and embraced him tightly.

Alive.

Jesse’s eyes slowly adjusted. The light above was intense, but it carried no warmth, only a cold, artificial brilliance. She pulled back, studying Daniel’s face. His eyes were swollen, marked by exhaustion and something deeper... but alive with relief.

“You’ve squeezed through the hourglass,” he said weakly, attempting a smile.

Jesse’s expression hardened. “You did it again,” she snapped, turning away, her anger sharp but fleeting.

Drawn forward, she climbed toward higher ground from the plunge pool and stopped.

The space before her was immense.

Above, countless glowing orbs hung like suspended suns within a vast domed cavern. Below, towering structures rose from both land and water, spires shaped like bubbles, lined with balconies and hollow openings.

It had an unnatural construction. An entire city, hidden beneath the world.

Her senses strained, but the scale overwhelmed them. The cavern stretched beyond comprehension, hundreds of leagues, perhaps more. Water surrounded the landmass like an inland sea, and the structures stood both within it and upon it, as though built for a civilisation long vanished.

Daniel stepped beside her, following her gaze.

“Inspiring,” he murmured.

Jesse’s anger faded, replaced by awe.

“What is this place?” she whispered.

Daniel exhaled slowly.

“An ancient underground city.”

Urban Underground

Jesse was no stranger to the vast cave systems of the planet. In the equatorial regions, they stretched endlessly, forming a hidden world beneath the surface. Most Polkans, however, had migrated toward the poles, where the calmer climate allowed for life above ground. Fresh air and higher oxygen levels were considered healthier, though the surface came with its own dangers, harsh sunlight that could scorch their skin and toxic growths that thrived in the open.

For generations, the oceans had concealed the existence of polar cave systems, reinforcing the belief that surface living was the only option. Though their ancestors had once known of these hidden spaces, they had only recently been revealed. Now, Jesse and Daniel stood among that rediscovered past.

As Jesse's senses adapted, the cavern began to reveal itself in greater clarity. She tilted her gaze upward, noting the fractured ceiling above. Thin cracks laced across the stone, some spilling light into the darkness, others draining streams of water from the world above.

"The forces of nature always prevail," Daniel murmured.

Jesse traced one of the fissures as far as she could perceive. It stretched endlessly into the distance. "This could explain the missing sea," she said. "The quake we felt, it must have opened these channels. The water had somewhere to go."

"There are layers upon layers," Daniel replied.

Jesse smiled faintly. “Then this cavern may be larger than anything we’ve ever known. Polkans could have lived here for thousands of years.”

Daniel’s red eyes flickered with excitement. “And now the world is waiting...” he said, glancing toward the towering structures ahead. “Let’s see it.”

Jesse followed his gaze downward, noticing a smooth, ascending roadway carved into the terrain. Despite the rugged surroundings, the path was wide, engineered, deliberate, and capable of supporting large vehicles. It bore signs of recent flooding, as though water had only just swept through, leaving behind a fine mist that still lingered in the air.

Ahead, the towering structures came into clearer view. Jesse scanned one carefully, counting eleven levels of balconies stacked on top of each other. The cavern ceiling loomed far above, dwarfing even these immense constructions. In the distance, the constant roar of falling water echoed through the chamber, louder than anything a Polkan would normally tolerate.

“The sky lounge would have the best view,” Daniel called out with a grin.

The road forked toward an open archway. As they approached, a massive statue came into view within the foyer. It depicted a large, heavysset figure seated cross-legged, palms pressed together in a gesture of stillness. The statue rested at the centre of a fountain, surrounded by carvings of strange, mythological creatures, beasts unlike anything Jesse had ever encountered. Their forms blended the strength of bears with the strangely serene faces of Polkans.

To one side, a spiral staircase wound upward into the structure. Another archway opened to the left, and they moved toward it together. The floor was scattered with debris, and each step was taken with caution. Jesse remained alert; every shadow carried the possibility of movement.

Beyond the archway lay a vast theatre, reminiscent of the Plus-type building they had encountered weeks earlier. A stage stood at the far end, its backdrop adorned with intricate, interwoven square patterns. The room differed in subtle ways; there were no chairs, only low platforms for kneeling.

Statues, relics, and paintings lined the walls. Soft light filtered through windows along one side, illuminating the room just enough to reveal its details.

“What is this place?” Jesse whispered. “Another kind of auditorium?”

She approached a strange artefact near the stage, three vertical bars held between two fixed points. She touched one lightly, and it shifted. Curious, she pushed it further. It spun, releasing a clear, resonant chime that echoed through the chamber.

She spun the others, each one producing a distinct tone. When she pushed them harder, the ringing grew louder, filling the gallery with layered echoes before slowly fading into silence.

Daniel gently took her hand and guided her along the gallery. Each artefact shared a similar theme: figures seated in meditation, ornate chalices topped with spires, small relics encased in glass, and miniature structures resembling houses. Each was marked with inscriptions, though none were recognisable.

When they reached the far end, Daniel glanced at her. “Shall we continue?”

Back in the foyer, the contrast in sound became apparent. The noise from outside had softened, while the interior carried its own quiet weight. Daniel suggested they rest before continuing to climb higher.

They sat on a bench opposite the statue. Jesse leaned into him, exhaustion overtaking her. Within moments, she drifted into sleep.

Flap... flap... flap...

Jesse’s eyes snapped open.

The sound echoed faintly through the chamber. She felt Daniel beside her and shook him gently. He stirred with a low groan. Her body felt heavy, as though sleep still clung to her.

Flap... flap...

She turned toward the sound. A fish thrashed weakly in the shallow water of the fountain.

Her stomach tightened, hunger surfacing sharply. She couldn’t remember their last meal.

“Time to eat,” Daniel muttered.

Jesse reached into her pack, retrieving dried meat sticks. She hesitated briefly before opening the packet, relieved to find them still intact. She handed one to Daniel, who swallowed it almost instantly. The second he ate more slowly. She followed suit.

Around them, the darkness thickened.

“It’s night, I think, based on our sleeping pattern,” Daniel said quietly.

They would need to rely on their heightened senses now.

After eating, Jesse felt some strength return. She moved toward the fountain, sitting along its stone edge. The water was murky, thick with sediment, but something glinted faintly beneath the surface.

“What are those?” she asked.

Daniel reached in and retrieved a small, flat disc. It shimmered faintly with a golden hue.

“A coin... I think,” he said.

Jesse retrieved a small torch from her pack. When it flickered to life, relief washed over her. Daniel examined the coin under the light.

It bore the profile of a Polkan head, surrounded by text: *Delldimple III Europa 843417*.

He turned it over. The same interlocking square symbol appeared. They found another, nearly identical, though marked *843423*. “Five years apart,” Jesse murmured. “This place... It’s ancient. Over fifteen thousand years, at least.”

Her thoughts drifted back to her childhood, when she explored the equatorial caves, climbing and sliding through endless stone passages. But this was different. This felt like origin.

“Where did they come from?” The question lingered in her mind.

Daniel pocketed the coin and gestured toward the staircase.

As they climbed, Jesse noticed faint patterns along the walls, imprints resembling the statue's silhouette below. She brushed her hand across the surface. The material crumbled at her touch, leaving a trail behind her fingers.

At the first landing, a hallway stretched ahead, lined with doors. Daniel opened one; the door fell from its hinges with a brittle crack.

Inside was an apartment-like space, with a shattered window opening to the cavern beyond. The damage looked recent, likely from the flood.

Jesse began piecing events together. The vanished sea. The quake. The sudden flooding.

“This place was sealed for thousands of years,” she said. “Until recently.”

Daniel’s eye widened. “Astounding.”

The room itself was modest, a bed, a small table, two chairs, and a kitchenette. Dampness clung to everything, though it was clear the water had not fully submerged the space.

On a nearby shelf, Jesse found several weathered books. She carefully picked one up, a red leather-bound volume.

High School Dictionary.

Inside it read: “FARMINGHAM SCHOOL DEPARTMENT JUN 13 1955.”

The format was unfamiliar, but significant.

She turned the pages carefully, discovering illustrations, creatures, maps, and figures unlike any she had known. One image stopped her cold: a being with a Polkan's upper body and a horse's lower body.

Centaur.

Another page showed figures labelled simply ‘Man with two arms, two legs and upright. A different species, perhaps a real one.

Jesse lifted the book.

“This is it.”

Daniel studied it, landing on an image of a towering structure.

“Cathedral,” he read. “That’s what we saw.”

Jesse placed the book into her pack.

In the bathroom, she found small bottles, likely medicine. One refused to open. She pocketed it anyway.

“Ready?” Daniel asked.

She stepped carefully, avoiding a weakened floorboard, and followed him out. Together, they descended the staircase, leaving the silent relics behind as they stepped back into the vast, forgotten city.

The Cave Reveals

A scattered field of bubble-like towers stretched across the cavern, their forms rising from shallow, retreating waters. With each step they took, the subterranean lake seemed to shrink back, as if yielding to their presence. Some towers stood half-drowned, their bases swallowed by the water, while others rested on small islands at the pool's centre.

One tower drew their attention. It was different, taller, more deliberate. A narrow column rose from the cavern floor, piercing upward through the ceiling like a needle threading the world above. Small, evenly spaced windows spiralled along its outer shell, climbing toward the unseen. They waded through the cold water and approached it.

At its base stood a set of heavy, rusted, sealed, unwelcoming metal double doors. Daniel stepped forward, gripping the centre seam, and pulled, but nothing. He tried again, harder. Still nothing. He glanced back at Jesse, giving a familiar look, another obstacle.

Jesse's eyes wandered. A small metal box sat beside the entrance, fitted with a narrow slot and a keypad. The slot was thin, too thin for anything obvious. Then she remembered.

The discs.

She reached into her pocket and pulled one free. Carefully, she slid it into the slot, mimicking a motion from a forgotten world. The disc slid in partway... then stopped.

"Well," she muttered, "that was hopeful."

Daniel leaned in, pressing the disc further. It resisted, spring-loaded. He pushed harder.

“Click.” They both froze.

Daniel turned back to the doors and pulled again. This time, they shifted. Slowly, reluctantly, the metal panels slid apart and water spilled out.

First a trickle, then a steady rush, pouring from within as though the tower itself had been holding its breath for centuries. They waited until the flow eased before stepping inside.

The chamber within was circular, centred around a spiralling staircase that rose into shadow. Paintings lined the walls, their frames dripping with the water that had filled the room. Much of the artwork was blurred, colours smeared into indistinct forms. Still, some images endured.

One portrait showed a bearded man in formal attire, a dark suit, a bright shirt, and a striped cloth hanging from his neck. His beard was trimmed close, unusual among the Polkans, who were typically hairless.

Another painting depicted a woman. Her long, wavy hair framed her face, crowned by an elaborate headpiece adorned with jewels. Symbols of status, Jesse realised, markers of rank. Her eyes were dark, her lips vivid, her presence commanding. Beneath the painting, faded text read:

Queen Mary.

Jesse lingered there, studying her. There was something captivating, something different with this species.

Around them were more images: flying machines, diagrams, and one detailed rendering of the very tower

they stood in. The illustration showed it extending beyond the cavern, blooming on the surface like a lily ready to open.

“Are you coming?” Daniel called, already ascending.

They climbed, and the staircase wound endlessly upward, the air growing lighter with every turn. Eventually, the stone ceiling gave way to something brighter. They had left the cave behind.

Higher still, windows revealed glimpses of the outside, vast, open, unfamiliar.

At the top, they entered a wide room. A viewing chamber. Desks circled the space, lined with silent monitors. Jesse stepped toward the glass, staring out at a flat, open stretch of land.

“A runway...” she murmured. “This was... a control tower?”

Daniel sat before the dead screens, while Jesse searched a nearby cabinet. Inside, among forgotten objects, she found something familiar, a device appearing to be a recorder.

Her pulse quickened. Turning it over, she saw a slot, perfectly shaped for their memory stick.

“This might be it.”

She connected a power pack from her bag and waited. The device flickered to life. Daniel moved to her side as she inserted the Earth 120065 stick.

The screen stabilised. A man appeared. Bearded, like the portrait below.

The voice crackled, faint at first. Jesse adjusted the volume.

She remembered the earlier recording, the one that spoke of Europa, once a frozen moon of Jupiter, torn free

by the rogue planet SIMP2125 and captured by Earth's gravity. Over ages, it transformed, ice melting, oceans forming, life beginning.

Now, the story continued.

Earth, Tellus, had sent life to Europa. Marine species first seeded into new oceans. Then, as the environment shifted, land began to emerge. Humanity followed. The surface was harsh at first, barren and unstable, but beneath it lay vast cave systems, shelter.

They survived below.

Over time, the atmosphere stabilised. The poles became habitable. Life spread, plants, animals, people. Europa became a second world.

But Earth... Earth did not endure.

Its polar ice melted, drowning the planet. The last survivors fled, here, to Europa. Those who remained adapted beneath the oceans. The recording ended.

Jesse turned to Daniel, stunned. "Can you imagine that?"

Daniel gave a quiet smile and powered the device down. "Now we know."

He held up the memory stick, its weight suddenly greater than before.

"This place... they built it. And somehow... we're connected to them."

Outside, night had fallen.

They descended and pushed open the outer door. It burst outward, and a rush of air escaped like a long-sealed breath. The smell hit immediately, salt, decay, the remnants of a dead sea. Jesse stepped onto the mud and looked up.

Searching for Tellus.

She imagined it, vast oceans, hidden worlds beneath the surface, life continuing in silence. Ahead, the horizon stretched, littered with the remains of what once thrived, a world drained, a world remembered. Perhaps, one day, the cycle would turn again. Oceans would return. Life would rise. And somewhere, far from here, they would find their way back.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Over the last 20 years, I've started to write things down; my father published many books, so there must be some interest there. I've been writing fiction as a hobby and to improve my writing skills, keeping diaries of our travels. At first, it was handwriting, and now it's in electronic form. I once attended a writing forum, and the lecturer said that to be a good writer, you either need to be extremely talented or write one million words. It's daunting, I know, but I'm not there yet. Perhaps it will be two. I'll let you be the judge.

Andrew Cheffers