

DOUBLE JUMP

by Jason Glaser

The Lattice of Worlds

Book One

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The characters presented in this book are not intended to represent any existing persons or characters, living or dead. Although many characters in *Double Jump* represent re-imaginings and/or composites of popular or obscure game characters and game archetypes, all characters are distinct, separate entities

and should be read as such.

I'd like to thank my wife, Becky, for tolerating my geeky gamer identity and supporting my dreams. I'd also like to thank my dear friend of many decades, Lester Thiem, with whom I have spent countless hours playing co-op games and discussing game theory. Thanks to every one of you who catch one of my subtle inside jokes and smiles.

CHAPTER 1

Jeremy Chin had passed by the same bank nearly every day for the last two years, completely unaware until now that the American flag hanging over the bank's doors only had forty-nine stars on it. He so rarely looked up at the faces of the endlessly tall skyscrapers he'd have to pass by to get to school, the park, the grocery store, or home again. The sky was always covered with some form of haze or smog into which the buildings harmlessly poked.

But today the sky was different—crystal clear, with a sun glaring down like the focused beam usually achieved through a magnifying glass. He had to shield his face. The incredibly rich blueness above Jeremy held only one occupant, a giant zeppelin adorned with two bony, draconic wings of taut stretched black scales which seemed to serve no purpose other than to terrify, yet did not hinder its slow flight across the heavens. And from it, the sky was falling.

The dusty gray cloudiness Jeremy associated with the city's usual atmosphere had disintegrated into glittering particles, like a rain of diamonds smaller than pinheads drifting slowly toward the street. The gentle descent seemed to make time itself slow down, and Jeremy took it all in as if for the first time: the weathered bricks, the shiny windows, and the incomplete Star Spangled Banner with seven equal rows of seven identical stars, as precise as it was inaccurate.

Jeremy snapped out of his trance when the ream of graph paper he had just bought landed on the sidewalk. Although the world seemed to have slowed to a crawl, the bundle had fallen from his relaxed hand at normal speed. The sound set Jeremy back to thinking again, and the twinkling dust sweeping down the sides of the buildings all at once now took on a hint of menace—less like gemstones and more like tiny teeth,

eating away all visible surfaces of the city above his head.

He was struck by the urge to run and gave into it, leaving the graph paper on the ground. For a moment he considered shedding his weighty backpack and possibly even his Rivercrest High hooded jacket, but once in motion could not bring himself to slow or stop. The school was closer than home. He would go there and sort through this feeling of dread. He sprinted around pedestrians who stood like statues, their mouths agape at the spectacle, much as Jeremy himself had been moments before.

One thing was for sure—it was no longer the boring, same-as-every-other-day day he'd been complaining about to his friends, his only close friends, Ken and Derek, over lunch. For a moment he considered what they would say, and how they might laugh at him, if this whole event turned out to be some kind of fancy parade or celebration and the shimmering dust little more than confetti. But it did not stop him. Jeremy bounded up the steps three at a time and threw open the doors. Only once he had gotten inside did he stop to lean, panting, against the door to look out again through the wide glass panels of the high school's front door. The earliest specks were just beginning to settle on the trees outside. As they collected there, the green leaves seemed to become obscured, as if somehow smudged like wet ink.

His homeroom and biology teacher, Mr. Prejchik, stood beneath a tree looking up at the dissolution of color in the leaves with morbid fascination. Only as the flickering specks began to settle on his own skin did Mr. Prejchik begin to seem concerned for his own safety over that of the school's tree. Jeremy watched as his teacher took a sharp intake of air, as if in pain. The thick doors and glass of the entryway muted nearly all sound from the outside, but he was sure he could hear a gasping cry. As he strained to make it out, the distant wails and agonizing screeches of others were beginning to join in.

The reason was soon abundantly clear. As had the foliage before it, the healthy tan of Mr. Prejchik's skin began to disperse and free itself from his arms and face like a cloud. Where there was once vitality and depth, there was only a translucent wavering swirl left behind. No bone, no blood, just empty air. By the time half of Prejchik's face was seemingly disintegrated, Jeremy had already turned in horror and bolted further inside the building.

In doing so, he turned his back on one of the few staff members at the school who had ever believed in him. Jeremy recalled the most recent

“pep talk” that Prejchik had given him. It was the day after he’d blown off a tutoring session that he’d reluctantly agreed to as an opportunity to bolster his sagging biology grade.

“I know you know the answer to this next one,” he’d said, “because we spent a half an hour on it the last time you came to class. What three things are required for photosynthesis? What you wrote—you didn’t even try!”

Jeremy shrugged. “There is no right answer,” he mumbled.

“Of course there’s a right answer,” Prejchik said. He began counting on his fingers. “Water, sunlight, carbon dioxide.”

“But you also need a plant,” Jeremy replied, staring at the clock. “And the plant needs soil. Soil needs gravity, and an atmosphere to hold it all together. The whole thing probably requires a universe to be in, and maybe even a God to set it all in motion.”

“You’re over-thinking it, Jeremy. This isn’t philosophy, it’s biology.”

“It’s all connected somehow.”

“Jeremy, you’re brighter than your grades indicate. Personally, I believe you can do anything you put your mind to. But for whatever reason you always have to challenge every little thing.”

Jeremy continued to stare blankly at the wall.

“...and everyone, for that matter. These aren’t meant to be trick questions, Jeremy. I’m on your side.”

Jeremy had looked at him then. “But on my side of what?”

Right now Jeremy was on the side of survival. He was convinced that the dust falling outside was a dangerous attack of some kind, perpetrated by the bizarre airship he’d seen passing over. It was too late for Prejchik, he told himself.

His early pangs of guilt were disrupted by the sound of more horrified screaming and yelling from upstairs. Against his better judgment, Jeremy took the nearby stairs up to get a glimpse, hoping that the terror was a result of people witnessing the chaos at work outside through the windows, windows that were hopefully shut tight and sealed strongly enough to protect against the dust that had begun to evaporate a man before Jeremy’s eyes.

It was worse than he imagined. The brick and mortar of the school fared no better than plant or flesh. He poked his head into the first classroom he came to and saw that the roof and walls of the building were fading and slipping out of existence. The dust was penetrating,

dissolving desks and the students hiding under the desks alike with equal ease. Jeremy marveled as he saw a few students, crouched in resolute stillness in the earthquake emergency drill position they'd all learned as students—on your knees, head down, hands over the back of your neck.

For a second he thought about scouting the rooms for Tara, but remembered that she and her family were away on vacation. It had been hard to convince himself to even go to school without her there in English class, even though it spared him some embarrassment around her. The last day she was there, she'd caught him turned around in his desk, sneaking a glimpse at her chest as she leaned over her class journal entry. He couldn't deny that he'd taken a glance at the view afforded him by the opening of her shirt as it hung away from her impressive breasts (and were they ever impressive), but that hadn't been what had caught his attention that day. He had been enthralled by her necklace, which appeared to be a gold chain connected to a pendant in the shape of a "staircase" Tetris block, accented with an emerald jewel in each of the four squares of its shape. They'd matched her eyes perfectly. Jeremy hoped she was safe, and abandoned everyone else.

He flew down the stairs toward the lower level. As he made his way back through the main floor, he saw small packs of students fleeing outside, as if the building was on fire, as if they needed to assemble outside in the parking lot. He wondered why no one had hit an alarm. Everyone was just running around like crazy.

His destination was the very center of the bottom level, where the locker rooms were. The door to the boys' locker room was shut tight when he got there. He slammed his scrawny body against the door. It didn't budge.

"Who's out there?" came a voice from the other side.

Jeremy started to give his name, but thought better of it. If it was the football team or something in there, they might not let him in even if the world was coming to an end. Being trapped in a shelter with any number of those smug, dim-witted assholes wasn't an idea he relished either, even in the face of armageddon, but it was still preferable to disintegration.

"Open up, man!" he said instead.

There was a pause. "Are you a zombie?" the voice said. "Are people turning into zombies out there?"

"Dingo, is that you?" Jeremy yelled.

"Jer?"

The door flew open. On the other side was Kyle, one of the guys in Derek's Dungeons & Dragons campaign. Everyone called him Dingo because one of his characters, a chaotic neutral rogue, had kidnapped a baby to get in the good graces of a powerful local baroness. To cover his tracks he successfully convinced, through two perfect "natural twenty" charisma rolls, the parents and the town guard that a dingo had taken the baby. Derek, as DM, had wailed mournfully in character as the mother in question, lamenting "A dingo! A dingo took my baby!" The game was regularly disrupted with laughter for the rest of the night from the soon running gag.

"Come on in, man. Hurry."

Kyle ushered Jeremy inside the locker room. It was vacant, save for the two of them. There was a laundry cart nearby filled with heavy things looted from the coaches' office—loaded file cabinet drawers, chairs, the computer, and a bunch of towels. As soon as the pair were inside and away from the door, Kyle locked it with a set of keys he'd probably likewise taken from the office and pushed the cart up against the door.

"I thought there'd be more people here," Jeremy said.

"There were some dudes beating on the door a few times, some screaming and yelling, but I couldn't tell who they were or what they were going to do so I kept the door locked." Jeremy noticed that Kyle had a semi-vacant, uncentered look in his eyes. Jeremy recalled Derek saying Kyle could be a little spacey and that he probably sniffed the paint thinner he used while designing his fantasy miniatures. "It's the zombie apocalypse out there, isn't it? I knew this day would be coming. If only I'd been at home when it happened, I'd have my shotguns and my water supply."

"No zombies," Jeremy told him. He tried to force himself to breathe slower so he could talk properly. "But it's something just as bad, maybe worse even."

"Worse than zombies? No way."

"It's some kind of a chemical weapon, I think, dropped on the city. It's dissolving everything it touches. Just wipes it away completely. No residue at all."

"For real?" Kyle asked. "Where'd it come from?"

"Some kind of blimp. Looked straight out of World of Warcraft. Had dragon wings on it, I think."

"Coulda been from Warcraft II. World of Warcraft zeppelin wings

look more like fish fins.”

Jeremy couldn't believe Kyle was talking about this like it was not only believable, but somehow plausible.

“Can't see why it would drop a bio-weapon, though,” Kyle said. “Some kind of magic powder, maybe.”

“Magic powder?” Jeremy responded, incredulous. His head was starting to hurt from trying to keep his reality in order inside his head. “You can't be serious.”

“You got a better explanation for glimmer dust that wipes out everything it touches?”

Jeremy blinked. “I never said what it looked like. How did you know that?”

Kyle leaned his head back slightly and pointed up. Jeremy followed his gaze to see that the ceiling above their heads had begun to fade away silently. There was no cracking brick or straining metal, no pained death throes of a building coming apart. Just nothingness above their heads, with a shimmering seam running along the edge between what still remained and the void left behind. Some of the sparkling flakes were beginning to fall into the room. The silence with which it had crept up on them was horrifying. Jeremy wondered if everyone above their heads was already gone, and that was the reason why he could not hear any screaming through the growing hole.

“Oh shit!” Jeremy said with a start. “We've gotta get out of here.” But Kyle seemed mystified by the colorless empty space spreading overhead and the bits of sparkling doom easing down around them. They looked like bits of dust caught in a sunbeam, but they fell straight down, unaffected by air currents either from Kyle's breathing or Jeremy's leaping away from the innocent-looking specks. Jeremy ran back to the door and started to pull the laundry cart aside, but then stopped when he saw a few tiny holes start to eat their way into the door.

The only other exit was the one that led to the swimming pool. Jeremy yanked on the door, but it was locked. He remembered that Kyle still had the keys with him and hurried back to the central area of the locker room. Kyle held the keys in his hand, but just barely. His grip was easing. A moment later they slid out and fell to the floor, which itself was starting to lose a few spots. The keys clattered dangerously close to one of them. Although patches were now missing from Kyle's left cheek, shoulder, and arm as a result of the settling dust, he didn't seem to be in either the pain

nor the panic that everyone else had been. He just continued to look up into the bright empty absence that beckoned and whispered hollowly, “That’s it, man. Game over, man. Game over....”

Jeremy kneeled and leaned in, trying to get at the keys, but there were too many of the sparkling flakes passing down around it. So he ran back to the laundry cart and grabbed a towel. It felt wet, like maybe Kyle had soaked them all before tossing them in the cart for added weight to help serve as a blockade. Jeremy twirled up one corner and ran back to the expanding pillar of light. He snapped at the keys in the familiar locker room tradition, and the whip-like crack blasted the key ring out of danger and under a bench. Jeremy afforded himself one more look at Kyle. The top of his head was gone, down to the lower jaw, which was still whispering over and over to itself. Jeremy let out a repulsed cry.

Extremely motivated now, Jeremy scooted over to where the keys had come to rest and grabbed them from under the bench. The ring they were on had been amateurishly painted the school colors, black and white, but the keys weren’t labeled in any way. Jeremy tried to take his best guess and singled out a key to jam at the lock barring him from the pool area. It didn’t work. There was a thump from the room behind him, probably what remained of Kyle’s body collapsing onto what remained of the locker room floor he’d been standing on. In the back of his mind, Jeremy marveled again how in all of this, nothing had fallen through in the gaps in the ceiling, or gave way around them. It was as if the things affected were not really gone at all so far as structural integrity was concerned.

It took four tries to find the correct key, and two tries to make it work properly. He pulled the keys from the door lock and shoved them in his sweatshirt pocket, in case he needed them to get out the other side, into the girls’ locker room. The pool was deathly silent, like a crypt, save for the sound of his own breathing and footsteps. The filters were not running. The surface of the water was completely still.

Jeremy dropped to his knees down onto the tile. He had a strong compulsion to vomit, but forced it away. He still had his cell phone in a pocket of his backpack, and followed the idea to set the pack down, pull the phone out, and power it on. No reception. Was it because he was deep in the bowels of the school, or because the communication towers and antennae no longer existed on the outside?

Even if the event was only city wide, Jeremy’s family, neighbors, and

friends were probably all gone already. He wondered why he couldn't feel an urge to cry, and began to feel so guilty about not feeling guilty that Jeremy tried to force himself to shed a tear, and was momentarily relieved when his vision began to blur over.

That is, until he realized that the blurring wasn't caused by his attempts to cry, but rather by the slow onset of the walls and ceiling around him beginning to lose their composition. The stuff, whatever it might be, was here. All four walls and the ceiling began to slip away all at once around him. As the particles once again began to fall, Jeremy knew there was only one other place he could go. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and dove headfirst, fully clothed, into the swimming pool.

Jeremy knew that panic would only cause his air to run out faster, and he didn't want to risk surfacing amid the fallout. He tried to stay as still as possible, clamping his arms around the bottom rung of the ladder as soon as he located it to keep himself deep below the surface. He knew he shouldn't, but he opened one eye to see what was happening. As the ripples dissipated, he could see the flecks begin to collect on the surface of the pool. They did not cause any ripples of their own, and Jeremy could not tell if they were causing any of the water to disappear. Above it all was an empty brightness, and although Jeremy recognized it as bright, it didn't hurt to look straight into it.

He was running out of air. He had no choice but to surface, but he did so slowly, pulling himself up the ladder, and letting only his face slip out above the water's surface. He caught a brief glimpse of the area around the pool, and saw that everything was missing. Gone. The pool drifted like an island in infinite space. Drawing in the largest gulp he could manage of whatever air remained around the pool, he swam back down to the bottom. The sides of the pool were being wiped away now, although the water remained where it was, inexplicably held in place by some unknown force instead of flowing out into the vastness surrounding it.

Again, the pool did not seem to be coming apart in the same way that everything else had. Maybe the dust was about spent, and if he could just outlast it another minute, it would be over. He could re-emerge and....do something. It was hard to tell with no background left above him if anything was still falling or not. Suddenly he noticed that he was no longer hanging onto the ladder. His hands no longer gripped anything, and he realized the ladder, too, was disappearing, even down to the

bottom rung. The mysterious force was still penetrating through the water, somehow. Without something to hold on to, Jeremy tried to swim down to stay low in the pool but could not find the bottom. It was as if the floor itself was gone and only water was left. The water and him.

A pounding, throbbing pulse inside his head began to make his eyes hurt even more inside his skull. He was running out of air again, but he knew he couldn't go up to the surface one more time. He wasn't even sure which direction the surface was. His survival instincts clashed with each other. Should he stay underwater in this inexplicable zone of protection and remain safe from the catastrophe that had befallen everything else, or kick for the surface and perhaps avoid drowning? His arms made the decision for him, reaching out for what he hoped was the edge of the water. He opened his eyes to help guide him. The infinite light surrounded his bubble of water. It seemed just beyond his reach, and yet Jeremy couldn't seem to get there. He rolled and thrashed in the water and tried another direction, only to come to a point where he could not overcome the last few centimeters of liquid and break to the surface.

New lights were beginning to flash before Jeremy, and he realized that these were inside his head. The pain was agonizing now. His lungs felt like they needed to cough or burst, but he knew that if he did, he'd be dead. He fought for as long as he could, but finally his mouth popped open of its own accord and drew the liquid around him into his chest. Jeremy felt a numbness spreading over his whole body, and for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, the dull brightness outside the confines of the water started to become eclipsed by something else, a darkness that began to throttle inward from the edges of his vision. It was like looking down a tunnel, and the sum total of the nothingness was in the center.

Was this it? he thought. *The light at the end of the tunnel?* It was the last coherent thought he could form before the darkness squeezed out the light and everything went black.

CHAPTER 2

The deflating dirigible spewed its noxious vapors out the vents opened in its sides by the tinkerers that guided the process upon the slate stone landing outside the castle walls. The initial gust flung copious amounts of volcanic dust off the ground and into the already dirty, thick air. For the third time in the last minute, the leather-gloved hand of the craft's captain brushed collecting ash off the shoulder of his proudly pressed uniform. He looked about the landscape and sneered.

“Who would be so foolish as to build a castle near the base of a volcano?”

A quartet of the pallid yellow creatures around him tromped in unison over to the bay at the back of the airship. They began to hoist a dull, lusterless crystal onto their shoulders. It was larger than any one of the creatures by half, and heavy. The foursome strained under the weight.

“Be careful with that, cretins. If it should crack...”

“There is no need to concern yourself, Baron,” came a soothing voice behind him. The craft's pilot turned to greet his host, a pale-skinned woman wrapped in a robe that seemed to be woven from black, fiery smoke. The train of it rolled across the slate behind her like puffs from a pipe. “If the crystal has been properly discharged, there is no threat to us. And as I have yet to find a way to recharge one of them, it is most likely useless now.”

With the utmost courtesy, the Baron replied “If I may ask then, sovereign, why bring it all the way back here to dispose of it?”

The wisps of the cloak roiled away from a slender arm that reached out and rested upon the man's shoulder. The arm was wrapped in a raised winding spiral that started at her wrist and continued all the way up to the shoulder. The spiral wriggled and moved along her arm,

revealing itself to be alive. In a soft sort of stroke, the woman's hand brushed more of the volcanic debris away from the heavily decorated uniform's collar.

"The answer to that question is related to your first," she answered him. "The sheer madness of such placement of a castle here is just another example of the ill-conceived design I intend to correct. Still, even this risk can be transformed into advantage. No one must ever discover the work I am doing here, and should our secrets ever come near to discovery, I have taken steps to ensure that the volcano shall erupt in a means of my choosing, and in doing so will conceal our efforts from prying eyes. Now report."

The one she called Baron made himself even more rigid, if that was possible, and spoke without hesitation. "Activation of The Undoing occurred exactly as planned. The entire region that you discovered was cleansed completely. We were a little concerned, once full collapse had occurred, that perhaps we would not be shunted back to the outer hub and would need to activate the beacon."

The slender hand pulled back from the shoulder. "And why was this?"

"At the very end of the collapse there was a delay of several minutes before we were expelled back into the lattice. We had expected to be returned as soon as The Undoing was completed."

"As you should have," the cloaked woman nodded. "Are you certain nothing remained?"

"We had both scryers and scanners on board. Were something left behind, they would have detected it."

The woman turned away from him and brought her hand up to her ghostly chin pensively. "And yet we still know so little about the artifacts, from their size to their nature. We know only the scope of their power and that they cannot be destroyed. We don't know if they might be detected by standard means." She began to pace as she considered the repercussions of the Baron's report. "I had assumed that using The Undoing on such an untapped and disconnected zone would cause any such artifacts to remain behind, ripe for collection, prior to total collapse. But if it, too, were shunted as you were..."

"Then it could be anywhere in the lattice of worlds," the Baron concluded. "To be found by anyone, anywhere. And yet, we have no evidence such a thing took place."

"We cannot afford to take even that risk. It is time to move forward to

the next stage. It will take some time to transfer another crystal. In the meantime, alert your network of spies. Should someone try to sell, identify, or smuggle anything unusual, I want to know about it.”

The Baron gave a curt nod. “At once, sovereign. I will send my drake riders with the message. I assume you have something in mind to deal with the assorted hero collectives once we initiate the next stage? Our operations will most assuredly not be a secret then.”

The woman smiled, almost warmly, and moved close to him, smoothing out the front of his uniform with her long fingers. “My strong, wise Baron. Their diversions are already underway. And by the time I am finished, what self-styled heroes remain will be utterly powerless to stop what is coming.”

* * *

“I think he’s coming around.” The voice penetrated through the dark fog and floating images of fire and ash. “He was murmuring about something. Can you hear me there, kid? You awake?”

Jeremy opened his eyes, and was greeted with yet another kind of all-encompassing light, this time bright and painful from somewhere overhead. Jeremy blinked and started to lift his hand to shield his eyes from the source of it.

“MADDOC, can we dim these lights?” came another, deeper voice.

“Of course, sir,” came a woman’s voice from overhead somewhere. “Although, in my learned opinion, it seems plenty dim in here already.”

The intensity of the room’s lighting decreased as soon as the woman finished speaking. Jeremy sensed more than a little sarcasm in her voice.

“I must have been dreaming,” Jeremy said, when he could find his words again. His throat felt dry, not at all like somebody who’d gotten a torso full of pool water.

“You’re sure he’s not a non?” the deeper voice said again. The light had been reduced now, and Jeremy could begin to focus on the pair of figures hovering over him.

“Positive,” the younger man affirmed. “Had to float him through two hubs just to get him here.”

“It is possible we might still learn something with a different series of tests,” the woman’s voice interjected again. “And you know how I love to

test.” Jeremy thought maybe it was coming through some sort of intercom or speaker. There was an electronic touch to it.

“I’m not dead?” Jeremy rasped.

“You’re here, aren’t you?” the deeper voice responded.

“Where am I?” Jeremy asked, rubbing his head.

“You’re in a recovery room in a hospital on New Mechatron City, three hubs from the southern edge of Protagondria.”

“I’m where?”

“You’re in the hospital.”

Jeremy looked around. The room was completely white, and nearly empty except for a pair of beds—one of which he was lying on—and a small table between the two. He could see the men who were talking now. One of them looked like he’d just walked in out of a war zone. He wore a gray and dark blue camo-patterned uniform complete with military vest and boots. Knife and gun holsters dangled off of him like Christmas tree ornaments. His hair was black with thin streaks of gray. Piercing eyes looked out from below a sweaty headband.

The other man was thin and wiry, with hair dyed (Jeremy assumed) green and adorned with numerous facial piercings. His face, neck, and forearms displayed a network of intricate, ornate symbols tattooed over a majority of the visible skin. He looked like some sort of punk rocker, but wore a spotless white cloth shirt and pants. A matching pristine robe hung on a hook nearby. But where was the woman?

“No, no. What was that last part? Prada...Proto....”

“The capital city, Protagondria,” the military man said simply.

“The capital city of what?” Jeremy answered back.

The two men looked at each other for a moment before the heavily pierced man stepped in. “Which hub are you from? Can you tell us what your archetype is? Or what class you are?”

“Hub? Archetype?” Jeremy shook his head. “I don’t get it. But class? Like school? I’m a senior.”

“A senior what?” the pierced man prodded.

Jeremy gave him a hard look. Nothing was making sense here. “What are you talking about? Seriously, what’s going on?”

Ignoring Jeremy, the immaculately clean-clothed but dark-inked young man turned to the older one and said, “Seems like he’s got amnesia.”

The older man nodded. “Epic hero.”

“I should have known the moment I saw him. His bizarre clothing

style should have given it away. I guess I just naturally expect to see super spiky blond hair on one.”

Jeremy blinked. “My bizarre what?” He raised up his arms and looked down at himself. Half of his sweatshirt and T-shirt were missing, separated cleanly off. He looked ridiculous, with his upper clothes barely hanging onto his body by one sleeve and a few strands around the collar. Likewise, half of one pant leg had vanished on the same left side. It had been the side with which he had been clinging onto the pool ladder. It must have been disintegrated, or whatever it was, along with the ladder and everything else.

“Well, if he’s just now coming off the amnesia, I probably don’t have to requisition him a big ass sword yet,” the military man said. “I’ve probably got a long sword of some kind out in the van.”

“Might as well run him through the standard up-to-speed training,” the man in white nodded. “We can assume he’s been trained for swordplay all his life but condescendingly remind him how to swing and block as if he’s never held a weapon. Then we can get him started killing some rats in Dankburg and see where it goes from there.”

“Man, I’m frazzled,” Jeremy said. His head was hurting again.

“My apologies, Frazzled,” the older man said. “I should have started with introductions. They call me Steel Serpent, and this is Xartus.”

“Who does?” Jeremy asked him. “And my name’s not Frazzled. It’s Jeremy.”

“Can you be sure? After all, you’ve got amnesia.”

“I don’t have amnesia,” Jeremy protested. “I know exactly who I am. I just don’t know what got me here.”

“From your appearance, I would conjecture that someone threw acid in your face,” came the female voice again. “Or maybe you fell from a tree, hitting every branch on the way down with your face, in order to protect the rest of your body. Or it could be that you just have an ugly face, in which case I cannot be certain of your injuries.”

“Who is that?” Jeremy wondered, looking around.

“That’s MADDOC,” Xartus said. “Stands for Medical Analysis and Diagnosis Direct Operational Control. She’s a bitch. Also a computer.”

“I resent that,” the voice announced. “I am far more than a computer. On a different topic, the results of your drug test are in. They are inconclusive. Although the logs indicate a complete analysis, the sheer number and volume of findings alone suggest some sort of

miscalculation. For instance, I detect in the lining of your lungs the presence of inhaled ash residue containing traces of a plant previously considered to be non-flammable. How you might have managed to smoke it defies comprehension.”

Xartus flipped a middle finger up at the ceiling. Jeremy was struck by how much the computerized voice reminded him of someone, or something.

“At ease, you two,” Steel interjected. “Jeremy, if you tell me the last thing you remember, I’ll see if we can’t figure out everything in between then and now.”

“Um...I was headed home from school,” Jeremy told them.

“And where was this?” asked Steel.

“Rivercrest High School in Rivercrest, California.”

“I’m unfamiliar with it,” Steel told him. “Is it in one of the outer hubs?”

“You mean, like a suburb?” Jeremy asked. “It’s kind of near Sacramento.”

“MADDOC?”

“I am unfamiliar with any such location. So far, the only part of his story that seems plausible is the word ‘in.’”

“Let’s try it this way. What is the connecting hub to your home’s nearest spawn point?”

Jeremy looked at him blankly. “I have no idea what you just asked.”

Steel Serpent’s eyes narrowed. “Have you ever been to Protagondria before? How about Saguaro City? The Ivory Citadel? Outpost Rho? How about The Bizarre Bazaar?”

“I’ve never even heard of any of those places.”

Steel shot a finger up to his ear and pressed it against the upper edge. “Hojo, I need you here on the double for a secured transport to Schrödinger. I want to see you outside the hospital in...”

Steel dropped his hand away from his ear and twitched his head, as a crackle audible even to Jeremy cut through. With his thumb, Steel pried out the small electronic device that Jeremy assumed was a communicator and gave it a puzzled look. He reached over and grabbed a hold of Jeremy’s bare arm.

“Hey!” Jeremy yelped.

“This little Q&A is going to have to continue a little later, and with smarter people than me in the room.”

“That will be rather difficult, I think,” said MADDOC calmly.

Xartus looked up. “Hey, why does Steel get the compliments?”

“It’s not a compliment,” MADDOC droned. “It’s merely an observation that getting anyone smarter than yourselves in the room will be difficult now that I’ve locked and sealed all exits.”

Steel Serpent tensed. “You’ve sealed the doors? Why?”

“Because if I don’t, it won’t properly contain all the neurotoxin I’m preparing to pump into this room.”

Jeremy’s heart began thumping faster in his chest. The whole thing seemed uncomfortably familiar. The computer’s threat reminded him of one of the video games he used to play at home.

“I thought she was on your side,” Jeremy said.

“She was,” Xartus replied, snatching his robe off the hook and wrapping it around himself. “In her own bitchy way.”

Wisps of yellowish tinted gas began to spew forth from the vents throughout the room. Steel tried the door to verify what MADDOC had told them. He turned to Xartus.

“You got a key on you?”

Xartus shook his head. “But I can do something about this neurotoxin, at least for a while.”

The green-haired Xartus sat cross-legged on the floor and began to chant softly. A white glow began to emanate from his body and washed over the three of them. The tendrils of toxin outside the glow seemed to whirl and thrash outside the borders, as if fearful of passing through.

Jeremy looked around the room, as if hoping that some solution might present itself among the sparse accommodations of the room. “You’d think if this was a hospital there’d be an oxygen tank or something nearby that we could breathe.”

“Unless the hospital was underwater, there’s no need for an oxygen tank. It’s already got beds.” Steel rammed his shoulder up against the door, to no avail. “Open the door, MADDOC.”

“I can’t do...”

“OPEN THE DOOR!”

“You won’t even let me finish the sentence. You never let me have any fun. Except that time you let me see what would happen when you sew a demon-possessed arm onto a cowboy. Remember that one? That was a real hoot.”

Jeremy looked at the edges of the door. There was barely an outline

around it. The thing seemed to be as perfectly fit and sealed as MADDOC claimed. On one side was a simple metal circle with a slot in it. Steel gave him a harsh glare.

“You gonna admire the door or help me get it open?” he barked. “Put some shoulder into it.”

Together with Steel, Jeremy threw himself against the door. He did it hesitantly, having seen how solid it was when Steel had done it, and not wanting to hurt himself.

“C’mon, dammit! Throw some real weight into it unless you want to die here.”

Jeremy looked about the room. The swelling clouds of neurotoxin were beginning to press inward against the glow, and hovering just over their heads. Jeremy nodded, and together they slammed into the door again. From the pocket of the remaining side of Jeremy’s sweatshirt came a metallic clank upon impact with the door as they slammed helplessly against it.

“What was that?” Steel said, looking at the noisy pocket. Jeremy reached down and pulled out the key ring from his school’s locker room. He remembered he’d stuffed it into the pocket after gaining access to the pool. Steel’s eyes seemed to bulge from beneath the headband.

“You mean you’ve had keys on you this whole time?!” He snatched the keys away from him and chose one, a smudged copper key that looked like it went to one of the gym lockers.

“Mr. Serpent, there’s no way that’s going to fit that lock,” Jeremy said.

The soldier ignored Jeremy and confidently shoved the key into the slot. With a distinct click, the circle turned and the door popped open.

“Time to go, Xartus,” Steel called. Xartus’ eyes popped open, and the glow seemed to buckle. He sprang to his feet and darted out through the newly opened door with Steel and Jeremy. Steel closed the door behind him again before stuffing the key ring into a pocket on his vest.

“Well, that was unfortunate,” MADDOC chimed in from what seemed like everywhere at once. “I don’t know why I never took the time to determine if our new friend Jeremy was carrying any keys on him. Now I’m here with egg on my face. Or at least I would be, if I had a face. Or an egg. Are you also carrying an egg, Jeremy? Because if you were, that would really be something.”

As Jeremy, Steel, and Xartus moved along the hallway to the lobby, Jeremy was surprised to see a number of patients and the occasional

staffer sauntering about calmly, paying no attention at all to anything outside their own business. Steel tapped his ear again.

“Hojo? Hojo!” he shouted. “MADDOC must be jamming me,” he told his companions.

Jeremy stepped in front of a woman wearing what looked like a hospital uniform of some kind. “Hey, do you have a line to the outside? We need to call the cops or something. Your AI is trying to kill us.”

The woman gave him an unfocused glance and responded, “It can be a dreary thing, sitting in these rooms all day without getting a chance to go outside. I bet if these patients just had the right sort of plants in their rooms, they’d all be so much happier.”

“What?” Jeremy said incredulously.

“Don’t bother. They’re all nons here,” Xartus grumbled.

“Aren’t they in danger?” Jeremy asked him. “Do you think MADDOC will try to take them out, too?”

“If she could, I’d like to see it,” Xartus said with a wry chuckle. “Us on the other hand, that’s a different story.”

Steel had already moved over to the elevator and stairwell door on one side of the lobby to find that the keypad did not respond and the stairway door was held shut. The aging soldier popped open the holster to his sidearm and drew out a pistol, which he fired three times into the door. He followed that up with a kick, but the door stayed closed.

“Damn,” he said. “She’s locked down everything.”

“Well, you know what they say: ‘When one door closes, another door opens, unless of course the person on the other side really, really doesn’t want to talk to you.’” MADDOC’s voice issued forth from the speaker next to the elevator. “I think it would be best if the three of you remained where you are. There’s no telling what trouble you might get into if I let you run free, and if I can’t kill you properly, I might as well keep you here until someone can come to pick you up.”

“And who would that be?” Steel prodded, but for once the computerized voice did not say anything.

“Better use another one of the keys on that ring,” Xartus called back.

“If she’s locked down every door in the building, we won’t have enough keys to make it to the outside.” He stroked the short gray fuzz of his beard. “But maybe we would have enough keys to get somewhere else.”

“You got a place in mind?”

“A couple, but we can’t discuss it out in the open. She’ll pick up on it.”

“If you want to lay low for a while, I’ll let you down to the kitchen,” MADDOC said. “You can each hide in an oven. I’d never think to look for you there.”

“This way,” Steel said. He led Xartus and Jeremy to a door only slightly different than the others on the floor, with a metal push bar across it. Steel gave it a shove only to find it locked same as all the others. He pulled out the key ring he’d taken from Jeremy and jammed a key at random into a similar slot on the door. With a simple click, the door unlocked. At the same moment, the key ring dropped to the ground. Jeremy noticed that there were seven keys on it and one fob in the shape of a black number eight billiard ball. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought there had been more when he was fumbling with them back in his school’s locker room. Steel swept up the key ring and pushed the door inward, motioning for the other two to follow him in.

“You’re sure she can’t monitor us in here?” Xartus whispered, once inside.

“I’m sure, and no need to keep your voice down either,” Steel said. “I used to sneak into these things with Kate Bowman now and then for the occasional ‘agent debriefing’. If MADDOC had gotten any notion of that, I’d have heard plenty about it by now, so I think we’re clear.”

“So what’s the plan, boss?” Xartus asked. Jeremy took the “boss” comment as validation that these two were part of some group with Steel as the leader. They certainly worked together with familiarity and ease, and Steel must have some real pull somewhere if he could walk around a hospital while draped in weaponry.

“You stay here with Jeremy and do your best to keep him safe. MADDOC mentioned that someone might be coming to pick us up, and I don’t know how quickly that might be. If she had actually turned on us a while prior to her gas attack, she might have somebody already stationed in the building on their way.”

“So where are you going?”

“I’m going for the R&D wing three floors below us. There’s a gadget up there that I think might help us get out of here, without having to waste time with keys. I should have enough left on this ring to get me in there.”

“Won’t MADDOC know what you’re up to as soon as you leave this room?” Jeremy butted in.

Xartus gave him a dirty look, but Steel seemed to humor him for the moment. “She won’t see me,” Steel replied. “I might have a spare stealth suit stashed nearby the R&D, and until I get there, I’ll be using this.” He pointed toward one corner of the small room. There was an open box filled with hospital robes. Jeremy was happy he hadn’t been put in one himself when he’d been brought here, but he wondered why he was the only patient on the ward who wasn’t wearing one.

“You’re going to disguise yourself as a patient?” Jeremy had figured Steel would want to keep his gear.

Steel gave a stiff exhale in response. “Not the robes...” He picked up the cardboard box and flipped it over, dumping the robes out on the ground before huddling low to the ground and covering himself up with the box.

“Ok,” he said from underneath the box. “Xartus, the door please.”

Jeremy looked at the shuffling box in disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding me. There’s no way that’s going to work.”

“I once made it into the heart of an evil scientist’s lair in a box only half this size.” Steel’s voice was calm, albeit slightly muffled. “I should be able to slip myself up the stairs and get to R&D before MADDOC catches on.”

As ordered, Xartus opened the door, and the box containing Steel Serpent shuffled out. As soon as the last corner was through, Xartus closed it again.

“So what do we do now?” Jeremy asked.

“We wait for Steel to come back and get us.” Xartus sat himself down on the pile of dumped robes and picked at his teeth with the nail on his pinky finger.

“Great,” Jeremy said. “Let’s hope he brings back a box big enough for all of us.”

“That only works for him,” Xartus fired back.

“Of course it does,” Jeremy said, sitting down on the floor across from Xartus. “Probably takes years of training.”

Jeremy got the feeling that he was going to die today, and most likely in the weirdest way possible.

CHAPTER 3

Jeremy is seven years old. He is leaning against his father's chest as his dad plays a game on their television screen. As his father presses buttons and shifts the controller stick, a super-powered being leaps from rooftop to rooftop in pursuit of a sequence of glowing lights hovering above flagpoles, generators, fire escapes, and tall spires.

“One of the fundamental elements in game design is to determine the sort of game that it's going to be in terms of how it progresses from start to finish, and how much control you put into the player's hands. In a game that is ‘on rails’ as we say, the game forces the player to constantly move forward in a predetermined direction, having to either meet and survive the challenges along the way in sequence or lose the game. If there is a section the player can't pass, they can either give up, replay old sections, or work harder to get better.”

There is a slight delay between one glowing target disappearing and a new light appearing, but the inhumanly dextrous being on screen changes direction and leaps toward the next sequential light even before it shows up on screen. Each target is collected with practiced efficiency.

“Some games are what we call ‘sandbox’ games. Some game events may have to occur before others can be accessible, but the player has the ability to go mostly where he wants and explore the environment. There are often amusing distractions or mini-games like this one to pass the time. Some sandbox games are so extensive in this regard that people can play hours upon hours without ever advancing the central story.”

There is a helicopter above the action, with a glowing target suspended from one of the landing struts. The being onscreen lands and rebounds off the strut just outside the edge of the whirling blades. With a perfectly timed redirect, the on-screen being reverses direction in the air and lands on a pixel-thin landing point at the center of the rotor atop the flying craft. Using it as a launch pad, the superhuman is able to leap high enough to clear the top of the tallest building on the cityscape. The hero veers away from the circuit course now and uses his height and trajectory to clear the outer wall of

the game field. The buildings collapse into two-dimensional backdrops and the superhuman appears to fall into endless white space outside the game environment.

“There is another form of gameplay that designers find both exhilarating and terrifying. They call it ‘emergent gameplay.’ It happens when one or more unorthodox players use the tools and rules inside a game to create something that the game designers never anticipated, or perhaps never intended. In its most basic form, it involves finding bugs or exploits like I did here. Sometimes they can be used to the players’ advantage, and sometimes it kills the game. My character here will just keep falling forever now, unless I reload the game. In a different game, wholly independent gameplay elements can emerge to modify, improve, or even transform the face of a game. Give people just a few building blocks, and they can really surprise you sometimes.”

“I wouldn’t call what you’re doing now emergent,” Jeremy says.

“Oh?” his father says. “What would you call it?”

“Broken.”

“Ugh, what I wouldn’t give for a smoke,” Xartus grumbled.

With a few minutes to himself to think, Jeremy could now try to confront head on what were undeniable parallels between elements of this world, such as Steel Serpent, and the world Jeremy knew. At least, parallels to the games in the world Jeremy knew. There were a number of differences, but the nature, the *archetype*, as Steel and Xartus had referenced, was unmistakable.

The obvious thought was that he was dreaming, but while the details were fuzzy, he seemed to recall dreaming just before he woke up in this hospital. Could somebody dream within a dream? Another possibility was that he was dead. But if that was the case, why the threat and fear of being killed by neurotoxin?

“This must have something to do with that shimmering dust,” Jeremy said aloud to himself.

“Huh?” Xartus responded. “What shimmering dust?”

“My town, maybe my whole world, was dumped on by this glittery stuff that made everything disappear. It wiped everything out, including parts of my clothes I think, and then I ended up here somehow.”

An angry look crossed Xartus’ face. “I thought you said the last thing you remembered was walking home from school.”

“I was just setting up the story, but we never got any further than that.”

“Well fucking A, kid. We needed info, not your autobiography! That would have been good to know. You may not look like much, but your

stock just went way, way up.”

“Why? Do you know what that mist was?”

“Not exactly, but it happened to all of us once, a long time ago. It was the event that created the lattice of worlds. Everyone who’s not a non is a remnant of some other world. The leftover pieces of those worlds form the lattice.”

“But what could have caused it?”

Xartus seemed unconcerned, shrugging his shoulders at the idea of contemplating the origins of present existence. “No idea. Everybody just pretty much assumed it was magic.”

Jeremy laughed. “There’s no such thing as magic.”

The muscles in Xartus’ jaw tightened. “Excuse me, shit-for-brains, but perhaps you noticed me save our asses back in that hospital room by casting Resist Poison? Damn, see if I ever cast a healing spell on you, ya prick.”

The realization hit Jeremy like a brick. “You’re a white mage.”

“Damn skippy, dimwit. Eighth level.”

Jeremy examined the bizarre sight that was Xartus, the spiky green hair, the heavy tattoos, the copious amount of piercings and metal interspersed throughout the immaculately clean white clothes he was wearing.

“I just expected a white mage to be more...monk like. Reverential, I guess.”

“Hey, you know what? Fuck you, nonbeliever.” Xartus cleared his throat and fired off a wad of thick phlegm into a corner of the room. “Don’t be dissing magic and then tell me how to practice my religion.”

From outside in the hall, there was a hushed ding from the distant elevator. The two stopped their heated discussion and listened. Jeremy thought it was a little too soon for Steel to be back. Plus, there were two audible sets of footsteps. One of them was exceptionally heavy and loud, like someone throwing small sandbags out in front of himself as he walked.

“Should we peek to see who it is?” Jeremy asked softly. Xartus shook his head no. The sound of the heavy thumping grew louder and closer, and Jeremy moved up to the door to examine the keyhole. The thumps stopped just outside the door. “Maybe we should lock the door again...”

A monstrous bright red boxing glove came crashing through the door. The slightly cushioned mass inside it merely grazed Jeremy, but it was

enough to send him spinning backward. He would have toppled over had Xartus not caught him. The immense, gloved hand hooked the inside of the door and pulled it right out of the frame before discarding it on the hallway floor. The light from the hall was mostly eclipsed by the massive bulbous figure taking up nearly the entire doorway. Jeremy could see that the obstruction was an extremely flabby bald man wearing only boxing trunks, boxing shoes, boxing gloves, and a cheap looking tin crown that seemed never to so much as shift about, even as the immense man tried to cram himself through the door frame. Jeremy recognized him immediately.

“Crown Prince Fat Ass,” Xartus said. “I see you’ve managed to maintain your trim figure. However do you do it? Eating twice as much as you train, I’d say.”

“Hey, it’s a white mage! I’d better watch out—he might heal me to death. Haw-haw!” The very heavy-set pugilist regarded Xartus inside the room for a moment before scoping the rest of the maintenance room. “So where you got Steel Serpent in here?”

“You mean you can’t see him?” Xartus mocked. “What are you... blind?” His white clothes glowed slightly, and Xartus lashed out. A small, brilliant pair of darts flashed into existence in front of him and propelled themselves into the obese antagonist’s eyes. The boxer blinked and tried to bring his hands up to rub them, but the motion caused him to become wedged in the door frame with his hands held up in front of him. Xartus followed up by grabbing a broom and snapping the brush off over his knee. Wielding the broomstick like a pole arm, Xartus brought several hard strikes down onto his enemy’s head and shoulders. The “crown prince” grunted at each blow.

The corpulence of Xartus’ target was so great and his height so tall, however, that the white mage had to step in close in order to get his shots in. As Xartus cocked back for a fifth or sixth swing, his opponent flexed his arms, shattering the door frame completely and making the opening big enough for him to pass through unhindered. The giant’s swaying arms thumped Xartus in the chest and sent the unorthodox mage sprawling to the floor.

The porcine puncher raised his hands up into the air and pumped them in victory. “Haw! Gotcha with that one!” The first thing Jeremy noticed as Tubby raised his mitts was the terrible stench of armpit smell. The second thing was the pulsating knob that seemed to be the fighter’s

navel.

“Ah, what the hell...” Jeremy said to himself. He stepped into a swing and launched his own fist square into the behemoth’s belly button. The giant’s eyes bulged, and he let out a blast of stale breath. Jeremy wanted to recoil at the disgusting odor but found himself instead being drawn out the door with the boxer, who was definitely reeling from the hit. Jeremy’s forward motion was led by his hand, still firmly lodged in the navel cavity of his adversary’s flab. As the two clumsily lurched into the hallway, Jeremy needed all his strength to wrest his hand free again. When he did withdraw it he saw that it was coated in a sticky gray lint.

“Oh, geez. Gross!” Jeremy exclaimed. Just then, a fist came in from his blind side and caught him square in the jaw. Jeremy’s eyes glazed over as he fell to his knees, rolled and rose to his feet again. Another bald man had been in the hallway as well, an accomplice. This one was more normal sized, although still quite muscular, with a light brown mustache and goatee. He wore a brown leather jacket over a tight red T-shirt. Jeremy could see bits of tattoos on him as well, but these were more distinct: daggers and flaming motorcycles.

“You can deal with this punk, Tony,” the recovered boxer said. “I’m gonna go have a few more words with the magic nurse.”

“Sure thing,” Tony answered. “Kid, I’m about to kick the shit out of you.”

Jeremy was still trying to blink through the pain of the previous punch as the thug advanced on him. He couldn’t decide if he should take up a defensive posture or take off running. Tony cocked back a fist, and in the same instant a ghostly arrowhead appeared in front of Jeremy, pointing downward. Instinctively, he looked down at the ground in the direction of the arrow. Tony swung a half-second later, and his fist struck the thick bone-reinforced area of Jeremy’s forehead. Both of them yelped in pain, Jeremy holding his head and Tony flexing his hand.

“I think I broke a knuckle, you little shit.” Tony shifted and began to wind up with his other fist, and as he did another arrow phased into existence, pointing left. Tony seemed to not even notice. Jeremy took the arrow’s advice and lunged sideways against the wall. Tony’s swing and momentum carried him through where Jeremy’s head had been, and Tony nearly tripped from the overextension.

A new image switched places with the arrow, this one showing a fist. Still uncertain, Jeremy took the opportunity provided by Tony’s

unbalanced position to fire off a quick jab, which caught Tony in the ear. Immediately, the arrowhead appeared, flashing and pointing downward. This time, Jeremy ducked as Tony's backhanded swing whooshed by overhead. A smaller fist image blinked within the space between Jeremy's face and Tony's stomach. With a bit more self-assurance, Jeremy threw a solid punch into Tony's abdomen and backed away.

Tony was furious. He charged forward and lunged to tackle Jeremy, even as another arrow pointed upward. Jeremy was a little slow in deciding to hurdle Tony and took a hit to the knee, yet managed to avoid being driven to the ground as both of them sprawled out. An image of a foot appeared near Tony's head, and Jeremy opted to kick Tony in the face before standing up again.

By this time, Jeremy had become a firm believer in the odd signals. By following their constant lead, Jeremy was able to almost effortlessly dodge or parry every attack Tony launched at him, while countering with some strikes of his own. The arrows allowed Jeremy to see that telegraphing of punches from Tony, which his father had talked on and on about whenever he discussed the art of fighting. With each passing moment, Tony became angrier and angrier, his swings more violent but just as ineffective.

Over the course of the fight, Jeremy had let himself be maneuvered backward toward a medical cart. As he stepped beside it, a diagonal arrow showed itself for the first time, pointing at the cart. Jeremy allowed himself a glance at the cart and its contents, but wasn't sure of what it meant. *Hide behind it?* The indecision allowed Tony to get in close enough to grab Jeremy by the neck.

"Gotcha now, fucker," Tony hissed through a bloodied lip. The diagonal arrow flickered rapidly. It was pointing not so much at the cart, Jeremy realized, but at a hypodermic resting on a towel on top of the cart. Jeremy grabbed the needle and jammed it into the shoulder of the arm squeezing his neck, injecting the entirety of the device's contents into Tony. Tony howled and let go, stepping back and yanking the needle out of his arm.

"Oh, you are so dead now," Tony said. "I'm gonna...I'm gonna..."

The muscular man wobbled for a second, and then crashed face first to the floor. Jeremy took a moment to be certain that Tony was out by kicking him in the head a few times to see if he'd respond, and then headed back toward the maintenance room.

Just as he arrived, the heavyset prince was forced backward out the doorway yet again. He seemed to be punching himself in the face. He was followed closely by Xartus, who was holding up a hand encircled by a gleaming shield. Every time his opponent threw a fearsome punch, it was reflected back up at his own head. Unfortunately, those blows seemed to be having little effect on the pudgy pugilist.

“C’mon,” Fat Ass grumbled. “Fight fair!”

“He’s got a weak spot,” Jeremy called. “It’s...”

At the sound of the voice, the bald boxer turned his head in Jeremy’s direction. Xartus immediately dropped his hand and slid the wristband he was wearing, which had sharp-looking metal spikes on one side, up and around his fingers which he balled up into a pointed fist. He dropped to one knee and put all his strength behind a single shot directly into his mammoth foe’s crotch.

Fat Ass let out a high-pitched “EEP!” clamped both gloves over his groin, and fell sideways to the ground before his eyes rolled back into his head in pain.

“Um...I was thinking of a spot a little higher,” Jeremy said.

Xartus straightened up and looked over with a grin. “That weak spot seemed a little bit more effective than yours, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Having never actually met a white mage before, Jeremy supposed he shouldn’t be so shocked at how one operated. He wondered if there was a skill tree for fighting dirty on any healer class he could remember.

“Now I think we better...” Xartus’ sentence trailed off, and his eyes widened slightly. His body tensed, his fingers sprang out, and the wristband dropped to the ground. He looked like he was being hit with an electrical shock. A column of bright light rose up from the ground and bathed him in brilliant glow. A sound like distant chimes jingled from somewhere nearby, and then it was over. Xartus stood there, looking at his hands.

“That...shouldn’t have happened yet,” was all Xartus could say at first. “But I’m glad as hell it did. Get over here, Jeremy. We’re ditching this place.”

Jeremy walked over and stood in front of him. “Where are we go-”

Xartus reached out and grabbed Jeremy’s shoulder. There was a sudden sensation of falling, less than a second, and then Jeremy realized that something had changed.

“...oing?” he concluded. He looked around. They were in a

completely whitewashed room filled with a mishmash of blocky platforms and surfaces marked with Xs. A number of narrow cylindrical machines rested upon tripod legs atop a couple of the large raised platforms. All as one, the devices extended their sides and protruded a red glowing lens with a nozzle beneath.

“Peek-a-boo.” MADDOC’s voice emitted from all of them in unison. Jeremy had forgotten all about her.

“Oh, shit,” Xartus said. He raised his hands up in time to erect a barely discernible barrier before a torrent of bullets flew in at them and ricocheted away harmlessly off the shield. “We’re pinned down,” he added.

“So what do we do?” Jeremy asked.

“How about I concentrate on maintaining this shield and you come up with a plan?”

Salvation sprang up from behind them as a cardboard box was lifted and tossed aside. Steel Serpent sprang out from underneath, firearm in hand. He let loose with fast successive shots that struck the turrets above them in precise sequence. The impact wasn’t enough to destroy the devices, but it did knock them over, sending them tumbling to the ground. They fired in futile, misdirected bursts before burning out and shutting down entirely. Jeremy stared at their rescuer wide-eyed.

“How did I not see your box there?” Jeremy asked him.

“You weren’t looking for it,” Steel said. “You’d be surprised how many people aren’t.”

“There you are,” came MADDOC’s voice. “I’ve been looking all over for you. How did you like my assistants? I see they’re a little unstable.”

“They’re not the only ones,” Xartus called out.

“Sticks and stones will never hurt me,” MADDOC replied nonchalantly.

“Why does a medical unit need bullet-shooting turrets?” Jeremy asked of no one in particular.

“For ballistic tests, silly. With all the times you people get shot at out there, wouldn’t it be nice to be able to have a full and rich understanding of how bullets affect organic tissue? And what better place to run such tests than in a hospital, where the test subjects can be quickly treated in case anything goes wrong. And by wrong, I mean exactly to specifications.”

Steel had ignored the whole explanation. Instead, he had moved over

to a pedestal which held an ivory-colored device that looked a bit like a claw. Steel put his hand and forearm into it, and it crackled with blue and orange energies.

“Hey, I know that thing,” Jeremy said, flabbergasted. “It’s a prototype gun that puts large space-traversing holes in things big enough to jump through.”

Steel paused to consider Jeremy’s words. “I’m very curious to learn how you determined that, but the description is accurate enough. Now I’d stand away from that wall if I were you.”

Jeremy gave a cursory glance to the wall behind him, and then moved aside, just enough to give Steel room to fire at the wall. Once Steel realized Jeremy wasn’t planning to move any further away, he shrugged and pointed the device at the wall. An orange blob of energy sped from the gun and impacted with the wall with an immense explosion that rocked the room. Jeremy was blown off his feet by the force of it, and it was from down on the ground amid the concrete dust and pebbles that he saw how there was now a perfectly smooth oval-shaped hole leading through the meter-thick wall into the next room.

“Holy shit!” Jeremy said. “What the hell?”

“Kid, you said it yourself. It puts big holes in things. Power the gun one way and it blasts a hole in what it hits outward. Power it the other and it tears a hole by pulling stuff inward.”

“Damn, that’s impressive,” Xartus said. “But the outside’s that way,” he added, pointing at the wall across from them.

“I know, but now that we can teleport out of here if we get trapped, I thought we might go have a little chat with our friend MADDOC.” Steel stepped confidently through the hole, and Jeremy heard the sounds of similarly sizable blasts coming from the room Steel had entered. Xartus and Jeremy followed behind, but by the time they had passed through into the next lab, Steel had already finished slagging the turrets in that room, blown a hole in the next wall over, and moved on.

They drilled purposefully through one room after the next until they came to a giant, empty, dome-shaped interior. As soon as they had entered and moved near to the center, a mechanical arm pushed a metal plate up and over the hole. Steel made note of it, but didn’t address it.

“Come on out, MADDOC,” he called. “Where are you hiding?”

“Maybe I’m under a cardboard box,” came the response. “I can’t believe I fell for that one. I must be losing my touch. Either that, or I

wasn't paying attention while I was building my new friends. Although they're not so much friends as underlings. Although underling is a bit of an exaggeration. More like nearly mindless killing machines."

Two entry points popped open from the ceiling, and a pair of vaguely humanoid robots dropped from them, landing on the floor with weighty crashes. One had a rounded and sphere-like body. The other was reminiscent of the turrets in shape, its center mass was elongated like a capsule as those had been. Both had basic robotic limbs that immediately went to work, churning forward on a dead run for Steel Serpent.

The soldier, unimpressed, raised the prototype weapon and fired off a burst at the wide-bodied robot charging at him. The orangish blob struck the robot squarely, but nothing occurred other than a dispersion of the energy blob into so many like-colored droplets that disappeared before reaching the ground. Steel was taken by surprise and tried to move, but he was too slow. The robots crashed into Steel together and sent him flying through the air. The impact caused Steel to lose his grip on the gun, and it clattered away from the warrior as he came back down to the ground.

"Hmm," came MADDOC's voice. "It seems the POSTAL gun doesn't seem to affect the metal that forms the chassis of my henchbots. The same metal that I use for my most important projects, like these impenetrable steel wall plates you witnessed before, and my own body, when I feel the need to get out and about. What a completely unexpected by you and yet pre-determinedly beneficial development for me!"

The two robots, which previously showed no sign of the humanity that their forms carried, broke from their aggressive stances to high five each other in response to their success and their creator's apparent approval.

"Stop that," MADDOC chirped. "You're embarrassing me in front of the victims. I mean test subjects."

Steel rolled painfully toward the gun and re-attached it to his arm. He fired another blast at the robots, but this one was aimed at their feet. There was an eruption in the floor material, and the two automatons dropped through the hole only to have the two of them, or exact copies of them, somehow re-emerge through the original entry tubes in the ceiling five seconds later, landing back on the floor and ready to fight again.

"Excuse me while I clean this up," MADDOC interjected as the hole in the floor sealed. The remaining panels in the floor flipped over in a

rapid pattern. Humans and robots alike had to leap to previously flipped panels in order to avoid being squashed in the transforming plates. The floor now was covered in the same impervious material MADDOC had boasted about. “Try not to let your human minds be disrupted by that little trick. You should try thinking of this room less like a ‘net’ in which I so easily trapped you and more like a series of tubes.”

“I’m thinking run like hell, boss,” Xartus yelled.

“Agreed,” Steel called back. He ran toward a section of the outer wall and fired a burst at it, colored blue this time. No sooner had it struck and imploded a hole in the wall than a large piston propelled up from the ground and slammed an impenetrable panel in place over the hole.

“Don’t think so,” came the robotic taunt as the pair of metallic creatures approached him. Steel tossed the POSTAL gun over to Xartus and drew his pistol. Each robot had a single central eye of sorts in the middle of their metal torsos, and Steel plugged each twice with no effect. The two swiped their claw-like hands at him, and Steel was on the defensive. It was all he could do to avoid their swirling limbs, all four of which struck with equal aptitude.

“I could use some backup!” Steel called.

“What do you want me to do?” Xartus yelled. “You know most of my magic doesn’t do shit against robots!”

“Feel free to try!” Steel replied, narrowly ducking under a fist from the taller droid. Steel slid a jagged knife out from another holster and stabbed it into one of the leg joints of the rounded robot. He tried to saw away, perhaps hoping to sever some wiring hidden within, but the blade broke off in the moment before the thinner construct plucked Steel off the ground. The aging soldier popped a grenade from a vest pouch and slammed it into the central gap containing the rotating eye sphere. He pushed off from his assailant with both feet and tore free from its grasp, diving across the floor behind the fat robot for cover as the grenade exploded, catching the two metal forms with the majority of its explosion. The “eye” of the round robot spun around madly, and it seemed like the thing might fall down due to something like dizziness, but it quickly regained its composure. The other robot was completely unaffected. The only one hurt seemed to be Steel himself, who had caught some shrapnel in one leg that hadn’t been completely protected behind the squat robot.

A series of blasts issued from high above them all. Xartus had turned

the gun on the domed ceiling over their heads, trying to pull rubble down on the robots' heads. Most of the collapsed roof region was ruptured into small baseball-sized chunks, but a few larger sections, probably weighing hundreds of kilograms each, collapsed and slammed into the ground around the robots, some striking them directly. Their knees buckled slightly, and their hulls showed some slight denting, but they were otherwise fine.

Xartus tossed the gun to Jeremy this time, and sped to get close enough to target Steel's leg with a light bluish stream that seemed to instantaneously mend the damage. The skinnier robot raised its arms up and gripped them together, intending to bring them down and pound Xartus into a pulp on the floor. Xartus brought up his hands and summoned the protective reflection disc he had used against the fat boxer. The impact seemed to be blunted, but still was able to compress and then shatter the defensive spell and land a crashing blow on Xartus.

With his leg back in working order, Steel grabbed Xartus by the shirt and dragged him across the floor as fast as he could away from the robots and toward Jeremy.

"All right," Steel said. "Get us out of here, now."

"Me?" Jeremy said, his voice a little too high in reaction.

"Pronto! Teleport us out. Isn't that how you got down here?"

"No, that was me," Xartus groaned from the floor.

Steel looked down. Somehow Jeremy felt that this look of surprise was about as rare as they come.

"You? Since when can you teleport?"

"Since the time I dropped Prince Fat Ass on his namesake and leveled up about ten minutes ago."

"If you were that close, why didn't you just go grind up some skeleton warriors?"

"I wasn't that close. Somehow I did."

The robots were slowly, arrogantly striding toward them. The fat one was cracking its "knuckles" as they approached.

"Uh, guys?" Jeremy interrupted. "Can we go now?"

"No problem," Xartus said, grabbing their hands and closing his eyes. Jeremy waited for the falling sensation, but nothing happened. Xartus' eyes popped open again in wonder. "Okay, so maybe a little problem."

"My scan readout of you indicates that your newfound teleport ability can only be used once per hour," MADDOC added helpfully. "I

probably should have told you that when you first gained the ability, but I was really, really busy with my not telling you.”

The robots each gave the other what Jeremy thought might have been a wink with their lens-like eyes, and then launched into a new attack. Jeremy covered up his head with his arms, but the two ignored him. The fat one gave Xartus a brutal kick across the floor, and the tall one caught Steel in the chest with an unexpected piston-like extension of his arms that nearly sent him on top of Xartus on the ground. The two bots trudged past Jeremy, not paying him any mind at all, and continued in pursuit of Steel and Xartus.

Jeremy’s mind raced. His companions were about to be pulverized, and Jeremy was certain he would be dealt with in much the same way shortly afterward. He looked at the weapon in his hands, and at the environment around him. There were almost no helpful uses left for the gun at all. But then an odd idea crept into his head. He looked up and saw that the robots had Steel and Xartus as cornered as one could get in a roundish room. Xartus was trying to cast another spell, but his fingers were bent and broken, and he couldn’t get it to manifest properly. Jeremy took up a position alongside the room exterior.

“Hey, rock’em sock’em wannabes!” Jeremy hollered.

The two robots stopped and spun their eyes around in their bodies without turning to face him otherwise.

“Your momma was a toaster!” Jeremy taunted them.

The two robots focused on each other for a moment, seemed to shrug, and then spun their eyes back to their near helpless prey. Jeremy rephrased.

“How about ‘Your creator was a human momma!’”

Jeremy had not even noticed there had been a constant electric hum in the room until it stopped. The pair of robots stiffened straight and turned around, their claw grippers clenched tight. The reddish light from their lenses seemed to burn in anger.

“Killbots,” came MADDOC’s voice in a humorless monotone. “Destroy him.”

The lumbering metal things took a few slow steps toward Jeremy, but very quickly built up speed along the edge of the room. They seemed to emit a low roar from their gears as they bore down on him. Jeremy felt his heart beating rapidly way up in his throat. He raised the weapon and aimed. He realized that he wasn’t entirely sure how to fire the thing. He

felt a loop inside the grip that he imagined must be the trigger and prayed he was right. He tensed himself. The gun did not seem to exhibit any recoil, but he needed to be steady just in case. He waited until the pair of murderous things were a second or two away from him and then fired.

The burst passed wide of the inbound robots and struck the wall, blasting it open as they passed alongside it. In a microsecond that still felt like a lifetime, the auto-responding floor panel sprang up like a bear trap and clamped tight against the wall, covering the hole. In doing so, however, the thick indestructible panel crushed and flattened the two robots between the edges of the hole, the wall, and the thick panel at the end of the powerful piston. One long robotic arm protruded out from the side of the paper thin gap between the panel and the wall, clutching at Jeremy briefly before it twitched, shuddered, and drooped lifelessly. The hum that had resumed withdrew from the room again, as if the unseen enemy MADDOC had paused its electric breath for a brief time.

“Oops,” MADDOC said at last. The lights in the room dimmed slightly.

“You know, I once heard a theory that no test could ever be conducted and observed absolutely free from interference because the very act of observing the experiment has some immeasurable effect upon the outcome. By attempting to marginalize that theory, it is possible that my decision to remain otherwise removed from this little event by not directly controlling the programmed actions of the room or my robots has resulted in the elimination of my new creations.”

The hum began to increase in volume, and the lights dimmed even further. More entry points opened in the ceiling, and Jeremy was afraid more robots were coming. Instead, a dozen or more construction arms appeared with immense components in tow and began to assemble a large colossus of a machine in the center of the room.

“Then again, the test might have gone awry the moment that I directly instructed my minions to break off their own established actions and go after you, and that the test was therefore flawed from that point.”

The massive construct was beginning to take shape. It was becoming yet another robot form, several times larger than either of the other two and far more menacing.

“Of course, if one were to subscribe to either of those theories, it would suggest that what just happened here was somehow my fault, and

to be honest, I'd much rather blame you. So I've decided to take a more apparatuses-on approach this time."

As the construction wound down to a quick completion, an immense glowing computer core lowered and attached itself to the center of the fabricated metal giant, which closed its chest, activated an array of motors and lights, and whirred into complete being.

"For the purposes of accuracy, I must inform you that this test is really more of a control. I have considered every contingency, and can say with complete certainty that this form cannot be damaged by any force in existence within this structure. The outcome is no longer in any doubt, other than whether I kill you, you surrender and I don't kill you, or you surrender and I kill you. I know which I prefer, but if I told you, it might taint the results."

The towering construct took a step forward, and the heavily reinforced floor still gave a groan of strain. MADDOC extended both arms, which culminated in giant cannon-like mounts powering up and leveled point blank at the human trio.

"You're going to feel a little sting," MADDOC said.

At that moment, half of the remaining ceiling caved in, having been crushed by a steel fist the size of MADDOC's robotic body, which crumpled like a soda can. The wrecking ball of a fist crunched the entire unit into a pile of flat scrap against the chamber floor. The newest largest robot Jeremy had ever witnessed withdrew its hand through the hole in the roof only to return a minute or so later, holding a small child in its palm. The kid wore a cartoonish red and white jumpsuit with matching helmet and held a remote control which seemed to be directing the hand as a mode of transportation.

Steel hobbled toward the descending hand. "Hojo, what kept you?"

"Sorry I'm late meeting you guys. Did you know there's some kind of interference on the earmitters? Had a hard time cutting through it to find you. And before that, I had to battle my way through Tyrannax, Granitelfist, and Battle Beetle just to reach this hub. You wouldn't believe the number of gigaforms going nutso out in Colossus Canyons. It's like something put them in a rage. I know the place is pretty remote, but I didn't know if they were likely to take a spawn point to somewhere else or not, so I tossed them into the middle of the Crimson Sea for safe keeping. They won't be going anywhere quickly for a while."

"Maybe Schrödinger will have some answers about all this," Steel said.

Double Jump

“Let’s get going. We’ll all take your mech.”

Hojo looked at the three of them and said “I think there’ll be enough compartments to hold everybody, but someone’s going to have to ride in the butt.”